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Joetta Sack-Min

Demographic shifts, changes in housing market make predicting student enrollment more difficult

In Lower Manhattan,

the area once devastated by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks is thriving. New apartments and condominiums are rising high, businesses are moving in, and huge office complexes under construction nearly guarantee the boom will continue.

What city planners—and the school district—didn't anticipate were scores of young families moving into trendy neighborhoods and sending their children to the area's public schools. In Tribeca and Battery Park, which many residents believe have the best elementary schools in the city, New York officials are scrambling to find more classroom space and plan new facilities to alleviate overcrowding.

It's a remarkable reversal of the decades-long shift to the suburbs, and like some other cities, New York is dealing with the irony of excess classroom space in some neighborhoods and overcrowding in others.

Enrollment projections—and the ensuing debate over whether to build or close schools—always have been a moving target for districts. But recent years have brought about some unexpected demographic shifts, including

the arrival of new immigrants, and a faltering U.S. economy and housing market have made the job all the more difficult.

"Part of it is art and part of it is science when it comes to demographics," says Carl Baxmeyer, a planner and senior associate with Fanning/Howey Associates, Inc., a national school architectural and engineering firm. "The element that's more difficult to get a handle on is the intangibles. How many people are moving into the area? Are they young people? Young families? Older people?"

Many planners are waiting to see whether economic trends will impact where families live and where children go to school. Some think rising gas and energy prices will nudge more families to migrate from outer suburbs to urban areas, and families who can no longer afford private school tuition may move to public schools. The housing slump is expected to be a major factor in school site planning for several more years.

School districts "are getting much more detailed in looking at their student populations and where students have lived and how they move within those boundaries," says Tracy Healy, president of DeJong-Healy, a school demographics and facility planning firm. "What we're finding is that a lot of the old rules of thumb don't apply any longer."

Growing districts plan cautiously

Reliable data is critical to figuring out where students live, and how many families are moving into or out of an area. More districts are investing in

new technologies, such as geographical information systems, which use interactive maps to locate targeted populations and gauge mobility trends.

Healy says it used to be customary to assume that large, relatively expensive homes housed families with several older children. Now, she's seeing more families with preschool-age children, or no children at all, moving into those types of homes.

In growing areas, Healy has worked closely with other city and county agencies to create "build-out" projections of where new developments will be located. This, in turn, helps districts determine where large pockets of students will reside.

But overbuilding is a risk, particularly in a slow economy.

Michael Reuter, chief financial officer for the Hamilton Southeast District, a suburb of Indianapolis, is proceeding carefully. Hamilton has grown from 4,000 students in 1994 to 17,000 students this year, but officials wait until a new school is almost filled to capacity before breaking ground on another one.

Hamilton's population has grown because of its reputation as a place with good schools, lifestyle, and amenities, and Fishers, Ind., its main hub, recently ranked 10th on *Money* magazine's 2008 Best Places to Live list. Families tend to move to the area when their children are very young,

Reuter says, and then buy larger homes as their children grow.

“Our enrollment pattern looks like a pyramid—you start at the 12th grade and go to first,” he says. With the bulk of students clustered in the lower grades—last year, the system had about 750 12th graders and more than 1,500 first-graders—the district knows it must adapt as the bubble moves through.

Most recently, Reuter says elementary school enrollment appears to be tapering off, and fewer building permits are being issued as a result of the housing downfall. To manage potential enrollment declines, the district uses portable classrooms to accommodate extra students in the lower grades.

The Clear Creek Independent School District near Houston also has grown exponentially in recent years, and officials there created a software program to help forecast growth and the cost of new school buildings. Based on a Microsoft Excel platform, the software uses a matrix to show projected growth and costs, adjusted for inflation each year.

Ron McPherson, associate superintendent of operations, says the software has been useful for bond campaigns because it helps communicate the district’s strategic planning and projections.

“We know three to five years in advance what’s going on and can make sure we have a facility with the resources and staffing that we need,” he says.

Closures hurt communities

In areas with declining populations and economies, closing schools is a painful fact of life. Districts must decide whether to keep a building—either reusing it or letting it sit vacant in case the population rises again—or sell it.

Most districts choose to keep the building for the first few years, notes Charles Eckenstahler, a long-time municipal planner in Michigan, where many areas are seeing declining populations. But that sometimes proves to be a costly mistake, he says, because vacant buildings are difficult to maintain and insure, plus energy costs are rising. Many times, he adds, school boards wait several years before donating a building to the city, which then has to make costly repairs or raze the facility.

Eckenstahler, a senior consultant with McKenna Associates, an urban planning group, has worked on projects that have converted school buildings into senior housing complexes, administrative offices, and even shopping malls, with varying degrees of success. Generally, though, finding a way to reuse and convert a school facility is difficult.

“When you look at it, unless there is a very significant tax advantage, a low-interest loan, or financial incentive, most often it is faster, cheaper, and more profitable to go to a [new] site than to reuse,” he says.

In Pittsburgh, the school district is trying to sell about 20 school facilities that were closed during a massive “right-

sizing” plan that was implemented after years of declining enrollment caused by suburban flight, lower birthrates, and the growth of charter schools.

The district still has seats left in the schools that remain open in case of a surprise upswing, says Richard Fellers, special assistant to the superintendent. But Fellers’ forecasts so far show no signs of growth in the near future.

“Birthrates are easy to predict, but just recently several city organizations have speculated, with skyrocketing fuel prices that some people may move back in, and that’s a tougher one to predict,” he says.

Deciding to close and sell the facilities was particularly difficult, Fellers says, because many of the buildings were community hubs. The district wants to find buyers who will reuse the facilities in ways that could benefit neighborhoods, rather than open competing schools.

Meanwhile, the district spends about \$1.5 million a year to maintain the buildings and has few prospective buyers, Fellers says. The district’s security patrol monitors the vacant schools, but some have been vandalized.

To avoid closing buildings, Healy says districts often try to open magnet or specialty schools in areas with declining populations. Others experiment with different grade configurations, such as the K-8 schools that have become increasingly popular in urban districts.

Rallying around a school

Losing a school can hurt a neighborhood’s character, and historic preservationists and community activists nearly always rally to save a building from closure, or at least demolition.

Tom Hylton, a journalist-turned-activist in Pottstown, Pa., is campaigning to save the quality of life in small communities and keep local schools open. In recent decades, he says, Pennsylvania’s quaint charm has been ravaged by suburbanization and school consolidation.

“We’ve created this pattern where you have to get into your car for every aspect of life, and as we’ve been doing that it’s becoming increasingly evident that that’s not sustainable,” he says, citing statistics that show 15 percent of students now walk to school compared to 42 percent in the 1970s.

Districts have led the path to suburbanization and overdevelopment because they tend to build large schools on the outskirts of towns to have room for athletic fields and parking lots, says Hylton, who won a Pulitzer Prize for newspaper editorials lamenting the state’s loss of farmland.

Consolidation also has severely damaged many of the state’s small towns and villages, he says. In one area, five neighborhood schools—located in the center of their towns, where most students could walk—were closed to build a 700-student elementary facility where they had to be driven or ride a bus.

In some areas, an influx of immigrants has kept schools in operation. In Hazleton, Pa., district officials shuttered a land-

mark high school, known locally as “The Castle” for its Gothic-style architecture and turreted entrance, in the mid-1990s. After much debate and community protests, the district planned to raze the vacant building. But a sudden enrollment boost came when a meatpacking plant opened nearby and families from larger cities began migrating to the town in search of a more laid-back lifestyle.

District officials were initially caught off guard by the surging enrollment, which has grown from 6,500 to 10,000 students in three years. Many of the new students were English language learners.

“We played catch-up, unfortunately, for a while,” says Donald Bayzick, Hazleton’s director of elementary and middle schools.

When the district needed a new elementary site immediately, officials decided to renovate and reopen the high school. The restoration project was more expensive than anticipated, but Bayzick says the community was thrilled to keep its prized building. Now, fundraisers are being held to restore the school’s auditorium as a community amenity.

Hazleton might see even more growth in coming years, as a proposal to open a nearby cargo airport is gaining support. This time, though, school officials think they will be more prepared.

“At this point, we have our head to at least water level,” Bayzick says.

Urban districts may see shifts

What’s most perplexing for districts to track are shifts from certain neighborhoods to other areas, leaving some schools underutilized and others overcrowded. Denver, for instance, saw a migration of large Hispanic families from older neighborhoods to new suburbs several years ago. Cities like San Diego, San Francisco, and Portland, Ore., are seeing professionals with young children settle in trendy neighborhoods while gentrification has driven out lower-income families in other areas.

At the same time the lower Manhattan areas are seeing tremendous growth, other areas in New York City have flat or declining school-age populations, says Margie Feinberg, a Department of Education spokeswoman. The 1.1 million-student school district has created a master building plan that is updated annually to accommodate new developments, such as the overcrowding in lower Manhattan.

“There are pockets of overcrowding, because in the past we were not as well-focused,” she says, adding that school officials plan to get input from parents and community groups for the next phase of the capital building plan. “We’re going out and listening to the community and fine-tuning what we have.”

Until more facilities can be built or expanded, two of the area’s elementary schools (PS 89 and PS 234) are increasing class sizes and converting other spaces into classrooms.

“Class sizes will have to increase unless we get additional classroom space,” PS 234 Principal Lisa Ripperger wrote in a

letter to parents on the school’s website this summer. “Furthermore, PS 234 has already cancelled its pre-K, turned the computer lab and large art room into classrooms ... Overcrowding is worse than it appears, and will get much worse soon.”

This year, the school is borrowing space from a new community center next door, which means that some senior citizens’ and early childhood programs will be cancelled, says parent Eric Greenleaf, who is heading a committee studying the overcrowding issue.

At PS 89, Principal Veronica Najjar told parents in June that an influx of kindergarten students this year means some higher grades would have to be combined into larger classes. For instance, three second-grade classrooms would become two third grades, and fifth-grade classes would have about 34 students each, with a second, part-time teacher. If class sizes were lower, she told parents, students from other overcrowded or low-performing schools in the area could transfer to PS 89.

Parents and staff at the schools protested the overcrowding and say they urged the school district to take action earlier. “What’s really lacking was careful monitoring of the school-aged population and how fast it’s growing,” says Greenleaf, a marketing and business professor at New York University who compiled independent enrollment numbers for PS 234’s committee.

“If the education department had been doing that, they would have known years ago that there was going to be a problem, but they simply did not do those forecasts, so the parents did.”

Greenleaf’s research found that, since 2002, 15,000 new apartments have been built in the area, with 4,400 opening this year. Many of those are two- and three-bedroom models marketed to families. To keep up with that growth, PS 234 has needed at least two to three new classrooms each year, he says.

“PS 234 has made a huge difference in families being attracted to downtown Manhattan,” Greenleaf says. “Whenever people talk about downtown, one of the things people talk about is how wonderful 234 is—a lot of parents could send their kids to private schools, but they want to send them here.”

Greenleaf says New York’s education department is doing a better job of recognizing the needs of lower Manhattan’s schools. But, he says, other districts should be aware that many young professionals want to live in urban areas and send their children to public schools.

“It’s an outdated viewpoint that everybody moves out to suburbs,” he says. “Things have changed. People want to stay in the city, and they want to send their kids to public schools.” ■

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