



# SCHOOLS

## GRAPPLE WITH

# GROWTH

BY BOB EVANCHO

**P**rosperity has its price. Just ask the Boise School District as it struggles with a swelling enrollment and cramped classrooms. “Growth,” says Boise land-planning consultant Chris Korte, “is a double-edged sword. On one side it provides a tremendous increase in the economy. But growth causes impacts, and [school] overcrowding is one of them.”

But are some Boise classrooms so jam-packed that the quality of education suffers? The answer may depend on what part of town you’re in and what grade level you’re talking about. One thing, however, is certain: Boise’s steady population growth has forced some of its schools to cram too many students into too little space.

“Boise schools are full,” allows Ed Davis, assistant superintendent, “and in the case of elementary schools, they are overcrowded.”

According to Wayne Gibbs, Boise planning director, the city’s population has grown from 101,000 in 1980 to 123,000 in 1990. “And the southeast area [south of the Boise River and east of Broadway Avenue] and the west bench [north of the regional mall and out to the Hewlett-Packard area] have consistently been the highest growth areas,” he says. “You get some growth in the foothills, but not as much as the other two.”

And the trend is expected to continue. Studies conducted by the Ada Planning Association (APA) and Idaho Power estimate a population increase between 80,000 and 110,000 over the next 20 years. In addition, Boise’s current and projected rates of population growth are about twice the national average.

The reason for Boise’s expanding population is twofold, observes





*The overcrowding problem at Liberty Elementary, above, is alleviated somewhat by portable classrooms behind the building, lower left.*

Dale Rosebrock, a demographics analyst. “First,” he says, “there has been an in-migration of people here, and they’re bringing their kids and impacting the school system. The second reason is what is being referred to as the ‘baby boomlet’ ... The baby boomers are having kids.

“With new people coming into the community and many people starting to have families, the school system has been hit with a double whammy. That has made the school district’s job very difficult.”

And in the context of education issues, few topics are likely to elicit a more emotional response than school overcrowding. The reason? The dilemma deals with two things that people hold most dear: their kids and their money.

Rosebrock, who teaches an urban planning course in Boise State’s public affairs program, notes that Boiseans, like citizens anywhere else, have a vested interest in their local school system because it involves their children and their tax dollars. And if classroom overcrowding fuels an already sensitive subject, as it has in parts of Boise, the situation, he says, may turn into a “very emotional, political, almost nasty issue.” Korte agrees, calling the overcrowding problem “super volatile.”

The obvious solution is to provide more space—whether it’s building new schools, expanding existing facilities, or both—through a bond election, which is exactly what the Boise School District plans to do in May. But Boise’s overcrowding woes are not districtwide, and therein lies part of the problem. There are plenty of people who 1) live in parts of Boise not beset by overcrowding, 2) oppose more taxes, and/or 3) don’t have kids in school and might not be sympathetic to the district’s plight. “It’s always tough for the school district to get money because it has to go to the voters to pay for anything,” says Rosebrock.

Although the Boise School District has the data to back its request—including an APA study that projects enrollment to increase by 5,300 students in grades one through 12 in the next decade—passing a school bond issue in Idaho is anything but a done deal. “The bottom line is that [passage] means a property tax and people aren’t excited about that,” Davis says, “and [Idaho’s] two-thirds [voter approval] requirement is one of only four in the nation. We consider that totally unfair. We have very little question that we could get majority support, but when you ask for a two-to-one vote, it’s almost unbelievable.”

And a change in Idaho code to make school bond election passage easier won’t occur soon. Switching the requisite two-thirds approval rate to a simple majority or 60 percent—both of which were proposed during the last session of the Legislature—requires action by Idaho’s lawmakers. “So we’re looking a few years down the road at the earliest for that to happen,” Davis says.

Meanwhile, Boise educators, politicians, and developers are striving to accommodate the city’s growing school enrollment with adequate educational facilities. “Growth is a very interesting beast,” Korte remarks, “and it’s typically cyclical. Five years ago people were not fat and happy in this town and they wanted growth and development, and a set of officials were elected based upon that premise. Now we have a tremendous amount of growth. And now those people who are fat and happy don’t want extra kids in their school district and they don’t want overcrowded schools; yet will they want to pass a bond issue to build new schools?”

Lawmakers and educators have mentioned other methods to help derive the funding necessary to ease school overcrowding. They include pooling state lottery proceeds in a statewide fund to leverage bond issues and leveling impact fees on new developments.

Impact fees would force developers to carry the bulk of the financial burden initially, but the cost eventually would be passed on to the consumer.

Says Korte: "How do you best pay for education? The development community should pay its share, but it seems everybody wants to hit developers with the largest amount. It ends up affecting us all. Whether it's through a bond issue or through increased costs on your house, and whether your house is old or new, you're going to pay for it."

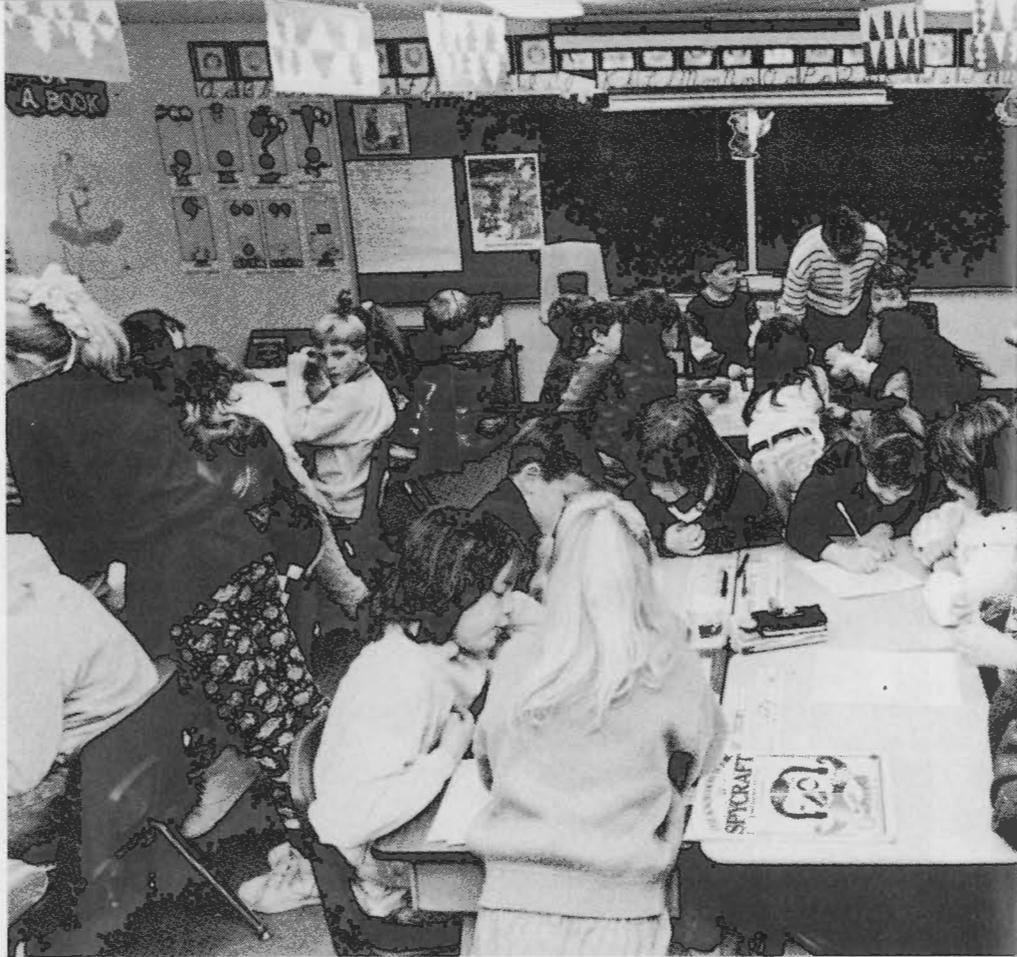
Before the economic instability of the early 1980s, Boise schools stayed ahead of the game and had a much easier time obtaining land for new sites. The school district had an unwritten agreement with the city that it could go into undeveloped areas and buy land from developers in anticipation of new subdivisions and other pockets of growth.

"That all worked well until the late 1970s and early '80s when things got tough in the development world," says Davis. "So all of a sudden when we were trying to get land ahead of time in east Boise ... the developers essentially wouldn't sell us the land. It's a complex issue, but basically we knew that if we made them sell us the land at that time, they probably would have gone broke in a couple of instances. So we made an exception or two of not stopping development [by informing the city a school wasn't planned for] before a site was procured."

The "exceptions" to which Davis refers led to some of the Boise School District's current overcrowding woes. Under normal circumstances, schools are an essential ingredient to residential development for two reasons. First, the Boise City Council is empowered to delay or deny a rezoning application until a school site is made available. Second, a residential area's "school situation" is often a key selling point. Thus, notes Korte, it behooves the developer to include a school site in his plans.

"Schools are a key component to any form of development and exceedingly important to the development community," he says. "They form the nucleus of any form of a neighborhood or community, so it's in the developer's best interest to assure that adequate school facilities are available."

Currently, the level of the need corresponds with the level of the grade. Interestingly, Boise's secondary enrollment has dropped 1.4 percent from 1985 to 1990. But it's a different story at the elementary level. Boise's elementary school enrollment numbers have risen from 11,778 in 1985 to 13,485 in 1990—what would seem to be a manageable 14 percent. But those numbers are not spread evenly throughout the district. "If we could congregate the kids in one spot, there's no question we would build [more] schools," says Davis. "But they come 100 here and 50 there, and you just can't build a school for



*Overcrowding is evident as first- and third-graders at Liberty Elementary share a portable class-*

600 kids when they're all over the city."

And given the near certainty of Boise's continued growth and the fact that the district's elementary schoolchildren of today are tomorrow's secondary students, it would appear the Boise schools' predicament will become worse before it gets better—at least in certain parts of the city.

"The fact is, there are pockets of growth in some of Boise's younger communities and those areas that have a lot of kids," says Phyllis Edmundson, a BSU teacher education professor and former Boise school board member, "and then there are other schools that are in neighborhoods that are aging and don't have as many kids. Unfortunately, this has led to busing and school boundary changes; both are very unpopular."

Overcrowding also takes its toll on the teachers and students, Edmundson adds. "Having more kids in a class decreases the time a teacher has with individuals" she says.

The problem to which Edmundson refers is most apparent at schools such as Liberty Elementary. "Teachers can get around [to a large number of students] only so much," says Arvin Spofford, principal of the southeast Boise school. "Last year we had several classes that had 36 students. I couldn't ask for a more hard-working staff, but there comes a point where year after year of 36 kids to a classroom kind of grinds you down."

Much of the stress placed on Liberty was

alleviated this fall when nearby White Pine Elementary opened its doors for the first time. The new school was built not a moment too soon. Liberty, which was designed to hold about 650 students, has added 60-100 pupils each year since 1985; its 1989-90 enrollment was 1,055.

Despite the relief provided by White Pine, Liberty still has the third-highest enrollment (760) this year among Boise's 30 elementary schools. And the construction of White Pine appears to be only a temporary solution as the enrollment numbers in southeast Boise continue to climb.

"We're much better off now than we were because we have White Pine," says Spofford. "We have one class with 28 students and nothing larger. But I think the numbers here are going to continue to build, and we're still experiencing overcrowding to the point where we have one [portable] classroom each for grades K-3. In addition, we're taking some overflow children from White Pine in kindergarten now."

Such overcrowding problems are not unique to Liberty. White Pine and the west bench's Cynthia Mann Elementary, which also opened this fall, have already installed portable classrooms to meet a legislative directive to lower class size to a 20-to-1 ratio in kindergarten through third grade—a mandate that recently forced the Boise School District to add 30 portable class-



GLENN OAKLEY PHOTO

room during a reading session.

rooms at a cost of \$2.2 million.

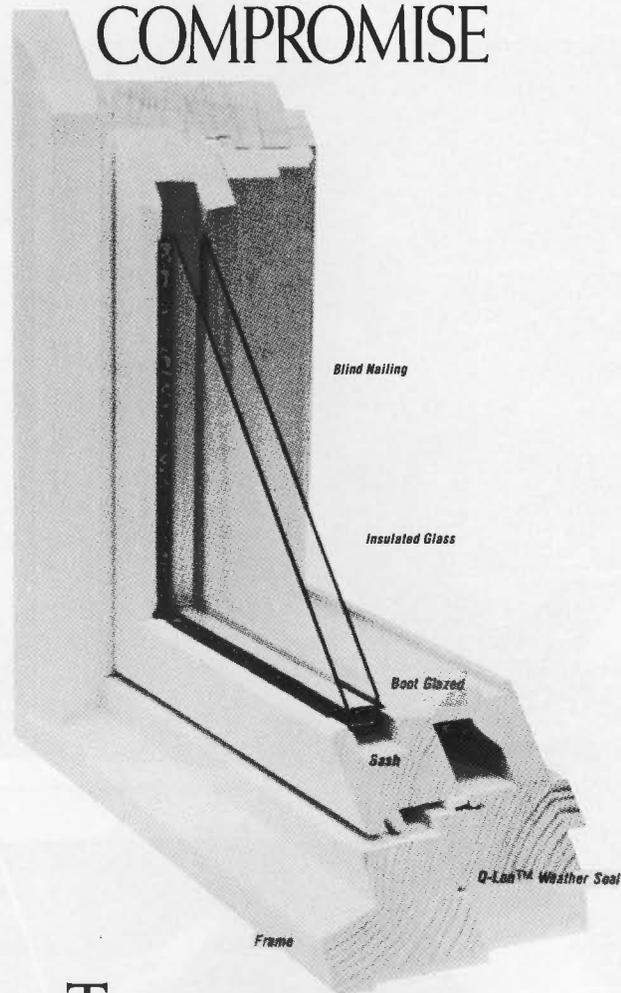
Given the tight spot some Boise schools are already in, the 20-to-1 criteria only exacerbates the situation. "Before the Legislature told us that we're not going to have more than a 20-to-1 pupil-teacher ratio we were full ... now we're overcrowded," says Davis. "At this point we have 120 [portable] classrooms in Boise schools, and frankly, next year I'd be amazed if we don't need more until we build another school or additions [to existing buildings]."

Fortunately for schools in the established parts of town like the North End and east Boise, the problem isn't as extensive. "We've experienced some growth," says Chris Olson, principal of the North End's Longfellow Elementary and a graduate student at BSU, "but subdivisions aren't springing up and people aren't moving into this area like they are in other parts of town. Not all the people in this area have kids and many of them tend to be older couples in older homes."

By and large, Korte says, the Boise School District has done a "good job in trying to plan for future growth." But the 20-to-1 student-teacher ratio and other factors have forced the district to put the squeeze on many of its elementary school classrooms.

It's a very difficult balancing act," says Korte. "I guess the question is, just how big can Boise be and still provide quality education at a reasonable cost?" □

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