

PART THREE

CHICAGO'S ENROLLMENT CRISIS

WHAT THE LATEST ENROLLMENT TRENDS MEAN FOR CHICAGO'S SCHOOLS

A data-driven look at the forces shaping CPS enrollment and what they mean for students, families, and schools across Chicago.

January 2026



OUR MISSION

Kids First Chicago's mission is to dramatically improve education for Chicago's children by ensuring their families are the respected authorities and decision-makers in their kids' education. We do all this by partnering with families to support them in gaining the resources, access, and voice they need to achieve their vision for their children.

OUR VISION

Imagine a Chicago where parents have a prominent voice in shaping their communities so that every child has access to a world-class education — the kind that opens the doors to new opportunities in college, career, and life. An education where 100% of our students graduate with the confidence, knowledge, and skills to shape our city for the better.

THEORY OF ACTION

Empowering parents to co-design education solutions will ensure that any decisions made will prioritize children's needs, leading to improved education systems and policies. This will result in better academic outcomes for children and improved life opportunities in the long run. Ultimately, this will drive the positive transformation of communities, fostering a thriving Chicago.

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INTRODUCTION

LATEST CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS' ENROLLMENT TRENDS

Every fall, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) takes stock of who it serves. This year's count showed a notable change: 316,224 students were enrolled on the 20th day of school — more than 9,000 fewer than last year. After two years of modest gains, CPS enrollment is once again on the decline.

Over the past decade, CPS's enrollment has fallen by nearly 80,000 students, a trend that has transformed the daily life of hundreds of school communities across the city.

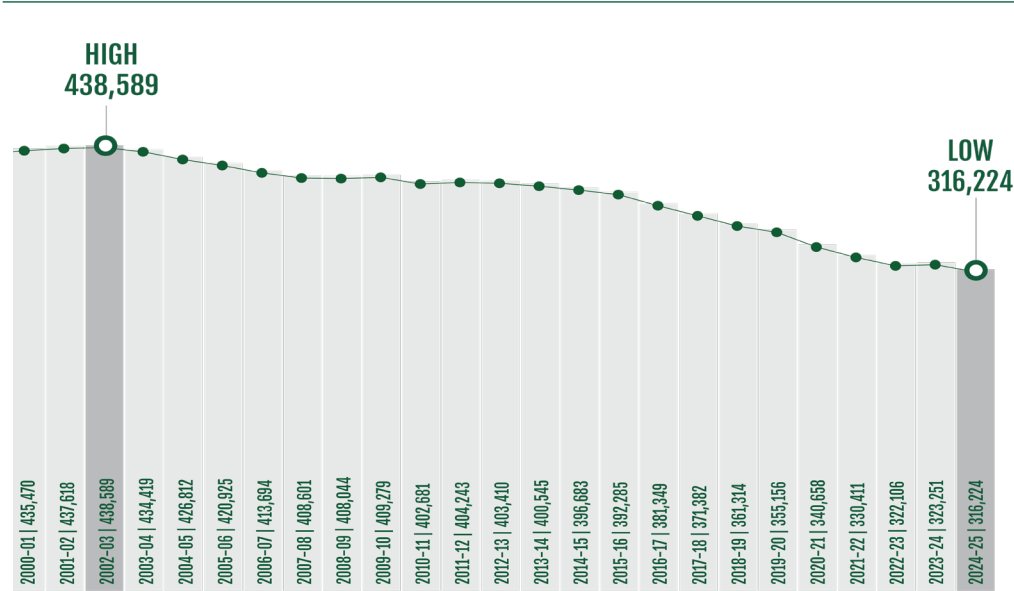


Even with a new equity-based budgeting model, smaller enrollment still means fewer staff and less funding. At Kids First Chicago, parents tell us they’re seeing the impact firsthand: limited access to electives and advanced coursework, and in some cases, schools too small to field sports teams or offer a full set of extracurricular activities. As offerings shrink, so do the experiences that build belonging and keep students engaged.

With enrollment continuing to fall, district leaders face difficult decisions about how to ensure that every student, in every neighborhood, has access to a high-quality and well-rounded education.

FIGURE 1. CPS ENROLLMENT OVER 25 YEARS

All students



02

BIRTH TRENDS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CPS ENROLLMENT

With far fewer children being born in Chicago, as well as a recent stagnation in the number of families moving to Chicago, CPS is increasingly shaped by demographic forces outside the district's control.

In our 2022 report, *Chicago's Enrollment Crisis: Part One | Exploring Root Causes*, we found that despite only modest population changes over the past decade, Chicago had experienced a sharp decline in births — and that drop has continued.¹

¹ Kids First Chicago, "**Chicago's Enrollment Crisis: Part One: Exploring Root Causes**," report, 2022.

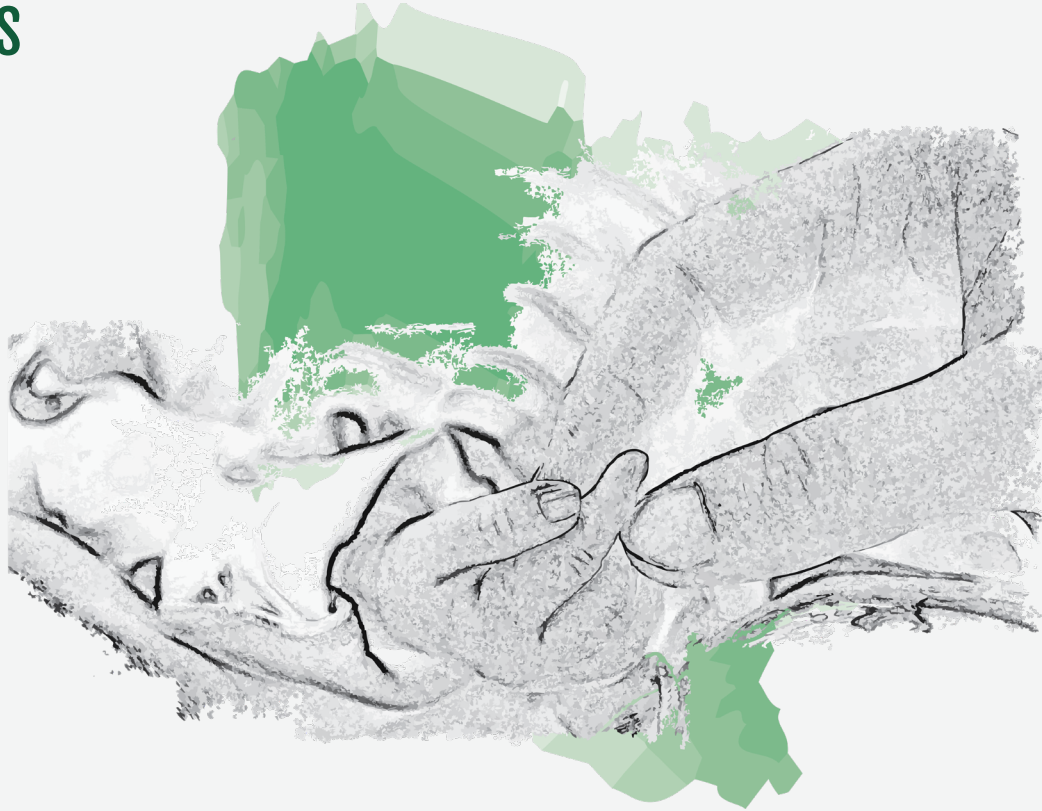
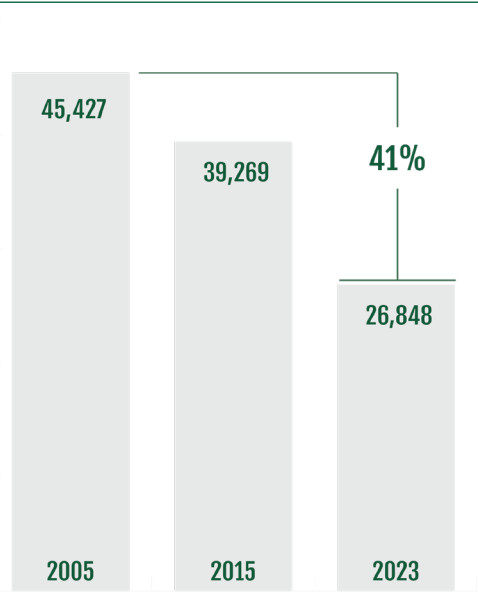


FIGURE 2. BIRTH RATES
2005, 2015, and 2023



In 2005, the city recorded 45,427 live births. By 2015, that number had fallen to 39,269, and by 2023, to 26,848 — a decrease of more than 12,000 births since 2015, or roughly 32%. In fewer than twenty years, Chicago’s annual birth total has nearly halved.

Fewer births today mean fewer students entering and advancing through CPS in the years ahead, a demographic trend that will continue to shape the district’s future size and structure.

In recent years, CPS enrollment was briefly buoyed by the new arrival of nearly 9,000 migrant students.²

That influx helped offset declines in the short term, but recent data show that growth has leveled off, with enrollment of new students falling from last year to this year across every grade level and racial or ethnic group.³

With fewer new families entering CPS, the district’s overall trajectory is once again driven by declining births and a smaller population of school-age children.

² Reema Amin and Mina Bloom, “Lost in translation: Migrant kids struggle in segregated Chicago schools,” Chalkbeat, May 21, 2024.

³ Chicago Public Schools, “SY26 CPS 20th Day Enrollment Analysis,” report by Dr. Sara Kempner, Executive Director of Data Science, Insights, and Research. Report delivered to Chicago Board of Education at its October 2025 meeting.

03

CPS MARKET SHARE TRENDS

After holding steady for years, CPS is serving a shrinking share of Chicago's school-age children, signaling that demographic change is now intersecting with shifting family preferences.

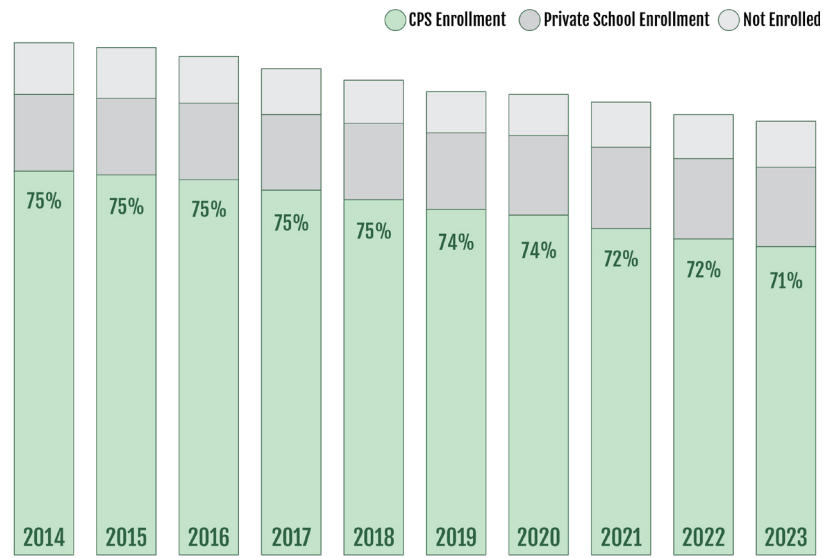
Fewer births in Chicago have led to a smaller pool of school-age children, but that alone doesn't explain CPS's enrollment decline. New data show the district is also serving a smaller share of Chicago's children than in years past.



In our 2022 report, we found that CPS maintained a stable market share of roughly 75% of Chicago’s school-age children between 2008 and 2018, even through years marked by budget crises, the 2013 school closures, and multiple teachers’ strikes.⁴ This stability suggested that earlier enrollment declines were driven primarily by demographics rather than by more families choosing non-public options.

That trend, however, has shifted. While Chicago’s population of school-age children has continued to decline — down roughly 15%, or about 80,000 children, between 2014 and 2023 — CPS’s market share has also fallen, dropping nearly 5% since 2018. While that may sound small, the impact is significant: in 2023, CPS enrolled about 322,000 students, representing roughly 71% of the city’s school-age population. Had its market share remained at 75%, CPS would have served approximately 18,000 more students.

FIGURE 3. CPS MARKET SHARE
2014-2023



⁴ Kids First Chicago, Chicago’s Enrollment Crisis.

Private school market share has also inched upward each year since 2014, even as total private enrollment has grown only modestly. For much of that period, this increase did not come at CPS's expense; most of the decline was among students classified as "not enrolled."⁵ That changed after 2020, when CPS's share began to fall each year while both private enrollment and the "not enrolled" population grew.

CPS cannot reverse the broader demographic decline in Chicago's school-age population on its own, but it can influence whether the families who remain see CPS as their first choice.

Rebuilding that trust — through consistently strong schools, engaging programs, fiscal stability, and responsive leadership — will be key to keeping more Chicago families enrolled.

⁵ Students classified as "not enrolled" in Census data include school-age children (ages 3–18) who are homeschooled, have dropped out, or are not yet enrolled in a formal education program. This category may also include children attending unregistered or informal education programs, those temporarily unenrolled due to mobility or family circumstances, or cases of underreporting or data error in Census responses.

04

EARLY GRADE ENROLLMENT TRENDS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

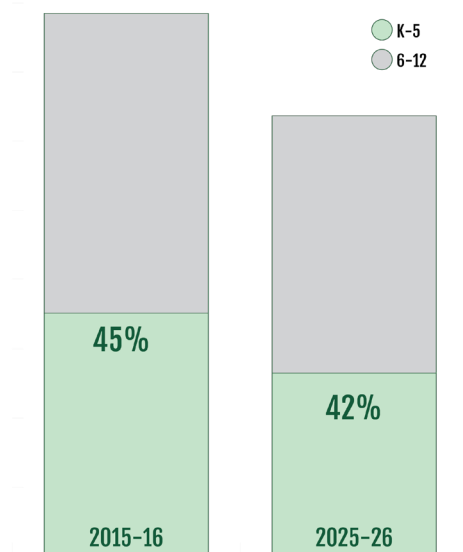
The early grades provide the clearest signal of CPS's long-term enrollment trajectory: fewer children are entering kindergarten each year, producing smaller cohorts that move through the system and reshape the district from the bottom up.

With fewer children being born in Chicago and a smaller share of school-age children enrolling in CPS, the effects are clearest in the district's earliest grades.



FIGURE 4. KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT

SY2015-16 vs. SY2025-26



In 2015-16, CPS enrolled 27,651 kindergarteners. This year, that number is 20,040, a decline of more than 7,600 students, or roughly 27%. The pattern now extends beyond kindergarten: as fewer students enter at the starting point, the impact is increasingly visible across the full span of early elementary grades.

From 2015-16 through 2024-25, grades K-5 accounted for about half of all CPS students; in 2025-26, that share dropped to around 42%.

This shrinking foundation of young learners has long-term implications: smaller cohorts moving upward, fewer staff positions, and continued pressure on schools to adapt to a smaller student population.

Tracking student cohorts over several years helps clarify how enrollment patterns are changing in the early grades. About 22,000 students entered kindergarten in 2020-21, and roughly 23,000 are now in fifth grade this school year. While not the exact same group of children, this comparison shows that CPS has largely retained its early learners, even adding some new students along the way. The challenge is at the entry point: fewer families are enrolling their children in CPS each year, resulting in smaller classes that ripple through the elementary years.

05

ENROLLMENT DECLINES IN WEST AND SOUTH SIDE NEIGHBORHOODS

Enrollment declines are unfolding unevenly across Chicago, with West and South Side neighborhoods experiencing the steepest losses while other areas remain relatively stable.

The steepest declines have occurred in West and South Side neighborhoods — particularly in elementary schools, where long-term population loss has contributed to sharp drops in the number of students attending local schools.



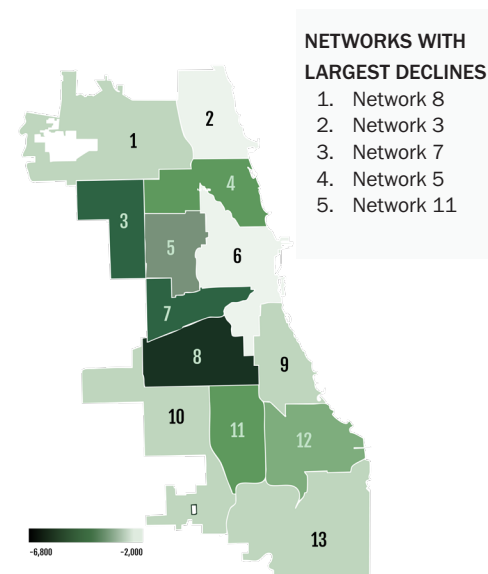
Since 2015-16, the McKinley Park Network (Network 8) has experienced the steepest enrollment drop in the city, losing nearly 7,000 students. The Belmont Cragin-Austin Network (Network 3) has lost 6,000 students, while the Pilsen-Little Village Network (Network 7) has seen a decline of about 5,000. The Humboldt Park-Garfield Park-North Lawndale Network (Network 5) has fallen by more than 4,400 students. In some cases, these elementary school networks have lost over one-third of their student population.

By contrast, elementary school enrollment in North and Central Side neighborhoods has remained comparatively stable.

The Ravenswood Network (Network 2), Near North-Loop-Chinatown Network (Network 6), and Logan Square-Lincoln Park Network (Network 4) each lost only a few thousand students during the same period, reflecting steadier population trends.

These community-level changes illustrate how Chicago's broader population changes are reshaping CPS. As enrollment declines concentrate in specific areas, the district faces growing challenges in maintaining equitable access to strong schools and programs citywide.

FIGURE 5. ELEMENTARY ENROLLMENT CHANGES *by Network*



06

CHANGES IN CPS STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS AND NEEDS

Enrollment decline is occurring alongside important changes in CPS's student population. Understanding changes in demographics and learner needs is essential to ensuring schools remain equipped to support the students they serve.



BLACK AND LATINE ENROLLMENT DECLINES

As CPS's overall enrollment continues to fall, the impact is not felt evenly across student groups. The steepest declines this year were among Black and Latine students. Latine student enrollment fell by 4.7%, from 153,820 to 146,862 — a loss of nearly 7,000 students — while Black student enrollment declined by 2.6%, or about 2,900 students. In contrast, White, Asian, and multiracial student enrollment saw small increases.

Over the past decade, the district's racial composition has changed gradually as total enrollment fell. Even with these declines, Black and Latine students remain the majority of CPS's enrollment. In 2015–16, Black and Latine students made up about 85% of CPS enrollment; by 2025–26, they account for around 81%. The share of Black students declined from 39% to 34%, while the share of Latine students has remained roughly steady near 46%.

Together, these shifts point to subtle but meaningful demographic change within CPS, shaped largely by uneven enrollment declines rather than by major growth in new student groups.

FIGURE 6. CPS RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS *SY2015-16 vs. SY2025-26*



ENGLISH LEARNERS DIP, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENT RISES

After two years of steady growth, the number of English Learners (ELs) in CPS declined this year for the first time in nearly a decade. Between 2023 and 2025, EL enrollment reached a ten-year high of 88,807 students, but in 2025–26 it fell by 2.9% to 86,172. Even with this dip, ELs now account for over 27% of all CPS students — up from about 19% just five years ago — reflecting the lasting impact of demographic change and past influxes of new arrivals. These additional EL students have also triggered higher priority for state funding under Illinois’ evidence-based formula, elevating CPS to Tier 1 status and unlocking extra dollars for the district.⁶

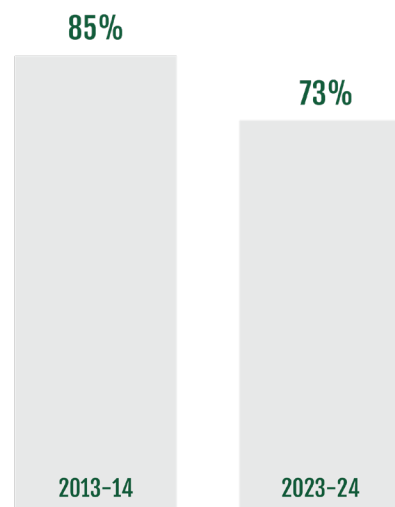
By contrast, special education enrollment has continued to climb. Over the past three years, the number of students receiving special education services has grown by roughly 8%, including a 2.5% increase this year, bringing the total to 54,846 students. In 2025–26, more than one in six CPS students (17%) receives special education services, compared to one in seven (14%) five years ago.

⁶ Samantha Smylie, “Chicago will receive a larger share of state dollars for K-12 schools this year,” Chalkbeat, August 4, 2025.

MORE THAN
1 IN 4
CPS STUDENTS ARE
ENGLISH LEARNERS

FIGURE 7. STUDENTS CLASSIFIED AS LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

SY2013-14 vs. SY2023-24



CPS CONTINUES TO SERVE A MAJORITY OF ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Over the past two years, the number of CPS students classified as economically disadvantaged has fluctuated — rising by 2% from 2023–24 to 2024–25, then falling by 2.5% in 2025–26. Today, more than 227,000 CPS students come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, representing roughly seven in ten students across the district.

This year's change fits within a longer-term transformation identified by Chalkbeat Chicago in 2023, which found that the share of students from low-income households had declined over the previous decade — from about 85% in 2013 to 73% in 2022–23 — as gentrification, population loss, and other changes reshaped who attends CPS.⁷

Even as the share of low-income students has fallen gradually over time, their absolute numbers remain high.

⁷ Reema Amin and Thomas Wilburn, “**Chicago Public Schools is becoming less low-income. Here's why that matters.**” Chalkbeat, September 6, 2023.

07

LOOKING AHEAD

As Chicago's student population continues to change — in size, composition, and need — it is essential to monitor these trends and understand what they mean for students. Each shift in who attends CPS affects classroom resources, school programming, and the supports available to families. Tracking these changes over time will help city and district leaders make informed decisions to ensure that every student, in every neighborhood, has access to a high-quality, well-rounded education.



Declining enrollment often makes it appear as though schools are spending more per student, but that increase rarely reflects additional resources in the classroom. Instead, fixed costs — staffing, building operations, and basic, required services — remain largely unchanged even as enrollment falls, making these schools more expensive to run without meaningfully expanding what students receive.

For high-poverty districts like CPS, enrollment declines can be especially damaging. As budgets tighten, students often bear the consequences: schools may be forced to cut arts programs, electives, and extracurriculars, or reduce counseling, library, and mental health staff.

Shrinking enrollment also narrows what schools can offer. When enrollment decreases, it becomes difficult to sustain multiple Advanced Placement courses, foreign languages, or sports teams.

In some cases, students find themselves repeating electives simply because there are no other options.⁸ Yet smaller schools can also provide a strong sense of community, where staff know students well and support them personally, even as they struggle to offer the breadth of opportunities found elsewhere.

Countering this trend demands coordination across the city and state to address the demographic and economic forces shaping Chicago's schools. CPS cannot change the number of children

being born or the pace of family out-migration, but district officials can influence how schools adapt and how students are supported as these declines continue.

Ultimately, these trends should compel everyone who cares about Chicago's students — from educators and policymakers to families and funders — to better understand the demographic forces driving smaller schools and what those shifts mean for the students learning inside them.

⁸ Mila Koumpilova and Jennifer Smith Richards, “**100 students in a school meant for 1,000: Inside Chicago's refusal to deal with its nearly empty schools.**” Chalkbeat, June 13, 2025.

ABOUT

Kids First Chicago is a nonprofit that partners with families to improve public education across the city. We provide data, policy expertise, and parent leadership support so families can advocate for the high-quality schools their children deserve. Our work centers parent voices, combined with strong data insights, to build a more equitable and effective education system in Chicago.

LEARN MORE

Connect with us at kidsfirstchicago.org



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