

# Declining births and lower demand: Charting the future of public school enrollment in D.C.



D.C. POLICY CENTER  
Education Policy Initiative

## Public school enrollment has plateaued. In early grades, it's falling.

After years of growth, enrollment in the District's public and public charter schools has stagnated. In early grades, enrollment has begun to decline.

**1598** Between school years 2007-08 and 2019-20, D.C.'s public schools added an average of 1,598 PK-12 students per year.

**29** In school years 2020-21 and 2021-22, enrollment increased by an average of just 29 PK-12 students.

## What factors drive school enrollment?

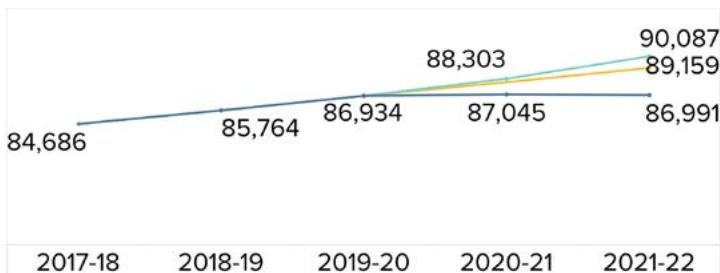
Both of the main drivers of enrollment growth have weakened since the onset of the pandemic. While a reduction in either of these factors would lead to lower enrollment on its own, the combination has amplified the impact.

### Births

Births in D.C. have been decreasing since 2016 and will likely continue to fall as the pandemic changes population dynamics:

- **Fewer births:** After peaking in 2016, the number of births to D.C. residents has declined by 2.3 percent every year.
- **Residents of childbearing age leaving:** Since 2015, residents aged 25-34 have been relocating to outside of D.C. in greater numbers than other age cohorts.
- **D.C. women are having fewer children:** Fertility rates have decreased by 23 percent since 2008.

### Births contributed to 1000 fewer students and lower retention meant 2000 fewer students during the pandemic



### Family retention

The pandemic has put downward pressure on families' desire to live in the District of Columbia and enroll in its public schools, as measured by retention ratios.

- **Fewer babies born in D.C. later enroll in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten:** Cohort retention ratios, or students enrolled in public schools as a percent of births in a previous year, decreased during the pandemic for pre-K and elementary schoolers by 4 percentage points.
- **Pandemic concerns impacted school decisions in new ways:** Some families had strong preferences for virtual learning while others strongly preferred in-person. Both preferences pushed some families to choose options aside from public schools.

- Actual enrollment
- Estimated with no changes to retention during pandemic
- Estimated if births continued to increase and no change to retention during pandemic

# Enrollment will continue to decline unless births increase, or retention ratios improve. Both scenarios are unlikely given current trends.

## A return to the number of births in 2016 is unlikely

Without a significant increase in cohort retention ratios, births would need to return to 2016 levels for enrollment growth to revert back to the pre-pandemic trend, a highly unlikely prospect given the District's demographic profile.

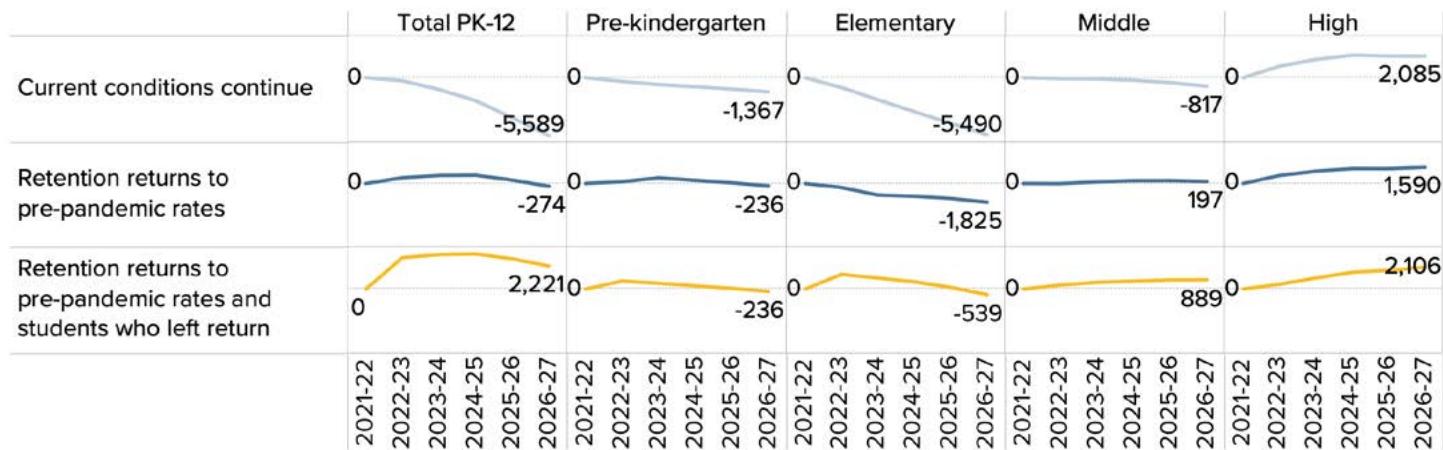
## Retention would need to increase dramatically

To keep enrollment at current levels while compensating for a decrease in births, retention ratios must increase by 2.1 percentage points a year: something we have not seen for more than a decade.

## Implications for future enrollment

These projections have important implications for resources, school budgets, and other plans regarding new schools. During the five-year window we captured in this research, pre-kindergarten and elementary grades are likely to lose students, but middle and high school grades will add more students as the largest cohorts start aging through the system. Eventually, lower enrollment at pre-kindergarten and elementary grades will translate into lower enrollment in higher grade bands forcing the city to rethink the current plans for expansion at these levels.

### Enrollment projections for D.C.'s public schools through school year 2026-27 by grade band, change from 2020-21



Source: D.C. Policy Center analysis of data on births and enrollment.

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### Read the full report

*Declining births and lower demand: Charting the future of public school enrollment in D.C.* is available online:  
[dcpolicycenter.org/publications/enrollment-decline](http://dcpolicycenter.org/publications/enrollment-decline)