

Where have all the children gone?

Connecticut's Public School Enrollment Projected to Shrink by 90,000

Between the 2006/7 and 2007/8 school years, Connecticut's public school population dropped approximately **3,886** for grades 1 to 12. A review of preliminary public school enrollment figures by the Connecticut State Data Center (CtSDC) indicates that the 2007/8 school year marked the beginning of a **long-term decline** in the school-age population.

Orlando Rodriguez, Demographer and Manager of CtSDC, states:

"We have been expecting this downward enrollment trend to begin. The leading edge of Baby Boomers are approaching retirement and the trailing edge of their children have aged beyond K to 12 schooling."

In Connecticut, the public school population, grades 1 to 12, peaked at approximately 523,100 in the 2003/4 and 2004/5 school years. This population dropped to approximately 516,400 in the just completed 2007/8 school year. CtSDC projects that this population will continue to decline, reaching a low of approximately 432,300 in 2020. This is a loss of approximately **90,800**, or 17%, from the highs of 2003/4 and 2004/5.

Low fertility rates are the root cause of this decline. The Boomer generation, now approaching retirement, had fewer children than their parents. Thus the size of the "Echo Boom" generation, the children of Boomers, is smaller than that of the Boomers. In effect, Boomers did not replace their own generation. Looking forward, Echo Boomers are expected to have lower fertility rates than their parents thereby exacerbating the projected decline. Each progressive generation is **failing to replace itself**.

It is unlikely that the enrollment peaks of 2003/4 and 2004/5 will return. Connecticut has some of the lowest fertility rates, across all ethnic groups, in the country. Foreign in-migration is too low to offset a long-persistent pattern of domestic out-migration. Indeed, Connecticut's population is skirting negative growth with only foreign in-migrants keeping the population numbers afloat.

Between the 2006/7 and 2007/8 school years, 66% (128 out of 193) of public school districts had no growth or experienced falling enrollment in grades 1 to 12. The Fairfield School District had the largest growth in population, adding 369 students – an increase of 4.3%. The five school districts with the largest declines were all in urban areas – Bridgeport, New Haven, West Haven, East Hartford, and New Britain. Bridgeport saw the largest decline, losing 568 students – a decrease of 3%.

The decline in enrollment in these urban school districts is **puzzling**. Current population projections anticipate that these urban areas would experience population growth. However, a drop in public school enrollment in these urban school districts does not necessarily correspond to a drop in population in the associated towns. The enrollment drop in these school districts may be the result of a combination of factors: parents opting for magnet schools, charter schools, or private education; more young families leaving urban areas (possibly undocumented populations); or an increasing number of dropouts.

Few public school districts in Connecticut will experience increasing enrollment, and thus few will need expanded facilities. A June 17th report completed by the State's Auditors of Public Accounts (http://cga.ct.gov/apa/pdf2008/DOE_70010_06.pdf) reveals a systematic **overstatement** in enrollment projections being used to justify the construction of new school facilities. While a few districts will see growth, on current trends, most will see a contraction.

Overstatements in forecasted enrollments may be the result of districts relying on an **inappropriate methodology** (cohort-survival) for calculating long-term projections. While useful for projecting short-term staffing needs, this methodology relies on recent short-term trends which are poor predictors of long-term growth. The towns of Rocky Hill and Newtown have recently considered enrollment projections in deciding whether to expand existing school facilities.

CtSDC has produced a **chart** that graphs enrollment from 2000 to 2030. Statewide summary **statistics**, detailed enrollment change for each public school district, and **maps** depicting enrollment change for town school districts and regional school districts are available.

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The Connecticut State Data Center is the State's liaison to the U.S. Census Bureau and is responsible for the official Connecticut population projections. For comprehensive population information on the State, its counties, and its municipalities, as well as demographic studies and special reports, please visit the website - <http://ctsdc.uconn.edu> - of the Connecticut State Data Center located at the University of Connecticut in Storrs.