

During the 1978-79 school year, we undertook a study sponsored by ASCD on the effects of declining enrollments on instructional and supervisory programs.\* Our project consisted of two parts: (1) a thorough review of the literature, assessing the causes, patterns, and effects of declining enrollments reported in previous research; and (2) a survey of 95 school districts nationwide to find out how they were coping with the problem.

The economic boom years after World War II were also boom years for marriages and births. In those years the birth rate was high—an average of 3.8 children per family at its peak in 1957. From that point, it started on a decline that continued until 1975. The increase in school enrollments eventually peaked in 1971 with over 146 million students. Even when primary grade enrollments dropped, baby boom students continued to increase secondary enrollments. Thus overall school enrollment didn't begin to decline significantly until well after the birth rate slowed.

The birth rate in the United States bottomed out in 1975 when the trend again reversed. Slowly but steadily, the number of live births has increased by more than 10 percent over the last 15 years. Although we're discussing here the effects of declining enrollments, administrators should be aware that primary grade enrollments in many communities will begin to increase this year and continue growing in the future. The 1980 census will provide valuable information about the number of students in each age group.

In professional literature, there are repeated reports by individual school district leaders about the effects of declining enrollments. Unfortunately, the experiences of one district may not be the same as those of another because of local situations and influences. To dispel some of the misconceptions that have arisen, we sur-

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**Dwindling student populations adversely affect the quality of many districts' educational programs, teaching staffs, and instructional facilities and materials.**

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## Instructional Effects of Declining Enrollments

veyed school districts with declining enrollments and districts with increasing enrollments and compared their responses.

One of the financial effects of declining enrollments is that school administrators no longer have "seed money" available to implement educational innovations. One premise is that with money in short supply, schools tend to maintain the status quo in their educational programs. Our findings did not generally support this premise. For example, 71 percent of the districts with declining enrollments use alternative educational strategies, as opposed to 57 percent of the districts with increasing enrollments. Over 60 percent of all districts are using team teaching methods regardless of their enrollment trends. The majority of both types of districts report using individualized instructional methods. And while declining enrollment districts make relatively little use of computer assisted instruction, they use it more than increasing enrollment districts do.

Another common belief is that school districts with declining enrollments have a unique opportunity to increase the quality of their educational programs. Several of our questions explored this idea. In the majority of school districts with declining enrollments the length of the materials replacement cycle had either remained the same or lengthened, while it had shortened in districts with increasing enrollments.

When we asked how enrollment changes had affected the quality of educational programs, a higher percentage of declining enrollment districts responded that their quality had either increased or decreased, in contrast to increasing enrollment districts where administrators reported no change in program quality. Thus an increase or decrease in the quality of the educational program appears to depend upon both the extent of decline faced by the district and the actions taken by administrators. This is an area in which more research is needed.

One measure of the quality of the educational program might be the drop-out rate. It would seem reasonable to assume that if the educational program were of high quality, students would be enticed to stay in school longer. However our data show that more declining enrollment districts saw an increase in the drop-out rate than did increasing enrollment districts. This counters the notion that districts with declining enrollments are striving to keep their students in school longer through alternative educational programs and other educational innovations.

It appears that the effect of declining enrollments on instructional programs is mixed. Some school districts are using enrollment declines as an opportunity to increase the quality of

\* "Effects of Declining Enrollments on Instructional Programs." Duplicated report available from ASCD for \$7.50 (Payment must accompany order).

the educational program while others are not. There are plenty of suggestions in professional literature for improving program quality in spite of declines.

The literature also suggests how to manage personnel during periods of decline, focusing on the question of whom to hire and whom to fire. Many articles propose that administrators hire teachers capable of teaching in more than one subject area. Our data show that declining districts are doing this to a greater extent than school districts with stable or increasing enrollments. This finding is significant for colleges of education: their graduates should be receiving certifiable preparation in more than one subject area.

Many articles have noted that districts with declining enrollments have adopted the "last-in, first-out" notion. When teachers are let go, usually the low-seniority and young staff are dismissed first. Our study supports this contention. The data indicate that the average teacher age has increased in the majority of declining enrollment districts. This phenomenon has a few disturbing implications. First, most studies investigating teacher characteristics and their effects on student achievement have found that teacher years of experience and teacher age have a negative or neutral correlation with student achievement. That is, as teachers obtain more years of experience, student achievement rises to a peak and then begins to fall. Thus, an aging teaching staff could, over time, result in reduced overall student achievement within an entire district. A stable, aging staff may also require more inservice and staff development activities. Of the school districts we surveyed, over 85 percent of all those with declining enrollments are offering inservice training programs for their teachers. There is another important implication of the "last-in, first-out" dismissal policy. It is likely that newer, younger teachers are more able to implement many of the available educational innovations. Because they cannot hire these teachers, school districts must either bear the cost of retraining older teachers or opt for status quo instructional programs instead of innovative ones.

One way to curb the trend toward an aging teacher staff is to institute

an early retirement program, an option supported in the literature. However, only 26 percent of the declining enrollment districts we surveyed have early retirement programs.

The declining enrollment literature also focuses on the reallocation of present human resources, such as relocating instructional staff within the district. In fact, we found that 73 percent of all declining enrollment districts have relocated staff in response to decreases in student populations. The majority of both increasing and decreasing enrollment districts have increased the use of part-time, volunteer, and student-teaching staff.

Finally, we examined the effects of enrollment declines on various curriculum issues. The curriculums of the districts were broadly grouped into the academic core subjects: language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies; the vocational subjects: industrial arts, business education, distributive education, home economics, and agriculture education; and all other areas, including foreign languages, fine arts, health and physical education, special education, compensatory education, and driver education.

When we asked how student enrollments in the various curriculum areas changed from 1970 to 1978, school districts with increasing enrollments responded that enrollments had increased equally in all areas, with agricultural education the only subject showing a decline and special education showing a very large increase. With few exceptions, as enrollments declined, changes in course enrollments followed a typical pattern—the academic core subjects were the overall "losers" with science and social studies in declining districts showing statistically significant student enrollment decreases when compared to increasing enrollment districts. In fact, for districts experiencing 21 percent to 80 percent enrollment declines, the largest student enrollment declines occurred in foreign languages, followed sequentially by agricultural education, driver education, and science. All districts without regard to enrollment trend reported relatively stable student enrollments in the vocational subjects.

These findings have serious implications: students are not devoting their time to study in the academic areas. Perhaps this is one explana-

tion for the decline in achievement test scores. On the other hand, students are taking courses geared to gaining employment when they graduate from high school. It is questionable whether this "get a job" training mentality is in the best interests of all the students. These student enrollment trends in the academic and vocational subjects deserve more attention in educational research.

When we asked what changes in staffing patterns had occurred between 1970 and 1978, the responses of the 95 school districts were very similar to their responses concerning student enrollments in different subjects. Again, social studies and science were the "losers" in the academic area, with foreign languages within the "arts" core showing the largest overall decline in the number of teachers. Conversely, vocational subjects showed increases in the number of teachers regardless of the percent of decline.

Much of the professional literature suggests that program offerings decrease as the number of staff members decrease. Our findings indicate this is a "myth," if "offerings" means the list of courses from which students choose. The majority of school districts, regardless of enrollment declines, actually increased program offerings in most curriculum areas. In fact, there were no statistically significant differences between increasing and decreasing enrollments districts with regard to course offerings. Only foreign languages, agricultural education, and driver education showed large decreases in course offerings, but only in those school districts that experienced enrollment declines of 20 percent or more.

When we asked how district enrollment declines affected the number of courses actually taught in the districts, the responses were quite different. Overall, declining enrollment districts greatly reduced the number of courses actually taught while keeping the course offerings in the curricular materials. Again, the academic core subjects and foreign languages suffered the greatest reductions. The vocational subjects continued to be reduced less than the academic subjects. Thus, when school leaders say their instructional program quality has not been negatively affected by enrollment declines, they

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may be responding "no" because their course offerings remain stable or actually increase, but if the number of courses actually taught is examined, an entirely different picture may emerge.

Our final questions concerned changes in the amount of facility space allocated to various subject areas. As would be expected from the pattern of instructional effects established thus far, the vocational areas gained in facility space allocation overall, and the space allocated to the academic subjects was slightly reduced. These reductions, however, were mostly in the districts with 20 percent or greater enrollment declines. This may be a result of space being lost when buildings were sold or closed.

The districts that were greatly affected by enrollment declines reported that the quality of their educational program deteriorated the most. Our evidence suggests that if school districts experience slight declines in student enrollment, the quality of the educational program may be increased because it is not necessary to reduce teacher staff or sell buildings. In fact, the enrollment declines offer opportunities to lower the pupil teacher ratio, and allocate extra space to worthy programs. However, as the pinch of declining enrollments is felt financially through reductions in state aid, which is based on the number of pupils, more stringent measures become necessary.

School districts with declining enrollments have serious problems. Declining enrollments require changes in administrative and leadership behavior, which the literature labels the "management of decline" and "decremental planning." Because much of the funding for educational institutions is tied to student enrollment, difficult decisions will have to be made when enrollments decrease. The idea that declining enrollments may be used to increase the quality of the instructional program is true only to the extent that such improvements do not require additional financial expenditures. Eventually, as enrollments continue to fall, instructional program cuts must be made. These cuts call for foresight, systematic planning, and program development on the part of administrators and teachers. ■

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