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Growth slows in Fort Mill schools
Enrollment slowdown is 'like a breath of fresh air'
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After years of surging growth, Fort Mill schools started classes last month with fewer new students than expected.

School officials say it may signal that the district's traditionally robust growth is cooling, and the slow economy could be a factor.

The district had estimated 9,578 new students would show up for class this fall. As of the 10th day of school, 9,421 students were enrolled.

That's 568 students more than the district ended classes with last school year, or about a 6 percent rate of growth. It follows two school years each in which Fort Mill schools had 10 percent surges in enrollment.

"It's a little lower than we thought," Assistant Superintendent Chuck Epps told Fort Mill school board members this month.

"This is probably the first year ... we haven't had to add teachers in eight or nine years after school started."

School districts use enrollment numbers from days during the first month of classes to evaluate whether more staff is needed.

"It's better to be under by a little bit, so you don't hire more than you need," Epps said.

School officials say the current drop off in growth might signal a slowdown in the number of newcomers flocking to Fort Mill.

Another indicator of that, officials say, is a sudden drop last month in revenue from impact fees.

Fort Mill is the only district in South Carolina that still charges the fees, which amount to \$2,500 per new housing unit. Developers generally pass the cost on to home buyers. The school district uses the money to build new facilities.

In July, Fort Mill received \$230,000 in impact fees, an amount similar to what it had received in the previous months. In

August, however, the amount dropped sharply, to just \$57,500.

"It'll be interesting to watch those over the next several months to see if this is a trend," Superintendent Keith Callicutt said.

A slowdown in enrollment growth might not be a bad thing, because it could give the district time to catch up to the booming student population it has experienced in recent years, Epps said.

"It's like a breath of fresh air," he said. "We felt like we could loosen our belt a little."

In other districts

Fast-growing Clover schools this year also saw fewer new students than officials had expected.

The Clover district's projected enrollment of 6,700 fell short by about 200 students. As of this year's 10th school day, 6,511 students showed up -- 238 students, more than last year, or about 3.5 percent growth.

"We've had about 5 or 6 percent growth the last few years," said Clover schools spokesman Greg Reid.

Rock Hill schools, York County's largest district, didn't see the same disparity between projections and actual enrollment. The district expected 17,800 new students this year. As of the 15th day of classes, 17,720 students were enrolled.

That's 549 more than last year, or about a 3 percent growth.

"The (economic) downturn didn't affect the growth," said Luanne Kokolis, Rock Hill's associate superintendent for planning. "We thought it might've slowed, but it didn't. I don't know what the implication is, but we'll continue to monitor it."

Early enrollment numbers are tentative. The numbers of students generally fluctuate, and schools track them throughout the year. Fort Mill schools, for example, expect enrollment to grow by about 200 students by the end of the school year.

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