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Small school districts vulnerable to more than state budget woes



Teacher Leslie Pombo helps eighth-graders Corey Forth and Maryjoe Perry on Friday at Banta Elementary School. CLIFFORD OTO/The Record

By Jennifer Torres
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The Banta Elementary School District, unlike other school systems many times its size, has been able to keep class sizes small in its primary grades. It is maintaining an after-school program that supervises children until 6 p.m. And in a time of tumult in educational staffing, its roster of teachers and assistants has remained relatively stable.

But Banta and other small rural school districts in the region were financially vulnerable long before the statewide budget crisis that is currently eroding programming and payrolls in San Joaquin County's largest school systems.

For smaller districts, survival depends on growth that can't always be counted on and that can sometimes seem at odds with a small-town identity.

"I don't want to say that the budget hasn't affected us drastically," said Albert Garibaldi, who serves as Banta School's principal as well as the Banta Elementary School District's assistant superintendent. "Because we're small, there are different things we're doing to try to cope with it."

Across California, there are more than 500 school districts with fewer than 5,000 students. In San Joaquin County, there are several that serve fewer than 1,000 children. Because school

funding is based largely on attendance, small districts often struggle to stay open; even a small drop in enrollment can deal a major budget blow.

The county has lost two of its small, rural districts in recent years, most recently Holt, and before that, Delta Island.

The Lammersville Elementary School District, which once consisted of a single school, has since been bolstered by development in Mountain House. Similarly, the Jefferson Elementary School District was sustained by growth in south Tracy.

A rapid-growth scenario was expected in the Banta district, poised to accept thousands of children expected to move into the River Islands housing development planned for Lathrop. But those plans are now on hold.

In a classroom at Banta last week, teacher Leslie Pombo discussed sentence parts with eighth-grade students.

"This is harder than it seems," a boy told her.

"Yes, it's harder than it seems," Pombo said. "This is eighth grade. Did you think I was going to make it easy?"

There are 37 students in her class - not because of layoffs, as in other districts, but because Banta eagerly accepts children who live outside its attendance boundaries. Those transfer students - they make up one-third of Banta's enrollment - and the state money they represent help make it possible to maintain smaller class sizes at other grade levels, Garibaldi said.

And Pombo herself is an asset the school is wielding.

She sent her children to the school, and 24 years ago, started working there as a bus driver. Then, she worked as a teacher's assistant. And finally, about 12 years ago, she earned her teaching credential through Project Impact, San Joaquin County's alternative credentialing program, and took on eighth grade.

Catherine Kearney, who oversees the Impact program for the San Joaquin County Office of Education, said it is especially beneficial to rural districts such as Banta, where it's difficult to attract recent college graduates willing to stay for more than a few years.

Project Impact participants earn credentials while they are employed as intern teachers.

Teachers such as Pombo, with roots in the community, are likelier to stick around, Kearney said.

"My heart is really connected here," Pombo said.

Garibaldi said that's a draw for parents.

"Our stability ... really makes the parents feel comfortable," he said.

To continue to survive, he said, Banta and other small districts will have to continue to find ways to grow.

"We're trying to keep the community school alive," Garibaldi said. "So far, we're happy with how we're moving forward. Banta's identity remains intact."