

MONTGOMERY SCHOOLS

Plan Reduces Temporary Classrooms

By DANIEL DE VISE
Washington Post Staff Writer

Montgomery County School Superintendent Jerry D. Weast announced yesterday a plan to reduce the number of portable classrooms by two-thirds over six years, reasoning that without such a campaign temporary classrooms could well become a permanent fixture in many schools.

Portables, often unsightly and unpopular, have increased more than threefold in the county in the past 10 years, as the 139,000-student school system has coped with rising enrollment, reduced class sizes and expanded kindergarten from a half to a whole day. In the 2004-05 and 2005-06 academic years, Montgomery schools had 719 portables, an all-time high and enough for three at every school. County schools have 607 this year.

A brief lull in enrollment growth — driven by a slowdown in immigration, prohibitive housing costs and other factors — offers “a propitious time to get rid of these mobiles,” Weast said, speaking at a morning news conference at Takoma Park Elementary School. “We won’t have it again. . . . But we have it now. Let’s take advantage of it.”

The increase in portables at Montgomery schools has brought a corresponding surge in complaints from parents, who disparage the structures as cramped spaces with creaky floors and stale air.

Weast, touring some portables yesterday with other officials, pointed out additional problems: Portables put students far from bathrooms and fountains, and they require repeated trips outdoors in bad weather. They eat up campus space. They leave children more exposed to security threats.

“If the portables were not here, you could have another soccer field,” said County Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large), who was among those touring the Takoma Park campus yesterday. It was familiar turf: his son, Francisco, 7, studies in one of the eight portables behind the school.

At Bells Mill Elementary School in Potomac, three portables were shut last year because of persistent

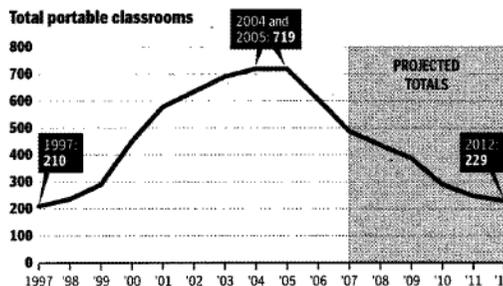


BY LINDA EDWARDS — THE WASHINGTON POST

Kindergartners romp at Takoma Park Elementary School, where Montgomery officials announced a plan to reduce the number of portable classrooms.

Less Portable

Montgomery County plans to reduce the number of portable classrooms by 68 percent during the next six years. The rise — and projected fall — of these classrooms:



SOURCE: Montgomery County Schools

THE WASHINGTON POST

mold problems that were blamed for illness among students and teachers. At Takoma Park yesterday, a teacher said she recently put her foot through a rotten floorboard.

Educators in Montgomery and across the nation have embraced portables, despite their flaws, because they provide quick, inexpensive classroom space to further such academic goals as shrinking class sizes.

But Weast said it was time the Montgomery school system moved away from relying on temporary classrooms. School enrollment has declined a bit this fall, from 139,387 to 138,520, based on preliminary data. He said he expects two to three additional years of flat growth after 20 years of steady gains.

Weast said the reduction in portables would occur in two phases.

The first, already funded in the five-year capital program, includes 14 school additions, 16 modernization projects and other improvements, reducing the number of portables from last year’s 719 to 373 by fall 2012. The second phase requires \$40 million in proposed amendments to the capital plan, including additions at Takoma Park Elementary and other proposed projects that are not yet funded, further reducing portables to 229.

Leventhal said the county should be able to pay for the effort, provided that property assessments continue to increase and drive up tax revenue.

“We’re publicly sticking our necks out here,” Leventhal said at the news conference, “and telling you that we’re going to have two-thirds fewer portable classrooms six years from today.”