

K-12 enrollment: A slight increase is predicted for elementary, but secondary will continue to see declines

By Monica Crouch

After declining for most of this decade, statewide student enrollment looks like it will pick up as we go into the next decade. Since 2006, over 54 percent of school districts and county offices have been experiencing multi-year declining enrollment conditions. But while average statewide enrollment is projected to now go up, that growth will be focused on specific regions. It will also be highly dependent on when and how the state comes out of recession.

Why should education leaders care about demographic trends? Well, in simple terms, kids come with money, and money comes with kids. Education funding is linked to two factors: current and future economic conditions, and demographic enrollment trends of school-age children in the state. These factors are critical when it comes to predicting state and local education funding.

California school districts receive funding from various local, state and federal sources. The largest component, of course, is state aid, more commonly known as Proposition 98 funding. Proposition 98, passed by voters in 1988, constitutionally guarantees a minimum level of funding for K-adult education and community colleges. K-adult education typically receives around 90 percent of total Proposition 98 funding. The guarantee is determined via a set of complex formulas that are directly linked to prior-year Proposition 98 base funding, state revenues, and projected growth in average daily attendance.

The interrelationship of economic trends and enrollment are the basis for future projections of demographic rates for schools. Based on the funding formula, average daily attendance (ADA) dictates the amount of funds a school district will receive, which ultimately helps education leaders decide in making financial and programmatic plans. Therefore, future projections of student enrollment, along with economic trends, play a critical factor with education finance – especially in times of budget shortfalls.

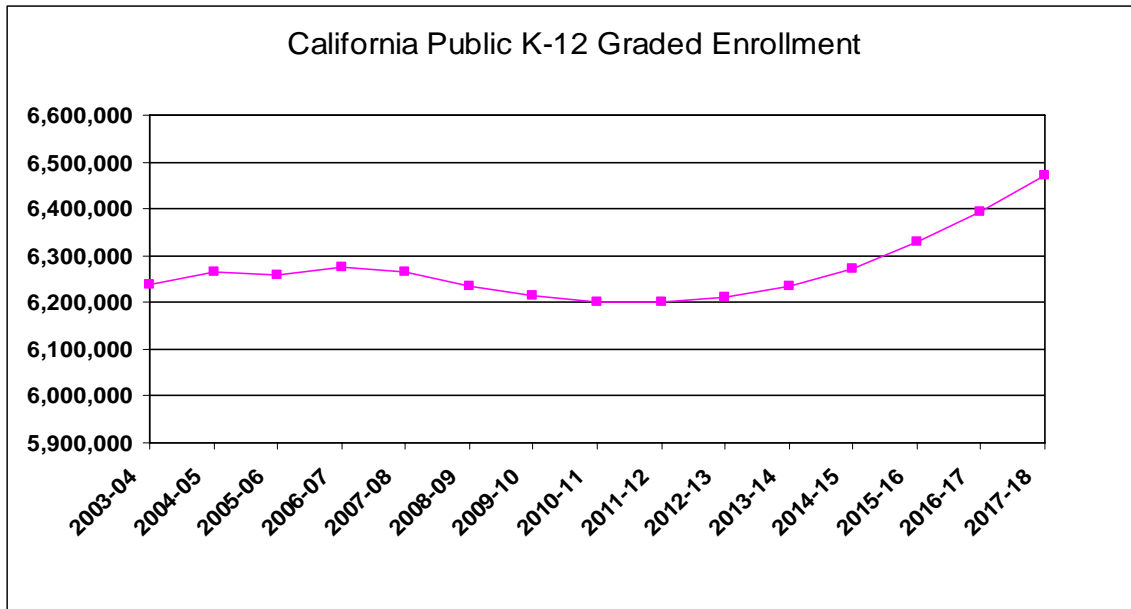
Research by the California Department of Finance (DOF) projects that student enrollment will continue to decline until 2010-11, however this will be followed by an increase in average enrollment growth statewide. The report indicates that “elementary enrollment will continue to decline until 2009-10. Beginning in 2010-11, K-8 enrollment is predicted to grow by over 325,000 between 2007-08 and 2017-18 to 4,581,424” (*California Public K-12 Graded Enrollment and High School Graduate Projections by County, 2008 Series. Sacramento, California, October 2008*).

But projections for secondary enrollment indicate continued enrollment declines through the first half of this next decade. DOF predicts that secondary enrollment is projected to decrease annually after 2007-08 through 2016-17, declining by almost 119,000 over the projection period.” (*California Public K-12 Graded Enrollment and High School Graduate Projections by County, 2008 Series. Sacramento, California, October 2008*).

Future demographic projections based on county-wide research conclude that the counties that continue to have the strongest enrollment growth in the next year will be Kern, Placer and Riverside. Furthermore, the report indicates other counties “to experience large enrollment growth from 2007-08 levels are Sacramento and Fresno. Enrollment growth in these five counties can be attributed to increasing births or strong levels of in-migration.” Los Angeles County has the largest student population in the state, but the projected enrollment rate is expected to decrease by 2.1 percent in the next year, then 13 percent during the next ten years. Overall demographic projections for enrollment from 2007-08 to 2008-09 are to decline in “35 of the state’s 58 counties, whereas by 2017-18 only 17 counties are projected to have enrollment levels lower than 2007-08” (*California Public K-12 Graded Enrollment and High School Graduate Projections by County, 2008 Series. Sacramento, California, October 2008*).

So it will remain a mixed bag for California’s school districts and county offices when it comes to future ADA. Some LEAs will see gains, while others will continue to struggle with all the ailments that come with declining enrollment. Broader economic, social, and demographic factors will continue to contribute to regional population and enrollment trends in K-adult public schools.

Added to this, state lawmakers will not likely be in a position to change statutes governing ADA and enrollment methodologies. Under current law, LEAs take the higher of current year or prior-year ADA. This gives them a one-year “buffer” to adjust spending and programs when they experience declining enrollment. But any change to current law will likely impact overall state spending. Given the state’s current budget crisis, we shouldn’t expect any major relief from state lawmakers when comes it to addressing the challenges associated with declining enrollment. The graphs/charts included depict the demographic projection of enrollment for grades K-12.



Source: Department of Finance

Enrollment and Number of School Districts by Type for 2005-06

Type	Number	Enrollment
County Office	58	68,809
Elementary	561	1,234,797
Unified	329	4,380,815
High	88	621,597
CYA	6	2,338
State Special	3	876
State Board of Education Charter	9	2,870
Total	1,054	6,312,102

Source: California Department of Education

***Editor's note:** Monica Crouch is a Legislative and Policy Intern with the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) and a graduate student from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's School of Public Policy.*

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