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New year, no new mobile classrooms

CMS enrollment surge appears to be slowing down

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Students at Mallard Creek Elementary School leave their mobile classrooms to take a restroom break in January. With six new schools opening, the district will not order new mobile classrooms this year. (Staff Photographer)

More Information

- [BTSgrowth0818.ART.08182008.O34AP7R_InfoBoxO34AP7R](#)

CMS facts

For the 2008-09 school year:

135,854

students projected for K-12

174

schools

1,262

mobile units

19,941,000

square feet of facility space

Maybe you should take a deep breath before you read this: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools isn't ordering new mobile classrooms for this year.

Call it a sign that the recent downturn in the economy may have finally tamed local schools' explosive growth rates. Or that ongoing school construction is denting the problem.

School officials are quick to note, however, that the growth problem isn't solved. The school system still has 1,200 mobiles this year.

"So it's not like we're caught up," said Mike Raible, head of CMS facilities planning and real estate. "But the fact that we don't have to order more (mobiles) is a good thing."

This year, six new schools will open, many of them in the booming suburbs north and south of uptown Charlotte. Six more will be ready for the 2009-10 school year.

CMS is projecting 3,573 additional students this year, far fewer than anticipated last year. Last year, school officials predicted 5,200 more pupils for 2007-08, but got only 2,900.

"We're taking a fairly conservative look at it," said Scott McCully, a student-assignment official for CMS. "With the economy the way it is, we certainly have some concerns."

CMS has enough space to meet the growth of recent years. Last year's voter-approved \$516 million bond package will help – at least until 2011, Raible said. After that, he noted, CMS will again need more classrooms.

Other fast-growing local school systems also struggle to handle growth. Union County, the state's sixth-largest district, expects almost 3,000 more students this year and will open two new schools. Superintendent Ed Davis said officials are keeping an eye on whether the economy will slow growth, but believes projections "will be in the ballpark."

In Charlotte, advocates of suburban schools and those for inner-city ones don't fight over construction money as fiercely as they have in recent years. Still, the old resentments linger.

At a recent meeting, school board member George Dunlap, a vocal advocate for inner-city students, noted that some of the new schools are opening with student populations far below capacity.

When inner-city schools opened that way in years past, he said, other school board members called them a waste of money. Why, he asked, weren't they saying the same thing now?

Most of his colleagues declined to debate him. "I think I've proved my point," Dunlap said.

Staff writer Ann Doss Helms contributed.

*Elon Park has been operating for a year, but was housed at the Polo Ridge building last school term.