

Southern Tier student population shrinking



Written by

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While school levies and taxes continued to rise, Broome County lost at least 4,745 school-aged children during the past decade, newly released census figures show.

That's the equivalent of the entire Union-Endicott Central School district, plus nearly two graduating classes from Vestal High.

The driving force behind that startling number? The county's 35- to 44-year-old population dropped by 8,838 over the decade -- or 28.5 percent -- and their children left with them.

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To put it in a different perspective, that's the equivalent of 2.4 people in that prime parenting age group moving out of Broome County every day over that 10-year span.

"The exodus quest: you've got a difficult

place to continue to pay your taxes in a declining economy," said Bob Kingsley, chairman of the education committee for Citizens for a Better Broome. "If you've lost your job ... it's a good incentive to look for greener pastures. And obviously, families of 4,745, more or less, have done so. They are voting with their feet."

Consider:

» The towns of Union and Maine, combined, lost 880 school-aged children over the decade. That directly impacts the school districts of Union-Endicott, Maine-Endwell and Johnson City. School leaders say they have cut back on staff -- some through layoffs, some through attrition -- to help balance those losses.

» The Town of Vestal lost 485 school-aged children during the past 10 years, while Apalachin -- parts of which feed the Vestal district -- lost 92 schoolkids, leading to enrollment declines. Vestal's superintendent, Mark LaRoach, said the impact was certainly felt last year with the

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elimination of an entire team of teachers at the middle school level.

» The City of Binghamton has lost 791 school-aged children over the decade. That's 13.5 percent of the Binghamton City School District's total enrollment of 5,859, according to a 2010-11 school statistical report. Last year, the district cut 18 positions in an effort to deal with state aid cuts.

Fewer job opportunities

So, why the sharp decline in numbers?

Regional job losses play a large part: some of the area's biggest companies -- Endicott Interconnect, LockheedMartin, IBM and BAE Systems -- cut jobs over the past decade.

The situation has been similar in many upstate New York communities, said Michael Moran, director of communications with the Business Council of New York State. New York's high taxes and high cost of doing business drive jobs -- and people -- away, he said.

"New York has had the biggest outmigration of people moving from one state to another for the better part of a decade," Moran said. "It slowed down a little bit in the face of the recession ... but as the rest of the country starts to recover, it seems to be starting up again."

When businesses locate to other parts of the country, the jobs follow, as do the younger people, he said.

"Because it's so expensive to do business here, I think they think, 'There are no jobs here, I have to go someplace to find a job and build a life,'" he said.

A newly-released NY1/YNN-Marist poll backs that up. The poll shows 1 in 3 New Yorkers under age 30 plans to move to another state at some time, while 1 in 4 adults overall plans to leave the state within five years, according to the Associated Press.

According to the survey, most of those who plan to move will do so because of economic reasons including jobs, the cost of living and taxes, the AP reported.

Susan Lerner, executive director of Common Cause New York, said New York is lagging others when it comes to creating meaningful jobs.

"If you can't get a job, then you are not going to stay in an area," she said. "Although we hear constantly from governors and legislators and mayors ...

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that they are concerned about creating jobs, they have failed to do so in areas of the state."

The ripple effect

While Broome County's population grew slightly over the decade -- to 200,600 -- experts say younger families aren't settling down in the Southern Tier like they used to.

Sometimes, young professionals will graduate from area colleges and move to places like New York City, to get the "bright lights, big city" feel, said Pike Oliver, senior lecturer for the Cornell University Program in Real Estate.

Then, after they've had a taste of the city, they want to come back to the Greater Binghamton region to settle down and raise a family, but because of the lack of opportunities here, often, they simply can't afford to.

"I hear a lot of anecdotal stories about people who would like to come back, but can't always do that," Oliver said.

Instead, many younger people have migrated toward the Southern states, including the Carolinas and Georgia, where there are more opportunities, Oliver said.

"People move to opportunity," said Kathryn Foster, director of the University at Buffalo Regional Institute. "They move to where they think they will have the ability" to find jobs.

The problem is that when people move

away from the area, the region loses the age group that is going to buy houses, invest in properties, enroll their children in schools and contribute to the local tax base, she said.

"All the things that make for a very ... vital community," she said.

In terms of local school districts, fewer taxpayers per district means the onus falls on the ones who are still around, said Kingsley, of Citizens for a Better Broome.

"You're also talking about families that represent the tax base," he said of the people that census figures show are no longer here. "Now we're seeing what everyone feared."

Enrollment battle

Since last year, enrollment has dropped in the Vestal district by 2 percent. On average, that's been the trend for districts in the Northeast, LaRoach said.

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While the district enrollment is stable at 3,689 students, he said, the fact that enrollment continues to decline in area schools is a concern.

"Baby boomers are moving into these towns -- those who have raised their families," he said. "Certainly, it's problematic and something we have to be aware of as we frame budgets in the future."

While LaRoach is optimistic Vestal can buck the trend, as long as the district continues to market itself as a [quality](#) place for parents to send their children, he acknowledged there could be other less-than-ideal possibilities.

If the district can't reverse or stabilize the trend, it calls into question the long-range future of programs currently offered, he said.

"You lose students, one of the things that comes to question right away is, 'How long can we continue to offer enrichment programs? How long can we continue to offer electives?'" he said. "This is where so many individuals get to express their giftedness."

Union-Endicott Superintendent Suzanne McLeod is no stranger to enrollment decline, either. The U-E Board of Education has trimmed staff right along, helping to balance out numbers, she said.

Over the last six to eight years, McLeod said the district has likely not filled 40 or 50 positions through attrition. This year, with other factors in play, more than 50

positions are being eliminated -- some through layoffs.

When it comes to keeping younger professionals in the community, and subsequently their children, McLeod said it's important for a community to play up its assets. For example, in the Southern Tier, she noted there's a great deal of nature and outdoor-related activities that could be a draw for young adults.

"I think a lot of people, communities, need to be aware of the needs of young adults," she said. "And really before they are starting their families, helping them have a connection through the community ... To that end, this region has a lot to give to that group."

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