

Soon We Won't Have Enough Kids to Fill Our Schools. That's a Problem.

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The number of school-age children in America is declining. At least one reason is the falling birthrate after the Great Recession. And declining university enrollment based on a lower school-age population — which has been described as a “demographic cliff” — is something that some colleges are already grappling with.

K-12 public school systems around the country are facing a similar demographic reality. Declining enrollment hit cities like Chicago and states like Michigan before Covid, and the pandemic hit many other school systems — Philadelphia, New York City, Seattle and several districts in the Boston suburbs — like a wrecking ball. As The Times's Shawn Hubler reported in May, “All together America's public schools have lost at least 1.2 million students since 2020,” according to a survey from the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute.

And the discussion around the more recent downtrend may have obscured demographic changes that were developing before the pandemic: According to analysis by Thomas Dee, a professor at Stanford's Graduate School of Education, “the population of school-age children in the United States, those 5 to 17 years old, actually fell by over a quarter million” during the pandemic, suggesting that “some of the enrollment loss during the pandemic simply reflects declining birth and immigration rates rather than an active choice not to attend public schools” — after all, today's school-age children were born before 2020.

While the school district in Florida's Orange County, home to Orlando, is expanding, the trends aren't uniform throughout the state — Pinellas County in the Tampa Bay area saw an enrollment decline approaching 5 percent from 2020 to 2022. Even in states like Arizona, where there's been overall population growth in recent years, enrollment has remained below prepandemic numbers, and rural schools in the state have been struggling for several years.

In some places, wealthier suburbs, long seen as desirable public school destinations for families, aren't immune — the tony Grosse Pointe, Mich., has seen a significant enrollment decline since 2010.

If declining enrollment is a reality for many of the country's K-12 public schools, what might the future look like, and how should states and local districts prepare? Right now, there aren't a lot of great answers to those questions.

I talked to Bryan Alexander, the author of “Academia Next: The Futures of Higher Education,” who said that we'll likely see efforts in various jurisdictions to “reduce overhead,” which often looks like closing and consolidating schools — even districts. With the caveat that because of local control, different states, counties and municipalities are run differently, Alexander pointed to Vermont as a harbinger of what's to come.

In 2015, Vermont passed Act 46, which, Vermont Public radio reported, “is designed to make education more equitable and sustainable in the face of declining enrollment — by consolidating school administration.” The first phase of the law's implementation allowed districts to voluntarily consolidate and offered incentives to do so, like merger support grants and the potential of a temporary homestead property tax reduction. But it later “allowed the State Board of Education to order involuntary mergers,” The Burlington Free Press explained.

Heather Bouchey, Vermont's interim education secretary, told me that the goal was to create economies of scale for districts that were losing both their tax bases and their school-age population. When enrollment declines too drastically without consolidation, she said, “the services available to those students who are at the school, the extracurricular activities that are available,” get cut.

At the same time, said Ted Fisher, the director of communications and legislative affairs for the Vermont Agency of Education, while there are parts of the state with too many school buildings that are expensive to maintain, he knows there's tension for individual towns and villages. “It's really hard to tell a community you might be better off if you and your neighbors in another small town operated one school,” he said. “That's a really hard local conversation to have.”

That tension has played out in a variety of ways since Act 46 was passed. For example, in 2021, two towns in Addison County, Lincoln and Ripton, voted to withdraw from consolidated school districts. The story is a bit wonky and complicated, but as the Vermont Public reporters Anna Van Dine and Abagael Giles put it, it ultimately boils down to small towns wanting to keep control of their local schools, no matter how tiny, because “having a local school gives people a reason to be a *community*, and not just a town.”

Chicago, which closed a bunch of public schools a decade ago with the rationale that they were underperforming and underenrolled, is dealing with some of the same issues as Vermont, but in a very different context. WBEZ and The Chicago Sun-Times recently published a pretty devastating analysis of the impact of the closure of those schools, assessing that when officials closed them, they made “three core promises”: “Students would be better off after their schools were closed”; “Their new schools would be transformed”; and “Former school buildings would be reborn as community assets.” Instead, WBEZ and The Sun-Times's reporting found that “these promises largely have never been realized. And city and school leaders haven't tracked the outcomes.”

In essence, the majority Black neighborhoods where these schools were closed had lost more population between 2013 and 2018 than majority Black neighborhoods that did not close schools (a 9.2 percent versus 3.2 percent decline). The cost savings of closing schools turned out not to be all it was cracked up to be, and the schools that remained open and absorbed the children from the closed schools — schools that were supposed to be better supported — got a short-term resource infusion but are now “just like any other school in Chicago — at the mercy of enrollment swings and budget constraints.”

Chicago's new mayor, Brandon Johnson, is a former teacher and teacher's union organizer. He campaigned on overhauling the Chicago Public Schools funding formula, which currently allocates funds on a per-student basis. He opposes closing smaller schools.

Instead of closing smaller schools, Nader Issa, Lauren FitzPatrick and Sarah Karp report in The Sun-Times, experts recommend allowing some schools to remain small but create their curriculums "with more intentional educational models" and more input from communities. "That might mean a projects-based curriculum with a teaching staff built for that purpose. Or sharing art, music and sports teams among schools in close proximity."

The rub, of course, is that small schools can be expensive to maintain. Individual schools need their own administrations and facilities, and the fewer students a school serves, the higher that cost is per pupil. Additionally, some areas of the country and some academic disciplines are facing teacher shortages. Beyond that, schools across the country are about to face another kind of cliff: Pandemic relief funding is winding down, leaving many districts with a budget crunch.

I asked Dee, the Stanford economist, if there were any states, cities or districts that had dealt with declining enrollment in an inspiring way. He said that "no one comes to mind as an exemplar," which is why it can be "a bit of a downer" to work in education policy. As he pointed out, in K-12 education we're still dealing with the fallout of the pandemic — we're still seeing some children struggle with mental health, chronic absenteeism is up and some children are developmentally behind. Declining school enrollment, then, is potentially another "layer on top of the already substantial educational harm" America's children are experiencing, he said.

Unsurprisingly, kids who are already vulnerable, who have the least amount of choice, will have the most to lose as we face a future with fewer children enrolled in public schools. I worry that with graying populations, even in states that are supportive of public education, voters will turn against major funding initiatives. Vermont does offer some hope on this front: Earlier this year, "the largest year-over-year increase in five years" to education spending was approved.

While there's a lot of parental and political energy burned on culture war issues like book banning, I wish more legislators were focused on big, blue-sky solutions for the enrollment crunch. Or at least preparing their constituents for the hard choices that will have to be made in the near future. Based on long-term birthrate projections, it's coming nearly everywhere, even places where schools currently seem bustling and full of life.

Tiny Victories

Parenting can be a grind. Let's celebrate the tiny victories.

My son is skillful at delaying bedtime. He was at it again recently when I placed his Pocoyo doll on his bed with a blanket and told him that Pocoyo needed a pal to fall asleep with. My son tucked Pocoyo in, cuddled up next to it and then told me good night.

— Diana-Marie Laventure, Jersey City, N.J.

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