

Local Schools Battle Declining Rural Demographics

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CANAAN — Across three operating high schools in the upper reaches of Coos County, NH and Essex County, Vermont, there are just 210 students.

About 25 are at Pittsburg's high school, 75 in Canaan and 110 in Colebrook.

Declining numbers of pupils in the northern two counties of New Hampshire and Vermont mean very few students in classes often, and fewer choices of classes and higher costs.

By pooling resources and creating a regional middle and high school in Colebrook and Canaan, nearby towns in two different states, local leaders are hoping they can offer students more opportunities, and provide a better educational value for taxpayers.

The towns looking to form the third inter-state school district for New Hampshire and Vermont are Clarksville, Colebrook, Columbia, Pittsburg and Stewartstown from SAU #7 in New Hampshire, and Canaan from the Essex North Supervisory Union in Vermont, as well as the Northeast Kingdom School Choice District, which serves 10 non-operating towns in the NEK and is part of Essex North.

There are approximately 50 aggregate students per grade across the districts, according to Karen Conroy, superintendent of Essex North and the NEK Choice District.

A regional high school is being viewed for Canaan's school buildings, along with a Career Technical Education Center, while Colebrook is being eyed for a regional middle school.

The education heads from both states will be reviewing the request and soon acting on allowing the Connecticut River Collaborative Committee to form a formalized study committee to ultimately bring a vote to their towns for an inter-state school district for secondary students.

The NEK Choice District serves 305 kids from 10 towns, whose tuitions follow them wherever they attend and 70 of the students attend school in New Hampshire.

Frank Edelblut, Commissioner of the New Hampshire Department of Education, said New Hampshire's demographics are

declining, saying it's projected that the state will see 50,000 fewer public school pupils in the next 12 years.

Vermont, too, has seen a dramatic decline, and expects to see that trend continuing through 2030, state officials have said.

Of the declining numbers, Edelblut said, "Kids haven't been born, we can't produce them. You can't snap your fingers and create high schoolers." That demographic trend is nationwide as well as worldwide, he said.

For rural, geographically isolated areas like Canaan and the towns of the NEK and across the river in Coos County, the challenges are very real.

"At a certain point you can't put a kid on a bus to get to school one way for an hour," Edelblut said. "As the population continues to come down, what does that look like and how do we engage communities?"

Dan French, Vermont's education secretary, said when he was principal in Canaan, there were 340 students in the K-12 school district and today that is down to about 200.

"We have lost 40 percent of our pupils in the last 12 years or so," in Essex County, French said referring to data from the Agency of Education from 2004-18 for Vermont, county-by-county for those school years.

Information provided Friday by the New Hampshire Department of Education shows that for the SAU #7 towns which are considered for the merger, that declines - averaging 30 percent across the five towns - were seen in student population between 2007-09 and 2017-18.

Pittsburg saw a 47 percent change, the highest, and Clarksville a 10 percent change, the lowest. Stewartstown lost 20 percent, Colebrook lost 29 percent, and Columbia 34 percent.



Canaan School (Courtesy Photo)

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