



PPIC

PUBLIC POLICY
INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA



BLOG POST · DECEMBER 9, 2021

What's Next for California's K-12 Enrollment?

Julien Lafortune, Emmanuel Prunty, and Vicki Hsieh

For years, the California Department of Finance has released projections anticipating a trend that has only recently arrived: declining enrollment in California's K-12 schools. COVID-19 hastened this trend, with enrollment dropping nearly 3% between 2019-20 and 2020-21, largely driven by kindergarten and the early elementary grades. Statewide enrollment data for 2021-22 have yet to be released, but there are early indications of persistent declines in some districts. Though the long-term enrollment trend reflects demographic patterns, whether or not students who left for COVID-related reasons will return to the classroom is an open question—and will have significant implications for the state's education system.

Since state funding is tied to student enrollment, declines can pose a financial challenge for districts. Right now, most districts are in a good position to weather these challenges, buoyed by record levels of state funding and federal stimulus. But in the coming years, the state and districts must figure out ways to prepare for lower enrollment, whether or not pandemic-driven declines reverse.

Over the next decade, declines are projected to accelerate, with statewide enrollment expected to fall 9% by 2030-31. The interactive below shows significant variation in past and projected enrollment across the state. Most counties are projected to see lower enrollment over the next decade, particularly in Southern California, along the coast, and in much of the Central Valley. Projected declines are greatest in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties—roughly 20% lower by 2030-31. The declines in Los Angeles County are particularly noteworthy: county enrollment has already fallen over 10% in the past decade, and enrollment in 2030-31 is projected to be 30% lower than it was in 2010-11.

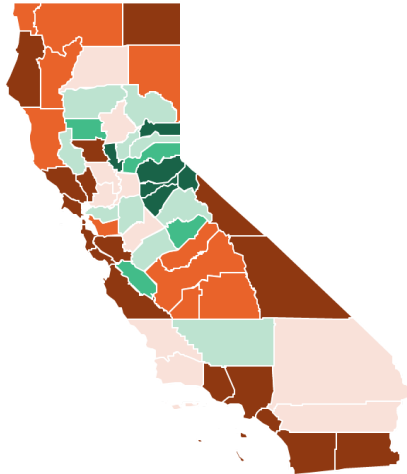
K-12 enrollment projections vary widely across California's counties

Click on the map or the dropdown menu to see county-level enrollment trends since 2010-11 and projected enrollment through 2030-31.

Percent change in enrollment

Past

Projected



- Decline 10%+
- Decline 5-10%
- Decline 0-5%
- Growth 0-5%
- Growth 5-10%
- Growth 10%+

Download data

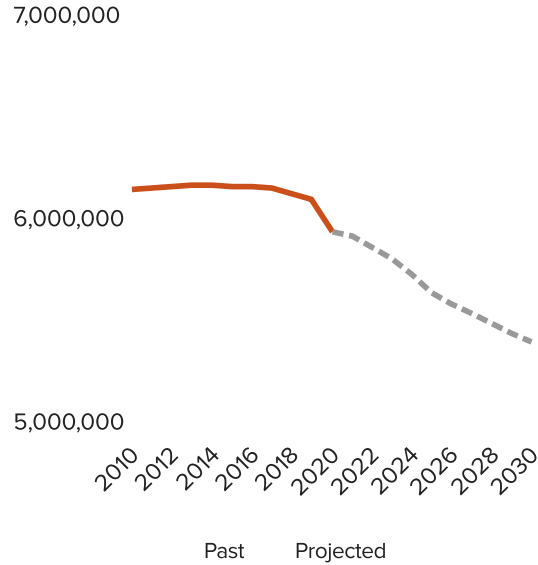
Number of students

<

Statewide

▼

>



Past Projected

Download data

Source: California Department of Finance.

Notes: Actual K-12 enrollments shown for 2010-11 to 2020-21; projected enrollments shown for 2021-22 to 2030-31.

From: PPIC Blog, December 2021.

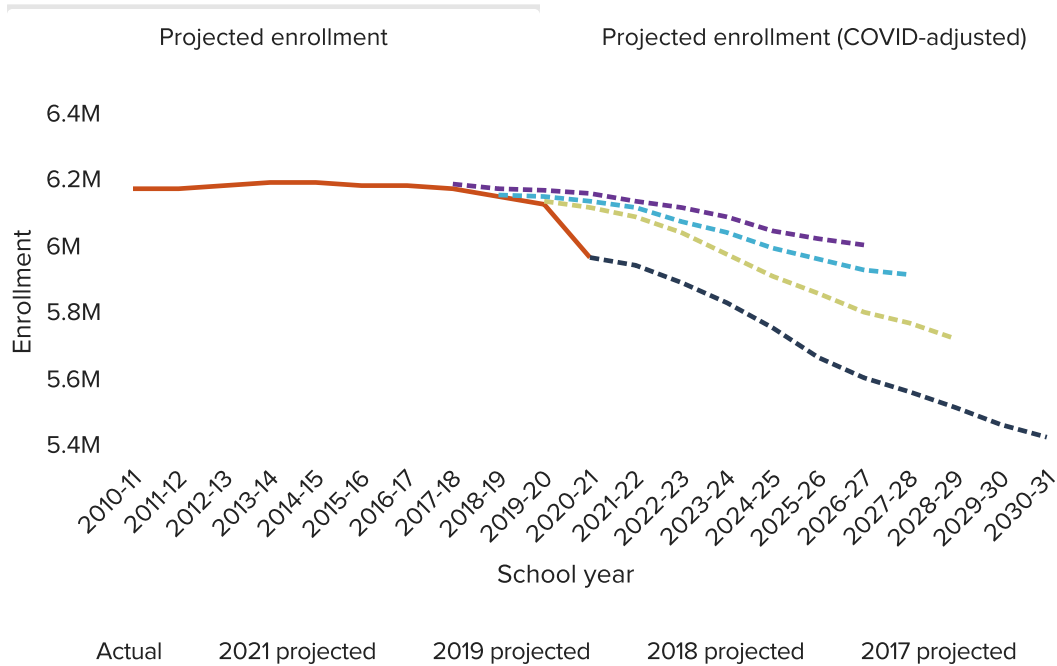
Share



A handful of counties are expected to experience significant growth, mainly in the Sierras and the northern Sacramento Valley. However, most of these counties enroll relatively few students. For example, Alpine projects the largest percent growth (33%) of any county in the state, but served only 73 total students in 2020–21. El Dorado is the largest county projecting growth greater than 10%, from roughly 30,000 to 35,000 students over the next decade.

It's important to keep in mind that these projections are only estimates. In fact, past projections have tended to slightly underestimate actual declines in recent years (pre-COVID). And more recent projections have estimated steeper declines in the 2020s, even when last year's enrollment losses due to COVID are accounted for. If current projections also end up being underestimates, even larger declines by 2030 are possible. However, if pandemic-related withdrawals from the public education system fully reverse, actual declines may be slightly smaller than projected.

Recent projections suggest steeper declines than past projections



Source: California Department of Finance.

Notes: Left tab: actual and projected statewide K-12 enrollment. Right tab: same as left tab, subtracting the 2020-21 decline from pre-COVID projections.

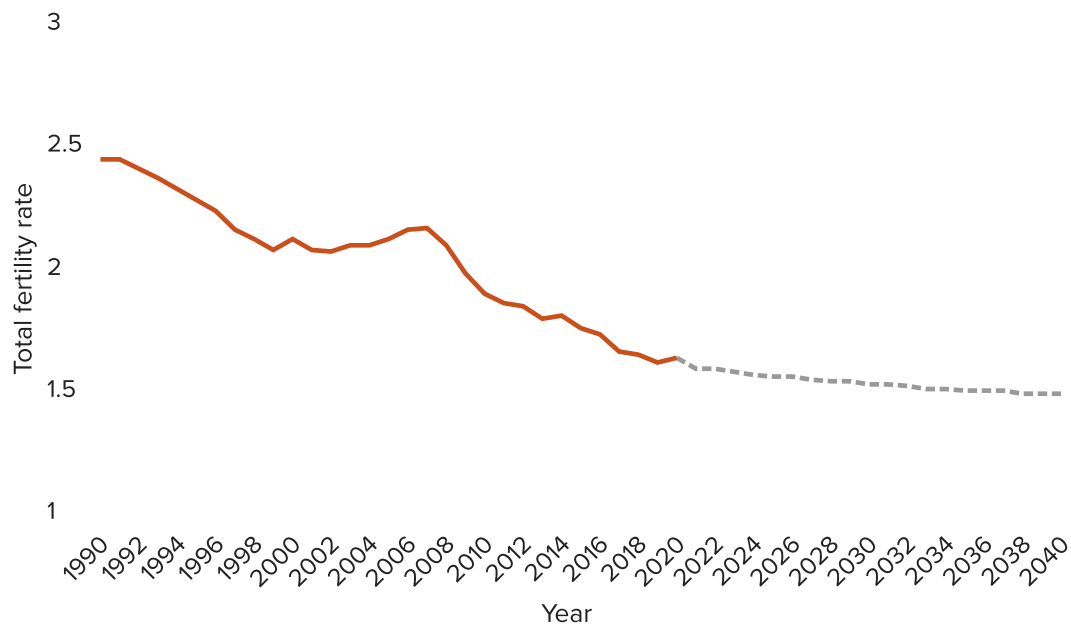
From: PPIC blog, December 2021.

Share



Ultimately, trends in key demographic factors like population growth, birth rates, and migration into and out of California will determine the number of children in California’s K–12 education system. Fertility rates have fallen by nearly 33% since 1990 in California, and the California Department of Finance projects an additional 9% decline by 2040.

California's fertility rates are projected to continue falling



Source: California Department of Finance.

Notes: Actual (shown in orange) and projected (shown in dotted gray) total fertility rates for California.

From: [PPIC blog](#), December 2021.

Share



Over the short term, education leaders must address enrollment losses while ensuring that students who did not participate last year return to school this year. Policymakers may want to consider providing a temporary cushion for impending funding declines in 2022–23, when the two-year “hold harmless” period ends and enrollment declines during COVID will lead to funding losses for districts. After the [struggles of remote instruction](#), abrupt funding cuts would only compound current challenges.

Nevertheless, most districts will need to adjust to a new normal of lower enrollment levels. Funding cannot remain higher in perpetuity to fund a level of student enrollment that no longer exists. Districts may need greater assistance from the state to predict, prepare for, and manage these declines. To ensure that student opportunities are not affected, resources and expertise from the state to help districts will be critical—especially for those that are smaller and have less organizational capacity.

Over the longer term, fewer children may be a boon for the state’s education system—barring future declines in the state budget, a statewide enrollment decline would mean higher levels of funding per student. But we must first find ways to effectively manage the costs of transitioning to a smaller school system.

TOPICS

coronavirus

COVID-19

enrollment

K-12 Education

Population

school finance

school funding

state budget