

# NDSU Predicts Oil Patch School Enrollment

*Katherine Grandstrand | The Dickinson Press | Published March 8, 2013*

Predicting the future is no easy task, especially for cities in the booming western North Dakota Oil Patch. Predicting the future number of students at any given school in that same area may seem a daunting chore.

But with enquiring minds wanting to know, North Dakota State University took up the effort and this week released a study commissioned by the North Dakota Association of Oil and Gas Producing Counties using three different models to provide a five-year forecast for student enrollment in Oil Patch schools.

“The reason why there wasn’t a single model chosen as the definitive answer is because there’s not a lot of good data out there,” said co-author Dean Bangsund, a research scientist at the NDSU agribusiness and applied economics department. “We tried to use the models in a way that would provide some context to what we know has happened in the Oil Patch.”

The rapid pace of change required the use of three models, said Nancy Hodur, study lead and research assistant professor in the NDSU agribusiness and applied economics department.

“We needed to find some new metrics to do this,” she said. “Because we needed to find something that we could go to quickly enough, that we could update the metrics on. If we used the standard cohort model that takes a look at birth rates and death rates and in-migration and those kinds of indicators — that data lags so much that by the time that would be updated, it would already be obsolete again.”

The first model in the study looked at current growth trends for Dickinson, Ray, Stanley, Watford City and Williston and continued them for five years. This put more than 500 more K-12 students in Dickinson and more than 1,100 new students in Watford City.

“Because our high school had been reducing in size or shrinking, she assumed that would continue and that won’t be the case,” said Vince Reep, Dickinson Public Schools assistant superintendent. “We have 160 seniors. That is the smallest class in the district. ... It’s going to be reversing starting next year.”

The second and most conservative estimate based public school enrollment on permanent employment trends, Hodur said.

“We know there’s a lot employment out in the region right now that falls into the category that we call ‘temporary,’” she said. “That is, folks that are just here for a short period of time — maybe a few months to a few years — or they’re people that are here that work in North Dakota but don’t live in North Dakota.”

This model put 2017-18 enrollment in Dickinson at 3,391 and estimated that 1,167 students would be attending classes in Watford City.

“Model two is perhaps a little conservative in the near-term, but probably in the long-term is a pretty good estimate,” Hodur said.

The third model, the most liberal of the three, is based on the housing potential of each community, Hodur said.

The team took an inventory of all of the housing developments planned for each city and compared that to a houses-to-students ratio based on historic data, she said.

“I think, considering the state of affairs out there right now, that’s a pretty good number for eventually,” Hodur said.

Enrollment estimates based on the third model for Watford City are pending. Dickinson could see as many as 5,262 students in the district by 2017 according to this model. That’s an 87 percent increase over this year’s enrollment.

Steve Holen, superintendent of McKenzie County School District in Watford City, said having good data to work with is crucial for school officials to plan.

“We know we’re going to grow, it’s just trying to articulate how much,” Holen said.

Holen said the challenge will be determining which model provides the best estimate. He anticipates the realistic number will fall between the conservative number and the estimate based on housing units.