



Uptick in Chicago Public Schools Enrollment Driven by Early Grades

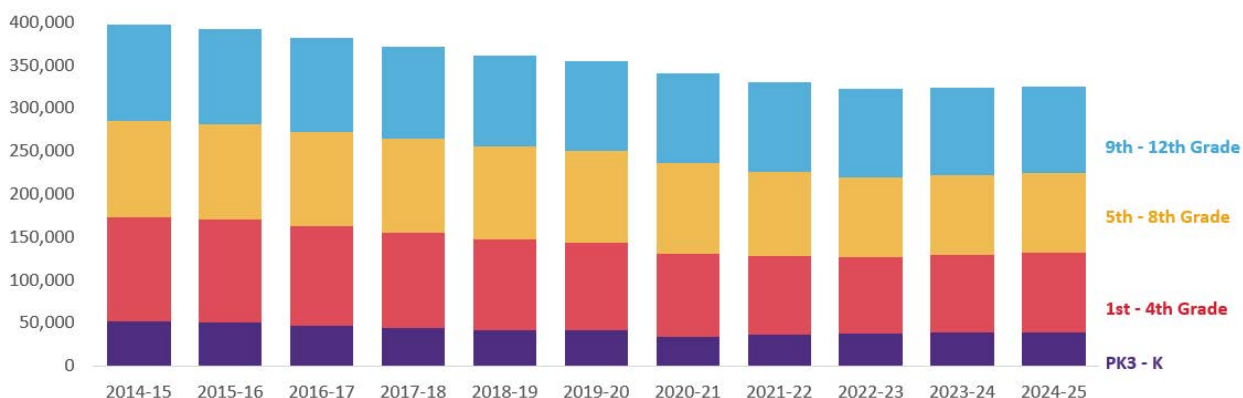
Overview

For the second consecutive year since 2022-2023, enrollment in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has increased, signaling stabilization after more than a decade of decline. In this brief, we examine trends in CPS enrollment over the past decade and identify factors contributing to the recent increase in enrollment.

Enrollment Trends in the Past Decade

Total enrollment in CPS has been declining over the past decade, as illustrated in Figure 1. However, over the last 3 years enrollment has stabilized and rebounded, increasing by just over 5,100 students overall—or about 2%.

Figure 1: After Years of Enrollment Decline, CPS Enrollment is Increasing



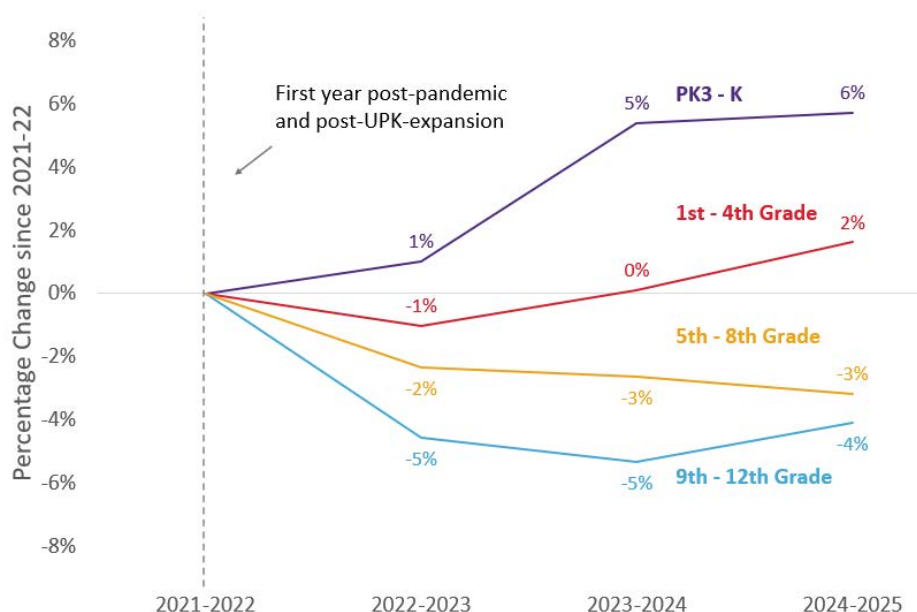
Notes: This figure shows total enrollment by grade levels over the past decade in all CPS schools, including charter schools. PK3-K includes total enrollment in 3-year-old pre-K, 4-year-old pre-K, and kindergarten. Source: [CPS 20th day enrollment](#).



Recent Changes by Grade Level

The recent enrollment growth has been driven by increases among the early grades (pre-K for 3-year-olds, pre-K for 4-year-olds, and kindergarten [PK3-K] and grades 1-4), while enrollment in older grades has continued to experience modest declines. Figure 2 shows the percentage change in enrollment by grade level since 2021-2022, the first year following the pandemic. Enrollment among the youngest grades (PK3-K) has increased by 6% over the last 4 years. Over the same period, 1st – 4th grade enrollment has also increased by 2%. In contrast, enrollment in middle grades (5-8) and high school grades (9-12) has continued to decline by 3% and 4%, respectively.

Figure 2: Post pandemic, CPS enrollment is increasing in the early grades



Notes: This figure shows the percentage change in total enrollment by grade level relative to the 2021-2022 school year. PK3-K includes total enrollment in pre-K for 3-year-olds, pre-K for 4-year-olds, and kindergarten. Source: [CPS 20th day enrollment](#).

Context

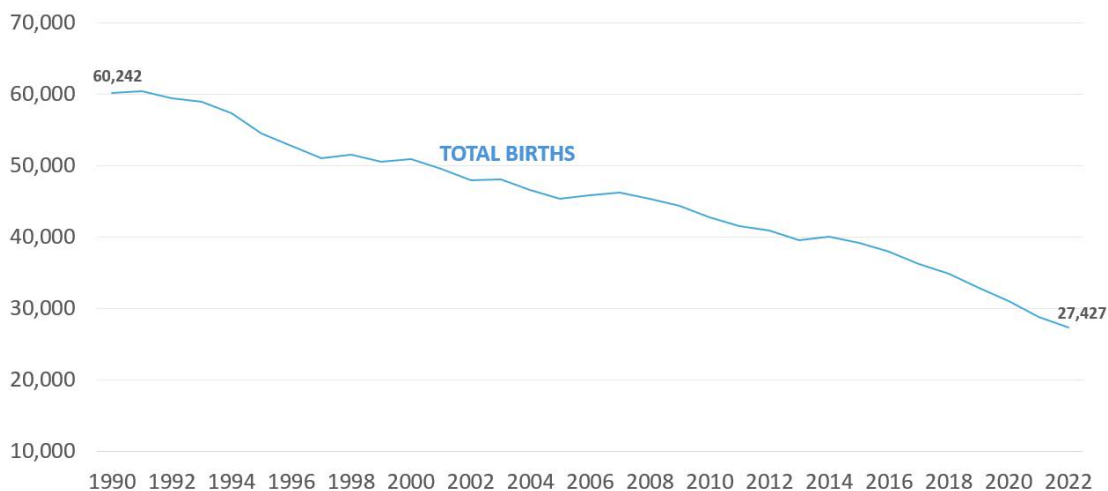
The causes of this recent uptick in CPS enrollment in early grades are difficult to pinpoint, as multiple factors may be contributing to this trend. One contributing factor may be the recent arrival of migrant families to Chicago. In Spring 2024, [CPS estimated](#) that about 8,900 of their students were recent migrants who arrived in Chicago since 2022, but it is not yet clear how many of these new arrivals are early grade students.

We also investigated whether the increase in enrollment could have been driven by stabilization or growth among the population of younger Chicago residents. The Census Bureau's population estimates show that after more than 15 years of steady decline, the population under age 18 in Chicago has leveled off in recent years and may even increase



somewhat. However, Chicago's population trends across children's age groups are not large enough to explain the CPS enrollment differences by grade level. Indeed, there has been a steady decline in the number of children born in Chicago over the last 3 decades. In 2022, there were half as many births as there were in 1990 (60,200 versus 27,400), as shown in Figure 3. (Nationwide, births decreased by 12 percent over this time period).

Figure 3: The number of births in Chicago has steadily declined



Notes: This figure shows the total births in Chicago from 1990 to 2022. Source: [IDHS Births by County of Residence](#). To view additional years of data, change the birth portion of the url from birth to birth1, birth2, or birth3.

Another possible contributing factor to the increase in enrollment in younger grades is the universal pre-kindergarten expansion for four-year-old students, which began in 2019-20. When we unpack enrollment among the younger grades (PK3- K), the data suggest that the recent enrollment increase is largely explained by increases in pre-K enrollment, not in kindergarten enrollment. On the other hand, enrollment increased in every grade 1st through 4th, with larger increases in grades 3 and 4.

It is also worth noting that the decline in high school enrollment has been driven by declines in 9th grade enrollment. As a result, older students, especially in grades 10 and 12, now represent a larger proportion of the high school population. This may reflect improved progress through school.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent stabilization and modest growth in CPS enrollment is primarily driven by an increase in enrollment in early grades, even while birth rates continue to decline. In order to best engage and support Chicago's children and families, it will be critical to better understand the factors that are contributing to this enrollment rebound—such as shifts in demographics, the impact of universal pre-kindergarten, and the arrival of new families.



Suggested Citation

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About EC★REACH

The mission of Early Child Research Alliance of Chicago (EC*REACH) is to unite diverse partners across sectors, agencies, and institutions to co-construct and conduct action-oriented research that promotes equitable solutions for early childhood policy and practice in Chicago.

EC*REACH is hosted by the [Institute for Policy Research](#) at [Northwestern University](#) under the leadership of executive director Maia Connors, senior advisor and advisory board chair John Q. Easton, and faculty co-directors Terri Sabol and Diane Schanzenbach.

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