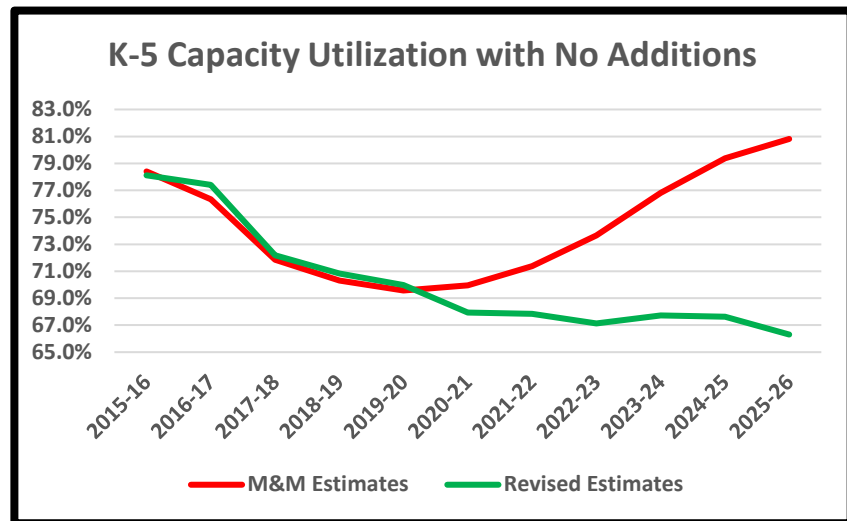


## TIME TO RECONSIDER K-5 SCHOOL EXPANSION PLANS

- Despite declining enrollments, the BOE wants to spend millions of dollars to add more capacity to our eleven elementary schools based on projections of higher future enrollments.
- However, those optimistic projections assumed a rebound in births that is not happening.
- Our K-5 schools are currently operating at only 78% of real capacity, and based on the most optimistic enrollment projections, without adding more seats, they would be operating at only 81% of capacity in 2025-26.
- Based on lower actual births, capacity utilization in 2025-26 may be only 66%, with more empty seats (1,925) than all the seats currently in Dwight, Holland Hill, Jennings and Mill Hill (1,776).
- At a time when we will probably be forced to cut spending on our education programs due primarily to the State’s fiscal crisis, it makes no sense to add more excess capacity in our schools.

The Board of Education (BOE) has approved educational specifications for Holland Hill School<sup>1</sup> that would add four more classrooms (in addition to the five that will replace existing “portables”), and has indicated a desire to add six more classrooms at Mill Hill School (in addition to replacing two portables). The effect of these additions would be to add ten more classrooms to the 240 we have now (including seven portables). The cost of an additional classroom, including the cost of all the related space required to support a larger school population, is ~\$1 million, so adding ten new classrooms will cost taxpayers ~\$10 million.<sup>2</sup> Fairfield Taxpayer believes that the Board of Education (BOE) should reconsider these expansion plans.

We are currently operating at only **78%** of real capacity, utilization is projected to decline to **70%** in 2019-20, and even if optimistic enrollment projections are correct, with no additional seats, we would be operating at only **81%** of real capacity in 2025-26. With the lower enrollments that appear likely because births have been significantly below expectations in the past two years, we could be at only **66%** of capacity in 2025-26.



<sup>1</sup> <http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/boe/meetings/agenda/BOE%20Feb%2014%202017%20AgendaEnc.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> This estimate may be conservative. Cost per classroom is subject to a wide range primarily as a function of the need for related infrastructure (cafeteria, lavatories, parking, special-ed/resource rooms, etc.). According to the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual School Construction Report, February 2015, by *School Planning & Management*, the cost of new elementary school construction in the Northeast in 2014 was \$86,619 per student, which implies **~\$2 million** for a 24-student classroom plus all related infrastructure. Adding additional classrooms as part of a renovation project would cost less unless adding more classrooms triggered a need for more infrastructure (e.g., larger cafeteria).

<https://webspm.com/research/2015/02/annual-school-construction-report/asset.aspx?tc=assetpg>

## K-5 Enrollment Projections

Official enrollment projections for Fairfield’s eleven K-5 schools in early 2016 showed an 11% decline between 2015-16 and 2019-20, due primarily to the unusually large number of students (894) currently in grade 5 (versus an average of 711 in grades K-4), and then a rebound to a level in 2025-26 that is 3% higher than in 2015-16. The projected rebound is based primarily on an assumed substantial increase in births in Fairfield.

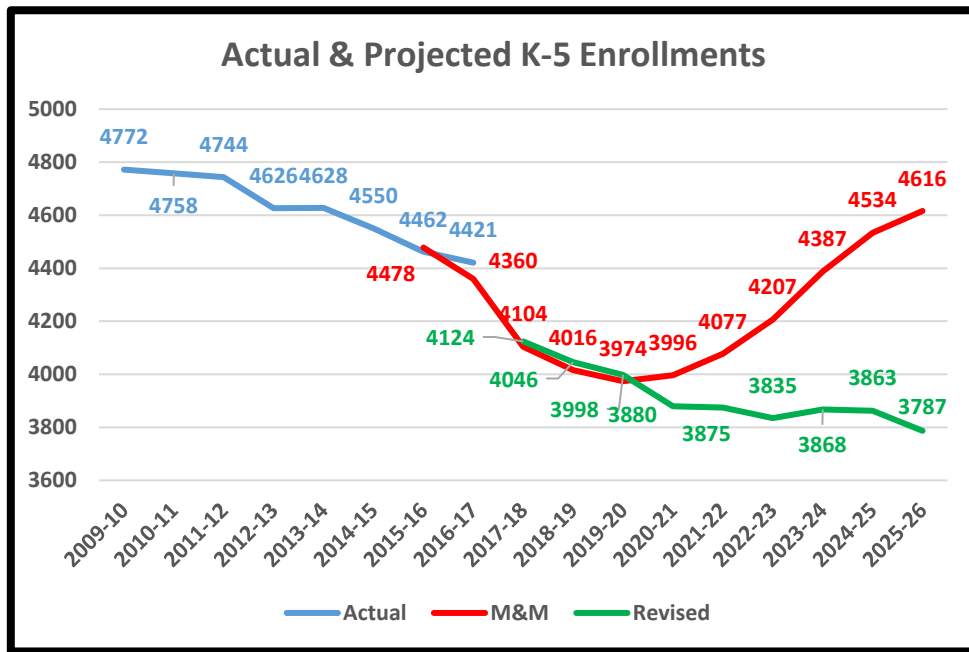
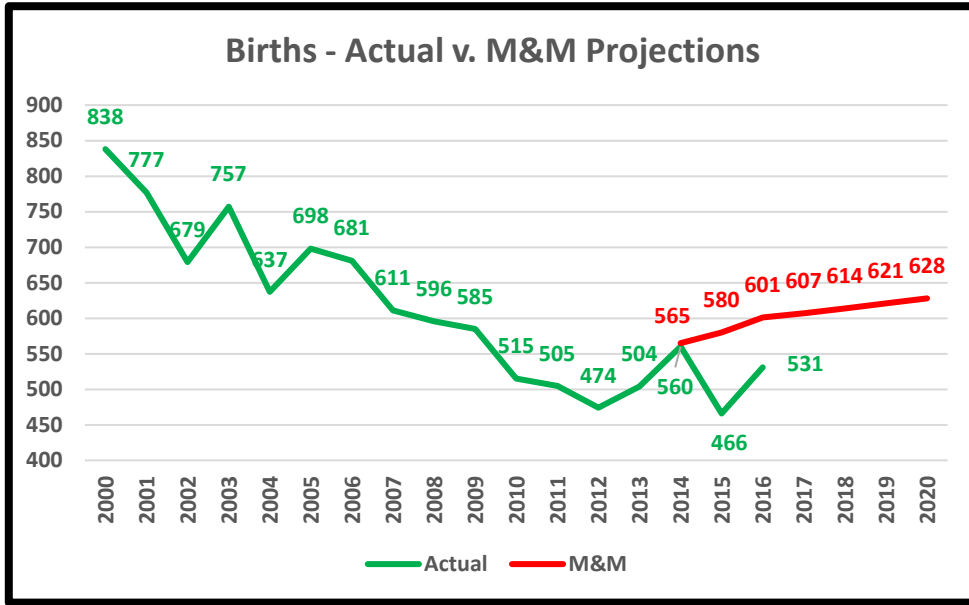
1. The latest official enrollment projections for Fairfield’s schools are included in the Racial Imbalance study by Milone & MacBroom (M&M) dated 2/11/2016.<sup>3</sup>
2. In its February 2016 presentation, M&M projected an 11% decline in PK-5 enrollment from **4,550** in 2015-16 to **4,046** in 2019-20, and then a 16% increase to **4,688** in 2025-26. The M&M projections for all years include **Pre-Kindergarten (PK) enrollment of 72 students**,<sup>4</sup> which is a non-mandated program that was instituted in an unsuccessful effort to solve the Racial Imbalance “problem” at McKinley.<sup>5</sup> Excluding these non-mandated PK students, M&M projected an 11% decline in K-5 enrollment from **4,478** in 2015-16 to **3,974** in 2019-20, and then a 16% increase to **4,616** in 2025-26.
3. The projected strong rebound in enrollment after 2019-20 is based on **three key assumptions: the number of births; the ratio of Kindergarten (K) enrollments to births; and the ratio of continuing net in-migration of students** in the five years after Kindergarten.
  - a. **BIRTHS: The number of births in Fairfield was assumed by M&M to increase substantially (22%) from 515 in 2010 to 628 in 2020** (births in any given year are presumed to result in K students five years later);
  - b. **B-to-K RATIO: The ratio between the number of K students and the number of births was assumed by M&M to remain at the level (1.214) experienced in the three academic years (2013/14-2015/16) leading up to its study, rather than regressing to the lower level (1.132) recorded in the preceding four academic years (2009/10-2012-13), or perhaps going even lower; and**
  - c. **IN-MIGRATION RATIO: The ratio between the number of students in grades 1-5 and the number of students in Kindergarten was assumed by M&M to increase slightly (from 1.037 to 1.049) due to net in-migration.** In other words, M&M assumed there will be approximately 5% more students in grades 1-5 than would be there if the schools merely retained all their K students.

<sup>3</sup> [http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/boe/racial-imbalance-plan/Fairfield\\_BOE\\_Presentation\\_02-16-2016.pdf](http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/boe/racial-imbalance-plan/Fairfield_BOE_Presentation_02-16-2016.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The actual number of Pre-K students at present is 58.

<sup>5</sup> For additional information on the Racial Imbalance “problem” and the BOE’s latest plan to address it, please see: <http://fairfieldschools.org/board-of-education/racial-imbalance-plan/>. We enclose the word “problem” in quotation marks because it appears there is only a problem in terms of a rigid State regulation. There does not appear to be any problem in terms of any students being disadvantaged by attending McKinley. Indeed, families are so pleased with McKinley School that none of them wants to move to other Fairfield schools.

4. **BIRTHS:** In the first two years (2015 and 2016) of M&M’s projections, actual births in Fairfield have been ~114 (20%) and ~70 (12%) below its projections (466 v. 580 and 531 v. 601, respectively). If actual births remain at their 2015-2016 actual average of ~500 for the next four years, total K enrollment will be substantially lower than M&M projected; all other things being equal, **total K-5 enrollment in 2025-26 would be 18% lower than M&M’s projection (3,787 vs. 4,616)**. Births could also continue to decline rather than leveling off at ~500, resulting in even fewer students.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Births in the first three months of 2017, based on Town Clerk data, are 18% below their year-earlier level (100 vs. 122).

5. **B-to-K RATIO:** The “BKR” is a function of the net number families with K-age children moving into and out of Fairfield, and of any change in the propensity of Fairfield families to send their children to private schools (which varies primarily as a function of general economic conditions). The BKR in 2016-17, the first year for which M&M did not have actual data, came in higher at **1.279** than M&M’s estimate of **1.214**, reflecting actual K enrollment at **646** (as of 10/1/16) that was 5% higher than its projection of **613**. **If births remain at the 500 level and if the BKR remains at this higher level of 1.279, total K-5 enrollment in 2025-26 would still be 14% lower than M&M’s projection (3,992 vs. 4,616).**
  
6. **IN-MIGRATION RATIO:** In-migration is a function of the same factors that determine the BKR, but it applies to children beyond Kindergarten in grades 1-5. Actual K-5 enrollment at the end of 2015-16 at **4,488** (6/1/16) was only slightly (0.2%) above M&M’s projection of **4,478** (not surprisingly, since M&M had actual January 2016 enrollment numbers at the time of their study). Actual enrollment on 10/1/16 was **4,421** slightly (1.4%) above M&M’s projection of **4,360**. Thus, the net inward migration ratio (IMR) for 2016-17 was 1.068 instead of the 1.059 that was assumed for that year. **If births remain at the 500 level, if the BKR remains at its higher level of 1.279, and if the IMR remains at its higher level of 1.068, total K-5 enrollment in 2025-26 at would still be 9% lower than M&M’s projection (4,220 vs. 4,616).**
  
7. **COUNTER-ARGUMENTS:** BOE proponents for adding more K-5 capacity argue that “enrollments may be declining, but they always recover.” The only support they offer for this assertion is that Fairfield’s enrollments declined in the 1980s and ‘90s (after the Post-War baby and suburban expansion booms subsided), but recovered in the 2000s, on which basis they also assert that Fairfield should not have closed schools at that time.<sup>7</sup>

However, the world has changed in ways that make it far less likely that Fairfield will see a recovery in enrollments. First, **women are having fewer babies**,<sup>8</sup> and **Millennials have demonstrated a preference for urban over suburban living**. Second, **our State is in bad shape**: it is losing population; it has not created any additional jobs in 27 years; it is facing a growing fiscal crisis that will require substantial reductions in public services and further increases in taxes and fees; and State school enrollment is declining and is projected to continue to decline. Third, **Fairfield’s ability to maintain the quality of its public services is at risk**: because of the State’s problems; because our spending and taxes have increased 2.5x-3.0x faster than the rate of inflation over the last 19 years; because our tax base is down 10% from its 2011 peak; and because our home prices remain under pressure, particularly at the higher end of the market which has traditionally paid a disproportionate share of total residential property taxes (almost 50% of taxes have been paid by the 20% of homes with the highest assessments).

BOE proponents of adding K-5 capacity apparently do not agree: that adding more capacity today makes economic sense only if enrollment surges well beyond the most optimistic current estimate;

<sup>7</sup> The assertion that closing schools in the 1980s was a mistake rests entirely on the fact that it was subsequently necessary to expand capacity when enrollment recovered. There has never been any analysis of: (a) how much was saved by closing schools; (b) how much would otherwise have been spent to renovate/expand schools that were closed; or (c) the benefits of repurposing some of the schools that were closed (e.g., Oldfield and Grasmere).

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/08/16/why-american-women-are-having-fewer-babies-than-ever/?utm\\_term=.39eb63f4b155](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/08/16/why-american-women-are-having-fewer-babies-than-ever/?utm_term=.39eb63f4b155)

that they are imposing a substantial unnecessary cost on the taxpayers; or that it would make sense to wait to see what actually happens to enrollments. **Ironically, at the same time that a majority of its members wants to forge ahead with capacity additions, the BOE also included the option of closing one or more elementary schools on its “Tier 3” list of possible cost-saving measures in response to the Governor’s recent proposal to shift \$9.2 million in teacher pension costs onto the Town. It is difficult to imagine a starker logical contradiction.**

Another counterargument from BOE proponents is that we need more capacity at Holland Hill and Mill Hill in order to redistrict students to solve the Racial Imbalance “problem” at McKinley School. This argument is not valid because we already have more than enough empty seats (5,712 - 4,450 = 1,262) in other schools to allow us to redistrict. Indeed, **1,262 empty seats is only 34 fewer than all the seats (1,296) in Dwight, Jennings and Mill Hill schools combined.** And by 2019-20, even with no additions to capacity and based on the most optimistic projection, we will have **1,738** empty seats (5,712 – 3,974), which is equivalent to four empty Dwight schools.

8. **OPEN CHOICE:** Future K-5 enrollment may include more non-Fairfield students. Current K-5 enrollment includes **51** students who attend school in Fairfield under the State’s Open Choice (OC) Program. As part of its plan to mitigate (not solve) the longstanding Racial Imbalance “problem” at McKinley School, the BOE wants to increase the number of OC students in each of the next two years by 14 students, thereby increasing the total number of OC students in FPS from 72 to 100 (net of assumed attrition). If this plan goes forward, it will add to budget pressures in our schools because the Town spends \$17,000<sup>9</sup> on average per student (not including another \$2,400 per student in expenses that are not included in the BOE budget), but we are reimbursed by the State only \$3,000 per OC student (and even that modest reimbursement from the State may be at risk because of the State’s growing fiscal crisis).

### **K-5 Capacity Utilization**

**With no additions to capacity, we already have enough seats (5,712) in our eleven K-5 schools to accommodate the most optimistic projected level of enrollments through 2025-26 (4,616 by M&M).**

1. Capacity in our K-5 schools in the M&M study is labeled as “Functional” because it assumes that we can put only 21 students in each classroom, on which basis there are only **5,040** seats available.
2. However, **real capacity** in our K-5 schools is determined by Administrative Policy and “noted in Collective Bargaining Agreements.” Current Administrative Policy<sup>10</sup> states that the maximum number of students per teacher is 23 in grades K-2 and 25 in grades 3-5. On this basis (assuming an average of 24), there are **5,712** seats available, and even this higher number of seats is understated because the same Administrative Policy allows for the possibility of even more students per teacher.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Proposed 2017-18 BOE budget of \$169 million / 9,894 students = \$17,081.

<sup>10</sup> See page 130 of the BOE Budget Book at: [http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/boe/budget/2017-18/BOE\\_Proposed\\_Budget-2017-18-02\\_14\\_17.pdf](http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/boe/budget/2017-18/BOE_Proposed_Budget-2017-18-02_14_17.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Note that this calculation accounts for the fact that maximum class sizes at McKinley School are slightly lower at 21 K-2 and 23 3-5. Administrative Policy (also on page 130 of the Budget Book) allows for more students per teacher per the following: “when class size in grades K-2 exceeds 30, the class may be divided or a teaching aide and/or intern

3. Understating actual capacity by 10% is a convention adopted by the BOE based on a “planning principle” (more on this subject later) which states that we should always have 10% excess capacity in our elementary schools and 15% in our middle and high schools. Note also that the BOE’s methodology of assuming only 21 seats per K-5 classroom actually results in chronic excess capacity of 12.5% ( $504/576 = 87.5\%$ ) rather than 10%.
4. If the BOE’s plans to add four classrooms at Holland Hill and six at Mill Hill are realized, there will be an additional 240 seats available, or a total of **5,952**.
5. If M&M’s optimistic projection of 4,616 students in 2025-26 is correct, without any additions our utilization would be **91.5%** of “functional” (i.e., “understated”) capacity (4,616/5,040), **BUT our real capacity utilization would be 80.8%** (4,616/5,712).
6. If M&M’s optimistic projection of 4,616 students in 2025-26 is correct and we make the proposed additions, our utilization would be **87.9%** of “functional” (i.e., “understated”) capacity (4,616/5,250), **BUT our real capacity utilization would be 77.6%** (4,616/5,952).
7. At the low end of the projection range based on an extrapolation of the lower level of births over the last two years, **without additions** our real capacity utilization would be only **66.3%** (3,787/5,712), and **with the proposed additions** real utilization would be **63.6%** (3,787/5,952), with 2,165 empty seats that are equivalent to all the seats in five schools the size of Dwight, Jennings or Mill Hill (each of which currently has 432 seats, including any portables).

### **Expensive Planning Principles**

At election time, all BOE candidates are quick to pay lip service to “fiscal responsibility,”<sup>12</sup> but in practice the majority that controls the BOE aggressively opposes any concerns expressed by other BOE members or the public about whether, given **the new economic reality** in Connecticut and Fairfield, the taxpayers can still afford to bear the costs of adhering to the Board’s expensive *Facilities Planning Principles*.<sup>13</sup>

Even though K-5 enrollment is declining, and even though we currently have 1,262 empty K-5 seats, the BOE majority claims that instead of simply redistricting, we must spend millions of taxpayer dollars to add 240 more seats (ten classrooms) at Holland Hill and Mill Hill because they think: (a) that redistricting is an “*inappropriate measure*”; (b) that we should maintain 10%-15% excess capacity in our schools; and (c) that we should add space to schools where students are located (in what they call, “*neighborhood schools*”). Here are the actual operative principles:

1. The first Expensive Planning Principle is “**Stability**,” and it states that “*redistricting should not be revisited every 3-5 years, especially without a major event such as a school opening or closing.*” This means that the BOE thinks it is better to spend millions of taxpayer dollars to add more seats rather

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provided; when class size in grades 3-6 exceeds 35, the class may be divided or a teaching aide and/or intern provided.”

<sup>12</sup> For example, the number one issue in the current Chairman’s platform as a BOE candidate in 2015 was, in his own words: “***Fiscal Responsibility: While advocating for ALL Fairfield students, we must make responsible and balanced fiscal decisions.***”

<sup>13</sup> [http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/business-services/facilities/Long\\_Range\\_Facilities\\_report\\_updatedrevbyLM9-2-2015.pdf](http://cdn.fairfieldschools.org/business-services/facilities/Long_Range_Facilities_report_updatedrevbyLM9-2-2015.pdf)

than to redistrict. Indeed, the *Planning Principles* later (under “Headroom”) refer to “redistricting” as an “*inappropriate measure*” to which the BOE should not resort when there are fluctuations in enrollment. However, more BOE members have recently begun to acknowledge publicly that it will be necessary at some point to redistrict in order to solve the Racial Imbalance “problem” at McKinley. If we are going to have to redistrict to solve the Racial Imbalance problem, we should simply get on with it since we have more than enough empty seats in other schools.

2. The second Expensive Planning Principle is “**Headroom**,” and it states that “*to ensure stability we should leave headroom in each school – the maximum number we should plan to is 90%/85% of capacity.*” Once again, this means that the BOE is happy to spend millions of taxpayer dollars to add more seats than may be needed because they say, “*enrollment projections are not an exact science,*” by which in practice they apparently mean that projections can only be low, not high.
3. The third Expensive Planning Principle is “**Commitment to Adding Space Where Students Are Located**,” which means that the BOE is happy to spend millions of taxpayer dollars because “*at the elementary school level we must have a commitment of maintaining the concept of ‘neighborhood schools’ and/or allowing students to attend the elementary school which is reasonably close to the students’ homes whenever educationally feasible and possible.*” Given that **the boundaries of any neighborhood are completely arbitrary as is the definition of “reasonably close,”** this principle is merely another excuse for the BOE to spend millions of taxpayer dollars rather than redistrict students when there is substantial excess capacity in the system.
4. The fourth Expensive Planning Principle is “**Enrollment Projections**,” and it notes that a plan “*should account for and accommodate peak enrollment projections,*” and warns that “*recent projections have at times underestimated actual enrollment.*” Once again, not surprisingly, this planning principle has not been updated for the fact that recent projections have substantially **overestimated** actual enrollment in Fairfield schools.

## **Conclusion**

As noted earlier, at a time when we will probably be forced to cut spending on our education programs because of substantial, growing budget pressures due primarily to the State’s fiscal crisis, it makes no sense to spend millions of taxpayer dollars to add more excess capacity in our K-5 schools. The State’s fiscal crisis also means that the cost to the taxpayers of school additions will rise because the ~25% of eligible school construction costs that has historically been reimbursed by the State is now at risk.

Under all plausible enrollment scenarios, we have enough seats to accommodate K-5 students through 2025-26. Thus, we can afford to wait and see what happens with enrollments. While we are waiting, long overdue changes in the State’s “prevailing wage” laws, which substantially increase the cost of public construction projects, could actually lower the cost of any future school construction by more than any loss of school-construction reimbursements from the State, which as noted, are currently at risk.

## APPENDIX

BIRTH, BIRTH-TO-KINDERGARTEN RATIO, AND KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT DATA												
School Year	Birth Year	Births					M&M Projections		Revised Projections		Revised v. M&M	
		SDPH	Town Clerk	SDPH vs. TC	M&M	Revised	Birth-to K Ratio	K Enrolls	Birth-to K Ratio	K Enrolls		
2009-10	2004	637	624	13		637	1.133	722	1.1334	722		
2010-11	2005	698	658	40		698	1.102	770	1.1032	770		
2011-12	2006	681	655	26		681	1.175	800	1.1747	800		
2012-13	2007	611	592	19		611	1.120	683	1.1178	683		
2013-14	2008	596	555	41		596	1.209	722	<b>1.2114</b>	722		
2014-15	2009	585	537	48		585	1.173	685	<b>1.1709</b>	685		
2015-16	2010	515	507	8	515	515	1.260	649	<b>1.2524</b>	645	-4	
2016-17	2011	505	490	15	505	505	<b>1.214</b>	<b>613</b>	<b>1.2792</b>	<b>646</b>	33	
2017-18	2012	474	455	19	474	474	1.213	575	1.214	<b>575</b>	0	
2018-19	2013	504	488	16	503	504	1.215	611	1.214	<b>612</b>	1	
2019-20	2014	560	544	16	565	560	1.214	686	1.214	<b>680</b>	-6	
2020-21	2015		451	15	580	<b>466</b>	1.214	704	1.214	<b>566</b>	-138	
2021-22	2016		516	15	601	<b>531</b>	1.215	730	1.214	<b>645</b>	-85	
2022-23	2017				<b>607</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>1.214</b>	<b>737</b>	<b>1.214</b>	<b>607</b>	-130	
2023-24	2018				<b>614</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>1.213</b>	<b>745</b>	<b>1.214</b>	<b>607</b>	-138	
2024-25	2019				<b>621</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>1.214</b>	<b>754</b>	<b>1.214</b>	<b>607</b>	-147	
2025-26	2020				<b>628</b>	<b>500</b>	<b>1.213</b>	<b>762</b>	<b>1.214</b>	<b>607</b>	-155	

SDPH = State Dept. of Public Health; TC = Fairfield Town Clerk; Difference reflects primarily out-of-state births to Fairfield residents.

TOTAL K-5 ENROLLMENT DATA										
School Year	M&M Enrollment Projections			K Enrolls in Prior 5 Yrs.	Implied IMR	Actual & Revised Enrollments			K Enrolls in	
	K	1-5	K-5			K	1-5	Total	Prior 5 Yrs.	IMR
2004-05						762				
2005-06						801				
2006-07						822				
2007-08						736				
2008-09						786				
2009-10						722	4050	4772	3,907	1.037
2010-11						770	3988	4758	3,867	1.031
2011-12						800	3944	4744	3,836	1.028
2012-13						683	3943	4626	3,814	1.034
2013-14						722	3906	4628	3,761	1.039
2014-15						685	3865	4550	3,697	1.045
2015-16	649	3829	4478	3,660	1.046	<b>645</b>	<b>3817</b>	<b>4462</b>	3,660	1.043
2016-17	613	3747	<b>4360</b>	3,539	1.059	<b>646</b>	<b>3775</b>	<b>4421</b>	3,535	1.068
2017-18	575	3528	4104	3,352	<b>1.053</b>	<b>575</b>	<b>3548</b>	<b>4124</b>	3,381	1.049
2018-19	611	3407	4016	3,244	<b>1.050</b>	<b>612</b>	<b>3434</b>	<b>4046</b>	3,273	1.049
2019-20	686	3281	3974	3,133	<b>1.047</b>	<b>680</b>	<b>3318</b>	<b>3998</b>	3,163	1.049
2020-21	704	3289	3996	3,134	<b>1.049</b>	<b>566</b>	<b>3314</b>	<b>3880</b>	3,158	1.049
2021-22	730	3346	4077	3,189	<b>1.049</b>	<b>645</b>	<b>3231</b>	<b>3875</b>	3,079	1.049
2022-23	737	3468	4207	3,306	<b>1.049</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>3228</b>	<b>3835</b>	3,077	1.049
2023-24	745	3638	4387	3,468	<b>1.049</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>3261</b>	<b>3868</b>	3,109	1.049
2024-25	754	3778	4534	3,602	<b>1.049</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>3256</b>	<b>3863</b>	3,104	1.049
2025-26	762	3851	<b>4616</b>	3,670	<b>1.049</b>	<b>607</b>	<b>3180</b>	<b>3787</b>	3,031	1.049

May 9, 2017