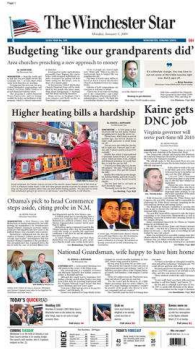


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Archive Edition: **Wednesday, December 31, 2008**

# Census findings affect funding

By Jessica J. Burchard  
*The Winchester Star*

**Winchester** — Many of the census forms that went home in students' backpacks last spring likely ended up in the trash can.

Winchester Public Schools officials had a hard time persuading people to respond to their 2008 triennial census.

They mailed census forms to city households in two phases, totaling about 22,000 letters. More forms were sent home with students in early June for those parents who had not submitted the information.

"We even sent the letter out in Spanish," said Diane Bontoft, finance clerk with the city school system. "I don't think you could have made it any easier."

However, just 46 percent of the nearly 30,000 census forms were completed and returned to school administrators between March 13 and July 15.

The forms were the system's only way of determining the number of 5- to 19-year-olds living in Winchester.

Administrators worked with AmeriComm LLC to conduct the census, at a cost of \$17,561.08.

Numbers equal dollars

Every three years, the Winchester schools and Virginia's other 131 public school systems are required by the state Department of Education to conduct a survey of their communities to determine the number of people aged 5-19.

The systems receive 1.125 percent of the state's sales tax revenues — about \$1.2 billion this year — to fund education. The amount awarded to each system is based on the number of school-age children in the locality.

Although the numbers have been filed with the Department of Education, the census findings will not affect the school systems' budgets until fiscal year 2011.

But the data from this year's census may not be accurate.

According to Scott Worner, facilities planner for the Spotsylvania County Public Schools, census form responses are at an-all time low in the state.

His finding came from a nine-question survey he sent to 99 of the state's 132 public school systems.

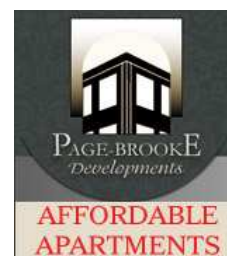
A study conducted by Susan Perrone, a researcher at the Weldon-Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, found that school systems organize and distribute their census forms differently, which creates issues with inaccurate student counts and miscalculated state funding.

Perrone's study states: "Theoretically, an accurate count in each locality results in every school division receiving an equal dollar amount per child."

Overcounting the number of school-age residents causes too much money to be allocated to one system, while undercounting leads to too little money being distributed.

Linda Meadows, director of finance for the Winchester schools, said the

recipient of  
Elle Magazine's  
Best Hair in  
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Co



difficulties of the triennial census don't diminish its importance.

"Part of the purpose of doing this is to let people know this could translate into a refund of sales tax revenue," she said. "The more people who responded, the higher the refund."

Despite fewer than 50 percent of residents returning the census survey this year, the city school system saw its largest number of students since the triennial census began in 1983.

This year's census reported that the city has 4,670 residents between 5 and 19 — an increase of 264 since the last triennial census in 2005.

#### Collecting data

The Frederick County Public Schools tried a variety of approaches to ensure higher census responses.

Schools Superintendent Patricia Taylor appeared in several televised public service announcements urging county residents to fill out and return the census forms.

The system also used enumerators — people sent door-to-door to obtain census data — in its collection process, and worked with AmeriComm to collect the information.

The school system also mailed 30,515 forms to county households.

The system spent \$36,000 on the census, conducted from March 13 through July 15.

Using the varied collection methods resulted in responses from 85 percent of the households in the county, said Wayne Lee, coordinator of planning and development for the school system.

"I'm pretty happy with the 85 percent response rate," he added.

The census found that 16,135 children aged 5 to 19 live in the county — 2,325 more than reported in the 2005 census.

#### Size is an advantage

Being the smallest school system in the area may have been an advantage for Clarke County.

The system boasted a census form return rate of about 90 percent.

The data determined that 2,485 school-age children live in the county.

Edward Breslauer, director of business for the Clarke County Public Schools, said he was confident with the accuracy of the census findings.

"We ought to be close [to 100 percent accurate]," he said, citing the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 estimate of 2,301 children between 5 and 18 in the county.

The school system mailed about 3,000 census forms to county households; the collection period was Feb. 13 to July 15.

All of the system's census work was handled by school administrators, and the cost was \$2,600.

The Associated Press contributed some information for this report.

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