

One descriptor of Sudbury Public Schools that I frequently use is “a growing, high performing, k-8 school district that has great kids, dedicated and professional staff, and generous and supportive parents.” It appears that, at least for this year, I will have to remove the term “growing” from this otherwise accurate statement. As we finalize our October 1 enrollment reports, we find our enrollment in grades k through 8 is 3,169; down 44 (1.4%) students from the 3,213 students enrolled last year.

SCHOOL	K-8 ENRLMNT 06-07	K-8 ENRLMNT 07-08
HAYNES	402	387
LORING	606	578
NIXON	521	515
NOYES	647	612
CURTIS	1,037	1,077
TOTAL	3,213	3,169

So, does this mean Sudbury Public Schools is no longer a growing district? Does it mean space will no longer be an issue? Does it mean we can reduce our costs and therefore our taxes? Let me briefly try to address these and several other related questions that you might hear at the soccer field.

Why K-8 enrollment figures, what about preschool? Preschool enrollment grows over the course of the school year as more children become three, or qualify for the program. The October enrollment is always much lower than it will become mid-year and beyond, so we tend not to use it at this time.

Why October 1 enrollment? The state has set October 1 of each year as the date for districts to submit enrollment reports. These data are used in many of the state funding formulas (e.g. Chapter 70 school finance) and comparative statistical reports. Because the enrollment is used in so many ways, it is important that we are extremely thorough and accurate.

Is this the first time that SPS has declined? I looked as far back as the 1994-95 school year and this will be the first time the total k-8 enrollment has decreased year-to-year. The rate of growth has been slowing from the rapid growth of the late 90s/early 2000s; and specific schools have declined for one year then continued growing. This year's decline of 1.4% is quite modest and we are often reminded that “one year does not a trend make.” Because this is a first, we are uncertain if this is the start of a trend or just a blip due to some external factor such as the sluggish real estate market. We will continue to look at this carefully. As we project our enrollments for next year, which are the basis for many budget and staffing decisions, we will want to be conservative in our estimates.

Is the decline at a specific school or grade level? You can see by the table above that each of the elementary schools is experiencing a reduction in enrollment from last year. Kindergarten continues a general decline we have watched over the last 4-5 years. We believe this is due to declining birth rates and the desire a number of families have for full day kindergarten. What is different this year is that we are finding smaller gains in 1st grade and middle school students than we projected and a decline in the other grade levels district wide.

What is happening in neighboring districts? All districts are still collecting their October 1 data but informally we know that Wayland, Concord and Lexington have all experienced a decline in k-8 enrollment this year. We also know that a number of the area preschools and childcare providers are experiencing a drop in enrollment this year. However, area private full-day kindergartens are seeing growth in their programs.

Does this mean costs will go down this year? Maybe our taxes? Any significant cost savings would have to come from a reduction in staff. However, as I mentioned, the decline is very modest. Forty-four students across four elementary schools (Curtis continues to grow) does not allow for a reduction in the number of teaching sections. For example, at Loring where the enrollment decreased by 28 students this year, the impact is hardly noticeable when distributed across the 28 classes of K through grade 5 offered in the school. One positive impact of the decline is that grades that we had projected to be above class size guidelines, are now at, or under, the guidelines.

Why did this happen? Was it anticipated? We did not project a decline in enrollment and are not certain of all the reasons why the drop occurred. We have watched the elementary grade enrollments decline, or have very modest growth, for a number of years. The middle school continues to grow. We have some anecdotal information from local realtors that it is clear that home sales are sluggish at best. Further, it appears the number of students who moved out of the district since last June due to relocation or enrolling in private school is very comparable to prior years. However for reasons which we can only speculate upon, the number of students moving in from other communities or returning from private schools is down considerably.

What about the space needs the district has been looking at for some time? Again, this is the first drop in enrollment in the last 14 years and it's relatively small. Curtis remains extremely crowded. For the first time, some middle school teachers do not have their own classroom but have to move from room-to-room throughout the day to meet students. Also, we have created several special education programs for students who would otherwise have to be served in significantly more costly out-of-district programs. Finally, we still do not have a solution for our goal to provide full day kindergarten. As the school committee continues its study of space needs, this year's drop in enrollment will be a new factor to weigh-in when looking into the future.

Some have expressed concerns about the enrollment decline and what it may mean for Sudbury and Sudbury Public Schools; others view it as a relief (albeit temporary and modest) from the pressure associated with constant growth. However you view it, Sudbury Public Schools continues to be a (growing), high performing, k-8 school district that has great kids, dedicated and professional staff, and generous and supportive parents.