



08/22/2001

Pennridge schools open next Wednesday with record enrollment

By: CHARLES W. BAUM

When Pennridge school bells ring next Wednesday for the opening day of classes, the district will once again likely set a new record high enrollment with over 6,900 students.

"The numbers are changing daily, but it looks like we'll set a new high," said Assistant Superintendent Dr. Mel Sonier.

Total enrollment is expected to increase by about 50 students over last year, largely due to increases at the secondary level, noted Sonier.

"It's not a major increase, but we're now seeing a ninth grade class of around 600 and some larger classes over 500 at the middle school level," the administrator added. The class of 2001 had about 440 students.

Overall, the numbers show a gain of nearly 100 students in grades 7-12, with about 50 students less in grades K-6.

"Kindergarten, first and second grades are showing classes of under 500, but with the new developments, that could change in the next year or two," added Sonier.

As of Aug. 15, projections showed 3,310 secondary students, up from 3,215 last year and 3,166 in 1999. Elementary totals are estimated at 3,591, down from 3,644 in 2000 and 3,563 in 1999.

Current kindergarten enrollments total 408, down from 432 last year.

Sonier said he did not have an updated count of charter school students included in the totals. Early August projections showed eight cyber school registrants from the district and about a dozen to the Souderton Charter School Collaborative. The district's total figures also include about 200 homeschooled students.

"I know the district registration office still has about 50 appointments for registrations and another 90 or so packets are out, but we won't hear responses from all of them," said Sonier, explaining that last-minute transfers and withdrawals occur up until the first few days of school. "That's why these numbers change daily."

In the past, Pennridge has registered as many as 250 students in the last two weeks of August alone - not something the district encourages. "We have been encouraging folks to register since April," said Sonier, noting late registrations can affect staffing of sections.

"Some parents may not even be aware that we start school before Labor Day, even though we have for the past four years. It certainly causes some last-minute scrambling," he added.

Final counts after the first few days of school determine where the district will add or subtract classroom teachers or aides, based on the district's class size guidelines.

September enrollments over the past 15 years are as follows: 2001(est.) ... 6,901, 2000 ... 6,859, 1999 ... 6,819, 1998 ... 6,774, 1997 ... 6,798, 1996 ... 6,642, 1995 ... 6,577, 1994 ... 6,250, 1993 ... 6,386, 1992 ... 6,225, 1991 ... 6,072, 1990 ... 5,879, 1989 ... 5,644, 1988 ...

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5,425, 1987 ... 5,260.

The figures show 1,000 new students since 1990 and over 1,600 in the past 15 years.

The district's most recent enrollment study by EI Associates of Harrisburg projects slower growth ahead, with 7,053 students by 2002, then to 7,106 in the year 2,003 before leveling off several years at the 7,000 mark, before eventually falling back to the 6,900s. Despite continuing growth in East Rockhill, Hilltown and Bedminster townships, Pennridge officials feel the enrollment projections are fairly accurate, at least for the next few years. "Anything beyond that is really just a guess," Pennridge Business Manager Denis McCall said earlier.

EI said its information was based on Pennridge area developments under construction, approved, or still in the approval process as of earlier this year.

The study showed the high school will face the brunt of the growth in the next few years with the larger classes moving up. That's one reason why the district is planning an \$86 million high school campus expansion and renovation effort slated to start next fall, with completion in about 2005. It calls for a grade 9-12 high school for 2,400 students and converting the freshman center into a 625-student third middle school for grades 6-7-8. Taking sixth grades out of the seven elementary schools should also free up more classrooms in those facilities.

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