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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

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Counting Kids

Every year, the third Friday in September is the day when public schools count the number of kids they have enrolled and submit it to the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). **This is an important day for public school district budgets throughout the state because the Membership Count is an important variable in determining a school district's budget.**

This count is especially interesting this year as we consider the impacts of COVID-19 on our schools. Rather than compare the 2021 count to 2020, I thought it would be more relevant and revealing to compare 2021 to 2019. 2020 was definitely an anomaly for most of us.

There are some school districts in the 17th Senate District that are up, but the vast majority are down. Overall, enrollment in the schools of the 17th Senate District is down -3.66% comparing 2019 to 2021. The average percent change is -2.93%. The biggest decline was in the Riverdale School District (-9.18%), while the largest growth was in the Highland School District (6.33%).

The negative trend in the 17th Senate District is not unique. Statewide, enrollment count from 2019 to 2021 declined by 30,881 students or -3.67%, nearly identical to our local trends. It is important to note that enrollment counts have been declining since the 2013-14 school year.

Third Friday in September School District Student Headcounts 2019 - 2021

School Districts in the 17th Senate District

District	2019	2021	# Change from 2019 to 2021	% Change from 2019 to 2021
Argyle	288	292	4	1.39%
Belmont	380	396	16	4.21%
Benton	207	215	8	3.86%
Black Hawk	375	366	-9	-2.40%
Boscobel	771	735	-36	-4.67%
Cassville	205	188	-17	-8.29%
Cuba City	650	678	28	4.31%
Darlington	872	870	-2	-0.23%
Dodgeville	1,216	1,110	-106	-8.72%
Fennimore	802	792	-10	-1.25%

Highland	300	319	19	6.33%
Hillsboro	555	537	-18	-3.24%
Iowa-Grant	735	696	-39	-5.31%
Ithaca	434	401	-33	-7.60%
Kickapoo	505	479	-26	-5.15%
Lancaster	992	976	-16	-1.61%
Mauston	1,466	1,440	-26	-1.77%
Mineral Point	763	762	-1	-0.13%
Monroe	2,352	2,284	-68	-2.89%
Necedah	727	698	-29	-3.99%
New Lisbon	640	601	-39	-6.09%
Pecatonica	393	401	8	2.04%
Platteville	1,564	1,520	-44	-2.81%
Potosi	331	301	-30	-9.06%
Reedsburg	2,826	2,657	-169	-5.98%
Richland	1,292	1,195	-97	-7.51%
River Ridge	545	538	-7	-1.28%
River Valley	1,202	1,127	-75	-6.24%
Riverdale	730	663	-67	-9.18%
Royall	514	471	-43	-8.37%
Shullsburg	340	316	-24	-7.06%
Southwestern	554	535	-19	-3.43%
Weston	299	291	-8	-2.68%
Wonewoc-Union Center	335	352	17	5.07%
17th SENATE DISTRICT	26,160	25,202	-958	-3.66%
Statewide	841,949	811,068	-30,881	-3.67

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

We can speculate on the reasons why enrollment trends are declining. Families are having fewer children. Some families are choosing private schools, virtual schools and homeschooling. Families are moving away or to other communities in rural Wisconsin. Families are open enrolling to nearby school districts. No matter the cause, it is important for school district officials and school boards to analyze their own data to make sound financial decisions and plans for the future.

With certain adjustments, school district budgets are determined by the Membership Count (the number of kids) multiplied by the districts' per pupil revenue limit (the amount of taxes and state aid a district has per student). The per pupil revenue limit is a state-imposed limit based on historic data and spending. Each district is evaluated individually, which is why there is a range in per pupil revenue limits throughout the state and is based on a three-year rolling average to smooth out declines. This formula has been used in Wisconsin for about 25 years.

If a student body increases, the budget increases. If a student body decreases, the budget decreases. As a result, the total dollars dedicated to public education in Wisconsin are less important than the actual number of students in the classroom, especially in rural school districts.

I often ask school leaders to consider whether they would prefer 10 more students or \$100,000 more in state aids. The answer is always (or at least it should be) 10 more students. More state aid does not increase the budget. More students in the classroom does increase the budget.

This is why you will see some school districts assertively marketing open enrollment to students in neighboring districts. More kids in the classroom ultimately translates to more dollars in the budget. It is one variable that a school district can most directly influence.

We also see our communities working hard to grow existing businesses, entice new employers and improve infrastructure to keep families in rural Wisconsin. Economic development, jobs and quality of life have a major impact on K-12 education. Economic development efforts directly impact local school finance.

Counting kids – and analyzing the data – is an important measure for school district planning. I will continue to monitor these trends in our communities.

For more information and to connect with me, visit my website <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/17/marklein> and subscribe to my weekly E-Update by sending an email to Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov. Do not hesitate to call 800-978-8008 if you have input, ideas or need assistance with any state-related matters.

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