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Why Pear Tree Point School Closed and Possibilities for the Future, According to Its Headmaster

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The economic downturn in 2007 and 2008 led to a drop in births in this area, and some other economic factors have also made it difficult for private schools in Fairfield County to survive, said David Trigaux, headmaster of Pear Tree Point School, which will close at the end of the school year.

"We're the fourth independent school to close in this area," Trigaux said in an interview Wednesday. He listed three recent closings: Canaan Ridge School in North Stamford, Connecticut Friends School (which now serves preschool children) in Wilton and the Beacon School in Stamford.

The economic jolts 10 years ago "produced a super low birth rate, so that produced fewer children over time," Trigaux said. In later years, there were fewer families with high-paying financial breadwinners, and that cut back the demand for private education in general. That was only one factor, however, for Pear Tree Point School.

The British Aren't Coming

For private schools near Stamford, there was a particular setback: The Royal Bank of Scotland being located in Stamford meant that a lot of British expatriots moved to the area with their children.

When RBS cut back on its jobs in the Stamford area, many of those British families moved back home. The RBS and UBS North American offices in Stamford are now in the same building, and you can see both of their logos on it as you drive by downtown Stamford on Interstate 95.

That British retreat from the area mattered a great deal to Pear Tree Point School, which had attracted a lot of British students. In the United Kingdom, Trigaux said, "They start their academic program when the children are three." In the United States, it's a little later.

That means the British students are somewhat more advanced in their education, so when British families would move back to the U.K., their children would be behind others of the same age if the returning students had typical American educations, he said.

One of the things Pear Tree Point School does is cater to students more advanced than their peers, and that allowed British students to maintain the pace of their learning with their compatriots back home, he said. The school also offers a rigorous curriculum in general, he added, and that also made it a good fit for the British students.

"We used to have 20 British families" sending students to the school, he said. "Now we don't have any."

Pear Tree Point School, which had as many as 178 students in the past, saw enrollment decline to its current 68 students, with about 40 of them from Darien (Darien typically has accounted for 70 percent of the school's students), Trigaux said.

Typically, 25 percent of students graduating from the sixth-grade class would go into public schools, he said. This year, there are 10 Pear Tree Point Students expected to go through the sixth grade (last year, there were 20). Of the other students, Trigaux thinks only a few are likely to go into any one grade in Darien schools once Pear Tree Point closes.

If that's the case, said Darien Schools Superintendent Dan Brenner, who said Trigaux has told him the same thing, then he doubts there will be a problem with the public schools in town taking in the additional students.

If any particular grades get a larger contingent of students from Pear Tree Point School than Trigaux thinks, the school district may have to make some adjustments, Brenner said.

With the school's high student-to-teacher ratio (classes typically have 10 to 12 students), Pear Tree is able to help not only more advanced students but also others who had learning difficulties, Trigaux said.

Where Pear Tree Point's students are going after this school year is not the only thing up in the air: Just about everything related to the school is, too, including the property and even the school itself. It's pretty crowded up there.

"We do have a group of parents who are considering trying to take the school in a new direction, maybe create a nonprofit school with a new name, and possibly a different location," Trigaux said.

The school occupies the site of the former Plumfield School, which existed from sometime in the 1930s to 1996. Shortly afterward, Ralph Parks and his family founded Pear Tree Point School. They tore down some of the old buildings and replaced them with new ones, and the family has owned the school ever since.

By this year, however, Trigaux said, Ralph Parks believed the writing was on the wall and the school could not continue

"I thought it was very considerate of them to announce it [the closure] at the beginning of the [school] year," Trigaux said. That gives plenty of time for parents to make plans. Trigaux announced the closure at a school assembly on Sept. 6.

After that point, when word of the closure got out, the school has been getting inquiries and visits to the property, including from other schools.

Trigaux said some people from the Darien school district were coming to a visit later this week. Brenner said he wasn't aware of that. Brenner himself came for a visit, after some people in the community suggested he see what was there, he said. First Selectman Jayme Stevenson said she has plans to visit the property soon.

Both Brenner and Stevenson, in separate interviews Wednesday, pointed out that there is no offer from the town to buy the five-acre tract, which is located in an expensive part of Darien.

"We've made no formal inquiries about the property," Brenner said. "It was simply me following up on community members saying it would be a property I should look at, but it's gone no further."

Brenner added that town officials would have to consider whether or not they wanted to spend money on a purchase at a time when the state's budget problems could impact Darien. In other words, the idea of the town buying the land is up in the air.

"I don't know if there's anything there for us," Stevenson said. She said she would consult with school district officials on whether or not they saw an opportunity for the town to use the school.

"I know that there's a significant interest in the property from a number of entities, both locally and from out of town," she said. "I haven't ruled anything out." In other words, it's up in the air.

"I was sad and disappointed to hear that the school was going to close because I do know that they have served so many families and children over the years," Stevenson added. "They have contributed to Darien."

Decisions on whether to buy a property for town use, even for schools, are made not by the Board of Education or school district officials, but by selectmen, members of the Board of Finance and ultimately by the Representative Town Meeting.

The first selectman typically begins the process with a proposal to buy and is in charge of negotiating a price. In practice, other officials, whether on the Board of Education and in the school district or with the Parks and Recreation Commission and Department, are consulted.

Stevenson said that while she was going to visit the property, she didn't know of any plans for other town officials to visit — either education officials or town parks and recreation officials.

The town plan for development calls on town officials to consider acquiring significant parcels of land as they become available in a town where about 98 percent of the land is considered already developed.

"It would be fun to have this continue as a learning environment, or as a pocket park," Trigaux said. He pointed out that the property extends across Pear Tree Point Road to the water's edge.

The school at one point had students go out in boats from the shoreline for particular class projects, but that stopped after Hurricane Katrina, when insurance companies said they wouldn't offer a policy to the school if it continued that. Now students from the school go to programs at Cove Park in Stamford and the Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk, he said.

Asked about his own future after Pear Tree Point School, Trigaux, a former superintendent of Weston Public Schools and deputy superintendent in Greenwich, said that, too, is up in the air.

"We'll have to figure that out," he said. "I'm just focused on making this a great year, so we'll see."