

NEWS

# Will South Kitsap's \$271 million school bond measure buck trend of past failures?

*South Kitsap voters haven't approved a school bond since 1988. Eight measures have failed since then.*



**Jeff Graham**  
Kitsap Sun



South Colby Elementary School, above, is one of three existing school that would be replaced under a \$271-million bond up for election in South Kitsap on Nov. 7. The measure would also fund a new facility for Explorer Academy and Discovery High School operations, make renovations to South Kitsap High School, and allocate \$24 million for upgrades at other sites. ,  
*Larry Steagall*

**In early 2021, South Kitsap School District formed a committee to consider and develop long-term plans for all its aging facilities.**

**After nearly a year and a half, the [committee came to a clear conclusion](#): every single facility, including all 16 school buildings, needs work. For some, modernization is sufficient. For others, complete rebuilding is required.**

**The ability for the district to address its most urgent needs will be decided during the Nov. 7 general election as voters consider a 21-year, \$271 million bond.**

**"I think when you talk about the quality of education and what our kids deserve, facilities play a role in that," South Kitsap School District Superintendent Tim Winter told the Kitsap Sun in a recent interview.**

**Should the measure pass, the [district will proceed with a plan](#) to replace Olalla Elementary School, built in 1954 with 63,000-square-foot/400-student capacity building' with a 400-student capacity; replace South Colby Elementary School, built in 1956, with a 63,000-square-foot/400-student capacity building; replace Cedar Heights Middle School, built in 1968, with a new 110,000-square-foot/800-student capacity building.**

**The district's plan also involves replacing Explorer Academy and Discovery High School with a two-story building (34,900 square-feet, 400-plus students) on the Madrona Heights campus off Fircrest Drive; renovating/modernizing portions of South Kitsap High School, including space used for career and trades instruction; eliminating 43 portable classrooms; and utilizing \$24 million for upgrades at other district sites.**

**If voters approve the bond, the district would be eligible for an estimated \$36 million in School Construction Assistance Program funding. The approximate cost for taxpayers in 2024 would be \$1.08 per thousand of assessed home value.**

**The big question, of course, is will the bond measure succeed?**

### **History of bond failures in SK**

**No current student was alive the last time South Kitsap voters passed a bond. Even parents of some of those students weren't alive when the last bond was passed in February of 1988.**

**Eight bond measures have since failed: one in 1993, two in 1996, one in 2007, two in 2016, one in 2017 and one in 2018. A majority of those measures, including the four most recent, were focused on the construction of a second high school on district-owned property off Old Clifton Road.**

**The two bonds in 2016 came closest to passing, but fell short at 59.9% and 59.4%. Those approval numbers dropped to 51.7% in 2017 and 55.9% in 2018.**

**Gerry Austin, who served on the district's long-range facilities planning committee and is a member of South Kitsap Schools Supporters group, said there's a reason the current bond measure doesn't include building another high school, but focuses its efforts elsewhere.**

**"Our community has been hung up on a second high school for decades," Austin said during a recent League of Women Voters of Kitsap forum. "Meanwhile our buildings have fallen apart and entered into a state of disrepair."**

**Winter insists the district has not abandoned the idea of a second high school.**

**“We’re not saying 'no' to the second high school. I think that’s important for voters who would have been in favor of that,” Winter said. “We’re just saying there are higher priority needs now because it’s been so long, and the property on Old Clifton is being reserved for future growth. We’re trying to think long-term here, not just the immediate.”**

### **Majority vote not enough for success**

**There's a common phrase when it comes to funding education in the state of Washington and how local districts bridge the gap between state allocations and actual operating costs: "Levies are for learning, bonds are for building."**

**Levies and bonds both require voter approval, but not at the same threshold. Levies need to reach a simple majority (50% plus one), while bonds require a super-majority (60%).**

**Winter admits the super-majority bond requirement is a source of frustration — and not just for South Kitsap School District, which saw its February 2016 bond fail by such a small margin.**

**“Even taking South Kitsap out of the equation, from a state-wide perspective, there are some communities that really struggle with passing at a 60 percent or above rate and therefore, schools are declining in quality and maintenance costs are going up,” Winter said. “I wish there was another way to fund school construction other than going to our voters, but unfortunately, it’s the only system we have.”**

**It's a system that's come under scrutiny.**

**In recent years, members of both the state Senate and House of Representatives have brought forth resolutions that, though unsuccessful, aimed to change the super-majority threshold.**

**Last month, the Washington Supreme Court [ruled against a lawsuit by the Wahkiakum School District](#) demanding that the state take more responsibility when it comes to school construction costs. The court stated that local communities must continue to bear the brunt of construction funding.**

**In response, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction head Chris Reykdal said that during the next legislative session, his agency would push forward with a request that the state lower the bond approval threshold to a 50% majority.**

**"The Court has affirmed that school construction is a shared responsibility," Reykdal said. "It cannot be reasonably assumed that every community can do their part with an undemocratic super-majority required to pass a bond vote at the local level in order to access the state’s share of the funding."**