

OPINION

Wall: 'Mega' high school not the answer

Evidence does not support increasing size of the school, SKSD director says

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Greg Wall

By GREG WALL

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District Board of Directors — District 5**

We have a great high school, with great kids and a dedicated faculty. But it is crowded and not in the condition it needs to be to produce a 21st-century education.

Would a mega-high school as proposed by my opponent result in a better education for our children or in significant taxpayer savings? The answer to both questions is “no.” It is important to remember that the purpose of the

school district and the guiding star of any member of the school board is to educate our students to the highest degree possible and prepare them to enter society as productive citizens. Education is about more than designing buildings.

There are some advantages to having a larger high school. At South Kitsap High School, we are able to offer a larger selection of classes than a smaller school. For example, SKHS offers Japanese, American Sign Language, career and technical education programs, AVID and an

International Baccalaureate program.

We offer more than the basic sports that most high schools do: crew (rowing), lacrosse and water polo. We also have a very successful band, orchestra, vocal music and extensive art programs.

However, there are disadvantages to being a very large school. A great deal of research has been done on the optimum size for a comprehensive high school. The Gates Foundation found that between 1,400 and 1,600 students — about 400 per class — produced the best results. If schools become too large, some of the problems are overcrowding, less engagement between faculty and students, higher dropout rates and less ability to participate in extra-curricular activities. A study on this can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/large-high-schools>.

The prototypical school model developed by the state of Washington uses a 600-student model. These studies also illustrate that between 600 to 900 students in a high school produce good results — and adverse effects arise when enrollment reaches 2,100 students. You can read this research at <https://tinyurl.com/y28bvfke>.

We have about 2,600 students in our high school. When setting policy and making decisions about our schools, the board of directors must use research-based evidence. And the evidence does not support a giant high school.

Would building a giant high school on the current site save money in any significant way? I doubt it. I do not believe the advocates of this approach have much experience in this area. While it is true we could receive a larger amount of state money than by building a new school, the expense of a giant high school with a multi-level parking garage would be immense.

For example, Olympic College just completed one building on an established site at a cost of \$46.5 million. Such a plan would also have to take into account the upgrading of the infrastructure in the area to accommodate a larger school. When we installed three modular buildings and a restroom at South Kitsap, the infrastructure costs alone, including required major stormwater improvements, was in the neighborhood of

\$200,000.

Imagine the cost of doubling the size of South Kitsap High School. While some proponents of this have drawn nice pictures, I haven't seen any cost estimates or feasibility studies by an architect.

The solution is to have two "right-size" high schools. It is best for our students and best for the taxpayers. That is why the majority of our taxpayers voted for this program three times in a row.

Greg Wall, a Port Orchard attorney, is an incumbent member of the South Kitsap School District Board of Directors.



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