

Educator blames generation gap for classroom stress

What is the most serious impact of the student enrollment decline in public schools?

Not money, teachers' unions or academic achievement.

The surprise answer: teachers' morale, which also affects the classroom atmosphere and students.

As older, high-seniority teachers are retained and younger faculty members are laid off, a "tremendous generation gap" develops between staff members and students.

One figure is that the average teacher's age is 30 years higher than the average student's age.

But student achievement tests aren't affected by the enrollment decline, although there is a deterioration of secondary school curriculum.

But superintendents, curriculum administrators and building principals believe teacher morale is a major problem caused by declining pupil enrollments.

The lower enrollments have affected most suburban districts for the past five to eight years. Those are some conclusions made by a suburban school administrator who wrote his doctoral thesis about the declining student enrollments in Wayne and Oakland counties.

When enrollments began to drop, high-seniority teachers retained their jobs but in many cases had to teach subject areas which were not their college major. In many cases, the teachers haven't taught the subject in many years, if at all.

ANOTHER SCHOOL official said there is a "big problem with having a staff of older teachers with no young blood. There has to be a 25- to 30-year gap between the age of our high school students and our staff on the average."

"The kids get upset when they lose a good teacher from the layoff route," Bedell had some suggestions for school districts facing a faculty morale problem.

They should, with state financial help, initiate extensive training programs for older staff members who remain in districts with declining pupil enrollments.

In addition to retraining for teaching in the college minor areas, there needs to be a "massive effort in in-service training and return to the classroom" for advanced college training for these staff members," Bedell said.

"It is obvious that much research and effort should be put into the area of employee morale and its impact on the instructional program.

School administrators interviewed that teacher morale was "minimally affecting students, but it was becoming a factor in student morale as more and more teachers were being dismissed."

The enrollment study also showed some other perceptions of school officials that usually don't surface in the numerous school board meetings attended by parents and students to protest the recommended closing of their neighborhood schools.

During his interviews, Bedell discovered that while student-teacher ratios were "offering" was severely affected."

"They cited numerous examples including split sessions in the elementary school, fewer electives, and course curtailment, especially in the arts area."

"They believed that support personnel had been affected there was a difference of opinion as to whether declining enrollments had caused a reduction in service or actually enriched the ratios."

"It would appear that there is a need for local school districts to strive for more building consolidations (closing of one school and transferring pupils to another building) to limit the impact of declining enrollment in the area of course offerings and split sessions."

"It is also recommended that other delivery systems be investigated to supply support services on a more efficient basis in districts experiencing decline."

IN THE SURVEY of all Wayne and Oakland County schools, excepting Detroit, Bedell found that the declining enrollment problems finished a distant third in a three-topic question on which problem is the most difficult.

School finances was ranked the most difficult issue by 63 percent of those answering the survey with employee unionization second with 25 percent. Declining student enrollment was third with 12 percent.

Sixty-three percent in the survey ranked declining enrollment third behind the other two topics.

Bedell said he wanted to determine if declining pupil enrollments were associated with program quality.

He looked at per-pupil expenditures, teacher-student ratios, support services, and reading and math test scores.

BEDELL DISCOVERED that academic test scores weren't affected by declining enrollment or any other variables.

Suburban schools were grouped into categories of growing, stable and declining school districts and those getting state aid or those not getting state aid.

In comparing reading and math test scores, Bedell found that no group of school districts dominated the rankings.

But standardized tests didn't really measure the areas most affected by enrollment declines — arts, electives, and student adjustments.

If there were any changes in test scores, it was because of a change in the population, not by enrollment drops, Bedell said.

Part of the problem of teachers' morale is that there is a "great deal of trauma" connected with building closings and transfers to other buildings.

"Building staffs have apparent difficulty adjusting to each other when there are building consolidations."

SUPERINTENDENTS, curriculum directors and building principals frequently disagree on their perceptions of the "facts."

For example, Bedell asked officials if educational support services, such as those provided by media resource teachers, had been eliminated or curtailed because of enrollment decline.

Three-fourths of the superintendents said "yes." Nearly two-thirds, or 65 percent, of the curriculum administrators agreed. But only half the building principals said "yes."

Superintendents "gave more emphasis to the loss of administrators" than the curriculum persons and principals surveyed.

Another area of differences in perceptions was students' academic achievement.

Superintendents agreed that declining

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THE ADMINISTRATOR is William Bedell, who resigned as assistant superintendent for operations in the Livonia Public Schools this summer to become the superintendent in Romulus.

Bedell surveyed all Wayne and Oakland County districts, except for Detroit, and personally interviewed school superintendents, a curriculum administrator, and a building principal in eight suburban districts.

Those eight are Livonia, Clarenceville (which includes parts of Livonia, Farmington Hills and Redford Township), Garden City, Redford Union, Wayne-Westland, Dearborn, Lincoln Park and Berkley.

Bedell, in his 109-page thesis, admitted that general school finances and teachers' unions are ranked as bigger problems than enrollment declines, but they are exaggerated by the enrollment problem.

One school official interviewed by Bedell said that student morale is down "because we have had to cut sports and other programs because of the financial impact of (pupil enrollment) decline, and our teachers are unhappy because they are teaching out of their area, and they pass this along to kids."

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