

The 'most attractive' towns

Study ranks Stamford at bottom for Fairfield County families

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By Maggie Gordon

On a Thursday morning in early October, Gail Newell sat in the passenger seat of her Realtor's SUV as they wound through the wooded streets of Weston, stopping to tour five houses in the quest for the perfect small-town home for Newell's family in their escape from Manhattan.

Currently, Newell lives with her husband, their daughter Marina and a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel named Cookie, in a 36th-floor apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, but she's looking for a change - one that offers more space for her family to grow, great public schools and an environment where Marina can safely enjoy the freedom to explore her surroundings.

"When we're in the city, my daughter can't be out of my sight," Newell said as she stood outside the first home of the morning, a Colonial on the market for \$1.1 million.

But space isn't the only factor in Newell's search for a new home.

"The key thing attracting me to Weston is that the school system here is supposed to be excellent," Newell said.

Newell isn't alone. Weston's small town charm, 2-acre zoning laws and the school system, which is frequently cited as one of the best districts in the state, creates a magic recipe for house hunters, according to Newell's Realtor Vickie Kelley.

"It's what attracted me here 16 years ago. I came for the schools," said Kelley who had a 7-month-old, a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old when she first moved to Weston from California.

According to Trulia, a real-estate services company, Weston's school system is attracting young families at a rapid pace. In a recent study that compared the number of elementary-school aged children in cities and towns across America with their pre-school aged children, Trulia concluded that Weston was the sixth most attractive school district in the nation for families with school-age children.

The math is simple: According to the 2010 census, there were 513 children between the ages of 0 and 4 living in town, and 984 children between the ages of 5 and 9, which equaled a ratio of 192 elementary-school aged children for each 100 pre-school aged children - the sixth highest ratio in the country, behind two schools in California, one outside Dallas, one on Long Island and one just outside Chicago.

"Parents vote with their feet," said Jed Kolko, Trulia's chief economist and the author of the study. While there were several reasons why parents' feet begin to shuffle around the time their children approach school age, "school quality had the strongest effect," Kolko said.

Population density, affordability and commute times were also factors in a town's overall desirability according to the Trulia study.

Kolko used rankings provided by GreatSchools.org, a non-profit website that compares schools on a 10-point scale using standardized test scores. Weston had a perfect 10 on the GreatSchools score chart; so did Wilton, New Canaan, Westport and Redding, which were listed at No. 2 through No. 5, respectively, of the most attractive towns in Fairfield County for young parents in a similar analysis performed by Hearst Connecticut Media Group.

Those same schools all appeared on the Top 6 school districts with the highest average SAT scores for high school students.

Desirable districts

An analysis of the school-aged population versus the pre-school-aged population shows movement in and out of districts. The chart below shows which towns gained the most and which lost the most.

TOWN	TOTAL POPULATION	0-4 NUMBER	5-9 NUMBER	0-4 PERCENT	5-9 PERCENT	MOBILITY
Weston	10179	513	984	5.04%	9.67%	4.63%
Wilton	18062	1062	1684	5.88%	9.32%	3.44%
New Canaan	19738	1139	1806	5.77%	9.15%	3.38%
Westport	26391	1448	2335	5.49%	8.85%	3.36%
Redding	9158	401	703	4.38%	7.68%	3.30%
Newtown	27560	1345	2182	4.88%	7.92%	3.04%
Easton	7490	368	595	4.91%	7.94%	3.03%
Ridgefield	24638	1342	2061	5.45%	8.37%	2.92%
New Fairfield	13881	637	1040	4.59%	7.49%	2.90%
Darien	20732	1666	2220	8.04%	10.71%	2.67%
Trumbull	36018	1883	2650	5.23%	7.36%	2.13%
Sherman	3581	155	217	4.33%	6.06%	1.73%
Fairfield	59404	3505	4489	5.90%	7.56%	1.66%
Brookfield	16452	813	1076	4.94%	6.54%	1.60%
Greenwich	61171	3721	4691	6.08%	7.67%	1.59%
Monroe	19479	1099	1394	5.64%	7.16%	1.51%
Shelton	39559	1851	2249	4.68%	5.69%	1.01%
Bethel	18584	1014	1175	5.46%	6.32%	0.87%
Stratford	51384	2769	3014	5.39%	5.87%	0.48%
Bridgeport	144229	10731	9639	7.44%	6.68%	-0.76%
Norwalk	85603	5883	5076	6.87%	5.93%	-0.94%
Danbury	80893	5409	4618	6.69%	5.71%	-0.98%
Stamford	122643	8309	7009	6.77%	5.71%	-1.06%

While the more exclusive towns ranked at the top of the Hearst analysis, Fairfield County's larger cities ranked at the bottom with Danbury and Stamford placing at the two bottom spots respectively.

The desirability factors in the Trulia study are all qualities on Newell's mind as she searches for the perfect new ZIP code to begin the next chapter of her family's life. When Kelley touted a recent *Newsweek* list, which ranked Weston High School as the No. 2 best high school in Connecticut, the point was made that several of Fairfield County's public high schools made that list, and the question was asked: Why not a similar neighboring district, like Redding, for example?

"We looked at Redding, because we have great friends who live there and we heard the schools were good," Newell said. "But it's just that my husband was born and raised in New York City, so this commute thing is really hard for him to swallow, and that extra 20 minutes was - there was no way."

She could find a much shorter commute in a town like Greenwich, which sits on the border to New York State and boasts both beautiful homes and high test scores. But it lacked the right balance for her family, Newell said.

"Greenwich is a beautiful town," she said as she examined an upstairs bedroom of a house on Weston's Fanton Hill Road - the second house she examined that Thursday morning. "I think it's a lot more expensive than Weston. What I like about Weston is that I can get a house for the same price that I can sell my condo for or less. You know, and I'll have property."

"My sister used to live in Ridgefield, and a year or two ago, we had gone around," she continued as she poked her head into a closet to check out the dimensions. "And the houses for a million dollars in Greenwich were really small and no property, and not on the best side of town. And for my daughter, I don't want to move into a community where we're moving into the cheapest house in the neighborhood."

Weston is no bargain itself. On Fanton Hill Road, Newell explored a 6,300-square-foot Colonial built in 1991, which was on the market for \$1.3 million. It wasn't the perfect fit for her, she noted, commenting that the five-bedroom house, while beautiful, was perhaps too much space for a family of three city dwellers.

With an average price of \$303 per square foot, Weston is the county's fifth most expensive municipality to buy into. But compared to Greenwich, which is the second-most expensive at \$532 per square foot, a buyer like Newell can buy a lot more for a lot less. That could explain why a place like Greenwich - with the shortest commute to New York City and a highly acclaimed school system - finds itself in the bottom half of Fairfield County's attractive towns for families with 5-to 9-year-olds at No. 15 of 23.

But Fairfield County's bar for desirability is pretty high. The county boasts a mobility ratio greater than 1, meaning that on a whole, more people move into the area when their children reach school age; across the county there are 140 5-to 9-year-olds for every 100 newborns to 4-year olds. In fact there are only four municipalities that have mobility scores less than 1: In Bridgeport there are 90 elementary-school aged children for each 100 younger children; in Norwalk there are 86 elementary-school aged children for each 100 younger children; in Danbury there are 85 elementary-school aged children for each 100 younger children; and in Stamford there are 84 elementary-school aged children for each 100 younger children, making it the "least attractive" town in the county for young families, according to the Hearst analysis.

While Stamford's schools outperformed Bridgeport's on the GreatSchools rankings - Stamford earned a 4 out of 10, while Bridgeport earned a county low of 2 out of 10^{****} and boasts a shorter commute time to New York City than Bridgeport, Stamford may have a unique challenge, according to Kolko.

"It depends on what the neighboring districts are like," he said. "A very good district surrounded by great districts might actually see parents leaving because the nearby districts are thought of even more highly. It definitely depends on the neighbors."

In Stamford, residents need only look east to Darien or New Canaan, which both earned perfect scores on the GreatSchools rankings or west to Greenwich. And financially speaking, shifting one's sights from Stamford to Weston isn't necessarily an unimaginable stretch. With an average price per square foot of \$243 in Stamford and \$303 in Weston, according to Trulia, movin' on up to the suburbs can be an attainable goal for many.

In Bridgeport, the average price per square foot is the lowest in the county at \$76, which means that residents who moved there for financial reasons could be priced out of alternative options, according to Kolko. A move from Bridgeport to Weston could result in homeowners quadrupling their budget, making it simply unattainable for many.

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