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School Ties: Families Staying in DC, Holding Out Hope for Better Schools

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by *Michele Lerner*

The steady exodus of families from DC to the suburbs for the promise of better schools may be slowing. Anecdotal and hard evidence suggest that more families are opting to stay in DC and send their kids to public schools rather than retreat to the suburbs.

"It used to be that as soon as couples had kids they would high-tail it out of the city," W.C. & A.N. Miller's Glen Sutcliffe told UrbanTurf. "Now, more of them are staying and getting involved with the PTA to improve the public schools."



Oyster Bilingual Elementary School

Census statistics released in December 2009 show that the District gained about 9,600 residents since July 2008, and the city's population is expected to surpass 600,000 when the 2010 census is taken. This is the opposite of DC's population trends in the past. For several years in the 1990's and as recently as 2003, the city had a net loss of more than 10,000 residents a year.

"Five years ago, no one was moving into the city with kids," Sonya Abney of Cosmopolitan Properties Real Estate Brokerage explained. "Families now are optimistic that the schools will get better, and if that happens, they intend to stay as their kids get older."

Bonnie Roberts-Burke of Evers & Company says when she moved into Adams Morgan in the mid-nineties, there were very few kids in the neighborhood. But, during last week's record snowfall, the streets were filled with children on sleds.

"I'm finding a lot more families are choosing to stay in neighborhoods like Dupont Circle, Kalorama, and Logan Circle rather than moving to the suburbs," Roberts-Burke told UrbanTurf.

While families may be staying put in greater numbers, what is not changing are the neighborhoods that have historically had good schools. A number of real estate agents said their clients are only looking for homes within the boundaries of the city's top elementary schools like Horace Mann, Lafayette, Murch, Janney, and Oyster. Guy-Didier Godat of Evers says he has seen increasing interest among families in neighborhoods like AU Park, Tenleytown, Wesley Heights and Palisades, largely because of the quality of the elementary schools in these areas. But, the difference now is that these parents are actively trying to

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improve schools at all levels.

“I’ve seen first-hand the improvements that are being made in the public schools,” says Godat. “So far, most of the improvements have been on the elementary level, but the parent involvement in these schools is pushing into the middle school and high school level. It will take time, but I am definitely seeing young families moving into the District who will keep pushing to make sure these improvements continue.”

What do you think? Are families sticking it out in DC for the hope of better schools? Or are most still heading for the award-winning districts of MoCo and NoVa when their children finish elementary school?