

Recount fails to find 'missing' students

Second enrolment count confirms unexpectedly steep drop in student numbers

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Vancouver school officials recalculated student enrolments late Monday after teachers challenged their claim that 1,160 students had disappeared in the last six months.

But the second count was the same as the first, board chair Ken Denike said, leaving unanswered questions about why enrolments this month are far below what the district forecast last spring while drafting its 2006-07 budget.

At that time, high-level staff predicted enrolments would continue to slide this year with the loss of as many as 250 students come September.

But late last week, the district summoned principals to an urgent meeting to advise that the drop had been much greater, with 500 fewer full-time elementary students and 660 fewer high school students.

Of particular concern was the dip in the number of kindergarten students, Denike said in an interview. The September numbers suggested a loss of 300 full-time five-year-olds, which translates into 500-600 fewer students because most kindergarten children attend school half-time.

"This is worrisome," Denike said, adding that officials were searching for an explanation. Were Vancouver housing prices driving young families to the suburbs? Or had the new child-care allowance prompted families to make different choices?

Yet, the problem seemed to be confined to Vancouver. When contacted by The Vancouver Sun, Surrey, Coquitlam, Burnaby, Richmond and Langley school districts said their September enrolments were in line with their spring projections, with differences of only 20-40 students.

The B.C. Education Ministry said it was unaware of other districts experiencing significantly higher or lower enrolments, although the final counts for 2006-07 aren't submitted until Sept. 30.

The unexpected drop in Vancouver's numbers -- roughly two per cent from last year's enrolment of 55,000 - was expected to cost the district \$1.5 million in funding, Denike said. The board issued a memo promising that no teachers would be laid off but 70 would have to be reassigned as teachers-on-call.

The upheaval would affect one-third of Vancouver schools, he said, while noting there is no geographic pattern to those experiencing the sudden enrolment change.

The unions protested the reclassification of teachers, telling district officials at a meeting Monday that cuts in services should be made as far away from the schools as possible. They also questioned how such a miscalculation could happen.

Mary McDermott, president of the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association, said the "missing" students were never more than a figment of the school district's imagination.

"Those students never existed," she said in an interview. "They only existed in the minds of the Vancouver school board."

Bill Bargeman, president of the Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association, also expressed skepticism that 1,160 students have left Vancouver. "There've been no shootings, no bomb scares -- nothing that would scare people away," he said.

"I think something went wrong with the counting."

Denike was also perplexed, saying he was "somewhat surprised that we weren't able to call it more closely." He said he doesn't think anything has changed in the way staff predicts enrolment changes.

"This is a challenge I would rather not have in September," he added.

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