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## Growth slows at area schools

**When would-be newcomers can't sell houses in their home states, fewer kids move into local schools.**

By Steve Lyttle

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Posted: Monday, Sep. 15, 2008

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*Preliminary enrollment numbers this year for three of the area's fastest-growing school systems:*

**Charlotte-Mecklenburg:** 134,000 students (up a little more than 1,500 students)

**Cabarrus County:** 27,800 students (up about 800 students)

**Union County:** 38,500 to 39,000 students (up about 1,500 students)

Some of the Charlotte area's fastest-growing public school systems are still getting bigger, but the growth rate has slowed this year, officials say.

They say a cooling economy in the Charlotte region could be a factor.

"I guess you'd have to look at the economy," Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Superintendent Peter Gorman said last week. "It makes sense that we'd see an impact, too."

CMS officials say preliminary figures indicate the system, North Carolina's second-biggest, added about 1,500 to 2,000 students this year. They had expected about 2,900 new students.

Last year, CMS grew by 2,900 students after school officials predicted a 5,200-student expansion.

This year's growth amounts to about 1.75 percent, down from the 5-percent-plus expansion rates earlier this decade.

CMS isn't alone in noticing a slowdown.

Wake County Schools has scaled down its growth projections to 5,245 from 6,441 – for a total of 139,247 students when N.C. schools take their official count on the 20th day, the (Raleigh) News & Observer reported Friday. CMS expects about 134,000.

Preliminary figures from Cabarrus County Schools show a growth of about 800 students, or about 3 percent. State officials had predicted the system to add about 1,500 students.

“We are below our usual growth percentage,” said Jim Amendum, assistant superintendent for administrative services with Cabarrus County Schools.

And Union County Public Schools, in one of the nation's hottest real estate markets, estimate enrollment growth this year is nearly 4 percent – down from a 7.4 percent expansion last year and a 9.4 percent growth rate two years ago.

Any slowdown is short-lived, according to a nonprofit group that monitors education trends across the South.

The Southern Regional Education Board projects that N.C. public school enrollment will grow by 15 percent from 2006 to 2016. That's a slight slowdown from the previous decade's 18 percent growth, but still above projections of 8 percent growth nationwide and 14 percent in the 16-state region.

Gorman said he thinks the influx of newcomers to the Charlotte region has been slowed by the slumping real estate market.

“People in other parts of the country are finding it difficult to sell their homes,” he said.

Figures released last week showed the sale of residences in the Charlotte metro region dropped 34.9 percent in August from the same month a year earlier.

School system officials stress two important points:

The enrollment numbers are preliminary.

While the growth rate is slowing, it doesn't mean the school systems are shrinking. “We're still growing, and the growth is appreciable,” said Luan Ingram, spokeswoman for Union County Public Schools.

The N.C. Department of Public Instruction's enrollment numbers, called average daily membership, is measured by school attendance figures on the 20th and 40th day of classes. The 20th day for most public schools in the state is Sept. 22.

Scott McCully, who oversees student placement for CMS, said several schools in southern Mecklenburg – he named Polo Ridge and Elon Park elementary schools and Ardrey Kell, Providence and Butler high schools – are at or above expected enrollment this year.

The area's private schools are still determining numbers, but officials from at least some of those schools say they haven't noticed a slowdown.

Judy Mayer, a spokeswoman at Charlotte Latin School in southeast Charlotte, one of the area's largest private schools with nearly 1,400 students, said it still has a waiting list for most grades. She said school officials decided a few years ago to cap enrollment.

"It's remained steady, give or take a few students, since then," Mayer said.

The same is true with the Mecklenburg Area Catholic Schools.

David Hains, spokesman for the Diocese of Charlotte, said Catholic schools enrollment is growing by about 1 to 2 percent a year.

The system's largest school, Catholic High, is at 100 percent capacity and has a waiting list for new students, Hains added.



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