

Monomoy enrollment slips at grade schools

By Susan Vaughn

HARWICH -- Faced with declining enrollments at its two elementary schools the Monomoy district, comprising Chatham and Harwich, should look at providing free pre-school and take steps to boost the towns' stock of affordable housing, Superintendent Scott Carpenter told Harwich selectmen Monday.

It was the superintendent's annual enrollment report to the board, and it revealed that elementary student totals fell by 12 percent in Chatham and nearly 3 percent in Harwich since last year.

While the trend mirrors the shift across Cape Cod, with fewer young families living among the region's aging population, Carpenter's report noted, "It would behoove our towns to support initiatives that would encourage young families to live in and afford our towns."

The stumbling block to a free pre-school program, besides the cost to the district, is a lack of space.

The selectmen had several questions about preschool programs, particularly full-day. Selectman Jannell Brown said she is impressed with the preschool option, but asked if there is room in Chatham to add preschool.

"We don't have space for full-day options," said Carpenter.

SEE SCHOOLS, A8

The lack of affordable housing continues to challenge younger families who

would settle in Chatham, as it does in other towns across the Cape. The state mandates 10 percent of the stock be affordable; Chatham is less than 5 percent, while the median price of a market rate home falls between \$578,000 and \$626,000, according to various real estate data sites.

The double-digit dive in elementary school enrollment caused Carpenter to transfer one Chatham kindergarten teacher to Harwich this year, to maintain comparable class sizes. There is still a slight imbalance of one to two students in class size between the two elementary schools, with an average of 18.5 per class in Chatham and 20.3 in Harwich.

The lack of space also is a problem in Harwich, but for a different reason - Harwich Elementary has maxed out its classroom space, even with its 3 percent enrollment drop.

Carpenter said he plans to meet with parents in the next couple of weeks about the fact "Harwich is bursting at the seams."

Students cannot be shuttled to the other town's schools. Under the agreement that formed the regional school district, Chatham children go to Chatham Elementary and Harwich children go to Harwich Elementary.

Selectwoman Julie Kavanagh summed up the enrollment situation, saying, "If we can get all-day pre-kindergarten and affordable housing, we will increase our numbers."

Enrollment trends at the

middle and high school levels were more encouraging.

Modest increases at the middle school and high school means fewer students are opting to leave the district under School Choice.

At the middle school, the number of students choosing to leave shrunk by nearly half, from 44 last year to 24 this year, Carpenter reported. In addition, a bubble of more students in the fifth grade has helped increase the middle school enrollment by 6.6 percent. The high school enrollment is up 1.5 percent.

"This was the first year there was an inflow at the high school with three more coming in than leaving," Carpenter said. Since before the school district regionalized, there has been a movement of students choosing Nauset Regional High School or Sturgis Charter School. He attributed the return of students to the programs and opportunities at Monomoy since it became a regional high school.

The high school tends to lose more students because of athletics rather than academics, Carpenter said. He has started addressing the issue by talking to the athletic directors about ways they can build the athletic programs, and he said he has seen some progress in the four years he's been superintendent.

In other notable enrollment stats: Carpenter mentioned a shift to more students coming from other countries, creating a greater need for English language learning services.

Of 24 students coming into Monomoy schools, he said six are from other countries and of 48 new students at the high school, five are from Jamaica.

Town Administrator Chris



Clark noted that the demographic trends are unique and he suggested the school and town officials hold a workshop to study that topic further.