

Davis school enrollment has fallen for years

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Davis Unified School District's long-running decline in enrollment continues this year, according to the latest district figures.

The district has seen declining resident enrollment for more than 15 years. A November district estimate projects that it will lose another 1,000 students over the next decade.

The enrollment decline has the district weighing school closures, a process that has already sparked opposition from district parents, who worry their voices will not be heard in the decision.

DJUSD shared updated enrollment figures in a presentation to the school board last week. The numbers show the downward trend continuing.

In response to the drop in enrollment, the district is lowering the number of class sections and reducing staff. The district plans to make a decision on school closures this spring.

According to the latest figures shared by the district, total enrollment has declined by more than 5% since 2019-20.

More specifically:

- High school enrollment has declined by about 5.5% since 2019-20.
- Middle school enrollment among students in sixth through eighth grades has fallen by 2.5% since 2019-20.
- Elementary school enrollment among students in first through fifth grades is down 11.4% since 2019-20.
- Kindergarten enrollment has fallen from 556 students in the 2019-20 school year to 444 this year, a decline of just over 20%.

Graduating classes from DJUSD high schools are substantially larger than incoming kindergarten classes, the numbers

show. While a graduating class may include more than 700 students, kindergarten classes have fewer than 500 enrolled students.

Interdistrict transfers have helped, but are not enough to maintain enrollment.

The roughly 1,000 enrolled students who live outside the district account for about 13% of enrollment. Enrolling at Da Vinci does not require interdistrict transfer approval, so the school's enrollment is not included in the district's analysis of interdistrict transfers. Most interdistrict transfers in recent years have been elementary school students. Still, the largest districtwide decline is in kindergarten through third-grade enrollment, according to the district presentation.

The district has offered transitional kindergarten since 2012. It began expanding access to the program in 2021 in an effort to boost enrollment, but the gains have not been enough to offset declines elsewhere, according to district figures.

Without transitional kindergarten, the districtwide enrollment decline would be almost 8% instead of 5%. Transitional kindergarten enrollment has increased, in part because of expanded eligibility. Only students who turned 5 between Sept. 2 and Dec. 2 were eligible in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. This year, any student who turned 4 before Sept. 1 can enroll in transitional kindergarten.

The eligibility expansion contributed to an increase of more than 350%, from 61 students in three classrooms in 2019-20 to 283 students in 13 classes. The expansion of transitional kindergarten has "absolutely helped," Associate Superintendent Laura Juanitas told the board last week. But the increase is not enough to make up for

declines elsewhere in the district.

Citywide, Davis had 13% more children ages 5-9 and about 3% more children ages 10-14 in 2024 than it did 10 years earlier, but about 11% fewer children under 5.

"Unless we have some significant population increase in Davis, we don't expect these numbers to increase that much," Juanitas said of the drop in kindergarten enrollment.

Some of the decline can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw enrollment declines around the state, Juanitas said. The decline is also due in part to Davis' tight housing market, which has few homes that young families can afford. The city is determined to bring back its "missing generation" of people ages 30-50 to boost city revenue and district enrollment. Doing so will involve building more housing, which the city has struggled to spur for decades, constrained by efforts to preserve Davis' small-town feel and Measure J-R-D, a local ordinance that requires voter approval to expand the city's urban footprint.

District leaders have been vocal supporters of new housing. They have called on voters to approve housing projects subject to Measure J-R-D and built their timeline to make school closure decisions around the results of voter referendums. Measure V, which proposed 1,800 housing units and was expected to bring 1,100 students to Davis schools, failed by 276 votes in June.

Davis voters are about to weigh in on Measure W, which seeks approval for the Willowgrove development, a 1,250-unit project featuring a variety of home sizes and price points. Board President Hiram Jackson spoke at rallies for both measures, lending his support and telling voters what the added housing would mean for Davis schools. "We can make room for the younger generation," Jackson said at a Measure W campaign kickoff event in July. "We can welcome them."