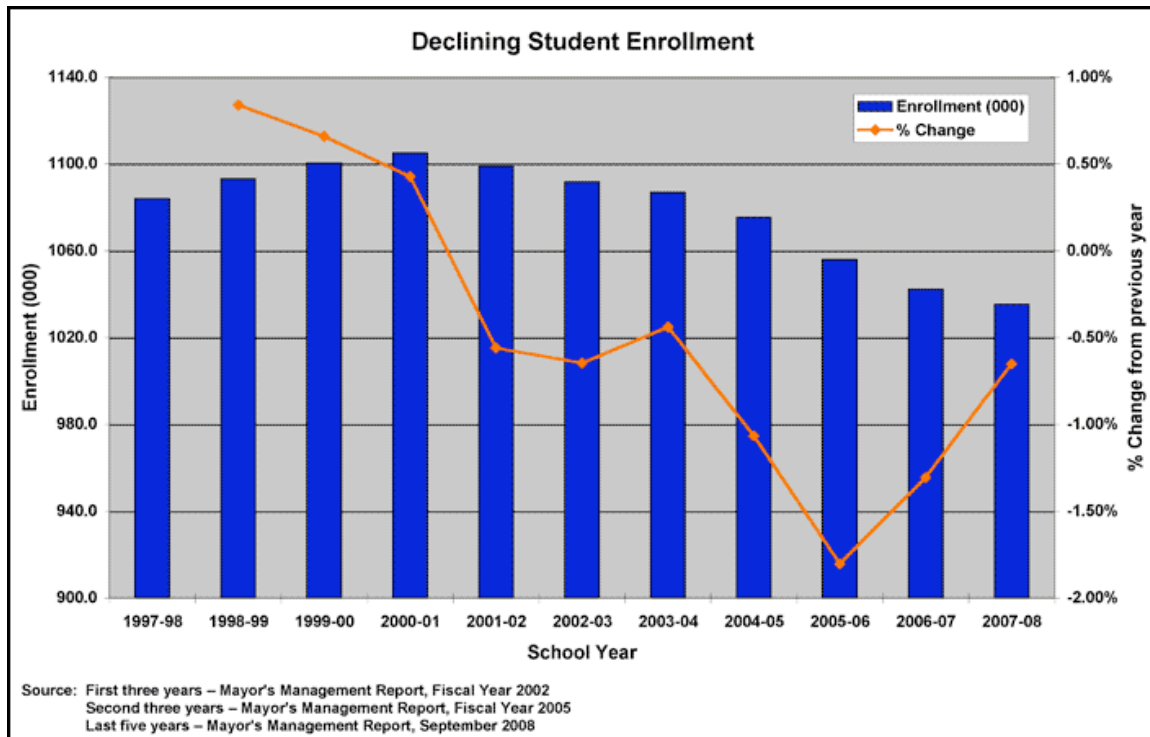


Where Have All the Children Gone? by Dan Jacoby

For the past seven years, there has been a disturbing trend in the demographics of New York City. In each of those years, there are fewer children enrolled in our public schools than the year before. In the late 90s, student enrollment increased, but starting with the 2001-02 school year that trend was reversed. If the 2001-02 year were a blip, it could have been chalked up to the 9/11 attacks, but it turned out to be merely the beginning of a longer-term trend (see graph below).



According to Census Bureau estimates¹, New York City's population increased by 2.6% from April 1, 2000 to June 1, 2006. Yet during that same time, student enrollment in our public schools declined by 4.4%. I'm not a statistician, but I'm pretty good with numbers, and that seems to me to be a significant difference.

Why is this a problem? Put simply, families are fleeing New York City. There are a lot of anecdotal claims that the middle class is being squeezed out, and that New York City is becoming less family-friendly; these numbers seem to provide some strong evidence that this is true. If this trend continues, what will become of New York City? If our city becomes a place people flee in order to have a family, what will happen to property values as people move out just as they are beginning to move up the economic ladder? If property values decline, that will hurt the tax base, and could contribute to further declines.

In other words, are we headed for a repeat of the 1970s?

¹ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/3651000.html>

I hope not. But in order to reverse the trend of declining student enrollment we must take steps to make New York City more family friendly.

- We must increase affordable housing for working-class and middle-class families. Based on a median income for New York City of about \$54,000 for a family of four, these economic classes can be defined as families with annual incomes from \$27,000-\$108,000. Currently, there are few, if any, new “affordable housing” programs that reach the lower half of this range; we must correct that.
- We must also build more schools and replace older schools with new buildings. We must also require not only that new schools be built in any new residential development, but also that the schools be completed before the residences are open for tenants or buyers.
- We must stop rezoning areas until we can develop a citywide concept of what we’re doing to our neighborhoods, to the residents of the affected areas, and to the city as a whole. Every time we rezone a neighborhood for the short-term benefit of a developer, we are forcibly removing the very people who made that neighborhood a desirable place to live. That concept must be rethought; they are also the people who are most likely to want to raise a family.
- We must increase mass transit alternatives, from high-speed buses to ferries to expanded subways – and possibly even light rail systems. Kids need to be able to get around, and driving cars is not an option. Families need to be able to travel together as well, to get to ball games, museums, and various other entertainment spots.
- We must create more parks and playgrounds, so that each residential neighborhood has enough space for children to play.

These steps must be taken soon, or it will be too late to reverse the declines, and the entire city will pay the price.