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Declining Enrollment in America's Public Schools:

How States Can Respond Strategically

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Executive Summary

After nearly 40 years of steady growth, the country's K–12 public school enrollment is in sustained decline. Federal projections indicate that 40 states will experience further losses through 2030–31,¹ driven by falling birth rates; slowing immigration; and the expansion of school vouchers, education savings accounts, and homeschooling programs.

The nation's public education system could lose \$11.5 billion in state revenues annually by 2030–31, prompting widespread staff layoffs, program reductions, and school consolidations and closures. As overall enrollment shrinks, the share of students requiring supplemental support, including English Learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families, is growing. Districts face the compounding challenge of serving a wider range of student needs even as total funding contracts.

States that act with urgency and intentionality can equip districts to emerge from this transition stronger, more resilient, and better aligned with the needs of their communities.

The short-term tools that states used during the Great Recession—budget deferrals, reserve draw-downs, and across-the-board cuts—may provide temporary fixes but are poorly suited to structural and demographic shifts demanding long-range system redesign. Accordingly, state leaders must

develop policy responses that enable local school systems to adapt to these changing circumstances and build capacity for long-range planning and execution.

This paper outlines three key recommendations for state leaders:

1. Align state funding policy with changing enrollment and student needs.
2. Provide forecasting tools, technical assistance, and system redesign grants and support that build local capacity for managing change.
3. Engage in strategic communication and case-making that strengthens public confidence and political will.

Absent a long-term vision and clear strategy for action, states risk a vicious cycle in which ongoing enrollment declines and the fiscal distress they create constrain the quality of public schools, further accelerating family opt-out, disinvestment, and erosion of public trust. However, periods of enrollment contraction can also catalyze transformation—creating opportunities to build more personalized learning environments and reallocate resources toward evidence-based strategies. States that act with urgency and intentionality can equip districts to emerge from this transition stronger, more resilient, and better aligned with the needs of their communities.

Enrollment Decline Is Reshaping Public Education

After decades of steady growth, K–12 public school enrollment in the United States is now in sustained decline. Following a sharp drop during the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment partially rebounded in some states, but nationally it remains below prepandemic levels and continues to trend downward.² According to federal data, 40 states and the District of Columbia are projected to see further declines by 2030–31,³ reflecting a demographic shift that will continue to reshape the nation's public education system.

One of the most immediate changes will be to funding since virtually every state funds school districts according to the number of students served. Because most district costs are fixed or slow to adjust, even modest enrollment losses can create fiscal stress. Based on each state's enrollment projections and 2022–23 per-pupil spending, the nation's public education system could lose \$11.5 billion in state revenues annually by 2030–31, as compared with the revenue they received in 2025–26.⁴

These enrollment declines are unevenly distributed across the country. School systems in the West and Northeast have seen steeper losses than systems in parts of the Midwest and South.⁵ And schools in urban areas have seen steeper declines than schools in other locales.⁶

Bellwether analysis found that the primary overall driver of declining enrollment is a sustained drop in birth rates, which has led to smaller incoming kindergarten cohorts each year.⁷ A national slowdown in immigration is another driver, as is out-of-state migration in some states. Another contributing factor is the growing popularity of

private school and homeschool options, particularly in states such as Arizona and Florida that have expanded access to vouchers, education savings accounts, and other programs designed to support school choice.

As total enrollment declines, the composition of those who remain in public schools is shifting—driven in part by the dynamics described above. As families with greater means opt for private school or homeschooling, districts are often left serving smaller but higher need student populations. At the same time, broader national trends are contributing to this shift: The country is becoming more linguistically and economically diverse, and more children are being identified for special education services.⁸ As a result, the percentage of English Learners, students with disabilities, and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch is growing as a share of enrollment.⁹ Public school districts are therefore serving higher concentrations of students requiring additional support—including English language development, special education, and wraparound assistance—even as fewer students remain to generate their overall funding.

As districts devote a growing share of their budgets to support services intended to meet a broader range of student needs, these costs can consume a larger share of the limited resources and crowd out funding for core instructional services.¹⁰ Since enrollment declines are often

The nation's public education system could lose \$11.5 billion in state revenues annually by 2030–31 due to declining enrollment.

gradual, school system leaders may not immediately experience acute fiscal pressure. This can create a false sense of stability, allowing existing expenditure patterns to persist even as underlying conditions change. Bellwether has found that 68 percent of K–12 districts experienced enrollment declines between 2018–19 and 2023–24. However, most of these districts still operate roughly the same number of schools—a mismatch that federal COVID-19 funding relief temporarily masked. Over time, however, these pressures compound, leaving districts with fewer options and forcing more abrupt and difficult cuts.¹¹

A New Era Demands a New Approach

This contraction in public school enrollment—and, consequently, in education revenues—is unlike any this country has experienced in half a century. The last comparable decline in enrollment happened in the 1970s, after the Baby Boom.¹² Since then, the demands on public schools have grown dramatically, and the systems that deliver education have become far more complex. Schools now address a more diverse array of student needs, and the responsibilities of schools now extend far beyond just academics. At the same time, technology has opened up new possibilities for how, when, and where students learn, and changes to the workforce have transformed what students need to be prepared to know and do.

Because this moment is unique, the policy tools that state lawmakers have used to address previous K–12 revenue contractions, such as during the Great Recession,¹³ are unlikely to be appropriate or effective now. Budget deferrals, reserve

spend-downs, spending cuts and service reductions, temporary tax hikes, and other short-term emergency responses will be insufficient to address long-term, structural challenges. These approaches are designed to preserve existing systems during temporary shocks, not to adapt systems to sustained changes in enrollment and student need. They also fail to address the deeper need to reimagine system delivery, not just deploy resources.

State policymakers should craft responses that are mapped to long-range enrollment forecasts and evolving student needs—not strategies designed for temporary downturns.

How state policymakers interpret declining enrollment will shape whether their responses simply shrink existing systems or strengthen them for the future. While some may view declining enrollment as an opportunity to reduce spending, that approach risks exacerbating fiscal instability and undermining quality. In response, more families could opt out, further reducing enrollment and exacerbating fiscal pressures—a vicious cycle that will continue to damage a local school system's ability to effectively serve students.

A more effective response is to treat this moment as an opportunity to make strategic and sustained investments that better align spending with student and community needs and strengthen public confidence in local schools. State leaders who take a proactive response to declining enrollment trends can equip district leaders to build stronger and more resilient K–12 systems that can adapt to changing demographic conditions, fiscal pressures, and evolving understandings of how schools must be designed to prepare students for a rapidly changing world.

Recommendations for State Leaders

As enrollment continues to decline, school systems in states across the country will eventually change—the question is whether those changes will be haphazard and reactive or proactive and strategic. That depends in large part on how state leaders structure policies and funding systems that actively account for these factors. State leaders have an important role to play in shaping the conditions under which districts adapt, including whether they have the resources, flexibility, tools, support, and political cover needed to adjust to new demographic realities.

This section outlines three key recommendations for state leaders, drawing on findings from K–12 finance policy research and our experience partnering with practitioners, policymakers, and other interest holders on finance policy design and implementation:

1. Align state funding policy with changing enrollment and student needs.
2. Provide forecasting tools, technical assistance, and system redesign grants and support that build local capacity for managing change.
3. Engage in strategic communication and case-making that strengthens public confidence and political will.

Recommendation 1: Align state funding policy with changing enrollment and student needs.

State funding systems are not designed for a period of sustained enrollment decline. As districts serve fewer students and encounter growing needs, they

often face structural imbalances and budget pressure since costs do not decrease proportionately or concurrently with enrollment loss. Policymakers can modernize funding systems to better reflect these dynamics—ensuring districts have the flexibility they need to adjust budgets and programming and better aligning funding formulas with student needs.

Strengthening School Funding Systems Begins With a Better, More Integrated Policymaking Process

State policymaking often happens in silos, with limited coordination across committees as bills are developed and deliberated.¹⁴ Even within the same committee, staff rarely analyze how one bill might impact another.

State leaders can improve decision-making by requiring that when multiple proposed bills would impact school enrollment and education resources, those bills be reviewed together to identify potential conflicts and unintended consequences. These bills may include enrollment hold-harmless policies, school funding formula adjustments, reimbursement systems for school- or community-based health support, and choice policies on education savings accounts or vouchers.

A more coordinated review process could help reduce the likelihood of redundancy and conflict across policies and support policymakers in making more informed decisions about the allocation of limited resources.

Policymakers can pursue these strategies:

Update K–12 funding formulas to account for enrollment change. Most state funding formulas are based on historic enrollment patterns. While this approach works reasonably well when enrollment is steady, it can create fiscal and planning challenges when enrollment is growing or declining. Some states have hold-harmless provisions or legacy allocation structures that preserve past funding levels for districts without a set end date, even as enrollment declines. These approaches weaken the connection between funding and current student needs, and they forestall structural adjustments. A more sustainable and responsive approach is to use dynamic hold-harmless policies or tapering mechanisms that allow funding to gradually adjust as enrollment shrinks. States such as Colorado, Maine, Texas, and California offer temporary relief through hold-harmless provisions that allow districts to use a recent prior-year or multiyear average enrollment.¹⁵ This approach gives districts time to rightsize their budgets in response to smaller student counts, enabling them to manage their limited resources more effectively over the long term.

Provide sufficient base funding coupled with local flexibility. Even as districts serve fewer students, many of their costs—such as facilities maintenance, administration, and utilities—remain relatively fixed. When funding formulas are based primarily on student counts, revenues can disappear faster than expenditures can adjust, creating diseconomies of scale that make it more expensive for districts to educate each remaining student. States can address this by ensuring districts have adequate base funding that covers their fixed costs while also granting districts flexibility in how those funds are used. Together, base funding and flexibility signal trust in local leaders to make strategic decisions that align with state and community goals

for student learning. This flexibility is especially important in a period of declining enrollment, when district leaders must make trade-offs, redesign systems, and allocate resources in ways that best meet evolving local needs.

Update formula weights for higher need student populations. As student needs change—for instance, as districts serve a growing share of students from households with low income or English Learners—policymakers should ensure that funding formulas include sufficient weights for these groups. This would provide districts with the resources needed to adequately serve them. These weights should include adjustments for more acute needs, such as areas of concentrated poverty, disabilities that are more costly to serve, and English Learners who are further away from language proficiency.

To the extent any of these solutions require additional investment, states can draw on savings realized from declines in total statewide enrollment. In other words, declining enrollment may create fiscal capacity that states can reinvest to strengthen public school systems and better address student needs.

Recommendation 2: Provide forecasting tools, technical assistance, and system redesign grants and support that build local capacity for managing change.

The state can play a critical role in ensuring that districts are not left to tackle enrollment declines on their own. Many local districts lack the tools, guidance, and capacity needed to adjust their budgets and redesign their systems and programs. Districts may need support in navigating the complex political dynamics that accompany

decisions about budget reductions, including staff layoffs, program reductions, and school consolidations and closures.

State leaders are well positioned to support building necessary capacity at scale, helping to address widespread needs prevalent in most states. They can develop shared tools, expertise, and support that individual districts would struggle to create or access on their own. By stepping in to help scale solutions, states can help improve the quality of local decision-making and ensure effective use of taxpayer resources.

States can support districts by building infrastructure and capacity and creating collaborative partnerships in several ways:

Offer tools for forecasting and fiscal planning. Provide accessible, user-friendly tools that help districts forecast enrollment changes in their communities and model the budget implications of different scenarios. These tools can help districts with both short-term budget adjustments and long-term fiscal planning.¹⁶

Provide guidance, technical assistance, and resources. Many districts would benefit from clear, practical guidance on how to adjust budgets, staffing, master schedules and instructional programs, facilities plans, and attendance zones in response to enrollment declines. The state can provide technical assistance and resource hubs that connect district leaders with both generalized and targeted support on how to rightsize budgets and effectively redesign systems for a smaller footprint.

Fund local planning and system redesign. The state can offer planning grants and support to help districts redesign their systems, develop new facilities plans, and/or plan for district or school consolidations. For example, Michigan's Consolidation and Infrastructure Efficiency grants provide funding for

districts to modernize and consolidate facilities in response to declining enrollment. In 2025, the state awarded \$75 million to three districts to replace or combine outdated facilities in order to improve learning opportunities and efficiency.¹⁷ States can also support broader school and system redesign efforts that help districts adapt to changing enrollment and student needs. For example, California recently launched the Secondary School Redesign Pilot Program. This \$10 million initiative supports California middle and high schools in exploring strategies such as hands-on learning; expanded use of technology; and approaches aimed at strengthening student belonging, personalized learning, and career readiness.¹⁸

Support effective labor-management collaboration. Declining enrollment often necessitates difficult decisions about salary agreements, staff reductions, and school consolidations. States can fund or facilitate labor-management partnerships and training to help districts and union partners work toward shared agreements that balance fiscal sustainability and efficiency. These agreements should also be fair to employees and conducive to high-quality teaching and learning.

Recommendation 3: Engage in strategic communication and case-making that strengthens public confidence and political will.

In addition to policy and technical support, state leaders play an important role in shaping how declining enrollment is understood and addressed. With strategic communication methods, state leaders can help build public understanding of enrollment trends, reinforce public confidence that declines will be managed responsibly, and create the political cover needed for districts to make difficult but necessary decisions. Without clear

and consistent messaging, enrollment declines risk being framed solely as a crisis, which could undermine trust and make it harder for local leaders to act. The suggested practices below can support local leaders.

Convene hearings to surface trends and solutions. Through legislative or agency-led hearings, state leaders can create transparency about the drivers and implications of enrollment declines. This transparency might include sharing statewide projections, identifying regions most affected, and outlining the fiscal pressures districts face. These hearings can create space for district leaders and other interest holders to discuss the challenges and implications of those trends and to share practical responses, such as how they are approaching school consolidation, adjusting staffing models, or repurposing facilities. These forums can also surface potential policy solutions and technical assistance priorities. By elevating data, local experiences, and policy solutions, these hearings can frame enrollment decline as a collective statewide challenge to be addressed rather than simply a local issue.

Spotlight innovation opportunities and success stories. State education agencies, in partnership with educators, advocates, researchers, and news media, can share examples of districts that have adopted promising new school designs, facility plans, staffing models, or cross-sector partnerships amid shrinking enrollment. These models can demonstrate what is possible and help shift the narrative to be less about loss and budget cuts and more about innovation and new possibilities for the student experience.

Provide political cover for difficult decisions. Declining enrollment often requires contentious decisions. State leaders can use the bully pulpit to emphasize the importance of aligning services

with enrollment realities and normalizing the reality that budget realignment will be necessary. They can provide cover for local leaders working to make those decisions in partnerships with their boards, labor groups, and communities. By framing decisions like district and school consolidation as necessary steps toward strengthening sustainability and long-term opportunities for students, state leaders can also encourage district leaders, including board members, to make fiscally responsible choices.

Encourage districts to innovate in response to changing demographics, student needs, and family preferences. As enrollment declines, districts must adapt not only to fewer students but also to changing expectations from families and employers. State leaders can encourage districts to rethink how they design and deliver educational experiences—whether through more personalized learning models, expanded career pathways, flexible scheduling, or partnerships that broaden opportunities for students. By framing enrollment decline as an opportunity to better align offerings with student and family needs, states can support districts in strengthening both quality and relevance, helping to retain and attract students over time.

Conclusion

The fiscal disruptions related to declining enrollment that school districts are experiencing throughout the country are unlike previous economic and revenue shocks. At the local level, enrollment decline may permanently reduce available resources and will significantly reshape public education systems for years to come. How states choose to support their school systems will determine whether the future brings stronger, more stable systems or continued disruption and unpredictability.

District and state leaders each have distinct roles. School system leaders will make operational decisions about funding allocations, staffing levels, and programs, while state policymakers will set the conditions that shape those choices. Whether and how state leaders act on the recommendations outlined in this brief will determine whether school systems have the resources, flexibility, and support structures to adapt effectively or are forced into reactive, piecemeal responses.

States that rely on short-term fixes or approach policymaking in silos risk compounding fiscal pressures, undermining public confidence, and accelerating enrollment loss. By contrast, states that act deliberately can help districts navigate decline in ways that improve alignment with student needs, strengthen system stability, and sustain trust in public education.

This moment calls for enhanced proactive state leadership. By aligning updated funding mechanisms with demographic realities, building local capacity, and shaping a clear public narrative, state policymakers can break the vicious cycle of eroding resources, quality, and public confidence. This can ensure declining enrollment becomes an opportunity to design more responsive, resilient, and effective education systems.

Endnotes

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