



Students at Ticonderoga High School pass between classes. Ticonderoga is like many Adirondack schools in that its student population is dropping. Lohr McKinstry / Staff Photo

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Adirondack population aging, dipping

Study finds more availing teachers-to-students ratio

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ELIZABETHTOWN — Public-school enrollment in the Adirondacks has dropped 31 percent since 1970, while teacher-to-students ratios improved.

Those are some of the findings in the recently released Adirondack Park Regional Assessment Project Report.

The 119-page report was funded by the New York State Department of State Quality Communities Grant Program and compiled by the Saratoga Springs-based LA Group.

Essex County Industrial Development Agency Co-Director Carol Calabrese said they've been making good use of the report.

"It's pretty powerful information. It's information we can use to leverage funding, maybe even change policy."

The report cost \$120,000, using \$93,000 from the grant and the rest from private donations.

Sponsors were the Adirondack North Country Association, Adirondack Association of Towns and Villages and the towns of Arietta and Chester.

The report received the Planning Excellence for Best Practice award from the Upstate Chapter of the American Planners Association, presented at the national planning conference in New Orleans this year.

The report's chief writer, LA Group Senior Planner James Martin, found that the park's median age is 39.5.

"The only region in the country that has a higher median age is the west coast of Florida," he said. "The median age of the park is aging at an exceptionally fast rate."

They evaluated U.S. Census data supplied by the Technical Assistance Center at Plattsburgh State, Martin said.

"The population growth rate is flat. The communities that compose the

core of the park are experiencing declining population. Each village in the park had population loss in the period we looked at."

It showed the Adirondack Park population grew just 1.7 percent from 2000 to 2006 and 3.9 percent between 1990 and 2000.

The report found 132,000 people living in the Adirondack Park, with annual household incomes ranging from a low of \$31,000 in Morehouse in Hamilton County to \$63,000 in Putnam in Washington County.

The worst news in the report was school enrollments, Martin said.

"It directly plays with the median age going up so much. The numbers of school-age children in the park are declining. It's down by 31 percent in a 37-year period."

Most of the loss was in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Martin said Adirondack schools are losing an average of 354 students every 18 months now.

"It's the equivalent of an entire school district in the park lost every 18 months."

But at the same time student-to-teacher ratios grew from 20-to-1 to 10-to-1. The number of teachers in Adirondack schools increased by 43 percent between 1970 and 2007, even while student populations fell 31 percent.

"If I was an economic developer looking for some good news, (it's) the student-teacher ratio," Martin said.

SMALLER CLASSES

Ticonderoga Central School has 992 students this year, about 150 fewer than it had 10 years ago, Superintendent John McDonald Jr. said.

He said that's resulted in fewer teaching jobs.

"We've had reductions in staff, we haven't filled some positions when people retired, and we switched some staff to grant-funded positions."

They also reduced the numbers of classes when possible, but enrollments in some grades were not down enough to do that, he said.

"You don't lose as many (class) sections as you'd think. In terms of operating the full program, it costs the same to operate a facility for 100

as it does for 600.

"There's been an increase in mandates in terms of what you have to provide, so there's been staff needed for that."

Having smaller class sizes has helped students that might otherwise need special-education programs, McDonald said.

"The smaller classes in K through 3 are better because less kids are classified special education if you meet their needs early. Our special-education class rate is below the state average. We've tried to make small class sizes, so when they get to higher (grades), they're not as far behind."

Moriah Central School Superintendent William Larrow said their enrollment hasn't seen the decline other districts have.

In 2003, Moriah had 799 students in grades kindergarten through 12, and this year, it has 780 pupils, he said.

"Our attendance is pretty consistent. We're holding our own. It's been 20 in, 20 out."

ALARMING

Moriah Town Supervisor Thomas Scozzafava said some of the numbers in the report are alarming.

"You don't find that anywhere else in the country. How do you communicate to the legislature that the Adirondacks are different than the rest of the state?"

Martin said the report could be their vehicle to petition for change.

"The continuing challenge is, in a region with 130,000 people, how do you overcome the perception that it's vast conservation land — that there are people up here?"

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