

Colorado schools are losing students

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Colorado public schools went from adding roughly 3,500 students a year before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to losing nearly 4,000 students a year afterward.

Note



As more than 870,000 Colorado students return to the classroom for another school year, they are part of a shrinking population since enrollment peaked in 2019. Colorado has 40,000 fewer students today than it did at its apex.

The Denver Gazette compared districts' average annual enrollment gains or losses in the five years before and after the pandemic to identify where enrollment trends changed the most.

The forces that long fueled Colorado's enrollment boom — births and migration — have lost momentum.

Note

Nationally, enrollment peaked in 2019 with 50.7 million students. Enrollment peaked that same year in Colorado with its 913,223 students, according to the Colorado Department of Education. It's fallen every year since. Colorado is hardly alone.

"This is a national phenomenon," Sofoklis Goulas, an economist who has studied declining school enrollment and school closures, said. "It's happening to everyone."

Among The Denver Gazette's findings: • Cherry Creek School District experienced the largest reversal among traditional school districts, going from adding an average of 369 students annually before the pandemic to losing 429 after

• Douglas County School District went from adding an average of 102 students a year to losing 585

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- Jeffco Public Schools, already shrinking before the pandemic, saw its decline accelerate to an average loss of 1,074 students annually
- Aurora Public Schools moved in the other direction: Its average annual loss slowed from about 540 students before the pandemic to about 64 after.
- Denver Public Schools remained technically in the growth category, but the arrival of immigrant students — whose families illegally crossed in the U.S. and ended up in metro Denver — temporarily interrupted an underlying decline.
- Colorado Springs School District 11 bucked the statewide trend, going from losing, on average, about 474 students annually before the pandemic to gaining about 23 after.

Declining enrollment has financial consequences because state funding follows students.

Marguerite Roza, director of Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab, said districts across the country are confronting a mismatch between the number of students they serve and the number of schools they operate.

"The U.S. has too many schools now, and many of them are going to close," Roza said.

In Colorado, however, closures remain concentrated in a minority of districts.

Despite widespread concern about declining enrollment, school closures have not touched most Colorado districts. Data from the state education agency show 70 of the state's 178 school districts — 39% — have closed at least one school since the 2015-16 school year. DPS and Jeffco lead the pack with 35 and 33 closures, respectively.

'Built out'

For years, Colorado's fastest-growing suburban school districts could count on steadily rising enrollment. The Denver Gazette's analysis shows that trend reversing.

Cherry Creek and Douglas County experienced the largest shifts among traditional school districts. Cherry Creek officials attribute much of the reversal to changing demographics and development patterns: The housing boom that once fueled enrollment growth on the district's east side has largely run its course.

"The district experienced sustained growth for many years due to the construction of large housing developments on the east side of the district that drew new families into the district," Abbe Smith, a Cherry Creek spokesperson, said in an email. "We are essentially 'built out' when it comes to residentially zoned land within the district."

JeffCo, meanwhile, was already losing students before the pandemic. Its decline accelerated afterward, giving the district the steepest post-pandemic annual enrollment losses among traditional districts that were already shrinking.

The prolonged decline has forced the district to adjust its spending.

"To be responsible stewards of taxpayer funds, the Board of Education has made budget reductions over the past several years and continues to identify reductions to align with fewer enrolled students," Devra Ashby, a Jeffco spokesperson, said in an email.

Denver Public Schools is a special case.

Although classified as a growth-growth district based on average annual change, post-pandemic enrollment was volatile and included a temporary increase associated with the arrival of the immigrant families.

Denver started seeing an influx of immigrants — primarily from South and Central America — in December 2022, with more than 40,000 arriving over a roughly two-year period. Their arrival was part of the surge of people who illegally crossed America's southern borders and traveled deep into the country's interior, including Colorado, Illinois and New York.

DPS added more than 2,300 students over those two years, Bill Good, a DPS spokesperson, said in an email.

"It's impossible to know precisely, but I believe it's safe to say we would have seen a steeper overall decline in the past five years without the influx, with consistently fewer students year over year rather than the up-and-down trend we have experienced instead," Good said.

Colorado Springs School District 11 has moved in the opposite direction.

After nearly two decades of declining enrollment, the district has added students each year since 2022, according to district officials. The Denver Gazette analysis found D-11 went from losing more than 450 students annually before the pandemic to modest annual growth afterward — a swing of nearly 500 students a year.

Jessica Wise, D-11's executive director of engagement, attributed the turnaround in part to an expansion of educational choices, including STEM and STEAM programs, arts integration, outdoor learning and career-focused programs.

"Families are responding to a broader range of school models and learning opportunities across the district," Wise said in an email.

District officials said the growth is not concentrated in a single neighborhood, grade level or student population and they expect enrollment to continue growing.

Aurora Public Schools offers a different picture.

The district remained among those experiencing enrollment declines in the years just before and after the pandemic. But The Denver Gazette analysis found its average annual enrollment loss noticeably slowed after the pandemic.

From 2010 to 2015, Aurora underwent a dramatic enrollment transformation — adding 3,644 students, a 9% increase. Aurora's enrollment peaked earlier than most districts examined by The Denver Gazette, reaching 42,249 students in 2015-16. Most of the others didn't begin declining until 2019 or later.

Enrollment then fell by 4,342 students or about 10%, reaching a low of 37,907 in 2020-21. Since then, enrollment has largely stabilized, hovering between roughly 38,000 and 40,000 students.

"I believe we've leveled off from the material changes in our enrollment," Brett Johnson, Aurora Public Schools' chief financial officer, said.

"I think the dust has settled on that." Officials considered the district's current enrollment close to the new baseline established after that decline.

A dramatic spike in the cost of living drew those priced out of Denver to Aurora. Additionally, Johnson said, the Fitzsimons Innovation Community has also done a lot to attract families to the city. This has had the effect of creating two corridors: an older, established one aging in place in the west and a younger, developing one in the east.

"Aurora has experienced, depending on what side of town you're looking at, growth or contraction," Johnson said.

'We need to adjust to the trends'

The largest numeric enrollment declines among districts that were shrinking before and after the pandemic are heavily concentrated along the Front Range, where many of Colorado's largest school districts are located.

The decline has implications beyond public school enrollment.

U.S. Census Bureau estimates show Colorado's population of 5- to 17-year-olds fell from 927,318 in 2019 to 901,507 in 2024. That's a decline of nearly 26,000 children or about 3%.

At the same time, an increasing number of Colorado families are educating their children outside of public schools. The number of homeschooled students increased from 7,880 in 2019 to 9,826 in 2024 — a 25% spike, state data shows.

The pandemic — in which school officials shut down classrooms and adopted remote learning — produced an even larger, temporary surge in homeschooling, but the number never returned to its pre-pandemic level after kids returned to the classroom. As The Denver Gazette previously reported, families increasingly cite concerns about school safety, bullying and drugs among their reasons for homeschooling.

That leaves public schools contending with two trends: fewer school-age children overall and more families choosing alternatives to public schools.

Over the past two decades, women have been waiting longer to have children and having fewer when they do, State Demographer Neal Marquez said. Migration among young families moving to Colorado has also slowed.

Birth rates nationally have slowed since 2007. Researchers have linked the decline, at least in part, to the Great Recession and the economic uncertainty, although Marquez cautioned against attributing the trend to any single factor.

Colorado's fertility rate has fallen particularly among teenagers and women in their 20s, while people increasingly are postponing childbirth into their 30s, Marquez said.

Migration helped offset that decline for years, as young adults and families moved to Colorado. That, too, has slowed.

The result is an aging state. Colorado's population under 18 is declining, while its population of 65 and older is its fastest growing age group.

Birth rates falling below what's called "the replacement level" — roughly 2.1 children per woman — have greater implications than school enrollment. Demographers warned this can reshape the workforce, economy and social systems.

Getting back to that level isn't as simple as encouraging people to have more children, Marquez said. Much of Colorado's fertility decline has occurred among teenagers and women in their 20s. Reversing it would require, among other things, more pregnancies among those younger women.

"That's probably not a policy that most people are interested in taking on," Marquez said.

Instead, the state and its institutions need to prepare for the demographic changes already underway.

"We need to adjust to the trends," Marquez said.