School enrollment surging again in Hillsborough, Pasco and across Florida

Jeffrey S. Solochek, Times Staff Writer

Saturday, May 21, 2016 10:29am

The brief respite from surging student enrollment is officially over for school districts across Florida.

Kids by the thousands are pouring in, with no end in sight. Jobs are returning in several sectors, along with housing starts, particularly in the suburbs.

Analysts project statewide enrollment will grow from 2.77 million children this year to 2.9 million five years from now. That increase will hit some counties harder than others.

Hillsborough and Pasco County schools, for instance, anticipate increases of around 8 percent over that period — that's above the state rate — while Pinellas and Hernando expect almost no growth at all.

The boom has caused a scramble for more classroom space that has many leaders struggling to keep up. Money, space and time pose the most common concerns.

"You do the best you can, being creative," said Lorraine Duffy-Suarez, chief planner for Hillsborough schools.

For instance, Hillsborough has begun expanding high schools because adding large classroom wings costs much less than buying land and building a new campus. But that strategy also results in school sizes that officials in the past have tried to avoid.

"We never had high schools that were 3,000 students," Duffy-Suarez said. "Now we will."
First up, Newsome High. The school in the southeastern part of the county will open a 20-classroom addition next fall, pushing its built capacity to 3,000. Alonso High in the northwest corner similarly will add 300, giving it room for 2,900 students.

Others are on the way.

Those choices allow leaders to use limited resources to build less expensive elementary schools, which are becoming needed at a pace reminiscent of the turn of the century. That’s when south Hillsborough was opening schools so fast that some children were being rezoned every year.

The latest projections show the county’s enrollment again rising by around 4,000 students a year. That’s enough to fill four big elementary schools annually.

Some new schools are under construction. But the district’s impact fee account, which pays the bulk of the expense, was down to $5 million in February. It will take time to rebuild the balance, though, leaving the district to ponder other approaches, including major attendance zone revisions and a possible sales tax for capital projects.

"I think the public will support (a sales tax) when they realize the money stays under local control," said Melissa Erickson, a parent activist living in the booming southeast corner of the county.

She also supported the concept of new school boundaries.

"That may be hard up front, with more disruption, but it would allow for more long-term stability," she said. "We have empty seats. We just don't have them where the kids are."

Pasco, once among the nation’s fastest-growing districts, is seeing a similar rate of growth — about 1,500 new students a year.

Unlike Hillsborough, Pasco has a local sales tax that supports school construction. But when voters renewed it in 2012, enrollment had stagnated, leading district officials to pledge the income to school renovations instead.

At the same time, impact fee revenue shrunk along with the dip in new homes, and property tax collections declined as a result of sliding home values.

So while the district is building three new schools to cope with crowding in its resurgent areas, mostly along the State Road 54 corridor, projects after that are on the bubble.

"The revenue is not there for additional schools to be done," district planning director Chris Williams said. "That is, of course, a problem."

Pasco officials will consider boundary adjustments and wing additions, Williams said. "But that’s not going to completely solve our problem. The other front is funding."

The School Board is exploring an impact fee increase, while also lobbying legislators to direct more construction money to districts. In recent years, lawmakers have divided such funds between traditional and charter schools, with some in the Legislature criticizing the districts for overspending on building projects — a charge that superintendents emphatically denied.

Scott Howat, director of planning and governmental relations for Orange County schools, said he expected lawmakers to continue to pressure school districts on construction expenses next session. He suggested that districts should look for ways to attack the problem head-on.

Like Hillsborough, Orange County projects enrollment jumps of about 4,000 students per year, which will require three to five new schools annually.
To help cover the costs, voters recently extended a half-percent sales tax. Passage of that referendum allowed district leaders to leverage a $300 million "capital renewal fund," which officials set aside for projects in case the tax failed, Howat said.

The county also is increasing its school impact fee by $2,000 for new homes, and plans to review the fees every other year to make sure they're keeping up. Without that move, Howat said, "We would be in the negative" in new school planning.

Crowding might still occur, despite the close attention paid by demographers and others, he acknowledged. "We're dealing with what we can deal with."

Collaboration between neighboring districts is a possibility, but hasn't come up much, Howat and others noted. New state law can ease some pressure, as students will be allowed to cross county lines to schools with space available.

Charter school expansions also alleviate some of the crowding, as they often take students from the full schools.

One of Florida's fastest-growing districts is St. Johns County, which has built 11 new schools and added on to eight others over the past decade. Its leaders project another 47 percent increase in the coming 10 years, as large-scale planned developments become the newest suburbs to Jacksonville.

"We know we'll need another 20 schools to keep up with that growth," executive director for planning Nicole Cubaedge said, noting the recession didn't stall St. Johns enrollment.

The district is redrawing attendance boundaries and moving in portable classrooms. It recently won a sales tax referendum and is doing everything else officials can come up with to cope. But making ends meet can be tight, Cubaedge said, and finding the right balance is critical.

"When you are growing as fast as we are, you have to be adding seats, yet we don't want to be overbuilt," she said. For the foreseeable future, though, "we are not in danger of that."

Contact Jeffrey S. Solocek at jsolocek@tampabay.com or (813) 909-4614. Follow @JeffSolocek.

School enrollment growth

Florida's public school enrollment slowed during and after the Great Recession of the mid 2000s. But now it's surging again, with projections of growth continuing at least five years in many — but not all — counties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Johns</td>
<td>36,122</td>
<td>37,350</td>
<td>38,804</td>
<td>40,252</td>
<td>41,788</td>
<td>43,476</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>194,990</td>
<td>199,986</td>
<td>204,378</td>
<td>208,706</td>
<td>212,464</td>
<td>216,466</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasco</td>
<td>69,633</td>
<td>71,306</td>
<td>72,594</td>
<td>73,469</td>
<td>74,547</td>
<td>75,842</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillsborough</td>
<td>208,038</td>
<td>212,126</td>
<td>215,921</td>
<td>219,213</td>
<td>221,328</td>
<td>224,195</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palm Beach</td>
<td>185,613</td>
<td>187,935</td>
<td>189,823</td>
<td>191,677</td>
<td>194,118</td>
<td>196,835</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinellas</td>
<td>101,658</td>
<td>101,906</td>
<td>101,892</td>
<td>101,978</td>
<td>101,947</td>
<td>101,998</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hernando</td>
<td>22,040</td>
<td>22,070</td>
<td>21,959</td>
<td>21,886</td>
<td>21,839</td>
<td>21,938</td>
<td>-0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STATE</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,771,605</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,807,961</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,833,424</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,855,326</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,877,198</strong></td>
<td><strong>2,903,691</strong></td>
<td><strong>4.8%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Enrollment count so far this year

Source: Florida Office of Economic and Demographic Research
Articles and offers from around the Web