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FROM CRADLE TO CLASSROOM:
HOW FALLING BIRTH RATES ARE SHAPING COLORADO'S K-12 SYSTEM

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Caitlin McKennie – Director of Research

Dr. Caitlin McKennie is an experienced economist and demographer who comes to the Common Sense Institute with more than eight years of experience working as a public servant for the State of Colorado. Her previous roles as an economist within the state government span across multiple agencies including: the State Demography Office (SDO) at the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA); the Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC) at the Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE); the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE); the Office of State Planning and Budgeting (OSPB) at Governor Polis's Office; and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Caitlin is motivated by data analysis and empirical modeling as a tool for informed decision-making. She brings extensive experience in public policy and econometrics to this role at CSI in a manner that is outcome-focused and equity-driven. She holds an M.A. in applied economics from the University of Colorado, Denver, an M.S. in mineral and energy economics from the Colorado School of Mines, and a PhD in economics from the University of Stirling, Scotland.

DJ Summers – Director of Communications & Research Operations

DJ Summers is Common Sense Institute's Director of Communications & Research Operations. He oversees CSI fellows and research staff, coordinates with partners, iterates and analyzes projects, and breaks down findings for the public, legislators, and commercial leaders.

Prior to CSI, DJ attended the University of Utah and Syracuse University. He worked as a journalist, investigator, and political researcher across the U.S. from Washington, D.C. to Alaska.

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John is a research intern with The Common Sense Institute. He is a student at Northeastern University and will be studying abroad next semester in London.

ABOUT COMMON SENSE INSTITUTE

Common Sense Institute is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of Colorado's economy. CSI is at the forefront of important discussions concerning the future of free enterprise and aims to have an impact on the issues that matter most to Coloradans. CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the economy and individual opportunity.

TEAMS & FELLOWS STATEMENT

CSI is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI's commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is a belief in the power of the free enterprise system. Our work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit of academic freedom. Our team's work is informed by data-driven research and evidence. The views and opinions of fellows do not reflect the institutional views of CSI. CSI operates independently of any political party and does not take positions.

INTRODUCTION

Denver Public Schools (DPS) has been acquiring hundreds of millions of dollars in debt through lease-purchase commonly referred to as leaseback programs. This could cause further problems as student enrollment in the district continues to decline in line with state forecasts, and akin to a broader general Colorado trend that will lower the number of enrolled students in the coming decades.

By the close of the 2024-2025 academic year, DPS is set to close seven schools and partially restructure three others, impacting thousands of students across the district.[i] This decision follows a unanimous vote by the DPS Board of Education in November 2024, which cited declining enrollment and the need for more efficient use of resources as primary factors. In both Douglas County and Jefferson County, several schools have closed under similar circumstances.

This outcome is primarily the result of falling birth and fertility rates—a demographic trend affecting not only the Denver region but the entire state of Colorado.[ii] Between October 2023 and October 2024 PK through 12th grade enrollment in Colorado decreased by nearly **400** students (a year-over-year downtick of roughly -0.1%).[iii]

As families have fewer children and migration patterns shift, school districts across the state are grappling with under-enrolled campuses, strained budgets, and difficult decisions regarding school consolidations and closures. These closures signal broader systemic challenges and foreshadow long-term implications for the state's educational pipeline, including decreased demand for traditional postsecondary pathways tied to recent high school graduates.

KEY FINDINGS

- Colorado's birth rate has been declining since 2005 and has **fallen at a faster pace than the national average** since 2011.

- Colorado has experienced roughly a **1/4th** reduction in its general fertility rate from 2020 compared to the annual average between 2001 and 2010, marking **the third-largest** decline in the nation.

- DPS projects a loss of approximately 6,338 students by 2028, equating to about **8%** of its current student population, which stood at approximately 85,000 in the 2023–2024 school year.

  > This is equivalent to the combined enrollment of East High School, Northfield High School, and South High School.

- This is equivalent to the student population of 19 DPS elementary schools, which had an average enrollment of 383 students in 2023-24.

- Over the next five years, by 2030, Colorado is expected to experience a loss of **15,035** children between the ages of 0 and 17.

  > This is equivalent to the entire student body of the Thompson R2-J school district, or 17% of the entire Denver Public Schools enrollment.

- Projections from the Colorado State Demography Office indicate that some of the steepest declines in birth rates are expected in the southwestern region of the state.

  > Among the counties anticipated to experience the lowest birth rates are San Juan County, with just 1.3 births per 1,000 residents; Dolores County, with 4.5 births per 1,000; and Hinsdale County, with 5.6 births per 1,000 individuals. These figures are significantly below the state average and highlight a deepening demographic contraction in rural and frontier communities—trends that carry long-term implications for school sustainability, local labor markets, and regional economic development.

SHRINKING CLASSROOMS AND THE FUTURE OF COLORADO'S SCHOOLS

Colorado has experienced a **25.1%** reduction in its general fertility rate from 2020 compared to the annual average between 2001 and 2010, marking **the third-largest** decline in the nation.[iv] This trending downtick in the 0-17 population is not expected to sway any time soon. DPS projects a loss of approximately 6,338 students by 2028, equating to about **8%** of its current student population, which stood at approximately 85,000 in the 2023–2024 school year.[v]
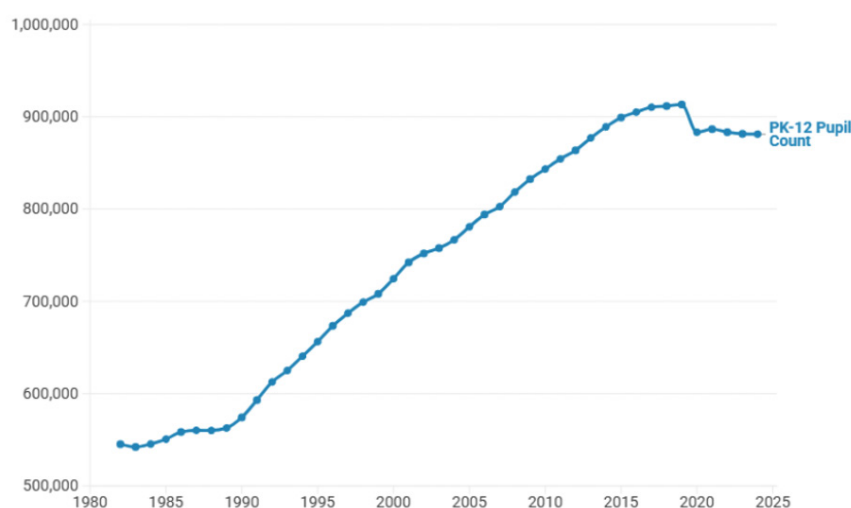
Relative to pre-pandemic levels in 2019, Colorado's statewide PK–12 student population has experienced a net decline of approximately 0.04% (Figure 1).[vi] While there was a brief post-pandemic uptick in annual enrollment change, this recovery has proven short-lived. Over the past three academic years, the state has recorded consistent annual declines in PK–12 enrollment: a decrease of **3,253** students in 2022, followed by a loss of **1,800** students in 2023 and **399** students in 2024 (Figure 2).[vii] These figures, while incremental, reflect a sustained downward trend in student population and serve as early indicators of the long-term impact of Colorado's declining birth and fertility rates.

According to the most recent estimates from the Colorado State Demography Office (SDO), Colorado's population of children aged 0–17 declined by approximately 0.006% between 2022 and 2023. This year-over-year decrease represents a loss of 7,394 individuals within this age cohort.

FIGURE 1

Colorado PK-12 Public School Enrollment
1982-2204

Source: Colorado Department of Education

Looking ahead, projections indicate that this decline will accelerate: by 2030, the annual growth rate for the 0–17 population is expected to fall to –0.012%, translating to a cumulati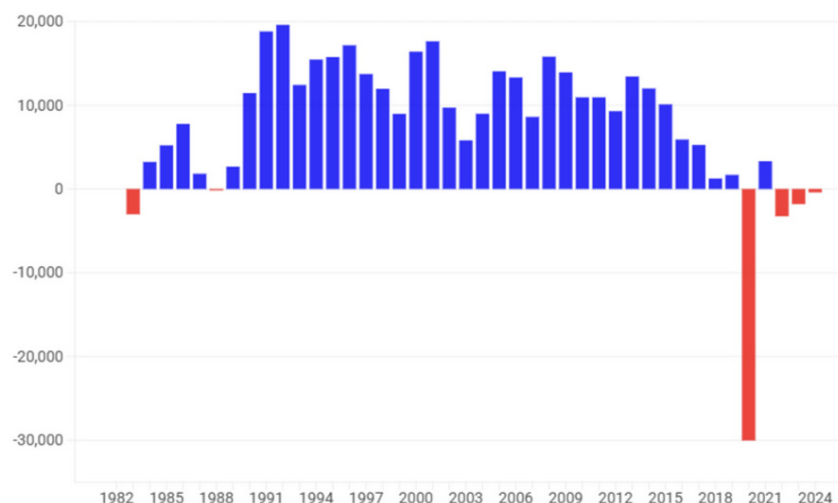ve loss of approximately **15,035** children statewide.[viii] This is equivalent to the entire student body of the Thompson R2-J school district, or 17% of the entire Denver Public Schools enrollment.

FIGURE 2

Annual Change in Colorado PK-12 Public School Enrollment
1982-2204

Source: Colorado Department of Education

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SDO projections indicate that some of the steepest declines in birth rates are expected in the southwestern region of the state. Among the counties anticipated to experience the lowest birth rates are San Juan County, with just 1.3 births per 1,000 residents; Dolores County, with 4.5 births per 1,000; and Hinsdale County, with 5.6 births per 1,000 individuals. These figures are significantly below the state average and highlight a deepening demographic contraction in rural and frontier communities—trends that carry long-term implications for school sustainability, local labor markets, and regional economic development.

BOTTOM LINE

Colorado's birth rate has been declining since 2005 and has fallen at a faster pace than the national average since 2011. This sustained decrease in fertility rates poses challenges for both K–12 education systems and higher education institutions, potentially leading to a reduced future workforce and increased competition for students among colleges and universities.[ix]

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v.   Axios Denver, "*Enrollment in DPS is dropping, here's why,*" June 24, 2024.

vi.   Colorado Department of Education (CDE), 2025.

vii.   Colorado Department of Education (CDE), 2025.

viii.   Colorado State Demography Office (SDO), 2025.

ix.   Colorado Newsline, "*Declining Colorado birth rate could impact state budget in coming decades, researchers say,*" December 7, 2022.