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[00:00:25] **Speaker 1** In the case of Wisconsin K-12 schools, enrollment has been on a steady slide. In the 2024-25 school year, there were 68,000 fewer students than in 2005. Enrollment figures for this year aren't tallied until the third week in September. Declines in school populations mirror declines in the state population and birth rates. School buildings being emptied out is happening all over the state. And issue lawmakers are hoping to address this fall by helping districts consolidate.

[00:00:59] **Speaker 2** Because student enrollment is the primary driver of our state school funding formula, districts experiencing declining enrollment receive less money in state aid. So to make up for this, many districts go to referendum and they raise local property tax bills to pay for increasingly empty buildings. The already heavy burden on taxpayers will only get worse over time.

[00:01:24] **Speaker 1** This is especially true for rural districts. We look at two of them now embarking on consolidation in the small Clark County cities of Loyal and Greenwood. For more on this, we turn to Greenwood District Administrator, Joe Green, and Loyal Administrator Chris Lindner. And thanks to both of you for being here.

[00:01:43] **Speaker 3** You bet. Thank you very much for having us.

[00:01:45] **Speaker 1** So, Jo, first to you, what is the Greenwood District student population right now, and how has it fallen over the years?

[00:01:55] **Speaker 4** Our 4K through 12 numbers, they fluctuate a little bit between about 350 and 370. And it is on a slow decline. It's been on a slowly decline for a number of years. You know, it ebbs and flows a little but overall, you know, we've, you know it's been on a decline and it continues to decline. I do think we've reached a little bit of a plateau, like I think we're, we've steadied the steady that a little it. We've been real stable in the 350 area for the last.

[00:02:30] **Speaker 1** What about in loyal?

[00:02:33] **Speaker 3** I would say in the last handful of years, we have gone from approximately 530 down to 480 in our 4k 12 district. Excuse me. Our senior class is one of our bigger classes at approximately 48. And then our junior class has 44, 43. Those are significantly the larger classes that we have throughout our building. Then after that, and then you are getting down to the mid to high 30s, you might have a 40 in there. And once we get down into. Fifth grade and below, then it takes another drop of another, maybe down to mid to low 30s per class. So we have seen a continuous decline. I think we will plateau after our juniors leave after next year. But that's a lot of money that walks out the door when they leave and your 4K come in and. Cannot, you know, you're losing five to 10 kids per year that gets gets to be hard.

[00:03:49] **Speaker 1** And so, Joe, are these enrollment numbers kind of the tipping point for what prompted the moves to consolidate?

[00:03:59] **Speaker 4** It's definitely one of the factors. It's a significant factor. I think that, you know, when you think about factors of why we look to consolidate, it's the declining enrollment paired with the increasing difficulty to hire highly qualified staff, which is then also, you now, paired with creating more opportunities for our kids and maintaining the opportunities that our kids need. To be college and career ready when they leave the district.

[00:04:33] **Speaker 1** How, Chris, how difficult is this process?

[00:04:42] **Speaker 3** It gets to be extremely, just because in Clark County, probably 15 years ago, we had influx of Amish move in, buying up farms and things like that. And now within the last maybe five to seven years, Mennonites have come in and have, I would say an influx them and they are buying up farms and between that and so I won't say it's just in Greenwood. I believe we are trying to do something before it gets to be too bad, where you don't have any students coming in, or you're declining enrollment. You can't deal with it because you're asking taxpayers for so much money in a referendum, operator referendum. So that's becoming a bigger, I wouldn't say hassle, but just the situation is difficult because you I don't have the kids there. Throughout our county, every district is.

[00:05:47] **Speaker 1** So how does the kind of influx of Amish or Mennonite people factor into this?

[00:06:00] **Speaker 4** They're valuable people to our community. They provide a lot of services and they pay the same taxes that other people do, but they have their own schools. So they're not sending their kids. So the farms of the past that used to raise kids and send them to public schools are largely owned by the Amish and Mennonite communities. And they operate their own own school so those kids are no longer coming. So that is probably the main reason why we're seeing in Clark County a population decline within our public schools.

[00:06:42] **Speaker 1** What is the mood among residents and families for this consolidation?

[00:06:52] **Speaker 3** I'll go ahead. So this has been something has been talked about since 1960. That is when I believe a big push was to consolidate. You had a lot of consolidation going on in the early 60s. So talk has been there for 65, 66, 65 years or so. Back in early 2000s, they had in 96, 7, they had a big push because. To talk about it because districts were looking at expanding capital referendums and it was talked about but nothing was done. Early 2000s I think it was approached once if not twice, actually had a vote on it, had a study done. It did not pass, so it seems like every 20 years this continues to come up. And we are at 20, 25, 26 school year. I believe community members, families. Are ready to make that move. I know there's questions out there. We have done a number of things in the last two or three years to help alleviate some of the pain with co-opping a number sports. Marching band is co-opt. We share some students back and forth for classes, some of your higher end classes that may not run because, or you run with three or four kids. Now you can add some more kids to make it a little more efficient for that teacher. But I really see both communities, which according to the advisory vote that we had last spring, are for it. And want to do something moving forward to help alleviate what I'll say is is higher taxes and operating referendums.

[00:09:04] **Speaker 1** Because, Joe, if and when, I guess, these schools are consolidated, that will mean that the district would not have to seek operating monies from a referendum.

[00:09:23] **Speaker 4** No, it, what it means is we, we are, our plan is, um, to significantly reduce the amount of need for operational referendum with the funding formula in we, you know, we would still be, you take two, two districts that are in declining enrollment, put them together. There's still going to be a district in a one district in declining enrollment. And when you have that formula, that's a, it's a recipe for disaster when it comes to. Operational referendums. You know, you will. We will rely on operational referendum. Right now between the two districts, we rely on between three and three and a half million dollars in operational referendams each year. So to just, you know, to turn the lights on and keep the doors open, and keep operating the way we are. Our hope is to significantly reduce that. And we haven't flushed out know, the amount, but I don't think it's unreasonable to have a goal at, you know, a million dollars less in operational referendum needs, maybe more, but I don t think that's an unreasonable goal.

[00:10:33] **Speaker 1** Chris, what are the opportunities that a consolidation represents?

[00:10:39] **Speaker 3** I think a lot of our services can be joined from two different districts into one or CESA. Would be one and just working together with some of the specialty areas that you need to have CESA for, speech and language that are two little districts. We do share some things, but those are things that. Crucial that we can't afford and we rely on CESA for some of that. I think having under one would be a benefit. Other opportunities is.

[00:11:29] **Speaker 4** Well, I'll say some of the opportunities are going to be in our courses. You know, we have small class sizes. So when you start looking at combining some populations, you're giving kids more opportunities to compete and work with students of like needs. Where sometimes we have singletons that need certain needs, or even some of the higher level learning can be. Challenging to provide for some students. But now when you mix a couple groups together, you're sharing some of those needs. There's gonna be opportunities in say, TechEd, between Loyal and Greenwood, we have two TechEd programs and we offer very similar courses with small numbers of kids in classes, some of the classes. So when you put two programs together, that doesn't necessarily mean that you're gonna reduce staff, Put it. Hopefully can mean is that we are able to offer more opportunities because we no longer have to, you know, we have one teacher maybe teach welding, and all of the kids and that opens up time slots for another tech ed teacher to teach different things, whether it's robotics or, or mechanics or, you know, anything like that. So in the same thing for some of the general curriculum, you're right now, you know, Mr. Linder said something a little bit ago about. You know some of the classes where we we share right now, you know And I've always used things like trigonometry or calculus or advanced placement classes where? We both have a class with Two three four kids in it and and we Teacher for that class well combined We would only need one teacher to teach that class thus opening the opportunity for the other teacher to add something new or or Add add something that we know that our students could benefit from. So there's there's ways in that perspective, in that light, to create more learning opportunities for our kids.

[00:13:34] **Speaker 1** What are your opinions of the state right now taking an interest in helping districts, potentially incentivizing districts to consolidate?

[00:13:47] **Speaker 4** Well, it's music to our ears that there's some interest. There was interest years ago. And I think I'm cautiously optimistic that they will take interest in consolidation. But again, would hate to see is then take the local control away from consolidation, it's not right for everybody. I mean, the school districts of Greenwood and Loyal are going down this road for good reason. And the reasons are, we have a similar tax base, we have similar mill rate, neither one of us have debt. We're six miles apart. We share the same bus service. There's a lot of things that. Make sense for our district, but that don't necessarily make sense for every district. So I hope that the I hope the state supports in there. If there is legislation, I hope they support the local control that districts have if they decide that this is the right course of action to help their districts out.

[00:14:55] **Speaker 1** Chris, that's on them.

[00:15:00] **Speaker 3** I agree with that, and we both have talked to some representatives and just say, you know, years ago there was a good benefit that the state gave for consolidation. It is not there, but we even talked about just like dealing with, helping out with studies that have to be done and things like that. But there is, there is a need. And I would say throughout the state, you have a lot of districts that are probably watching Loyal and Greenwood to see what happens there. And could be the pendulum swinging the other way if this does work out, which obviously we hope. I think the last couple of years we've worked very well together. And like Mr. Green said earlier, I think staff shortage was a big push with it in our declining enrollment. And I hear at a lot of superintendent conferences or meetings just that if we don't start working together, not just Loyola and Greenwood, but all our districts, we will be on an island by ourselves and it won't be, it will be a sinking ship or island, whatever you want to say, deserted. So we need to work together and help not only survive, but to thrive.

[00:16:30] **Speaker 1** Are you hopeful this will happen when by 2028, is that right?

[00:16:37] **Speaker 4** Yeah, that's the proposed timeline. I guess the tentative timeline would be to. We've been meeting as joint boards for the better part of a year regularly to work through this process and our joint boards just earlier this week. Past emotion both passed emotion. That there will be a binding question on the November 2026 ballot, that if both communities approve that question, then it's a binding consolidation, which then would start the 18 month process to consolidate July 1, 2028.

[00:17:23] **Speaker 1** Well, we really appreciate you taking your time out today to talk with us, Joe Green from Greenwood Schools and Chris Lindner Loyal Schools. Thanks very much, good luck.

[00:17:34] **Speaker 3** Thank you.

[00:17:40] **Speaker 1** You might have noticed that I took that longer than what we said we allotted for this. So we just want to let you know, we'll probably do some. We definitely have to. My producer is like, yeah, we have to shorten that. But it was great. It was great we have a lot of really good information. So thank you.

[00:18:02] **Speaker 3** Yeah, good. We appreciate it.

[00:18:21] **Speaker 4** That sounds great. Thanks for all you guys do.

[00:18:23] **Speaker 1** Yes. Thank you.

[00:18:24] **Speaker 4** Thank you very much.