

County losing students

Economy, schools of choice bleeding smaller districts

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The weak economy is taking a toll on area schools, which continue to struggle with decreasing student numbers and tightening budgets.

A recent report of the county's unaudited student count numbers revealed that

the county is down almost 127 students from last year and is down 10 percent over the past decade.

Robert Henthorne, superintendent of the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District, said the biggest reasons for the decrease are an aging population and people leaving the area to find work.

"There just aren't as many students throughout the whole state, it's a demographic shift," he said. "People have left this part of the state to go find employment elsewhere."

While larger districts such as Hillsdale and Jonesville have seen a minimal drop, if any, smaller schools are losing the most students, mak-

ing it increasingly difficult for them to compete with schools of choice.

"It's a Catch-22," Henthorne said. "Some families leave either by schools of choice or because there's no job. Now that small schools are smaller, they can't offer one more class and students

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Empty halls

Largest student losses since 2007	
Camden-Frontier	41
Litchfield	35
Pittsford	34
Reading	33
Waldron	14

Source: HCISD

A8

Saturday, November 22, 2008 www.hillsdale.net

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enroll in bigger high schools with more classes. It's a downward spiral."

With more than a 45 percent decrease in students over the past 10 years and a loss of more than 35 students in the past year, Litchfield has suffered one of the greatest student losses in the county.

Litchfield Board of Education President Sheryl Pitts said the school has been hit both by schools of choice and, more recently, because of the bad economy.

"Schools of choice had a big impact on us, we are surrounded by three bigger schools," she said. "(However), the trend is not school of choice this year, it's because they actually moved."

Pitts said that the school's high percentage loss is a result of having small numbers to begin with.

"Being small, our percentage is high, but we didn't start out with as many kids so it doesn't take much," she said. "When you have more numbers to work with, the (percentages) aren't quite the same."

Pittsford Superintendent Andy Shaw also said students in his district are leaving because their families are moving to places with more job opportunities.

"We don't have new jobs coming in to this area, and we don't have low-income housing or apartments for rent like Hillsdale and Jonesville," he said. "We don't have a housing situation that works for people who are trying to make ends meet."

Across the board, schools are doing the best they can to reduce spending, while holding on to student pro-

Winners and Losers

Student counts for schools in the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District

	2007 to 2008	Pct change since 1998
Camden-Frontier	-41	-17.06
Hillsdale	7.92	-7.48
Hillsdale Alternative	16.3	
Jonesville	0.2	8.2
Jonesville Alternative	2	
Litchfield	-35.43	-45.08
North Adams-Jerome	-19.79	-20.72
Pittsford	-34	-20.63
Reading	-32.87	-13.23
Waldron	-14.43	-24.56
Hillsdale Preparatory	10	-40.16
Will Carleton	14.38	70.83
COUNTY TOTAL	-126.72	-9.96

Source: HCISD

grams as long as they can.

Litchfield has made staff cuts, eliminated a bus run and reduced its superintendent and business manager from full-time to part-time employees. The school has also cut contracts with privatized custodial and food staff to hire its own directly, which Pitts said has saved the school a lot of money.

In Pittsford, the teacher's union took no pay increase for the year and the school has worked hard to make itself more energy efficient to reduce costs.

Despite the efforts, schools worry about how many more cuts they can make without reducing the quality of the education.

In Waldron, Superintendent William Stitt said the school has had to cut its art program in recent years and last year lost two teachers.

"The bottom line: every school's a business, and you have to make decisions sometimes that aren't the most popular," he said.

Camden-Frontier Board of Education President Clint Slusher said the school had to freeze spending after the school year started.

"It's getting to the point

where I don't know how much more cutting we can do and still provide a good education," he said.

Henthorne said if trends continue, it will get to the point where some of the smaller schools will no longer meet the Michigan Merit curriculum requirements.

"We would like for them to work together through the (Education) Leadership Initiative, but we can't force that to happen," he said. "We respect that as a local decision."

Down the road, the schools are hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst, with many looking to increase collaboration with other districts to save costs.

Several schools are already sharing teachers via interactive television and are considering more collaborations such as a consortium to purchase diesel fuel and natural gas to save money.

"If you continue to eat away at your programming, there's a direct correlation to your kids' academic success down (the road)," Shaw said. "If quality drops, you'll lose kids. Parents want to know if (schools) are going to be able to educate the child."