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As families migrate from the Northeast to South Florida, private schools report spiking enrollments

By AMBER RANDALL
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A migration of families from the Northeast and other states to South Florida — a shift that's sending real estate prices to historic highs — is beginning to reflect in a surge in enrollment in the area's private schools.

Although enrollment numbers are mostly not yet available, private schools are confirming an increase in new students that they attribute to new arrivals, especially from New York and other states in the Northeast. The draw, many say, is the opportunity for in-person classes at high-quality schools.

For Palm Beach Day Academy, 47% of all new students in the 2020-21 school year came from New York City and surrounding suburbs, representing a surge not seen in the past two years. Applications to the school shot up 124% from March to September 2020.

Saint Andrew's School in Boca Raton saw a similar increase over years past, as 12% of their newly enrolled day students for the upcoming school year have moved — or are in the process of moving — from the Northeast, growing their enrollment overall compared to previous years.

"We continue to have a stream of families inquiring from the Northeast for this fall and even for the 2022-23 school year," said Alexandra Tolischus,

direct of enrollment at Saint Andrew's. "Families are interested in seeing schools in the area before they decide to move, and they are certainly considering the Boca area. Many have parents who have retired here and are interested in being close to family."

Many private schools declined to give out exact numbers on student enrollment. But schools such as the Benjamin School in Palm Beach Gardens said they reached enrollment capacity in almost every grade level — and applications are still coming in. Both campuses of the Pine Crest School saw an uptick in interest from out-of-state families start about a year ago and steadily increase since then, according to their admission department.

While the trend is clear in private schools, it has not been so apparent in South Florida's public schools. Neither the Palm Beach County nor Broward County school districts have seen an increase in overall enrollment over the past year.

Taxes and new opportunities for remote employment are driving the recent surge of new arrivals in South Florida. But real estate advisor **Bonnie Heatzig** said she believes parents have seen more opportunities for in-person classroom learning in Florida than they had in other parts of the country.

"A trend I am seeing now is that people are relocating from high income tax states and they aren't just looking to buy homes, but they do have a strong impetus to have their kids full time in school," **Heatzig** said. "And Florida offers full-time, in-person learning."

New York state opened up its schools to in-person learning in October, while New York city public schools opened up their high schools on March 22, and middle schools in the area opened up in February.

Certain cities — including Boca Raton, Delray Beach, Palm Beach and Palm Beach Gardens — are especially big draws because of their proximities to private schools, said education consultant Robynn Ginsberg.

“They are looking for communities where their kids can meet other kids and make friends. They also want them to have exposure to amenities they may not have access to in New York,” Ginsberg said.

Not only is in-person learning more accessible, but private schools offer a quality of education that rivals what parents believe their children were receiving in the Northeast, Ginsberg explained.

In South Florida, families can enroll their children in a few options: distance learning, in-classroom instruction or a hybrid of both. During the course of the pandemic, issues arose with distance learning: Many students were told to come back to the classroom after data showed a sharp increase in student absences and failing grades, with some parents reporting their child having issues concentrating at home.

Areas like The Bridges and The Oaks are popular, with Ginsberg fielding many calls expressing interest in areas like Palm Beach and Palm Beach Gardens with families citing a similarity in that area to New York. More and more restaurants, transplants from New York, have begun settling down in the area.

“They feel that is a growing community out there,” Ginsberg added.