



# Enrollment decline and school closures

## Transforming empty buildings into new opportunities

A unique set of demographic, economic and policy changes have forced public school leaders in the Hudson Valley to make deep budget cuts that were practically unthinkable a decade ago. Teachers, programs and transportation have all been cut over the past four years as school boards battled the Great Recession by shrinking their budgets to meet a new economic and political climate that demands a lesser burden on property tax payers.

The decision to close school buildings has perhaps been one of the most difficult, but school leaders are increasingly looking at facility closure as they exhaust other cost-saving options.

From Hudson to Yorktown, and Monticello to Kingston, more and more school boards are making the painful choice to close a school building. A variety of numbers tell much of the story.

- Since 2009, at least 19 school buildings have closed across the nine-county region stretching from Westchester to Greene and Columbia counties. At least six others closed from 1999-2005.
- Those 25 schools account for more than 1.1 million square feet of floor space, and they occupy more than 344 acres across the Hudson Valley.
- Superintendents anticipated annual savings of roughly \$1 million for each school building they closed.

The implications of declining enrollment stretch beyond the closure of school buildings themselves. The absence of growth leads to an increased tax burden for the remaining residents, the loss of a portion of the middle class, as well as the loss of jobs and community volunteers.

Shrinking K-12 enrollment will also affect the recruitment of new students by community colleges, since they generally attract students from the local high school population.

Many school superintendents fear that the trend toward fewer students could make it more difficult to pass their annual budgets. If fewer school-district voters have a connection to the school through their children, the argument goes, fewer will be compelled to vote in favor of the school budget.

***Four important metrics and changes are driving school closures in the Hudson Valley:***

**ENROLLMENT** – From 2000-2009, public school enrollment declined or remained statistically flat in every county except Westchester, which saw a modest gain of 4.4 percent. Columbia County lost 20 percent of its student population, while Greene, Sullivan and Ulster each lost roughly 10 percent of their school-age children.

**PROJECTIONS** – Data compiled by the Cornell University Program on Applied Demographics show that the decline in school enrollment will continue at least through the year 2020. Over the next eight years, every county except Westchester is projected to see declines in school enrollment.

**ECONOMY** – The recession forced school districts to re-examine their budgets and look at new options to reduce tax increases. Some school superintendents said the strong economy of the early 2000s allowed districts to keep buildings open despite declining enrollment. When the recession began in late 2007, the support for keeping schools open with declining enrollment waned.

**TAX CAP** – The desire to keep taxes low was underscored in 2011 when New York lawmakers passed a 2 percent tax cap. Although the tax cap could be overridden by a 60 percent vote within the district, the cap places school officials under greater scrutiny and compelled many to keep their budgets within the tax-cap boundary.

School building closures have left holes in many neighborhoods. For decades, these buildings enhanced their communities' quality of life by providing a safe and welcoming environment for education. Most of the 25 remain empty today.

But the story does not have to end there.

Other communities across the state and nation have re-used empty school buildings as municipal centers, senior and workforce housing, health clinics, office spaces, business incubators and more.

The following pages include more information and data that show why these buildings have closed, followed by examples of school buildings that have been refurbished and reborn as centers of business and community activity.

By issuing this report, Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress hopes to ignite conversations about how communities can use these marginalized buildings to enhance the region's quality of life in new ways.

# Zero growth: where have all the children gone?

TABLE 1

County	Net inflow or outflow of county residents (total population)		
	2009-2010	2008-2009	2007-2008
Columbia	-93	-233	-918
Dutchess	-38	+68	-313
Greene	-19	+18	+36
Orange	-589	+185	-234
Putnam	-50	-148	-270
Rockland	-250	-658	-439
Sullivan	-147	-422	-301
Ulster	-340	-829	-383
Westchester	-1,792	-1,178	-3,428
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>-3,318</b>	<b>-3,197</b>	<b>-6,250</b>

Source: Internal Revenue Service migration data

TABLE 2

County	Live births		
	2002	2005	2009
Columbia	661	692	622
Dutchess	3,419	3,363	3,110
Greene	560	562	563
Orange	6,362	6,497	6,451
Putnam	1,260	1,115	972
Rockland	6,705	6,936	6,790
Sullivan	963	1,085	1,055
Ulster	1,926	1,952	1,833
Westchester	16,115	15,126	13,987
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37,971</b>	<b>37,328</b>	<b>35,383</b>

Source: NYS Department of Health

School enrollment is driven by a number of factors, including the movement of families into or out of the Hudson Valley, and how many babies are born in the region each year. The tables here show that both important metrics have been in decline.

Table 1 shows the net migration into or out of each county. The IRS tracks this data by using zip codes on tax returns. The IRS migration data allows us to see how many people come and go from a region, along with their place or origin or destination.

From 2007-2010, the net migration from our counties represented a loss of 12,765 people. While some of this change represents movement from county to county within the Hudson Valley, much of it also shows people leaving the region. According to the IRS data, thousands of people who've left the Hudson Valley are generally going two places – toward New York's metro areas, like Albany or New York City, or to southern states.

Published reports and Pattern's analysis suggest a few conclusions. People are moving toward the metro areas for jobs and shorter commutes, and they are moving south for a cheaper standard of living, more affordable housing and lower taxes.

Table 2 shows the live birth rates for our counties, which is tracked by the New York State Department of Health. The number of babies born in our counties each year has been flat or slowly declining. From 2002-2009, the number of babies born in the Hudson Valley declined by 6.5 percent, or nearly 1 percent each year.

The data sets help explain why school enrollment is dropping.

That conclusion is further supported by recent data from the Census Bureau. In 2000, children ages 5-14 comprised 14.9 percent of the Hudson Valley's population. By 2010, that number had fallen to 13.66 percent. The percentage of adults ages 25-34 also fell, from 12.7 percent to 11.03 percent. That age range represents the time when many people start families.



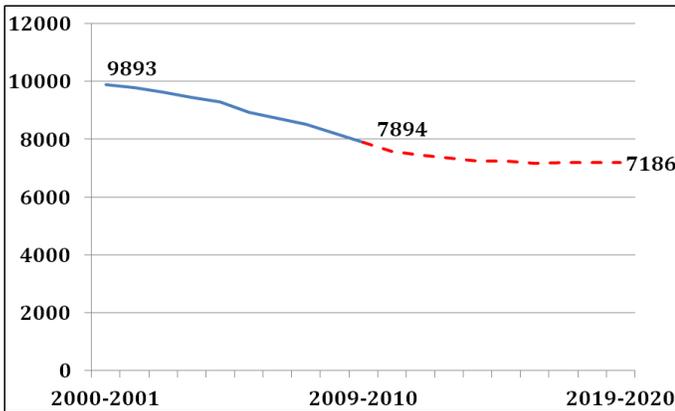
## Parochial schools also battle enrollment declines

A decline in student enrollment has also forced parochial schools, such as those operated by the Archdiocese of New York, to close buildings. The Archdiocese has closed 20 school buildings in the nine-county region since 2007. Those closures were prompted by a loss of 14,550 students across the entire Archdiocese region since 2006. The Archdiocese is working on a new school-governing model that centers on regional councils that will make school decisions. Rockland County was chosen as one of the three trial regions. The regional model will eventually include 10 councils. As of now, local parishes decide the future of closed school buildings. The Archdiocese has said it would like to sell or lease more of those buildings to create an endowment fund.

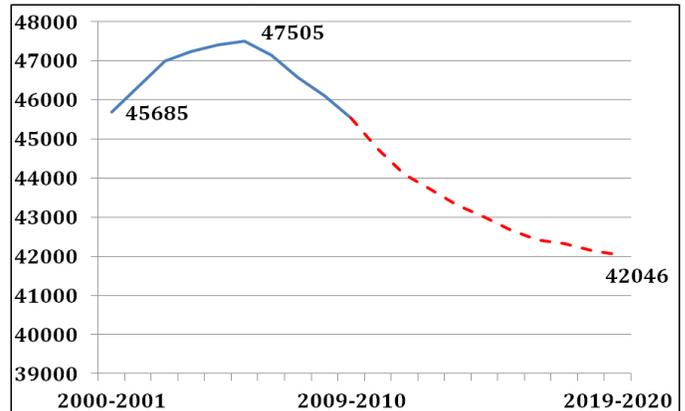
**SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS THAT ENHANCE THE GROWTH AND VITALITY OF THE HUDSON VALLEY.**

# Countywide school enrollment projections and

**Columbia County**



**Dutchess County**



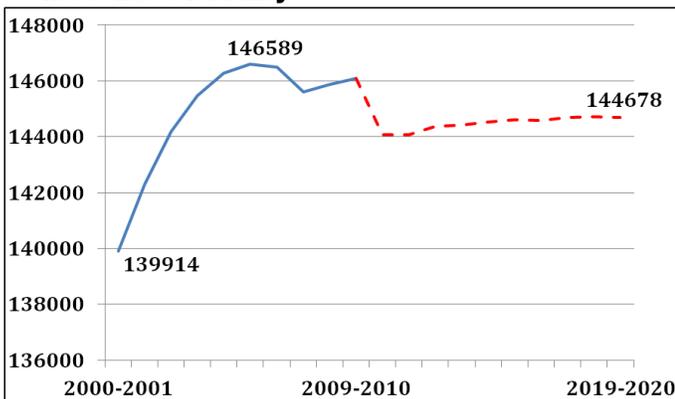
The school enrollment data for each of the counties displayed here shows a variety of trends that are noteworthy. They include:

1. All nine counties have fallen from the peak of their school enrollment.
2. The decade showed zero growth for the northern-most counties, which include Columbia, Greene, Sullivan and Ulster. It's interesting to note that these are the same counties that have no Metro-North train service.
3. The northward migration of New York City residents after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 provided large but short-term enrollment growth in Dutchess, Orange, Putnam and Rockland counties. The

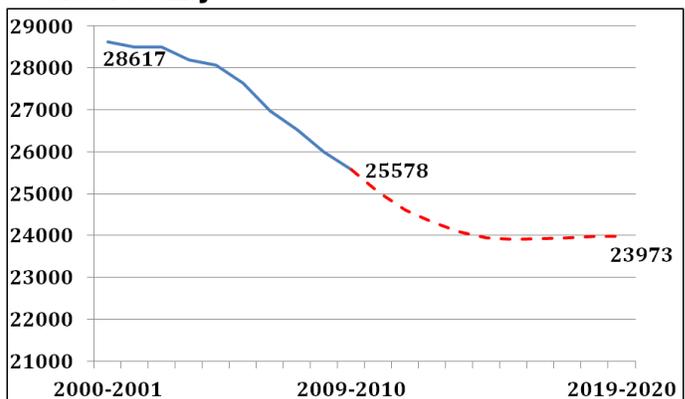
population bubble has since burst, and the school enrollments have returned or nearly returned to pre-9/11 levels in those counties.

4. Projections show that school enrollment in every county except Westchester will continue to decline through the year 2020. Westchester County will only see 0.4 per cent growth.
5. State aid to local school districts is directly connected to enrollment. Many superintendents fear that the continued decline in enrollment, matched by a decline in state aid, will impact their budgets in the future. At the same time, pension and health care costs are expected to continually increase.

**Westchester County**



**Ulster County**



**Columbia County**

- Roeliff Jansen School, 1999
- Ockawamick School, 1999
- Greenport Elementary, 2009
- Martin H. Glynn School, 2011
- Martin Van Buren School, 2011

**Dutchess County**

- Amenia Elementary, 2009
- Millerton Elementary, 2010
- LaGrange Elementary, 2010
- W.W. Smith Humanities School, 2010

**Greene County**

- Irving Elementary, 2004

**Orange County**

- Highland Falls Elementary, 2010
- Pine Island Elementary, 2011
- West Street Elementary, 2011

**Putnam County**

- Garden Street Elementary, 2012

**Rockland County**

- Colton Elementary, 2009
- Hillcrest Elementary, 2010
- Neary Elementary, 2012
- North Garnerville Elementary, 2012

**Sullivan County**

- Delaware Valley School, 2005
- Narrowsburg School, 2005
- Duggan Elementary, 2010

**Ulster County**

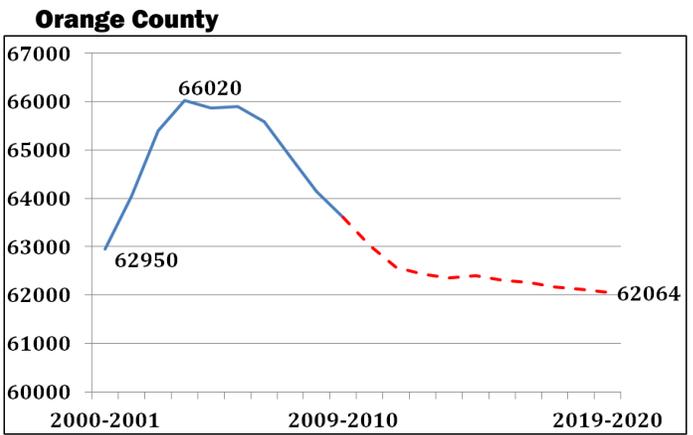
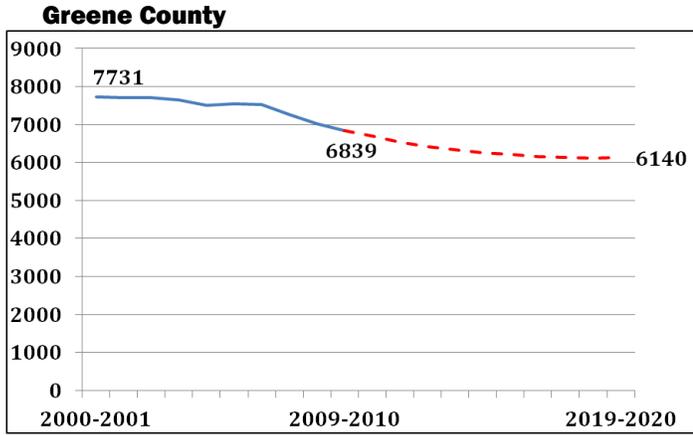
- West Hurley Elementary, 2004
- Rosendale Elementary, 2012
- Meagher Elementary, 2012

**Westchester County**

- French Hill Elementary, 2010

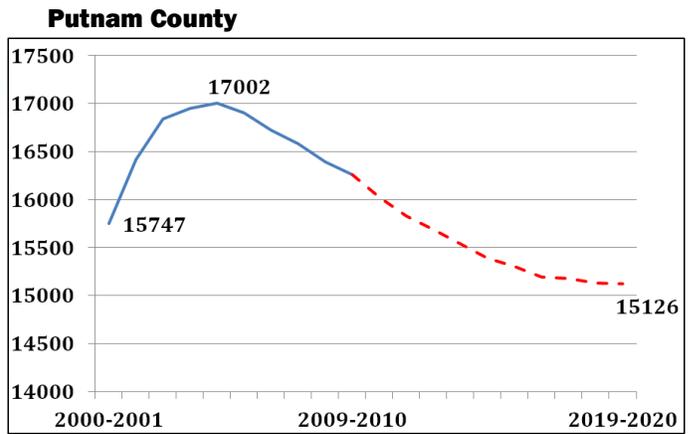
The above list of closures is organized by county, name of school building and year closed

# building closures across the Hudson Valley



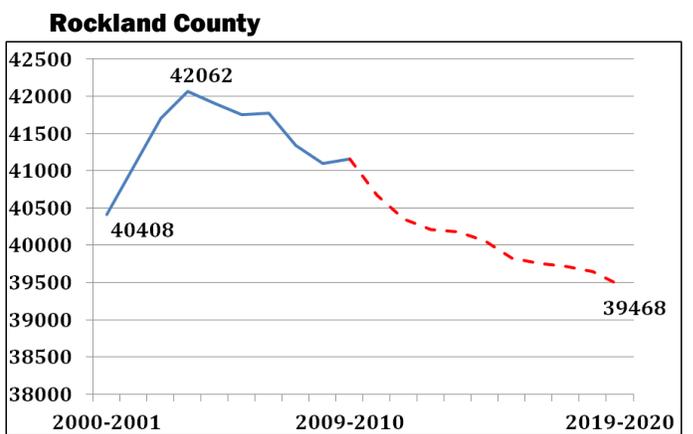
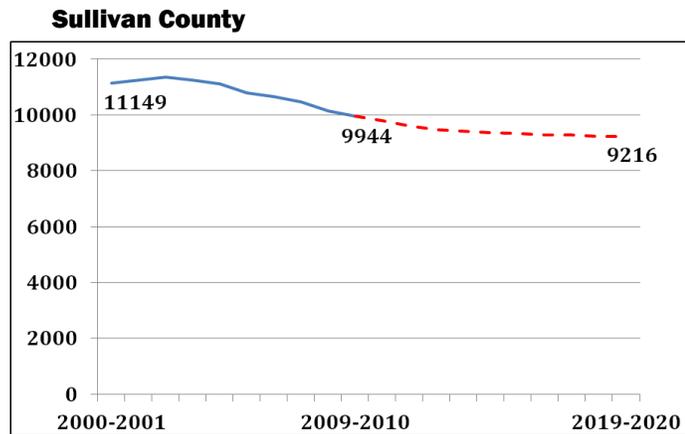
Sources: Enrollment data from NYS Education Department and Cornell University Program on Applied Demographics.

— School enrollment  
- - - Projected enrollment



**“The decision to close a school is 99 percent an enrollment issue. Some schools, like Pine Island Elementary, should have been closed years ago, but if districts had the money they didn’t push the issue.”**

Ray Bryant  
Superintendent, Warwick Central School District



## Is school district consolidation the answer?

Shrinking enrollments and tight budgets have forced more and more school districts to consider sharing services or consolidating with neighboring districts. Several in the Hudson Valley are discussing consolidation or actively studying it. The Highland and New Paltz districts in Ulster County have tentatively agreed to study shared services. The Roscoe and Livingston Manor districts in Sullivan County have talked with a consultant about merging, but tensions remain. The Chatham and New Lebanon districts in Columbia County have said they want to share services, while the Ihabod Crane district is discussing a merger with a neighboring district to its north.

While communities and school districts may choose to remain independent, money is available to study other options. Local government efficiency grants from the state have been and may continue to be available to explore shared services or consolidations among school districts.

**“School consolidation is always one of the concepts that comes up, even though the savings are often less than believed. But the drop in enrollment gives it legs so that it becomes a serious conversation.”**

Terrence L. Olivo  
Chief Operating Officer, Orange-Ulster BOCES

# Local examples of adaptive reuse in action

While most closed schools throughout the Hudson Valley remain empty, a few have found new uses. The Ockawamick School in Claverack was purchased by Columbia County to house a few county government departments. Part of the Pine Island Elementary School is being rented by a church group in Orange County. Two other school buildings have shown how far a community can go by reinventing their schools as government, community and recreation centers.

## Town of Bethel: justice court, meeting space, youth center and more



**Bethel's space for Town Board meetings, shown above, is now in the same room as its Town Justice Court.**

After the Monticello School District in Sullivan County made the difficult decision to close its Duggan Elementary School in 2010, the Town of Bethel chose to lease about one-quarter of the school building for \$15,000 annually.

With initial guidance from Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress, Bethel officials are using the former school to expand their existing offices and to provide new services to town residents. By removing a wall between two former classrooms, the town created a meeting space that doubles as its justice court. The court was provided with a dedicated entrance to the building for security purposes.

Other classrooms became a literacy center and a youth center that provides childcare services before and after school. A small kitchen is available for meetings of senior-citizen and veteran groups.

The school's gymnasium has allowed Bethel to host an array of recreation programs that did not previously exist. Town Supervisor Dan Sturm said the gym is used for basketball and volleyball, martial arts instruction and fitness classes. The town even used its new space to host a haunted house last Halloween.

Modifications to the building cost roughly \$20,000, but Sturm said the town used grant money for most of that. He said the new arrangement is beneficial for the town and school district. "We are helping the school district, too," Sturm said. "If the building is not used, it goes into disrepair."

## Have adaptive reuse ideas that you think your school district should try?

Send them to us by visiting the Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress website at [www.pattern-for-progress.org](http://www.pattern-for-progress.org) or by e-mail at [outreach@pfprogress.org](mailto:outreach@pfprogress.org). Ideas can also be shared on our Facebook page by searching "Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress."

## Town of Amenia: town hall, farm market and future theater

The Webutuck School District closed its Amenia Elementary School in 2009 and sold it for a dollar to the Town of Amenia the following year.

The vast majority of the school is now used for town offices. Town Supervisor Bill Flood said Amenia spent \$275,000 from an existing fund to overhaul the old school. Amenia's town offices had been located in a roughly 3,000-square-foot area in the back of the local firehouse.

Now, the town is offering new programs to its residents, such as intramural basketball and Nerf soccer, free movie nights, exercise classes and a farmer's market twice a month.

Plans for the future abound. Flood said a community theater group with roots in New York City wants to refurbish the school's 280-seat auditorium to stage shows in Amenia. The town also wants to renovate the school kitchen so that local farmers can use it to cook their foods, create value-added products and hold community dinners. Flood said the town is also pursuing some NYSERDA grants to make the building more energy efficient.



**A community group meets in a former classroom that now hosts Amenia Town Board meetings.**

# School building reuse: best practices from across the country

## How other communities have revived old schools to serve new purposes

Vacant school buildings are not a problem that's unique to the Hudson Valley. Across the United States, dozens of city and rural schools have been reused for new purposes that fulfill a need in their communities. Additionally, many of the projects have put the school buildings back on the property tax rolls.

Here are some of the best examples:

- The Penobscot Community Health Care group in Maine recently finished a \$6 million renovation of the former Helen Hunt School. The 109-year-old building now houses a full-service medical clinic that offers primary care, physical therapy, pediatrics, radiology and a pharmacy. The center serves roughly 9,000 people.
- Stone House Development Inc., has built apartments in at least four former school buildings in the state of Wisconsin. Some of the apartments have qualified as affordable housing, and others are market rate. Some of the refurbished schools were on the state or national registers of historic places, and the projects won awards from historic preservation groups. The apartments included amenities such as fitness centers, on-site parking and large outdoor spaces. These schools have been in cities and in rural areas.
- A former middle school and high school near North Lima, Ohio, have found new life as business incubators in that community. A local company purchased the two schools in hopes that their 167,000 square feet of floor space could be used to spur job creation in the region. The local daily newspaper in nearby Salem reports that the plan is working. The former South Range Middle School is now home to a convenience store, a restaurant, a daycare center, a media group, general office space and an insurance company. The high school is home to a consignment shop, a commercially licensed kitchen and a circus. The gyms in both schools are rented for hourly use.

## Other ideas for the adaptive reuse of our schools

- **Senior housing** — The decline of school enrollment is just one part of the region's demographic story. The Hudson Valley is also getting older, which will continue to raise the demand for senior housing. Other states and regions have reused school buildings to fulfill that need.
- **Farm market and kitchen** — Many closed schools throughout the Hudson Valley are located in communities with a vibrant agriculture economy. Those communities might consider reusing their schools as permanent farm stores, their kitchens for value-added production, and their land as garden space that could be leased to local residents.
- **Fitness center** — As people increasingly focus on their health, privately owned fitness centers have cropped up across the region. Their floor plans, in many cases, are similar to schools—including separate rooms for cardio, free weights, aerobic classes, and gymnasiums that are used for basketball, volleyball and more.
- **College satellite** — School buildings could be attractive to centers of higher learning that want to branch out across the state or country to attract new students.

## Is funding available for reuse?

Developers and communities across the country have tapped a variety of federal, state and local funding streams to make their adaptive reuse projects financially viable. Here are some that might help local projects get started:

- Federal and state historic tax credits
- Community Development Block Grants
- Low-income Housing Tax Credits
- New York Main Street program
- HOME funds for workforce housing
- Industrial Development Agencies
- NYSERDA for projects that include "green" elements
- USDA Rural Development



**"School officials need to pay attention to broader community and economic development issues. If their work is not enhancing the community, the population is going to get poorer and the population will become fewer. If they don't pay attention to those issues, their work as school administrators will only get harder. School leadership needs to be involved in the broader economic development conversations."**

John Sipple  
Director, New York State Center for Rural Schools

**SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS THAT ENHANCE THE GROWTH AND VITALITY OF THE HUDSON VALLEY.**

## Looking to the Future

# Working with the community to identify priorities and opportunities for adaptive reuse of schools

Now it's time for the stakeholders in your community to talk about adaptively reusing your school building. Should you sell it? Should you lease it? What does the law say? What new service does your community want the building to fulfill?

These are all questions that need to be answered. To get the conversation moving, Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress suggests the following steps:

1. Create an advisory committee that includes key stakeholders from the community. School officials, parents, business leaders, realtors, civic organizations, and labor groups should be included. Town, village or city officials should be at the table, too, in case zoning becomes an issue. Try including students who might learn from the process.
2. Look at the demographics of your district carefully. Is enrollment projected to rise, remain flat or continue to decline? This might help determine whether you **lease or sell** the building.
3. Convene a charette that gets the wider community involved. Many districts across the country that have sold a school for reuse have held several public meetings to gather ideas and input.
4. Explore what your community needs. Is there a shortage of senior housing or business space? Do your local farmers need a facility to sell their goods?
5. Pinpoint grants, tax credits, and state and federal programs that might help fund your idea.
6. Consider issuing a request for concepts (RFC) to determine if any developers or community groups are interested in building this new vision for your school building.
7. Reach out to other districts across the state and country that have gone through this process successfully. Let your committee have a video conference with their leaders to answer questions, dispel myths and calm any fears about reusing your school.

Visit the Pattern for Progress website for more demographic information and an interactive map, shown below, of school buildings that have closed and their vital statistics.

[www.Pattern-for-Progress.org](http://www.Pattern-for-Progress.org)



**Your thoughts on the issues?**

**Contact Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress at (845) 565-4900 or email [abosch@pfprogress.org](mailto:abosch@pfprogress.org)**

**Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress is the policy, planning and advocacy organization that creates regional, balanced and sustainable solutions to quality-of-life issues by bringing together business, nonprofit, academic and government leaders to collaborate on regional approaches to affordable/workforce housing, municipal sharing and local government efficiency, land use policy, transportation and infrastructure issues that most impact the growth and vitality of the regional economy.**

**Become a member of Pattern and be part of the solution!**

# HUDSON VALLEY PATTERN FOR PROGRESS

3 Washington Center, Newburgh, NY 12550

(845) 565-4900

[www.Pattern-for-Progress.org](http://www.Pattern-for-Progress.org)