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Report: School Enrollment Could Rise

Posted: May 12, 2009 02:43 PM

Updated: May 12, 2009 08:18 PM



A new report from the University of Virginia shows that Virginia's public schools are going to get a little more crowded very soon.

The Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service predicts about 42,000 more students will hit the halls over the next five years.

Susan Perrone, a statistician for the Weldon Cooper Center, says the bulk of the projected increase will be in the elementary grades.

"While we're expecting the overall increase in school enrollment to be 3.5 percent, the kindergarten increase in enrollment over the next five years will actually be about 10 percent," Perrone says.

Most school divisions in Central Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley will see the normal fluctuations they're accustomed to, like the ones Madison County is dealing with now.

"When we started the budget process this year, we were anticipating that next year we would have 1810 students," says Madison County Schools Superintendent Dr. Brenda Tanner.

Tanner continued, "Now that we're working through the budget and amending it once we have our final state figures, we are looking at our enrollment as it's changing and we're changing that to be 1,800 students."

Madison is seeing the opposite of the UVA report's prediction for kindergarten enrollment.

"We have a much smaller kindergarten class this year than we had last year (139 in September 2007, 118 in September 2008), so that impacted us at the beginning of the year," says Dr. Tanner.

The county is getting \$16,000 in state funds to offset the enrollment loss. The state spends an average of \$4,269 per year for each public school student, so those funds won't make up for what was lost when 10 students fell off Madison County's rolls.

"When we have declined enrollment we don't see students leaving in packages. i.e., you don't just see a first grade class or a third grade class," Dr. Brenda Tanner says. "At times you're still running the same number of buses, and you still have the same number of classes."

The recession could send enrollment numbers up everywhere, but there's no indication of just how much.

"A lot of families are pulling their children out of private school and putting them into public school. That's not even accounted for in these projections," Susan Perrone says.

For Madison County, Dr. Tanner says there is a bright side to the enrollment decline: "Fortunately for us, that might mean our class sizes could be smaller."

Tanner adds that she and the School Board still have to look at how they can adjust the budget in order to fully make up for the enrollment loss figures.

Reported by Tracy Clemons

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