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Report: Increase in births since 2000 will raise school population

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RICHMOND

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Virginia's public schools are expected to grow steadily over the next few years, mostly because of an increase in elementary-school-age children, according to a University of Virginia study.

U.Va.'s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service projects that nearly 42,000 children will enter public school between 2008 and 2013 — increasing overall enrollment by 3.5 percent —

with much higher growth rates taking place in the lower grades. Kindergarten enrollment is expected to increase by more than 10 percent during that five-year period, while 12th-grade enrollment is expected to fall 5.5 percent — the highest decline of any grade.

Enrollment in public schools was 1,205,169 statewide in fall 2008, about 3,000 higher than the fall of 2007, U.Va. demographer Michael Spar said Monday. It's expected to rise by 4,000 students between the current and the upcoming school year, and in increasing numbers through 2013.

The number of births in Virginia has increased by nearly 10 percent, from 98,862 in 2000 to 108,417 in 2007, the latest year for which data is available.

Spar said the last time the increase in births was comparably high was between 1946 and 1956 — the so-called baby boom. But this time, while the birth rate is low, there now are far more women having children.

"The large cohorts of children born after 2000 are just starting to feed into the public school systems now, and over the next four to five years, the kindergarten class is going to get successively larger," Spar said in a telephone interview. "The big lump in the pipeline will (then) move through middle school and high school."

Over the next school year, Loudoun and Prince William counties are expected to gain 3,655 students (6.5 percent) and 2,047 students (2.8 percent), respectively, according to the report. Forty percent of the state's 132 school divisions are expected to gain students, including districts in northern Virginia, suburban Richmond and Williamsburg/James City County. Virginia Beach and Norfolk are expected to lose 724 students (1 percent) and 501 students (1.6 percent), respectively.

Between 2008 and 2013, six divisions will lose more than 500 students: Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Portsmouth and Richmond, according to the report. On the flip side, 22 divisions are expected to gain more than 500 students over the period.

The report cautions that the recession and declining home values might limit the projections' accuracy, especially for school divisions where there are high private-school enrollments and very expensive housing.

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"As household finances deteriorate, some families are taking their children out of private school and enrolling them in public school, a process already under way in Arlington County," the report said. "Whether this trend will continue and how it might persist is not known, and makes enrollment projections for these areas especially difficult."

Large-scale changes to Virginia's military bases also can throw off some projections. The Fort Lee Army base, near Petersburg, for example, is anticipated to expand under a plan by the federal Base Realignment and Closure Commission. The move is expected to increase the number of students attending public school in Prince George County and surrounding areas.

While most localities aren't expected to grow, those that are will need to hire more teachers and possibly expand school facilities. The trend comes at a bad time because many localities' ability to raise money via real estate taxes has been curtailed because of lowered property values, Spar said.

The report also noted that divisions losing students might reflect their communities' impending shortages of available workers because of declining numbers of high school graduates, or because families with school-age children move elsewhere to find better jobs.

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