

# Enrollment sees biggest drop since '20

Statewide dropout rate reaches all-time low as grad rates hit 10-year high, data shows

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Colorado's public schools recorded their lowest dropout rate ever during the last academic year as four-year graduation rates surpassed a 10-year high, according to new state data. Yet these improvements come as statewide enrollment has fallen by more than 10,000 students, the largest decrease since the pandemic closed classrooms in 2020.

The drop in students — a 1.1% overall reduction in the current academic year — comes as fewer Coloradans are having babies. The state's biggest K-12 districts also reported larger-than-expected enrollment declines, a trend officials at Denver Public Schools and Jeffco Public Schools attributed to fewer immigrant students attending their schools as the Trump administration ramped up mass deportations.

Statewide, districts enrolled 870,793 students in preschool through 12th grade when the official count took place in October, which is down from 881,065 pupils in 2024, according to new data released Tuesday by the Colorado Department of Education.

"Colorado continues to experience enrollment trends shaped by a declining school-age population, increasing racial and ethnic diversity, and shifts toward part-time and online learning," Education Commissioner Susana Córdova said in a statement. "These changes require thoughtful adaptation, and our schools are working diligently to continue serving students effectively across the state."

The agency also released data Tuesday that showed Colorado's high school graduation rate reached its highest level in more than 10 years, as 85.6% of students received their diplomas on time during the 2024-25 academic year.

The last academic year's graduation rate increased by 1.4 percentage points from the previous school year as more than 60,380 students graduated in four years, the data showed.

The statewide dropout rate for 2024-25 also fell by less than a percentage point from the previous year to 1.6%, or 7,437 pupils. It's the lowest rate in state history, according to the education department.

In Colorado, students can take up to seven years to graduate from high school. The dropout rate reflects how many students in seventh through 12th grade left school before graduating.

"Colorado's graduation and dropout data show encouraging progress, with more students earning their diplomas and fewer leaving school before graduation," Córdova said in a statement.

DPS, the state's largest district, saw its four-year graduation rate increase from 79.9% during the 2023-24 academic year to 81.9% last year. The district said that was the largest year-over-year jump since 2006-07.

Jeffco Public Schools, the state's second-largest district, had an 86.7% four-year graduation rate for the 2024-25 academic year, which is not only up from 85% the previous year but a 16-year high for the district.

"We are just really proud to have the highest graduation rates ever," said Superintendent Tracy Dorland.

Jeffco Public Schools' district-run high schools also saw their four-year graduation rates increase a percentage point to 94%, she said.

The district has not only prioritized academics but also created a sense of belonging for students via clubs and non-academic activities that help keep them engaged with school through graduation, Dorland said.



"There's not a single thing we're doing that isn't worthwhile," she said, adding that it's why it's difficult for Jeffco Public Schools to implement the districtwide budget cuts underway because of declining enrollment.

## A multiyear decline

Public school enrollment has been falling nationwide in recent years as a result of fewer Americans having babies. Colorado's changing demographics and high housing prices also have altered where families live.

The Roaring Fork School District in Carbondale saw enrollment plummet at a higher percentage — 4.2% — than the state, which district officials attributed to a "sharp" increase in housing costs and shortages. The district has 5,621 students, state data showed.

"We have been aware of declining enrollment trends in our district for the last year and a half," Superintendent Anna Cole said in a statement. "While these trends are not unique to (the Roaring Fork School District), they present real challenges that we must manage. (The district) will be exploring all options as we begin working on the 26/27 budget to help ensure our students have the best education possible."

Statewide, enrollment peaked at 913,223 students in 2019.

In October 2020, during the first year of the pandemic, enrollment dropped 3.3% — or by more than 30,000 students — from the previous year.

Since 2020, enrollment had fallen steadily by less than 1% annually, except for a small, 0.4% increase of 3,318 students in 2021 when schools mostly resumed in-person learning.

An influx of immigrant families to Colorado in recent years has provided a buffer to districts experiencing declining enrollment, but the federal government has ramped up mass deportations since President Donald Trump resumed office a year ago.

Córdova said during a media call Tuesday that state officials "anticipated some impact" in enrollment from the changes in federal immigration policy.

Statewide, enrollment of multilingual learners dropped by 5.7% — or nearly 6,000 students — to 99,385 children between October 2024 and October 2025, according to the education department.

The state also saw 4,395 fewer Latino students enroll in schools this academic year compared with the 2024-25 school year, which is when the population's enrollment jumped by 8,722 pupils from the previous year.

The Cherry Creek School District expected to have about 350 fewer students in its classrooms this year but lost 483 pupils. The district has 48,035 students.

Spokeswoman Lauren Snell said in an email that changes in enrollment for at-risk students and special populations, such as English language learners and immigrant students, "increased more than anticipated."

The Cherry Creek School District's kindergarten class is the smallest it has been in about 25 years, she said, noting that fewer students live in school boundaries as more people are "aging in place" and don't have school-age children.

## Low enrollment felt by urban, rural districts

Declining enrollment is hitting districts financially as they receive less per-pupil funding from the state when there are fewer children in their classrooms. This was most recently seen with Jeffco Public Schools, which expects to run a \$49 million deficit for the 2025-26 academic year and is cutting jobs.

Jeffco Public Schools, which has 74,191 students, expected enrollment to drop by 933 pupils this year but instead lost 1,530 students — a \$5 million hit to the district's revenues.

"(I'm) struggling with the fact we have to make these reductions, given the lack of funding that the state of Colorado gives education," said Dorland, the district's superintendent.



Smaller districts will have an even harder time adjusting their budgets to declining enrollment, said Tracie Rainey, executive director of the Colorado School Finance Project.

"When you lose students, they don't all come out of one building or one grade level," she said. "So it doesn't mean that you can cut staff or resources easily."

Districts in mountain communities, including Summit County and Aspen, also are seeing larger-than-expected drops in enrollment because of federal immigration policies, said Frank Reeves, director of operations for the Colorado Rural Schools Alliance.

Meanwhile, districts on the Eastern Plains are affected by the struggling agriculture industry, as well as by the culture wars that emerged during the height of the pandemic and have driven families to homeschool their kids or put them in online schools, Reeves said.

"We are losing some kids that we don't want to lose because of that," he said.

Statewide, the number of students who are homeschooled jumped by 5.5% to 10,367 pupils in the fall. By comparison, about 9,826 students were homeschooled in 2024, data showed.

The state also saw a 2.9% increase in students registered in online programs.

More than 34,600 pupils attend school online compared with 33,629 students in 2024, according to the data.

