

School districts cope with fewer students and less money

By: STACY BRANDT - Staff Writer

NORTH COUNTY ---- After decades of increasing enrollment, most school districts throughout the county have started losing students in the last few years, according to a North County Times analysis of state figures.

And for school districts, fewer students equals less money ---- as much as \$6,700 per student each year.

As parents leave costly areas near the coast for newer, cheaper neighborhoods in inland locales such as Riverside and San Bernardino counties, about three-quarters of the districts in the county are feeling the crunch.

The enrollment decline in North County is a bit less severe, with a little more than half of the districts losing students, according to a report released in March by the San Diego County Office of Education.

Losing students can have a detrimental effect on districts because they get less money to educate students, while operational costs such as utilities, insurance and employee pay and benefits continue to rise.

"It has a huge, huge impact," Brett McFadden, a budget analyst for the Association of California School Administrators, said about losing students. "If you have a list of the top three issues facing school districts, I would say this is in the top three."

Because districts get state money on a per-student basis, receiving between \$5,300 and \$6,700 per student each year depending on the type of district, losing even a small group of students can have an impact on their budgets.

For example, when the Oceanside Unified School District lost 581 students between the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years, the amount of money it received from the state the following year was roughly \$3 million lower.

In the last five years, the Oceanside and Vista unified school districts have each lost roughly \$11 million in state funding as they have lost about 2,000 students.

"It's very difficult," said Lora Duzyk, the county Office of Education's assistant superintendent of business services. "Expenses do not decrease as quickly as the revenue does."

Causes and effects

The declining enrollment in San Diego County is being caused by a variety of factors, including a lower birth rate, decreasing immigration rates and the high cost of housing, the county's report states. As a whole, the schools in the county lost 1,227 students between the 2005-06 and 2006-07 school years.

Across the state, many parents are moving their school-age children to newer neighborhoods with less expensive housing, leaving the coast for the inland deserts, McFadden said.

"You go up along the coast all the way up to Eureka, you're going to see declining enrollment," he said.

Some high-performing districts along the coast in North County are actually bucking this trend and gaining students.

Another factor drawing students away from traditional schools is the proliferation of charter schools over the last decade. Charter schools are a type of public school that operates independently under a contract granted by a school district, county board of education or the state.

Though these schools are chartered through school districts they function as autonomous businesses and take the per-student money for each student.

In order to remain competitive against charter schools, private schools and even other districts, school officials are increasingly working to make their districts more attractive to parents and students in the face of increasing alternative educational choices.

In the last decade or so, educational options have steadily increased, giving parents the chance to enroll their children in schools other than their neighborhood campuses.

Oceanside Unified has tried over the last few years to increase options for families who want something different than typical schools have to offer, including new centers designed to help high school students who have fallen behind or are at risk of dropping out, said Robyn Phillips, the district's associate superintendent of business services.

"We're continuing to look at some alternatives," she said. "How do we compete?"

With fewer students comes less of a need for teachers, Phillips said, but even so, eliminating educators only accounts for about half of the changes the district has had to make to its budget in the last five years. Other cost-cutting measures have included scaling back busing and supplies, she said.

Other districts are facing similar situations, having to trim their budgets and hold off on new expenses.

As districts lose students and hire fewer teachers, it can become more difficult for educators to get a job, especially a permanent one, said Jan O'Reilly, president of the Vista Teachers Association.

"They can't pick up everybody," she said. "These poor (temporary teachers) are on pins and needles."

The numbers

Countywide, the loss of students started in 2003 after years of steady growth. The county total went from 499,186 students in 2003-04 to 494,001 students this year.

Out of 42 districts in the county, 31 are losing students this year, according to the county Office of Education report.

Based on demographic and economic trends, the county office has estimated that most districts will continue to lose students until 2013. After that, enrollment is expected to increase slightly.

The districts being hit the hardest are mostly in East County, while North County districts have generally been the least affected.

There are even a few districts in North County that are gaining students, though that growth is slowing.

"We're maintaining; we're not growing like we were," said Gary Hamels, assistant superintendent of business services for the San Marcos Unified School District

San Marcos Unified and Del Mar Union are the two districts in the area that have showed the biggest gains over the last five years, both with a 24 percent increase in students. The communities both of these districts service have seen explosive population growth over the last several years, which has brought more school-age children.

Between the 2001-02 school year and this year, 16,607-student San Marcos Unified gained 3,233 students and the 3,845-student Del Mar district gained 521 students.

Such rapid growth also can present a challenge, said Thomas Bishop, superintendent of the Del Mar district. In the

last decade the district has gone from three campuses to eight.

"As it slows down, it's going to be good for the district," Bishop said of the increasing enrollment. "We're going to get a chance to breathe."

On the other hand, the Oceanside and Vista unified school districts have both lost roughly 8 percent of their students ---- about 2,000 children ---- over the last five years. This year, Vista Unified had 23,447 and Oceanside Unified had 20,223.

"It's just been a real challenge," Phillips said. "We've had to work hard at trimming our budget."

In Escondido, the 18,474-student elementary school district has lost more than 800 students and roughly \$4 million in the last five years ---- 4 percent of its enrollment ---- while the 8,241-student high school district gained more than \$6 million and 1,000 students, a 15 percent increase in enrollment.

Though both districts were growing in the early years of this decade, as less families move into the area, the elementary district was the first to see the slump, district officials said.

As the children work their way through the educational system, enrollment in the high schools also is expected to decline, said Barry Dragon, assistant superintendent in charge of business services for the high school district.

The small Cardiff School District has lost almost 17 percent of its students, but the school board actually planned for that loss by eliminating transfers from other districts, Superintendent Vince Jewell said.

Because the district receives more money from local property taxes than it would get from the state, it is one of only four in North County that doesn't get any more money from the state for having additional students.

"Now, we have more money per kid to do things," Jewell said. "That's when we could start to have smaller classes and hiring specialty teachers and all that."

The three other districts with a similar funding situation are Del Mar Union and Rancho Santa Fe and Solana Beach elementary districts.

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Students are disappearing from the rolls of more than half the school districts in North County, where living costs and other factors are causing enrollments to shrink. As schools' rosters shrink, so do their budgets; each student represents as much as \$6,700 per year from the state. //Photo illustration by Kathy Magerkurth