

## WATCHDOG REPORT

## Student numbers undergo decline

### Gates Chili, Greece among hardest hit

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The common perception of public school enrollment trends in Monroe County, to the extent there is one, seems to be one of flight from the city to the suburbs.

While there is an element of truth to that perception, a look at the numbers shows a far more complicated picture and some startling changes in key suburban districts, such as Gates Chili, which has lost almost half its enrollment over the past 40 years.

Data from several state and local sources and discussions with school officials paint a variable landscape of enrollment — a key statistic since it is directly tied to day-to-day funding and to long-term decisions about programs and construction expenditures that can have a significant impact on how much you pay in local and state taxes.

Student enrollment at public schools in Monroe County, including the suburbs, is in a free fall, mirroring a statewide trend. But that could change.

Gates Chili, for example, had a student enrollment topping 7,000 in the late 1970s but now has 4,547 students, according to data kept by the state Comptroller's Office.

In a narrower data set kept by the state Education Department, the Gates Chili district lost 255 students between 2009 and 2011, or 5.4 percent of its enrollment. Other hard-hit districts were Fairport and East Irondequoit. Fairport lost 337 students, or 4.9 percent of its enrollment, during the same period. East Irondequoit lost 147 students, or 4.4 percent.

In Greece, enrollment fell about 3.8 percent, or 486 students, continuing a trend that began in the early 2000s. Indeed, enrollment in that district has fallen more than 12 percent since its

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## Schools

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peak of nearly 15,000 students in the 1990s, based on data from the state Comptroller's Office Both Gates Chili and Greece have reacted to their changes in recent years by closing schools. Gates Chili closed its Washington Irving Elementary School in 2008. Greece closed its Kirk Road and West Ridge elementary school buildings, as well as its Odyssey Academy building on Hoover Drive at the end of the 2011-12 school year. Additional closures and school consolidations are possible there in coming years, although officials expect the enrollment decline to stabilize soon.

"I don't expect drastic changes," said Barbara Tomasso, Greece's assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction and assessment.

According to the state Education Department data, New York public schools overall lost nearly 19,000 students between the 2008-09 and 2010-11 school years.

In Monroe County, the data show overall enrollment in the same period decreased by 2.8 percent, a loss of about 3,220 students, and staffing declined by 4.4 percent, a drop of about 630 workers.

Some school leaders suspect the reason for the enrollment drop comes down to a basic cultural trend: People are waiting longer to have children, or are not having as many, leaving classrooms empty.

"Young adults who would have already had babies in previous generations are not having children as early," said Jody Siegle, executive director of the Monroe County School Boards Association. "That change in culture means that you simply have fewer students in your classrooms."

Still, Siegle said districts may want to think twice before getting rid of those empty buildings.

"I'm expecting in the next five years we'll see another big increase in our kindergarten population as this next generation has their children," Siegle said. "Maybe not as big, but they'll be there."

### **Decline in the city**

Rochester city schools saw a similar 2.8 percent dip between 2008-09 and 2010-11, with district data showing that enrollment fell from 32,132 to 31,247. The loss coincides with a continued exodus of families to the suburbs, often for what they see as better educational options for children. But there's another variable at work in the city. Enrollment loss has also been accelerating since the state started allowing more charter schools to open. For each of the past two years, two new charter schools have opened in Rochester. This fall two more will open. Charter schools receive public funding but are governed by independent boards separate from public school boards. City school officials are projecting that about 433 more students will leave for charter schools in the coming school year, taking with them about \$5.7 million in state funding. City Superintendent Bolgen Vargas says that the district cannot ignore the enrollment loss, but rather sees it as a reason to make city schools more appealing to families who are leaving for charter schools or the suburbs. That means figuring out how to create and maintain quality programs, even as the district grapples with budget cuts.

"When you do that (cut programs), then the school becomes less attractive — not just for families but for the students themselves," contributing to enrollment decline, he said. The most current district staffing data show that funding loss has helped fuel the loss of about 620 staff positions in the past two years. Not all of those positions are reflected in the state data, and the overall county number, because of the lag time in data reporting. The district closed one school last year, and more school closings may be planned in the future, Vargas said.

Rochester schools have scaled back on art, music and sports programs in recent years, as well, he said.

### **Lots of variables**

Countywide, some districts had static or minimal growth. One district, East Rochester, is an example of the many variables that can affect enrollment.

That district, the only one in the county to register positive growth, saw a minimal 1.8 percent enrollment increase — from 1,174 to 1,195 students, but increased staff by 9.8 percent — from 153 to 168.

The growth in enrollment and staffing, Superintendent Ray Giamartino Jr. said in an email, was the result of a district initiative to bring students who were receiving special education services elsewhere back to the district.

Staff grew at a higher rate than student enrollment because some special education students required more attention from staff members. However, Giamartino said the district was still able to save money by educating those students "in-house" rather than contracting with outside groups. Pittsford, Brighton and Webster were among the districts that held steady or only lost a minimal number of students.

### **Statewide picture**

Some counties elsewhere in the state lost nearly 7 percent of their student bodies during the same period, according to the state Education Department data.

"On a statewide basis, (nearly 19,000 is) not a huge shift — you're looking at about 2.7 million students statewide," said Billy Easton, executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education, a policy group. "But in some districts, that could be pretty hard." The Education Department data are based on an enrollment count the state collects during one day in the fall of each school year, capturing a moment in time snapshot of how many students are present.

The number can differ from data collected by school districts, which track student enrollment throughout the school year. The areas hit hardest by enrollment declines, based on that data snapshot, are in western New York and the Southern Tier, while New York City and adjacent counties experienced growth. Those enrollment trends are consistent with overall population shifts. The statewide number of full-time professional employees, including teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, school nurses, psychologists and other professionals who devote more than half of their time to non-teaching duties, was down 4.6 percent statewide — from 281,871 in 2009 to 268,856 in 2011.

Data show that some districts with growing, stable or slightly declining enrollment are reducing staff at a more dramatic rate, trends that educational officials said have a two-fold explanation.

Districts with big shifts in enrollment worked to realign staff with their growing or declining student bodies. But schools have also cut staff over the past three years because of state-aid reductions and a property cap this year that limited the growth in property taxes to about 3 percent, experts said.

“Generally speaking, schools had really upped their staff in the recent past,” particularly in the early 2000s, said Tim Hoefler, director of the Empire Center for New York State Policy, a fiscally conservative think tank in Albany. “They’re rightsizing themselves.”

Schools received an \$805 million increase in state aid this year, but they dealt with either declining or flat state aid in the prior years. “The cuts we’ve seen go far deeper” than personnel adjustments for enrollment, said Carl Korn, spokesman for New York State United Teachers, a statewide union. “We’ve seen a slashing of programs and staff. We’ve seen school closings and the elimination of extracurricular activities and important subjects like art and music.”

Easton said the state’s “across-the-board” cuts were not “thoughtfully built around drops in enrollment.”

Staffing cuts have come as schools consider consolidating districts, sharing services or seeking legislative authority to establish regional high schools. “Those things are not easy to do,” said David Albert, a spokesman for the state School Boards Assotax ciation. “The fact that there is such a renewed focus on consolidations and mergers speaks to the enrollment declines and ... the fiscal reality that school districts are facing.”

A typical district spends three-quarters of its budget on personnel, said Robert Lowry, deputy director of the state Council of Superintendents. During difficult fiscal times, districts will first try to cut costs not associated with employees, he said. “But as the need to make tough choices goes on, it becomes harder to spare the biggest part of your budget,” he said.

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