

The number of public school students could fall by more than 8% in a decade

Declining U.S. births and immigration might lead to school closures but could also mean more pre-K spots

Column by **JILL BARSHAY**

November 26, 2018

What does the declining birthrate mean for elementary, middle and high schools across the country? According to one set of projections, it could mean 8.5 percent fewer public school students a decade from now.

“If it does come true, we’re going to see massive changes,” said Mike Griffith, a school finance specialist at the Education Commission of the States, a think tank that aims to inform education policy. “Nobody is talking about this.”

Griffith says that a decline this large will likely lead to school closures around the country along with some unexpected consequences, such as more full-day kindergarten and publicly funded pre-kindergarten. Rural areas, already hard hit by depopulation, will likely feel the effects most severely. Teachers may face a tighter labor market.

I calculated a gradual decline in enrollment from projections made by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), a nonprofit agency among 15 states. The organization predicts the number of high school graduates to help colleges plan for the number of students in the future. But in order to predict high school graduates, WICHE’s statisticians also projected student enrollments for first grade through 2020 to 12th grade through 2030.

These grade-by-grade projections start to show a drop in first-grade children beginning in 2014, six years after the 2008 recession, when Americans started making fewer babies. (Economic uncertainty apparently has this side effect.) Fertility rates have continued to decline since, despite the economic recovery, and WICHE predicts the number of first graders will fall by more than 330,000 to 3.6 million in 2019. That’s a 8.5 percent decline from a peak of 3.9 million first graders in 2013. This 8.5 percent enrollment drop cascades through the whole elementary-to-high-school system as these first graders age and progress into higher grades.

Total enrollment diminishes gradually. The projections for all 12 grades end after 2020, but before that, between 2015 and 2020, the total number of students falls by only 1.4 percent or roughly 600,000 students. That's because, even by 2020, the post-recessionary birth dearth is only beginning to reach seventh grade. Grades eight through 12 are larger cohorts who were born before 2008.

Full high school projections extend further through 2028 in the WICHE data. The number of high school students is expected to fall by 6.8 percent or 1 million students from 15.4 million students in 2022 to 14.3 million students in 2028. That's an indication of how the whole system might lose students.

It's important to point out that the National Center for Education Statistics, the statistics arm of the U.S. Department of Education, shows an opposite trend. Its most recent projections, released May 2018, show that student enrollment should *increase* 3 percent between 2015 and 2027. However those projections were based on 2014 Census Department data which didn't factor in continued fertility declines through 2017, when the U.S. birthrate hit a 30-year low. Those 2014 Census figures also factored in higher levels of immigration, which have since fallen. In addition, the Education Department statistics include pre-K and kindergarten, which have been expanding across the nation, while the WICHE figures begin at first grade.

Student enrollment through 2015, the most recent year available, confirms that the number of first and second grade students has actually started to decline.

To be sure, increased immigration could still offset lower birthrates in the future. Michael Casserly, executive of the Council of the Great City Schools, an association of large, urban school districts, said that he is expecting "steady" enrollment in urban public schools in the coming years as immigrants enter the country. The question, of course, is whether enough immigrants will come to make up for declining births. That will depend on federal immigration policy after the 2020 election.

Daniel Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, says some school districts may continue to see increases in students, even as the overall number of students drops across the nation. He expects rural areas, which are already suffering from depopulation, to be hardest hit. Domenech, a former superintendent on Long Island, N.Y., recalled that he had to close down many schools in the 1990s and says that his colleagues have experience adjusting to the ebbs and flows of the student population in their communities. Indeed, U.S. school districts coped with even larger drops in the student population in the 1970s and early 1980s following the baby boom generation.

Griffith of the Education Commission of the States anticipates an acceleration of school consolidations and reliance on online courses by rural school districts. School budgets around the country, not just in rural areas, may be slashed. Griffith explained that many districts are reliant on state funds, which are distributed at a fixed amount per pupil. "There won't be enough state dollars for all the things you used to do in the classroom," Griffith said.

Districts may also have to contend with excess real estate capacity after years of building new schools to educate a growing population and to house new charter schools.

One way of contending with declining enrollments, Griffith said, is to expand public education to younger children. Griffith predicts that many school districts will increase full-day kindergarten and start offering pre-kindergarten to all families. That way districts can recoup lost state funds and use their real estate. "It's odd. But you might be able to provide pre-K and break even without any additional cost to the state," he said.

That would be a silver lining.

This story about declining school enrollment was written by Jill Barshay and produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the Hechinger newsletter.

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