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Students get high-tech

Apache Junction High School students learned about the high-tech industry during a three-day SEMI High Tech U workshop.

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Override vote tallies in

While the unofficial results are in, showing the Apache Junction Unified School District failed in its effort to get an override renewal passed, there could be more to the story.

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Got Kids?

East Valley school officials discuss factors to enrollment



Students prepare to go into their classes the morning of Nov. 5 at Apache Trail High School, 945 W. Apache Trail. ATHS is seeing a slight increase to enrollment numbers in the community of Apache Junction, ATHS School Leader Giles Glithero, left, says.

By Terrance Thornton
 Independent Newspapers

Two of the East Valley's largest school districts are experiencing a noticeable drop in student enrollment, but a charter school in Apache Junction is bucking that trend.

Layoffs, housing and geography are playing a major role in whether or not a child attends a certain school district, school officials contend.

While districts in Queen Creek and neighboring San Tan Valley are seeing increases to enrollment

numbers, the Apache Junction Unified School District and Mesa Unified School Districts are seeing a significant decrease to student populations over the last two years.

School district officials agree numerous factors go into the abil-

ity to retain and attract students.

But due to the population boom to northern Pinal County and the eastern edge of Maricopa County over the last five years, the AJUSD and MUSD may be fighting a losing battle, school district of-

See Tallies — Page 6

While the larger districts are seeing a declining

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ficials say.

Apache Junction Unified School District

The AJUSD has for the past two years seen a steady decrease to total students enrolled, according to Carol Shepherd, director of public relations for the district.

"Virtually every financial decision faced each year is vitally affected by student numbers partly because the main state-funding formula is tied to these figures," she said in an Oct. 29 press release addressing a Nov. 3 AJUSD override renewal ballot question. "Many people do not realize that the Apache Junction Unified School District is experiencing a major declining enrollment situation."

According to Ms. Shepherd, AJUSD is experiencing a 5 percent loss to student tallies, or 300 students from last year to this year. Ms. Shepherd claims 300 students make up about one half of the population of an average-sized AJUSD elementary school, she said in the press release.

There are five elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school that are maintained, operated and funded by AJUSD, according to district officials.

District officials point to the tough economy, the still-ballooning number of house foreclosures and property-renting families moving away in search of construction jobs and other opportunities as major catalysts for the drop in enrollment, Ms. Shepherd said in the press release.

AJUSD officials were not available for further comment on this story because as Ms. Shepherd put it in an e-mail Nov. 2, "this is not a particularly good week with the election," she said of the Nov. 3 override election.

Apache Trail High School

While the AJUSD is seeing a decrease to students, Apache Trail High School, 945 W. Apache Trail, is seeing a moderate increase to its student tallies.

"In the last two years we have actually increased in enrollment," said ATHS School



Independent Newspapers/Terrance Thornton
Fremont Junior High School Principal Patricia Christie, left, says retaining students to her school is a matter of proving to parents the quality education given and that her school is an important part of east Mesa's community.

Leader Giles Glithero in a Nov. 4 phone interview. "We offer an alternative for students that may not be successful in a larger school."

At the 100-day mark last year, average daily membership to the Apache Junction charter school — which is owned by the Leona Group, a corporate entity offering tuition-free charter schools — was 170 compared to this year at 185.

The total amount of students the ATHS facility can handle is 205, according to School Leader Glithero.

School Leader Glithero says his school is experiencing a rise in student enrollment numbers because of the strong student-teacher relationships created.

"Not that teachers in other schools don't know something about their students, but our teachers here know a lot about our students because of the relationship they forge with those students," he explained. "You are able to talk to just about every student."

Where once they were lost, they are now found at smaller charter schools, School Leader Glithero contends.

"On occasion, I have heard parents say their child is felt lost on a larger campus,"

he said, but added more students help the bottom line. "For any school to be successful it has to grow every year, but it is all about getting to that point where we can grow."

Similar to traditional school districts, ATHS officials are hearing rumors of pending state-funding cuts, but no concrete numbers have been made public, School Leader Glithero said.

"There is no guarantee that charter schools will get what was anticipated," he said of state-funding mechanisms based on average daily membership. "Because of that there is an element of uncertainty when it comes to expanding a program."

School Leader Glithero says a sense of ownership plays a vital role in retaining charter school students.

"I think the reason why students stay in schools, specifically with charter schools, is because they develop ownership of their school," he explained. "This not just being where they get an education, but where they can learn life skills. When we do lose a student it is for reasons outside of their control."

Mesa Unified School District

MUSD Superintendent Mike Cowan says his district is facing enrollment decreases because of several factors, most of which point to cheap housing opportunities in northern Pinal County.

"Mesa Public Schools serve a large community of established neighborhoods that opened in the 1980s," he explained in a written response to e-mailed questions Nov. 3. "Many families who had young children moved out of Mesa and other suburban communities to the far borders of Maricopa County and into Pinal County where they could buy a home at a lower cost."

According to Mr. Cowan, over the last three school years MUSD has seen about a 5,000-student decrease to its district-wide enrollment tallies. The MUSD, as of Oct. 26, has 66,824 students attending its schools, Superintendent Cowan said.

There are five preschools, 57 elementary schools, 13 junior high schools and 20 high schools that are maintained, operated and funded by MUSD, according to district officials.

With students leaving MUSD — which translates into less state funding — Superintendent Cowan says funding is a concern, but it always is.

"The formula is quite complicated," he said of state funding. "It starts with a base-student allocation. The two main variables in this are the number of students and the amount of funding per student set by the state legislature each year."

Superintendent Cowan contends the main reason for decreases in MUSD enrollment tallies are geographical rather than issues with MUSD.

"When a student withdraws from Mesa schools, it is most often because the family is moving to another community," he pointed out.

Florence Unified School District

Florence Unified School District Superintendent Gary Nine says his district is growing, which he attributes mainly to the recent

Trend to student enrollment, others are growing

ve-year population explosion.

"We are growing because we provide the cheapest place to buy a house," he explained in a Nov. 3 phone interview. "That and the new program from Poston Butte (High School)."

Over the past two school years, FUSD has seen a 9 percent increase to student enrollment, which for the 2009-10 school year is a total student population of 8,055 students compared to last year's total of 7,385, Superintendent Nine said.

There are six K-8 schools and two high schools operated, maintained and funded by FUSD.

Superintendent Nine says trust plays a major role in retaining students, and for a growing district, developing strong relationships with parents are paramount.

"Have we earned everybody's trust? No. We haven't," he said. "But when we have problems, we go at them head on and we fix them."

But the focus of a school district has to be the education given, not the funding put in place to provide that education, Superintendent Nine says.

"We are doing a better job at teaching our students and our parents understand that," he noted. "We hope they (students) stay because they had an enjoyable experience — hopefully they will stay because they want to stay."

Student enrollment always translates to dollars and cents, Superintendent Nine says.

"Basically your funding is based on the 30-day membership of the previous years," he explained. "And that is the amount of days you have in your programs for the first 30 days is how your funding for the last year is."

Superintendent Nine says despite the growing student-enrollment numbers, he is preparing his district for future state-funding cuts courtesy of the still unbalanced state budget.

"We set aside \$1.3 million ... they (the state legislature) are going to come and get (percent) or 9 percent," he said of next fiscal year. "We are growing so that is a little bit of insurance for the tough times that are here."

Superintendent Nine says despite all the



Students exit Desert Mountain Elementary School, 22301 S. Ilawes Road, Nov. 4 headed for school buses to take them home. DMES Principal Bull Schultz, right, says a solid education foundation is the key to retaining students in the East Valley.

other factors associated with student enrollment numbers, parents and how their jobs have been impacted by the economy deter enrollment numbers more than anything else.

"Predominately kids go where their parents take them," he pointed out. "Do the parents think they are getting the education they think they deserve or are they not?"

J.O. Combs School District District

J.O. Combs School District Superintendent Jan Langer says enrollment has increased steadily over the past two years, which she says can be attributed to programs and opportunities parents believe to be beneficial to their children.

"A year ago, the primary reason for growth was the housing boom that northwestern Pinal County was experiencing as well as adding the ninth grade as the start of our high school program," she explained in a written response to e-mailed questions.

This year, the opportunity for new grade-level instruction is the reason for the uptick to student enrollment at the J.O. Combs

school district.

"The primary reason for an increase in student enrollment this year appears to be the grade-level progression of adding the 10th grade at the high school," she explained.

Since 2007, the J.O. Combs school district has seen an increase from 3,392 students to 4,238 students, according to Superintendent Langer.

There are four elementary schools, one middle and one high school operated, maintained and funded by J.O. Combs, according to J.O. Combs officials.

While funding levels may be in question next fiscal year — which for most school districts begin July 1 — Superintendent Langer says funding depicts program levels.

"Funding provides each district with an opportunity to expand and/or maintain its program offerings for students and keep class sizes at an appropriate level," she said. "The state funding formula for students is a weighted funding system based on each child's education category."

Although her district has been growing steadily over the past three school years, foreclosures continue to play a role in stu-

dent retention, Superintendent Langer said.

"Families believe in and support in the quality education provided in their child's neighborhood school," she said. "They appreciate the emphasis in an education system that addresses the education of the whole child with the inclusion of advanced academics, technology, fine arts and athletic programs."

Queen Creek

Unified School District

Queen Creek Unified School District Superintendent James Murlless says while his district is not losing students, it is not seeing increases to student population like its neighbors in the San Tan Valley.

"We have not had a decrease in enrollment over the last two years," he said in a written response to e-mailed questions. "I think we have had major increases in students during my 11 years here. This year and last we have seen only a slight increase of about 4 percent."

In May 2008, QCUSD had 5,238 students filling its halls and this year, the QCUSD has 5,443 students, according to Superintendent Murlless.

There are four elementary schools, one high school, on junior high and one middle school, operated, maintained and funded by QCUSD, according to QCUSD officials.

Superintendent Murlless says foreclosures are playing a role, but a minor one.

"We have foreclosures also, but now they are turning into rental properties," he said, comparing foreclosures from San Tan Valley to Queen Creek. "The Johnson Ranch area (Florence Unified) has seen tremendous growth, much more so than we have. And, now the foreclosures are countless."

The economy is playing the biggest role in student movement, Superintendent Murlless contends.

"Students move with their parents," he explained. "If a parent is let go, they have no income and no income doesn't pay the mortgage and they are foreclosed upon and oftentimes they move to something more affordable."