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## NEW STUDENTS

# School district math: Does it add up?

Critics say the Broward School District underestimates how many children will live in new housing developments. District officials say change is finally on the way.

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It's a tough math question.

How many new students will head to a public school in Broward County from each new home that pops up in a development?

Ask the Broward County School District, and you'll get two numbers.

The first -- the student-generation rate -- is used to calculate how much a developer must pay to accommodate students coming from a new subdivision.

A second, generally larger number is produced by the School Boundaries Department to plan how many desks, chairs and classrooms will be needed. Taxpayers cover the difference.

The Broward School District hasn't updated the way it measures student generation rates in eight years, despite the board's policy that it should be reviewed every five years.

Many Broward residents and school district officials have long said the student-generation rates produce unrealistically low numbers. Critics say such undercounting leads to crowded, stressed classrooms and lets developers off easy, leaving taxpayers to foot the rest of the bill.

"The numbers are low," said Deputy Superintendent Michael Garretson, who oversees construction. ``The community is going to demand we be more precise in our projections. We have to be."

Garretson and others say they don't rely on outdated student-generation numbers when planning new schools and additions. Instead, district staff members analyze local data, such as the number of residential units and students in existing homes, to come up with a more realistic number of potential students.

Fast-growing bedroom communities such as Weston, Parkland and Cooper City bear the brunt of inaccurate projections, said Garretson.

The gap between projected and actual students has sparked angry debate in Cooper City, where developer TOUSA Inc. has proposed Monterra, a 1,900-home development on the former Waldrep Dairy site.

TOUSA's agreement with the school district, forged before Cooper City annexed the land, requires the developer to pay \$3.2 million in impact fees to accommodate a projected 400 students. But parents with children in Cooper City's critically overcrowded schools say the estimate is low, and expect twice that number to come from Monterra.

## **HARSH CRITICISM**

Cooper City Mayor Debby Eisinger has harshly criticized the School Board for purposely keeping the city out of impact fee negotiations and letting TOUSA off easy.

"The underestimation of student generation rates resulted in placing a greater financial burden on an already underfunded school system," Eisinger said. ``Had the generation rates been more accurately determined, the Monterra developer would have been required to contribute more money or land for the building and renovation of school facilities."

The School District has responded to the criticism of Eisinger and others, fast-tracking plans for a new elementary near the Monterra development. But TOUSA's \$3.2 million will cover only a fraction of the cost of a new school.

Across the district, the gap between the number of projected and actual students evens out, says Tom Moore, Broward's School Boundaries director. The district has even over-projected enrollment slightly in the last two years.

Yet the money developers must pay to make room for new Broward students has stayed largely the same from year to year. In 1979, Broward was among the first counties in the nation to require builders to pay school impact fees, and today, developers give the school district an average of \$1,700 for each new home they build in Broward. That's far less than the state average of \$2,500.

Elsewhere in the state, the home-building boom has inspired citizen-activists to demand more money from developers for community impacts. Osceola, Orange and Lake Counties have all required developers to pay \$10,000 in school fees for each new home they build.

"Giveaway programs have gone by the wayside," said Jim Nicholas, a professor of urban and regional planning and law at the University of Florida. ``In Broward, for some reason, they've gotten hung up on these very low numbers that they know to be wrong, and they're continuing to do it."

Garretson, who oversees construction, has commissioned a study to revise the countywide student-generation rate. Results are expected in September.

The upcoming revision, Garretson says, will drop the district's one-size-fits-all approach in favor of localized rates that reflect the surrounding communities.

"You can't have one rate that accommodates everyone in the district," he said, citing high numbers of students in western Broward, as well as in low-income areas throughout the county.

## **MULTIFAMILY UNIT**

The new numbers also will be revamped to reflect the growing popularity of low- and mid-rise condominium developments. The School District considers any multifamily unit over three stories as a high-rise, estimated to produce an average of one student for every 20 units. That number is on target for traditional high-rises such as those in Fort Lauderdale and Hallandale Beach. New buildings of about three to seven stories are expected to produce many more students. Garretson is proposing a new category for them.

Jim Duncan, a Texas-based consultant on impact fees and former growth management director for Hollywood, says Garretson has the right idea.

"Anywhere like Broward or Dade, you're going to have a strong differential in student generation across the county," he said.

But the plan won't be easy to get past developers, who lobby hard against raising impact fees, said Duncan.

"Sometimes it's hocus pocus where impact fees come from," said Douglas Buck, director of governmental affairs for the Florida Home Builders Association. He argues that school districts fail to adequately finance construction and so turn to developers to bail them out.

## **FAIR SHARE'**

"Our builders don't mind paying their fair share," if impact fees are reasonable, said Brandon Biederman, Broward governmental affairs director for the Builders Association of South Florida.

Developers know they can't sell homes to families without adequate parks and schools, so many are willing to offer mitigation, money over and above what the county requires.

According to Garretson, Broward schools have collected \$15 million in mitigation so far this year. And while the market is hot, collecting extra money is easy.

"How are you going to sell out a community without schools and parks?" asked Biederman.

Self-interest motivates mitigation."