

## The Student Exodus from the Floodwood School

A closer look at what is happening

Marvin Pirila – Northland Watch

The Floodwood School had 399 students in 2006 and just 250 in 2017. The new Southridge School opened in 2012, but was that the reason for the big decline in enrollment?

Floodwood lost 71 students since Southridge opened and 78 in the six years prior to its opening. That is a loss of seven more students in the six years before Southridge opened than the six after.

Where did these students go? The average number of students from Floodwood that went to other schools was 5.7% in the six years before Southridge and 7.5% in the six years after. The opening of Southridge had virtually no effect on the number of students from Floodwood going to another school. This higher percentage takes less students as the number of students fell from an average of 350 in the six years prior compared to the 258-average realized after. In this case, where X is the number of students:  $X / 350 \text{ enrollment} = 7.5\%$ ,  $X = 20$  students;  $X / 258 \text{ enrollment} = 7.5\%$ ,  $X = 19$  students.

In the fall of 2018, the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) showed the Floodwood Elementary with 90 students and the high school 107. This is another 53 students lost since 2017. Floodwood had 446 students in 2002 and in 2018 just 197. This is a loss of 249 students in just 16 years.

The average number of students living elsewhere coming to Floodwood School was 23.7% in the six years before Southridge and 17.3% in the six years since. In the years 2009-2011, Floodwood was already losing ground, capturing only 14 to 16% of these students. Since Southridge opened, the net gain [Average Coming In - Average Going Out] fell to 9.8% from the 18.0% in the six years prior. In actual numbers, the average going out since Southridge is 19 students per year and 45 coming in for a net gain of 26 students. In the six years prior, the average going out was 20 and the average coming in was 85, a net gain of 65. The enrollment has been trending downward since 2003.

During this 12-year period (2006-2018), the population of the City of Floodwood and Floodwood Township has remained stable. The total population has ranged from 798 to 825, an average of 814. Likewise, the total number of households ranged from 358 to 381, an average of 376. The persons per household has ranged 1.92 to 2.03 in the city, an average of 1.99. Floodwood Township had a persons per household range of 2.36 to 3.78, an average of 2.59. Overall, the population and persons per household have remained steady.

The only population numbers for the surrounding townships (Van Buren, Ness, Arrowhead, Fine Lakes, Prairie Lake, Halden, and Cedar Valley) are for 2000 and 2010. In 2000, they combined for a total of 1048 people and in 2010, 965. This is a net loss of 65 people.

The school lost 196 students from 2003 to 2017, largely attributed to less students coming in from elsewhere. In 2004, 122 students came in from elsewhere, versus the 35 in 2017. Likely, most of these students have gone to the Grand Rapids, Hibbing, Southridge, and Cromwell schools. Some of course, would have been homeschooled.

What are some of the reasons for students elsewhere deciding not to attend Floodwood? In 2018, Floodwood High School shows an absenteeism rate of 30%, well above the state average of 12%. Source: GreatSchools.org. High absenteeism rates mean less time for teaching and learning. GreatSchools reports that high school reading, math, and science scores were 29%, 21%, and 26%, respectively. The state averages for reading, math, and science were 58%, 54%, and 56%, respectively.

The elementary fared a bit better. GreatSchools reports that reading, math, and science scores were 49%, 44%, and 65%, respectively. The state averages for reading, math, and science were 61%, 63%, and 62%, respectively. Still quite a bit lower for math and reading compared to the state average but at least a little above the state average for science. Overall, the high school was ranked 3/10 and the elementary 5/10 by Great Schools, based on average test scores, college readiness, student progress, and equity overview. The Equity Overview Rating looks at how well this school is serving the needs of its disadvantaged students relative to all its students, compared to other schools in the state, based on test scores provided from the state Department of Education.

In 2017, the median household income was \$32,500 (\$68,388), the median property value \$59,500 (\$224,000), homeownership was 69.6% (71.6%), and the poverty rate was 15.9% (10.5%). State figures are in parenthesis. Source: <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/floodwood-mn/?compare=minnesota>

The Floodwood School was asking for \$700,000, amounting to \$3,350 per pupil for a 10-year period, subject to annual inflationary adjustments. This amount suggests the Floodwood School is anticipating 209 students for the same period (\$700,000 / \$3,350). They don't have that now, so the referendum is asking for more than they will likely have.

In summary, the school referendum was shot down by voters for several reasons. First, it was a lot of money to taxpayers already struggling to meet household needs. If it had passed, they would have paid to overstaff a school with declining enrollments. Second, the test scores, particularly for the high school has been very poor. Third, the population is stable, but isn't increasing, nor are the persons per household. Fourth, the school is far too large for the decreasing number of students. Rather than make minimum use of the rooms, they could do something with them to increase revenue. Fifth, the school administration should have cut staffing as needed, rather than evading the issues by seeking a referendum to meet costs. They knew their approximate enrollment and made some cuts, but not near enough. Sixth, new programs come and go, but the success of each depends on the people in the classroom, the parents keeping their kids on track, and the administration making the hard choices as needed. Finally, some confess differences with the direction and actions of the administration.

As federal and state funding is based on per pupil units, the declining enrollments result in less revenue with every student lost. The state currently pays about 68% of the revenue, while the federal government provides about 6%. The local referendum didn't seem likely to cover costs as the student rolls continued to decline, particularly when the same number of buses and building maintenance are still required.

The fact is that the Floodwood School is suffering because it has lost kids living elsewhere who decided to go to school somewhere else or homeschool. That decision is a difficult one, but one many parents and students made. It might simply have been the closer vicinity of another school.

The failing of the referendum was not a surprise to many who cast “no” despite the avalanche of positive announcements about the school. They spoke to the duty and responsibility of all residents to vote “yes” because it was “for the kids”. They also suggested that Floodwood itself was at risk of becoming a ghost town if the school closed. The population figures contradict this statement as it has maintained its numbers despite the loss of more than 200 students. The facts suggest that the low prices of homes and their number are the reason for its stability, not the number of kids. This is supported by the stable persons per household numbers.

In the aftermath of the failed referendum, the “no” voters have been shamed for not caring about other people’s kids or the future of their own community. This reflects a true disconnect between leaders of the community and its citizens. Generally, you only hear from those that lead and follow a general direction, more taxes rather than greater cost controls. Most individuals won’t speak out of fear, belittling, or accusations of having no heart. They will cast their opinion via a silent vote. In public, they feel compelled to follow the mainstream theme, but they may speak otherwise with their vote. When has Floodwood shot down a referendum until now? The majority spoke with a “no” vote for many valid reasons.

The disconnect between community leaders and the community extends to what is best for most people. Floodwood has lower median incomes and higher poverty rates than the state, so the priority of most households is to provide for their own family. After first meeting their own household needs, individuals feel freer to spend more elsewhere.

In 2017, Floodwood was in the lower 22% for Taxable Tax Capacity, the ability of individuals and businesses to pay taxes. A tax capacity of 100% would mean taxing away 100% of income. The ranking is not saying that Floodwood is at any level near 100%, but it is worse off than 78% than other cities of less than 2,500 people.

The city was also in the top 21% for both Net Tax Levy and Property taxes. This suggests that many residents are already financially stressed. Even a small increase puts many households at financial risk.

The direction of the school and city fails to recognize the financial burdens of its residents. When you bear down on the statistical facts, you see clearly see the situation for Floodwood citizens. They are asked to carry the burdens of administrations that won’t cut instead of tax. For example, there are too many teachers/support staff for the number of students at the school and too many police officers for a city of this size. Floodwood’s grace period for endless taxation seems to have ended and fiscal responsibility now being demanded, along with the call for accountable leaders.

The times have changed, and with it, Floodwood has suffered. It lacks good paying jobs, resulting in many young families relocating. The median age (42.9 vs 37.9 for MN) of the area attests to it, as does the persons per household. Open enrollment achieved exactly what parents wanted, choices. The choice to send your child to the best school possible. Parents want their kids to have the best preparation possible for their adult life. If Floodwood doesn’t offer the best opportunity, parents have the right and responsibility to move their kids. Open enrollment is about competition and being the best. If you are, you are rewarded with more students. If you aren’t, you lose them. This is the school choice the majority of American’s desired, not closed enrollment and living with what you get.

Floodwood, regardless of intent, has many members in the community that will not share their true opinions. Others are easily persuaded by what they hear or read without questioning the underlying facts. This lack of facts or opinion oppression leaves a huge gap between perception and reality. This may be the biggest local issue to overcome. Agree to disagree, civilly, when you can't agree, but it must start with the facts. The public deserves the unfiltered, unbiased facts. Local papers bear some responsibility for not rooting it out, in large part, for fear of retribution.

If Floodwood is successful in showing excellent results, maintaining attendance and discipline, they could persuade some students to come back. This will require a better understanding of their positions and that of the voters. The stable but stagnant local population growth, along with declining or stagnant birth rates, leaves little else to try.