

Summer residents are enrolling their kids in schools down the shore. But will they stay?

Amy S. Rosenberg The Philadelphia Inquirer

MARGATE — The corner of Monmouth and Granville avenues is busy with morning drop-off at the William H. Ross School, but this year, in addition to masks and coronavirus protocols, things are a little different.

“You missed the New Yorkers,” says crossing guard Dawn Flynn, a veteran of the corner for 19 years.

The Philadelphia people, though, are still on the corner, after dropping off their two children, newly enrolled down the shore in Margate, where the family spent the spring and summer in a rental property, and where unlike back home, schools have reopened for in-person instruction five days a week.

The Philly dad doesn’t want his name used, fearing a possible backlash from the locals who are skeptical of the new parents’ commitment to their school. “We’re all in,” assures the dad. “We are staying.”

Up and down the Jersey Shore, summer people, many of whom arrived in the early spring from COVID-19 hot spots, are staying on. They are working remotely, arranging extended rentals, making September their new August and, a bit more controversially, enrolling their children in appealingly small schools in shore towns.

In the tiny schools in Avalon and Stone Harbor, where teaching is currently in a hybrid in person-remote model, the school board is worried the added enrollment will derail plans for a gradual move to a five-day reopening.

“If it is a luxury option, because you have a second home, to choose between school districts, nobody else has that luxury who is a resident,” Maggie Day, a school board member and Stone Harbor shop owner, said during a school board meeting broadcast Wednesday on Facebook.

She suggested capping in-person numbers and restricting any future summer people to an all-virtual option.

“If it’s going to affect a resident or a tuition student already attending our school, then their option would be virtual,” Day said.

The district, which barely cracks 175 students spread out over two schools, has seen 15 new students in its Stone Harbor school, which houses K-4th grade, and two new families in Avalon’s upper grades.

But just a few more summer residents will tip the balance of the school’s classrooms and prevent a full reopening with proper social distancing, Superintendent Stacey Tracy told the board.

She and others on the board doubted the summer people would be sticking around, and expressed reluctance to “flip the entirety of our school system” to accommodate them, as one board member put it, comparing their enrollment to “the difference between a marriage and a hookup.”

“The summer residents, I don’t think they’re going to stay for the year,” Tracy said. “I think by October or November, they’re going to go home. We had 12 kids in Avalon enrolled, and 10 of them are gone.”

The board explored whether they could restrict in-person learning to locals and those already enrolled, or ask people to show a New Jersey driver's license or voter registration to discourage summer people.

In Ocean City, board President Joseph Clark thinks the summer people are here to stay. Like elsewhere in coastal towns up and down the Eastern Seaboard, Ocean City real estate is on fire.

Ocean City's high school, which is running on a hybrid model, has about 75 additional students to put enrollment at about 1,300, Clark said, with somewhat smaller enrollment boosts in the lower grades.

The high school, in fact, is now at capacity, he said, and is still working out the wrinkles in social distancing. Any additional high school enrollments will be assigned to the district's outsourced Virtual Academy for now, he said.

Clark said he was well aware of a widely circulated photo showing students eating lunch bunched together on the high school's bleachers, and said the school was "working out the problems as we go along."

"There are people who have second homes, and it's not just we're going to sneak down here until we get it straightened out (back home)," he said. "I believe a lot of those families are moving here. We've had families move into town, buy a home, who are in the virtual program right now. We're full."

Unlike tiny Stone Harbor, Ocean City has multiple classrooms per grade and extra classrooms, he said. The district also has 198 students from out of district under the state's Choice program.

He said the additional enrollment was a reflection of Ocean City seeing a general increase in people relocating to seasonal destinations, spurred by concerns over the coronavirus in more dense locations. Post-Labor Day did not have quite the same feel this year, he said.

"For those of us used to the carpet being rolled up and things calming down, not so much," Clark said.

Back in Margate, parent William Jacovini said the decision to enroll his son in the beach town's school rather than in Philadelphia was easy.

"I went through Margate schools," Jacovini said.

And despite the town's typical nuisance flooding he had to navigate around Thursday morning, he said he feels his first grader is in good hands.

"These public schools really stood out," he said. "You hear the discussions, go on the Zoom meetings. They've really done their preparations. They had engineers discussing the upgrades in the HVAC system. It's amazing, for Margate to make such an effort."

He said he's staying "100%."

"We're actually selling our Philadelphia home," he said, and his wife, a pharmacist, is getting a New Jersey license. Plus, his parents still live in Margate and so are available for after-school pickup.

Thomas Baruffi, Margate's superintendent, said about 23 students had transferred into Margate's two schools, for a total enrollment of 381. The school has classes every day from 8:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m., leaving the afternoon for teacher planning periods.

It is also offering limited after-school care in its Lucky Kids program, and Margate recreation will be planning intramural sports, easily solving problems that are upending parents in other districts.

Students must pass health screening questions every day, bringing their signed paper with them, and are assigned one class per door to space them out around the building. Masking has not been an issue, Baruffi said, and classrooms have desk shields.

“It’s going well,” he said. “So far, so good.”

For a school facing declining enrollment, the boost would typically be welcome.

“We have a limit on our class size,” Baruffi said. “It’s kind of a funny conundrum. We always welcome new students because our enrollment is low. Now all of a sudden, we’ll be happy to take a few more but not too many.”

Back at Monmouth and Granville, the dad from Philly said he was looking forward to his family taking their place among the Margate locals. “It’s an amazing lifestyle,” he said.

“My daughter said she’ll do her homework on the beach,” he said. “I said, ‘You think you’ll do your homework on the beach.’”