

## **Enrollment dips at L.A. Unified**

**The loss of students, apparently to charter schools in some cases, is bad news for the district's budget -- with funding based on attendance. It also has resulted in fewer teachers and larger classes.**

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An apparent exodus of students to charter schools, combined with an overall enrollment decline, is disrupting Los Angeles-area schools and exacerbating an ongoing budget crisis.

Local independently run charter schools added more than 9,500 students this fall, a surge of almost 19% to more than 60,000. At the same time, enrollment is down more than 19,000 students, about 3%, at schools affiliated with the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Total district enrollment has fallen to 678,441, down from a peak of 747,009 in 2003.

The drop has long-term implications because school districts receive funding based on student attendance. Some ramifications are immediate: Schools simply cannot afford to employ more teachers than their student enrollment will pay for. The result is that many schools had to release teachers and distribute students into other classes a month or more into the school year.

The latest disruption comes on the heels of the layoffs of about 2,000 teachers in July. For the moment, no additional layoffs are planned, officials said. Edged-out teachers fill vacancies elsewhere or work as substitutes on full salary until a position opens. But that doesn't make the sudden changes any less disruptive.

By district calculations, Mulholland Middle School in Van Nuys had about eight teachers too many, though clever schedule shuffling and budget management reduced the casualties to four teachers.

Each of the four had been directly responsible for about 175 students, and almost no one among the school's 1,750 students escaped the effects.

Physical education classes, which already had been packed with more than 50 students, are now accommodating more than 60. At least one class ballooned briefly to 70. Elective computer classes ended; that teacher was needed for math.

The band teacher agreed to mix beginners in with his advanced class, a frustrating move for eighth-grader Richard Catalan. He also misses his former math teacher. "And classes are larger," he said. "It's harder for teachers to keep track of how the lesson is progressing."

Principal John White postponed back-to-school night for a month and Assistant Principal Jacqueline Purdy led a crisis team that reworked the schedule, giving priority to placing qualified teachers in core academic classes.

Purdy paid a former school clerk out of her own pocket to help out. The clerk had been bumped from the campus during the recent budget cuts.

Teacher Ricardo Stewart agreed to handle sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade history, tripling his preparation duties. Albert Estrada added on sixth-grade math and sixth-grade science to his eighth-grade science responsibilities. Math coach Gabriel Ortega added a math class to his full-time teacher-training duties while three other teachers gave up planning periods.

"It's hard getting used to new teachers, and new faces in the classrooms," said eighth-grader Emily Pinto. "It was a big adjustment."

Overall, the Mulholland faculty has shrunk by about 10 teachers and the enrollment by about 100 students, said Assistant Principal John Ford.

"The classes are kind of big," said Eva Vargas, Emily's mother. "And then they had to move all their schedules around. I'm worried that they're a little behind in math."

At the Santee Education Complex, a high school south of downtown, the faculty has shrunk from 140 to about 100 in a year, said Principal Richard J. Chavez. And ninth-grade enrollment was 200 fewer than expected.

Many factors affect enrollment, including birth rates, the availability of jobs and housing prices, but the growth of charter schools hasn't abated. Charters are publicly funded and operate free of many district regulations.

This fall, the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools, a charter organization, opened five new schools, a connection not missed by Santee teacher Jose Lara.

"We think some of the students are going to charters," Lara said. "We've got to improve our educational program and prove to the community that we're doing a good job as well."

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