Bellwether

Navigating Change

Strategies to Strengthen California High Schools Amid Declining Enrollment

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Introduction

After decades of consistent growth, California transitional kindergarten (TK) through grade 12 public school enrollment has been declining and is expected to continue to do so for at least the next two decades. Slowing birth rates, reduced immigration, and out-of-state migration are the primary factors contributing to declining enrollment, while public school opt-out also plays a small role. Although California served 6.3 million public school students at its peak,[1] the state is projected to enroll fewer than 5 million students by the 2037-38 school year (SY).[2] In fact, California is projected to have some of the steepest enrollment declines nationally.[3] With those declines come budget pressures for school districts, since most California districts receive state and local funding based on per-pupil average daily attendance (ADA). These pressures are exacerbated by the rising cost of staff salaries and benefits, facility maintenance and repair, utilities, and more.[4]

While California started to experience prolonged enrollment declines in SY17-18, with significant acceleration during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic,[5] most districts have yet to reckon with the implications of those enrollment changes. For the past decade, a booming state economy, which led to surges in state education funding,[6] allowed districts to avoid major budget reductions. In recent years, district budgets were further bolstered by once-in-a-generation COVID-19 relief funds.[7] However, federal relief funding runs out in September 2024, and the state has a massive budget shortfall as it begins SY24-25. As a result, many district leaders will have to confront the reality of reduced enrollment and adjust their budgets accordingly in the years to come. Multiple districts will need to permanently reduce the number of staff and schools, as well as introduce corresponding changes to programs and services — often unpopular and disruptive decisions for community stakeholders.

District leaders typically have more experience making these tough decisions at the elementary and middle school levels, since those schools are smaller and more numerous than high schools. What is less understood is how districts should downsize high school facilities, programs, and services in response to declining enrollment. High schools tend to be much larger, more geographically dispersed, and more comprehensive in terms of the range of academic, extracurricular, social, and emotional support services they offer. But when districts operate too many small high schools, they inevitably spread their resources thinly across schools, often reducing course offerings, programs, or services for students at individual school sites. For district leaders in this situation, downsizing — either by closing and consolidating high schools or by sharing programming across schools — may be the only way for district leaders to maintain or expand learning opportunities for students in fiscally sustainable ways.

District leaders can use this period of fiscal transition to redesign high schools to improve student engagement, motivation, and attendance.

This is sorely needed. Barely half of high school-aged students in California say they have a caring relationship with a teacher or another adult at school[8] or that they feel motivated in school,[9] and more than one-quarter of California students in grades 9-12 are chronically absent.[10] These trends appear to worsen as students progress through high school. Educators, policymakers, and researchers increasingly agree: The structure of high school must change.

Luckily, the education field has abundant evidence and examples of what works, and communities have deep assets in the form of educator experience, ready partnerships, and eagerness to innovate. Researchers have also provided district and state leaders with frameworks for redesigning high schools that draw upon the science of adolescent learning and development.[11] Yet districts lack resources and guidance on how to strengthen high schools in the face of budget pressures and declining enrollment — especially since redesigning schools often requires more money, not less.

This report provides guidance on how districts in California and elsewhere can respond to declining enrollment in ways that strengthen high schools.

It describes three strategies district leaders can use to realize cost savings, achieve greater fiscal efficiencies, and/or generate revenue while expanding learning opportunities, student supports, and community partnerships. District leaders can implement these strategies concurrently with broader budget adjustments, including staff reductions and school consolidations, that may be needed in response to declining enrollment. They can:

1. **Adopt flexible course delivery models to maximize student choice amid a smaller workforce.**

Students need access to high-quality, relevant, and engaging courses — especially as they transition into high school. However, districts often reduce schools and staff in periods of declining enrollment, which results in fewer course and program offerings. By expanding access to dual enrollment, using hub locations to offer specialty courses, providing work-based learning opportunities, and adopting other flexible course delivery models, districts can share costs with postsecondary institutions and other partners, consolidate resources, and free up staff time — all while expanding student choice.

2. **Partner with local organizations, agencies, and businesses to provide high school students with services and supports through blended funding models.**

Districts and schools must increasingly address a wide range of student academic, social, and emotional needs. Meeting these needs requires the expertise of tutors, counselors, mental health professionals, and other support staff positions that districts often cut when faced with budget pressures. To maintain and improve services, districts can collaborate with partners to provide high school students with access to academic, extracurricular, behavioral health, and wraparound supports. These partners, including other governmental agencies, community-based organizations, postsecondary institutions, and businesses, have access to funding and facilities that districts can leverage to increase revenue, expand opportunities, and reduce expenditures.

3. **Lease or sell closed or underutilized facilities and district property to support learning and address community needs.**

Many districts will eventually need to consolidate or close schools when facing steady enrollment declines. Maintaining an unused or underused facility is fiscally unsustainable and can contribute to neighborhood deterioration.[12] This leaves districts with a choice: Lease, sell, or leverage the school facility for a different purpose. Leasing space to early childhood education providers, redeveloping facilities into workforce housing, and leasing facilities to community-based organizations can generate revenue for districts and strengthen communities through additional supports and services for youth and residents.

State policymakers can also do plenty to help districts navigate this challenging fiscal environment, including removing policy barriers that make it harder for districts to innovate and redesign schools while balancing budget constraints. Together, these district implementation strategies and state policy recommendations offer a road map for how California's education leaders can improve and strengthen high schools while realigning budgets to new enrollment realities.

Though this report focuses on California, its lessons can be applied nationally. California is not alone in projecting prolonged and significant enrollment declines.[13] In fact, the biggest challenge facing public education nationally may be how to build better, stronger, and more equitable school systems even as our country serves fewer students. This is a long-term problem that demands comprehensive solutions.

Methodology

To identify how districts can respond to declining enrollment in ways that strengthen high schools, Bellwether relied on the following:

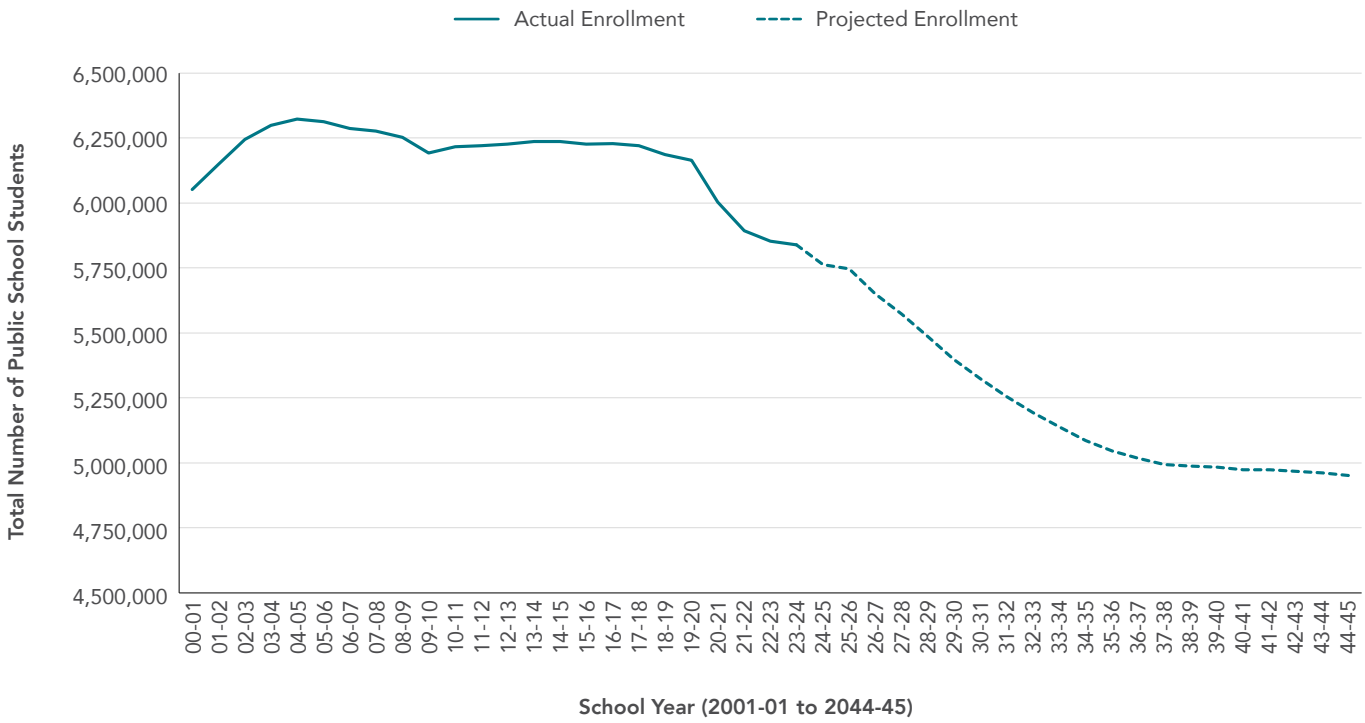
- **Desk research** on enrollment trends and other budgetary pressures facing California districts, budget realignment and cost-saving strategies available to district leaders, and frameworks for redesigning high schools.
- **In-depth interviews** with 15 California-based experts — including district leaders, technical assistance providers, researchers, and state association directors — to describe how districts are confronting enrollment declines, approaching the budget realignment process, and strengthening or redesigning high schools.
- **Listening sessions** with California high school students, families, and educators.

The biggest challenge facing public education nationally may be how to build better, stronger, and more equitable school systems even as our country serves fewer students.

Declining Enrollment Is Contributing to a Fiscal Cliff for California School Districts

After decades of consistent growth in student enrollment, TK-12 public school enrollment is now declining and is expected to continue to do so for at least the next two decades (Figure 1). California's student population grew consistently from 1980 to 2005,[14] peaking at 6.3 million students in SY04-05.[15] Enrollment remained relatively steady from SY04-05 to SY16-17, hovering between 6.2 and 6.3 million students.[16] Enrollment started to decline in California in SY17-18, but at a relatively slow pace, consistent with California Department of Finance (DOF) projections at the time.[17] The pandemic, however, greatly accelerated the pace of declining enrollment beyond the initial projections, though recent declines have been closer to the original estimations.[18] The DOF projects that California will continue to lose students through SY32-33, by as much as 11% overall, or 646,643 total students. The more extended projections suggest enrollment will continue declining until at least SY44-45, when the state is expected to enroll fewer than 5 million students.[19]

FIGURE 1: CALIFORNIA STUDENT ENROLLMENT FROM SY00-01 TO SY23-24 AND PROJECTIONS THROUGH SY44-45 (GRADES TK-12)



***Sources**: California Department of Education, DataQuest, state-level annual enrollment data; California Department of Finance, "California Public K-12 Graded Enrollment and High School Graduate Projections by County, 2023 Series."*

All regions of the state are projected to lose enrollment in the coming years (Table 1). The southern coast of California — Los Angeles, San Diego/Imperial, and Orange County — along with the Central Coast and San Francisco Bay Area are projected to lose more than 10% of their students by 2033.[20] All other regions of California will experience more moderate declines, with the exception of the counties located in the Northern San Joaquin Valley, which collectively are projected to lose less than 1% of their public school students.

TABLE 1: ENROLLMENT PROJECTIONS FROM SY23-24 TO SY32-33 BY CALIFORNIA REGION (GRADES TK-12)

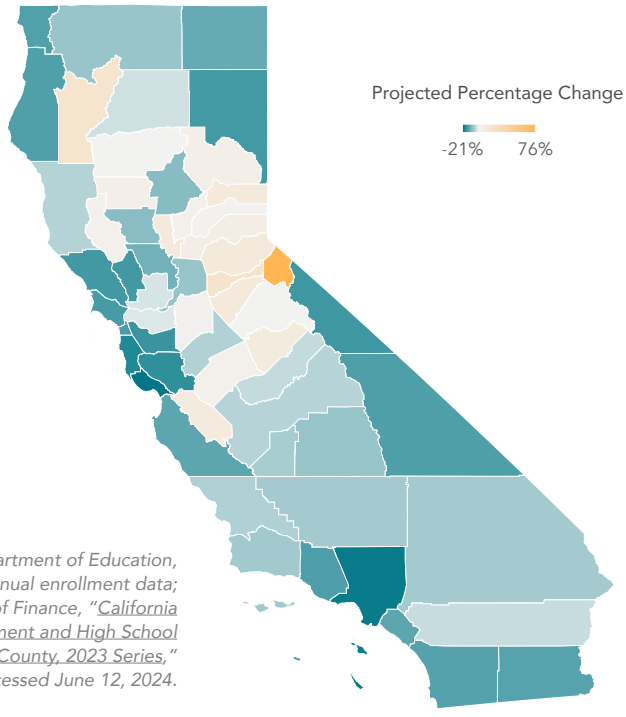
County or State	Actual SY23-24 Enrollment	Projected SY32-33 Enrollment	Percent Change
Los Angeles	1,298,060	1,035,314	-20.2%
San Diego/Imperial	514,150	444,104	-13.6%
Orange	437,276	380,657	-12.9%
San Francisco Bay Area	845,612	739,590	-12.5%
Central Coast	346,813	306,219	-11.7%
State of California	**5,837,690**	**5,191,047**	**-11.1%**
North Coast	144,016	133,019	-7.6%
Southern San Joaquin Valley	540,897	506,003	-6.5%
Inland Empire (SW California)	819,192	776,462	-5.2%
Superior (NW California)	519,462	498,699	-4.0%
Northern San Joaquin Valley	372,212	370,980	-0.3%

***Note**: Regional definitions come from the California Census, "Regions," accessed June 12, 2024.*

***Sources**: California Department of Education, DataQuest, state-level annual enrollment data; California Department of Finance, "California Public K-12 Graded Enrollment and High School Graduate Projections by County, 2023 Series;" Authors' calculations.*

At the county level, the picture is more nuanced. One-third of California's 58 counties are expected to experience enrollment *growth* from SY23-24 to SY32-33 (Figure 2). Nearly all of these counties are located in the mostly rural and sparsely populated Northern San Joaquin Valley and Superior regions of California. On the other hand, counties with higher proportions of English learners (ELs), Asian, Latino, and Black students experienced the steepest enrollment declines from 2012 to 2022 and are also projected to lose the most students by SY32-33.[21]

FIGURE 2: PROJECTED CALIFORNIA ENROLLMENT BY COUNTY FROM SY24-25 TO SY32-33 (GRADES TK-12)



***Sources**: California Department of Education, DataQuest, state-level annual enrollment data; California Department of Finance, "California Public K-12 Graded Enrollment and High School Graduate Projections by County, 2023 Series," accessed June 12, 2024.*

Enrollment declines are primarily driven by a significant drop in the school-age population, caused by slowing birth rates,[22] reduced immigration,[23] and a rise in out-of-state migration.[24] California experienced steady population growth every year from 1958 until 2021, when the state experienced its first of three years of population decline.[25] While California's overall population again grew in 2024,[26] that growth masks the fact that California's school-age population is projected to decline steadily until 2060.[27]

While population decline is the primary reason California school districts are losing students, traditional public school opt-out is also playing a role — though a lesser one. From SY17-18 to SY22-23, 44,830 more students in California were educated in private school or home-school settings.[28] During that same time frame, California lost 367,869 public school students.[29] Taken together, approximately 12% of declining enrollment can be attributed to students being educated in a private school or home-school rather than a public school setting.[30]

Increases in charter school enrollment may also be contributing to enrollment declines in *traditional* public schools, though the impact on district budgets remains unclear (Sidebar 1). In raw numbers, charter schools have added 80,786 students to their rolls from SY17-18 to SY23-24,[31] with at least some of those students transferring from traditional public schools. As a result, it appears that on the high end, increases in charter school enrollment have contributed to 17% of the decline in enrollment in traditional public schools.[32]

Declining enrollment creates and exacerbates district budget pressures.

Because California school districts are funded based on enrollment and ADA, the loss of students leads to a loss in total funding. In the simplest terms, operating under-enrolled schools is not fiscally sustainable. First, schools, regardless of size, have many fixed costs, including administrative staff salaries, operational expenses, and infrastructure investments. Schools with the same number of teachers for fewer students cost more on a per-pupil basis than those with more students.[33]

SIDEBAR 1

Increases in students attending charter schools may be contributing to declining enrollment in traditional public schools, but the extent to which this has a long-term, negative impact on district budgets is unclear.

In most but not all cases, research shows that districts spend modestly less per pupil as the percentage of charter school students in the district rises.[34] However, the extent and duration of the financial strain on districts varies depending on state policy and local context.[35] For example, one study focused on California showed that per-pupil spending dropped overall as charter school attendance rose, but the state's school funding policies at the time shielded districts from the worst financial effects, and results across districts varied. The variation in results suggests that districts respond differently to charter competition based on their ability to change fixed and variable costs.[36]

Since per-pupil funding follows students in California, districts lose revenue for each student who opts to attend a local charter school instead of a traditional public school. But at the same time, districts can reduce the marginal expenditures associated with educating those students. The degree to which the decrease in revenue and expenditures cancel each other out depends, in part, on how much of the cost of educating charter school students is borne by the district.[37] It is also a function of time. Although districts instantly lose the per-pupil funding from an outgoing charter-bound student, they cannot shed the cost of that student until enrollment declines to the point where an entire teaching position can be eliminated.

Charter competition also can make districts wary of closing schools.[38] As one former superintendent who now coaches other district leaders noted, "The harder problem is closing schools in ways that don't hurt the community. Politically, you begin dealing with charter schools that want to come in and take the schools you have. This then creates a greater decline in enrollment because now there's competition."

Districts can reduce the number of teachers at these schools, but the cost savings are lagging. In the end, districts that continually lose students end up having more schools and staff than they need, and district reorganization becomes inevitable.

Amid declining enrollment and associated revenue pressures, California districts are combating the increasing cost of doing business. Before the pandemic, districts grappled with rising costs associated with keeping up and renovating facilities, providing special education services, and paying for staff pensions and benefits.[39] The pandemic induced historic levels of inflation that have further increased costs and placed additional budgetary pressure on districts. For example, inflation coupled with the ongoing increases in the cost of living has prompted some California districts to offer record-high salary adjustments for both certificated and classified staff.[40] At the same time, many districts have added classified staff or converted part-time positions into full-time roles to address teacher shortages. A district superintendent noted that since all these staff are eligible for state pensions and health care, the rising and ongoing staffing costs will "be very problematic" for district budgets.

Elementary and middle schools are losing more students now, but high schools may still feel the fiscal effects of declining enrollment.

Elementary schools are likely to be the first to experience declining enrollment. As birth rates continue to fall, each successive TK or kindergarten cohort will be smaller. Eventually, those smaller cohorts will make their way into middle and high schools.[41] There is evidence of this from SY17-18 to SY23-24 (Figure 3). California's enrollment declines, which started in SY17-18 in kindergarten, are making their way through grade 6 (i.e., six years later) but have not impacted grades 7-12 as severely yet. During the next decade, however, DOF projections suggest that California's high schools will see declining enrollment on par with those currently experienced in its elementary and middle schools. For example, from SY24-25 to SY33-34, nearly all grade levels are predicted to see double-figure declines (Figure 3).

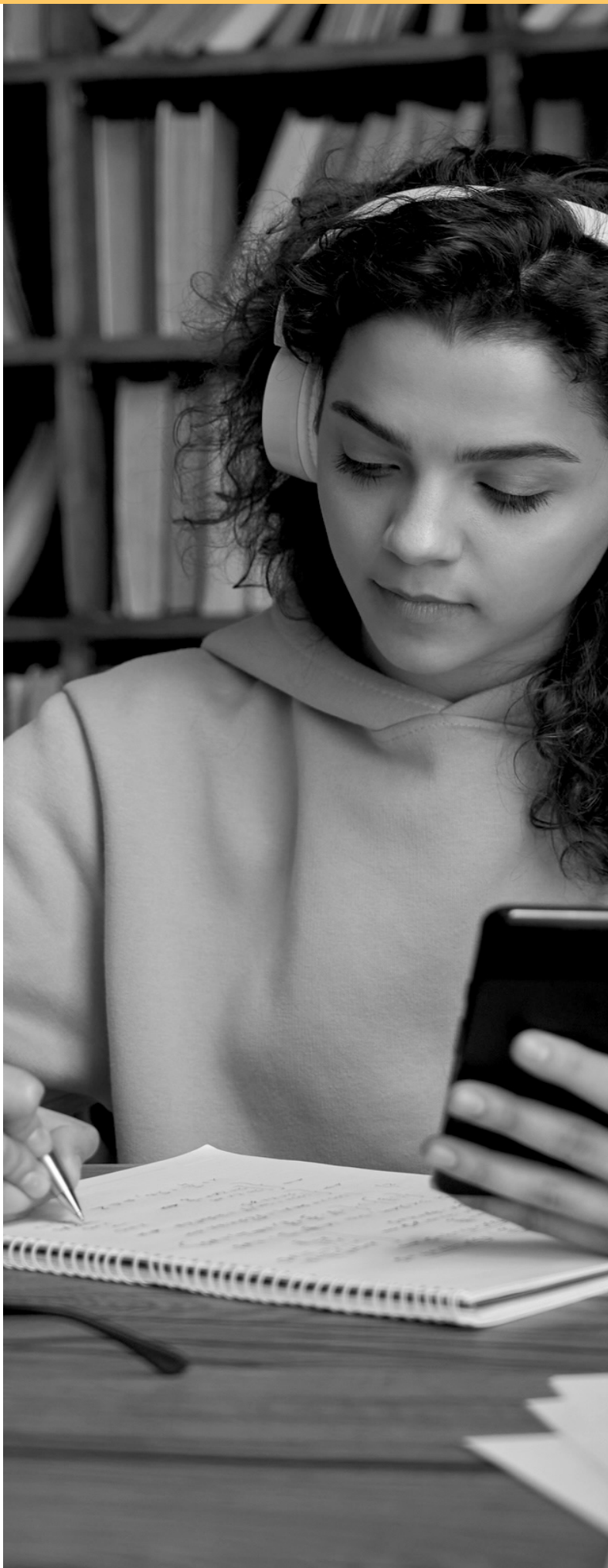
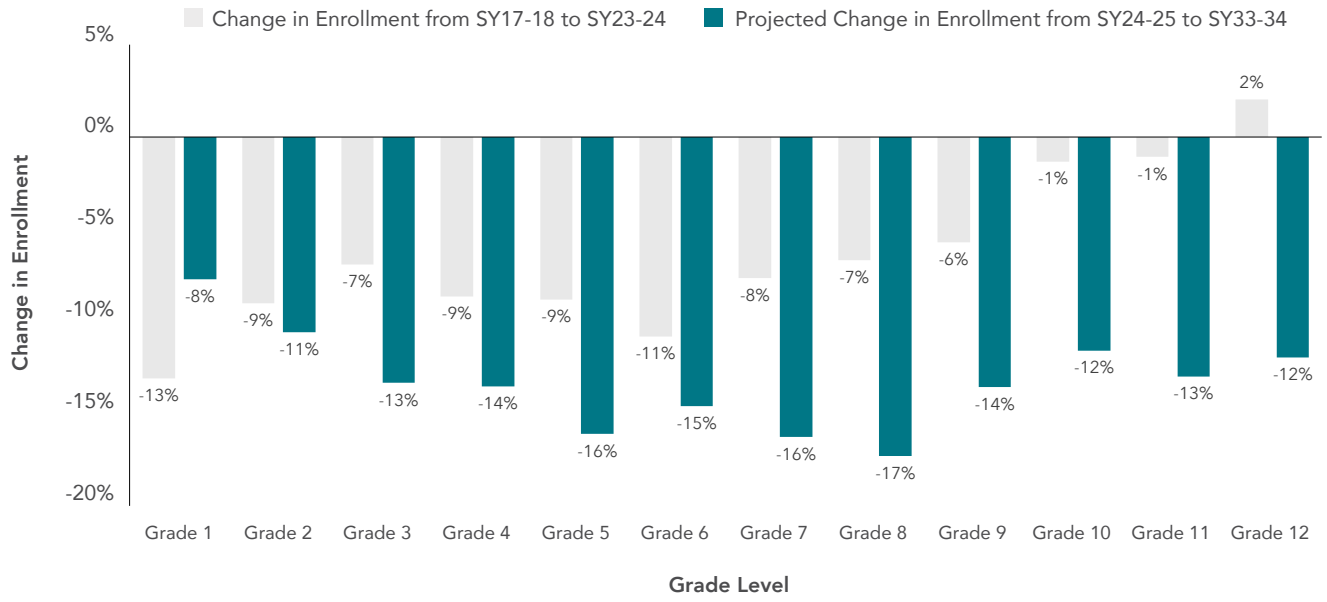


FIGURE 3: CHANGE IN CALIFORNIA ENROLLMENT BY GRADE LEVEL FROM SY17-18 TO SY23-24 AND PROJECTED CHANGE IN ENROLLMENT BY GRADE LEVEL FROM SY24-25 TO SY33-34



***Note**: TK and kindergarten enrollment are excluded from this figure because CDE reports those grade levels individually, while DOF combines TK and kindergarten projections in its forecasts, making it difficult to compare past data with future projections. Since California is gradually expanding the age eligibility for TK through SY25-26, TK enrollment increased by 70% from SY17-18 to 23-24, and combined TK and kindergarten enrollment is projected to increase by 11% from SY24-25 to 33-34. **Sources**: California Department of Education, DataQuest, state-level annual enrollment data; California Department of Finance, "California Public K-12 Graded Enrollment and High School Graduate Projections by County, 2023 Series;" Authors' calculations.*

By virtue of their size, high schools enjoy larger economies of scale and can withstand smaller enrollment declines than middle or elementary schools. One advantage of comprehensive high schools is their ability to offer students a robust set of course and program offerings as well as a broad set of specialized services to address a wide range of student needs. Comprehensive high schools can provide more options for students because the fixed costs of operating a school remain relatively constant. But as high schools become smaller and smaller, the average cost of educating students begins to rise and it becomes more expensive for districts to provide an expansive set of options for students. Students in declining-enrollment high schools are likely to experience reductions in courses, programs, and services well before the districts opt to close or consolidate high schools.

But even if a district's enrollment in grades 9-12 is steady, high schools may be affected by the declines in elementary and middle schools. Since budgeting happens at the district, not school level, declining-enrollment districts could spread budget reductions across all their schools. High schoolers could experience the negative budgetary effects of enrollment loss before seeing significant enrollment declines in their schools — and this is especially true in districts that avoid closing or consolidating elementary schools as enrollments plummet.

Many declining-enrollment districts have avoided making budget cuts due to a series of financial cushions.

Although California started to experience prolonged enrollment declines in SY17-18, with significant acceleration during the early years of the pandemic, most districts have yet to reckon with the implications of those declines due to a strong state economy and billions in COVID-19 relief funds. The state's revised ADA formula has also played a minor role in delaying the fiscal ramifications of declining enrollment for districts.

Strong state economy. California districts benefited from a strong state economy in recent years, though the outlook is increasingly bleak for the years ahead. The state budget grew by 85% — or $149 billion — in the six years between SY17-18 and SY23-24.[42] And because Proposition 98 guarantees a minimum level of funding for schools and community colleges, school districts received significant funding boosts in those years through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and several major new categorical grant programs (Sidebar 2). In the SY24-25 budget, California's districts have largely been spared from budget cuts required to address a $47 billion budget deficit.[43] Funding for districts will remain relatively flat, and the state will continue to fund large-scale programs like the Community Schools Partnership Program. However, to maintain existing funding levels for education, the state took on $6 billion in debt and drained its $8 billion rainy day fund. The depletion of the rainy day fund, in particular, could lead to funding cuts in the coming years if the state continues to experience revenue challenges.[44]

COVID-19 relief funds. Since 2020, districts' budgets have been bolstered by COVID-19 relief funds. California invested more than $5 billion in relief aid for education, and the federal government invested $28 billion in pandemic relief funds.[45] The last of these Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) dollars expire in September 2024, creating a fiscal cliff for districts, particularly those that used the funds to hire new teachers and other positions and backfill budget gaps. The national organization Edunomics Lab estimates districts have spent approximately 50% of ESSER funding on labor costs, including hiring new teachers.[46] This means that many districts used relief funds for positions and programs they no longer have the funds to sustain. While many may be shedding those excess positions as staff retire or choose to exit the public school system, other districts may have to conduct layoffs.[47]

Revised ADA formula. Since state funding is a function of enrollment and attendance in California, the state's revisions to its ADA formula have created a softer landing for declining-enrollment districts (Sidebar 2). Before the pandemic, districts received funding from the LCFF based on the prior or current year ADA, but starting in SY22-23, districts can use the current year's ADA, the prior year, or the three-year rolling average.[48] This option allows districts to temporarily delay some of the fiscal impacts of declining enrollment, but it is not a significant or long-lasting fix.

The fiscal cushions described above have protected many districts from the worst effects of declining enrollment in recent years, but cracks are starting to emerge across the state. Examples include but are not limited to:

- **Inglewood Unified School District**, in the Los Angeles County city of Inglewood, announced the closure of five schools in March 2024, with the district citing declining enrollment among the contributing factors. The district has lost more than 10,000 students since 2002 and projects that it can fill only 35% of its available seats by SY29-30.[49]

- In San Jose, the **Alum Rock Union School District's** school board unexpectedly fired its superintendent of more than a decade in March 2024 after the superintendent announced the planned closure of five schools. District officials argued that Alum Rock should be operating five fewer schools after losing more than 5,000 students in the preceding eight years.[50]

- **Hacienda La Puente Unified School District**, located in the east San Gabriel Valley of Southern California, closed four schools at the end of the SY23-24 school year, with declining enrollment cited as the primary reason for the closures.[51] The district's enrollment has declined by 14% since SY17-18[52] and is expected to decline by an additional 19% to 27% by SY32-33.[53]

With the financial cushions that have artificially boosted local budgets in recent years disappearing, these cracks will likely widen.

SIDEBAR 2

Primer on how California funds schools — and how those formulas intersect with enrollment.

Two formulas determine how much funding California districts receive from the state: Proposition 98 and the LCFF. The Proposition 98 formula is applied first and determines a "minimum guarantee" of state funding for TK through grade 12 schools and community colleges. To calculate this amount, the state runs three calculations, or tests, and determines which is operative in a given fiscal year.[54]

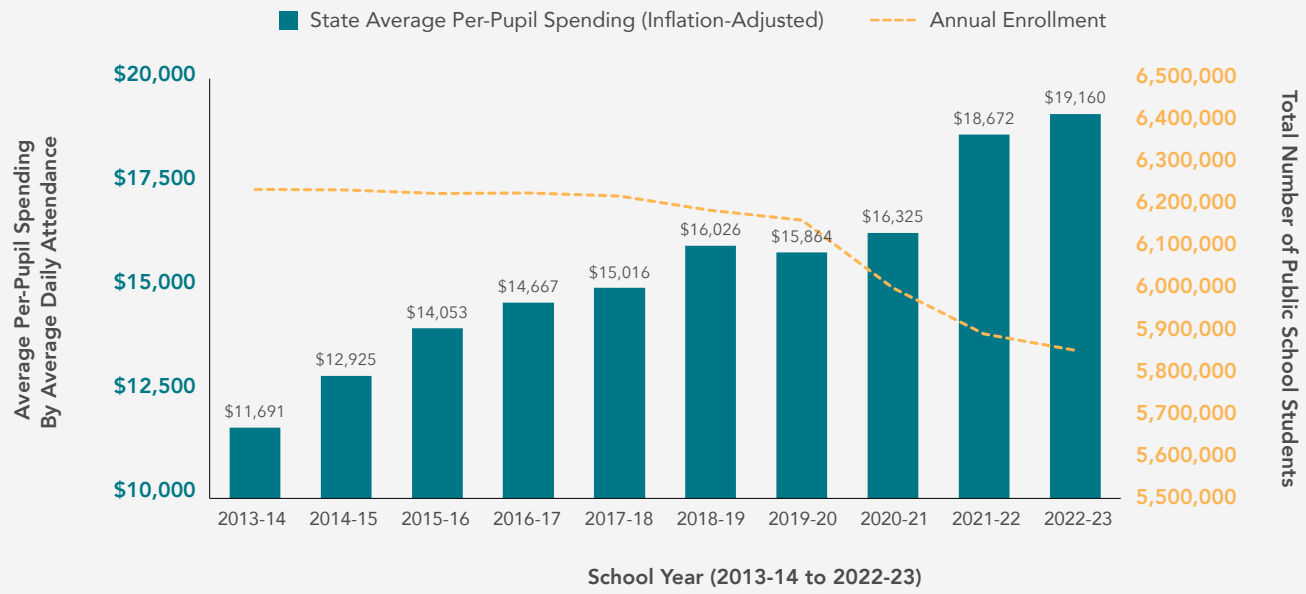
LCFF then determines how much funding each district is entitled to in the form of base, supplemental, and concentration grants. Base grants are calculated by multiplying a district's ADA by the base grant amount established by the California State Legislature in that fiscal year. Supplemental and concentration grants are awarded based on the number and concentration of students in a district who are economically disadvantaged, ELs, and/or in foster care. The total LCFF entitlement is paid by calculating, first, how much local property tax revenue is available to that district. The remainder is filled in using state dollars. Since some districts enjoy greater property tax revenues, they may receive less state funding, but they still receive comparable funding to districts of a similar size and with similar needs. There are exceptions, however. In about 10% of districts, property tax revenues exceed LCFF entitlements and those so-called "basic aid" districts get to keep the excess.[55]

If the Proposition 98 guarantee is greater than the LCFF allocation, the state can decide how to allocate remaining revenues to districts. These dollars usually flow to districts in the form of additional LCFF adjustments, categorical grants, or one-time allocations. In recent years, many of these categorical and one-time funds are in the form of programs designed to strengthen the high school experience (Appendix).

Since most California districts receive state funding based on the number of students they serve, how often those students attend school, and their proportion of economically disadvantaged students, ELs, and students in foster care, a decrease in any one of those areas means less money for districts. Districts experiencing enrollment declines and increases in chronic absenteeism, particularly among high-need students, will experience greater funding losses.

While declining enrollment results in a district receiving less total revenue, that does not mean it receives less *per pupil*. In fact, per-pupil revenues in California are higher than ever (Figure 4). And because California's Proposition 98 guarantees that K-12 education receives roughly 39% of the General Fund, declining enrollment could actually mean *more* money per student. In this funding environment, on a statewide basis, per-pupil revenues can rise even as the state budget tightens and enrollments decline.

FIGURE 4: TRENDS IN CALIFORNIA INFLATION-ADJUSTED PER-PUPIL SPENDING AND ENROLLMENT FROM SY13-14 TO SY22-23



***Note**: State average spending per ADA excludes spending related to (a) non-agency activities, (b) community services, (c) food services, (d) fringe benefits for retired persons, and (e) facilities acquisition and construction. State average per-pupil spending is inflation-adjusted (i.e., the average state per-pupil spending of $8,867 in SY13-14, using January 2024, had the same buying power as $11,691 in January 2024) using the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator. **Sources**: California Department of Education, "Current Expense of Education" (March 2024); California Department of Education, DataQuest, state-level annual enrollment data.*

Districts Must Eventually Reduce Staff and Schools in Response to Declining Enrollment

When facing significant and lasting enrollment declines, most districts will eventually need to reduce staff and close or consolidate schools. These two budget-reduction strategies are used most often because staff represent districts' largest expenditures and, as detailed above, districts cannot afford to operate under-enrolled schools. In one state association leader's experience, "If a district needs to move into a cost-cutting mode, people would be the biggest [area for reduction], then infrastructure." As district leaders confront the new fiscal reality caused by declining enrollment, they must address how staff reductions and school closures and consolidations have historically worsened inequities.

Since personnel are the largest district expenditure, budget cuts necessitate staff reductions.

Roughly 80% of district budgets go toward staff compensation in the form of salaries, pension contributions, and health care expenses.[56] As a result, districts often reduce staff — either through natural attrition or layoffs — to alleviate budget pressures. Proposed teacher layoffs may be the most visible effect of declining enrollment to date. According to the California Teachers Association, more than 2,000 teachers received "reduction-in-force" notices as of April 2024.[57] Although these layoff notices are only a fraction of the state's more than 319,000 teachers,[58] they represent a major jump in the number of notices from the prior spring.[59]

In many cases, layoffs do not materialize. For example, the Anaheim Union High School District in Southern California gave reduction-in-force notices to approximately 9% of its teachers in March 2024 but ended up avoiding any layoffs during the SY23-24

school year.[60] Even if layoff notices are rescinded, they can have negative downstream effects. Research from the Great Recession shows that layoff notices resulted in significant turnover as teachers left their districts to avoid being let go in the future.[61]

When layoffs do materialize, they often disproportionately affect certain groups of students and teachers. First, when districts cut arts teachers, coaches, intervention specialists, and the staff necessary to provide extracurricular programs, those cuts disproportionately harm students who cannot access those opportunities outside of school and who most need additional supports and services.[62]

Second, unless certain exceptions are met, California law mandates that districts lay off teachers according to their seniority.[63] These "last-in, first-out" (LIFO) layoff policies disproportionately affect students who attend low-income schools since teachers in those schools have less experience, on average.[64] This creates staffing instability and threatens workforce diversity, as newer teachers are often more racially and ethnically diverse.[65] District leaders interviewed for this report also noted that California's LIFO policies can make innovating difficult. Often, early-career teachers are the most willing to experiment with new practices or implement an innovative program. In one former district superintendent's experience, "The teachers more interested in doing things differently are the ones who are newer, not the teachers who have been there for 30+ years." Another former district leader said California's LIFO policy "caused younger, stellar teachers doing these innovative programs to be laid off."

District and state leaders can equitably navigate staff reductions.

District Leaders

To thoughtfully manage staff reductions in response to declining enrollment, districts can develop long-term staffing plans that align hiring and succession plans with enrollment forecasts. For instance, one former superintendent interviewed for this report said they froze raises and did not backfill roles when teachers retired. They made many such choices, gradually and strategically shrinking their district's workforce in anticipation of declining enrollment. When confronting urgent staff reduction needs, districts can also explore early retirement incentives, furloughs during noninstructional time, and other strategies that minimize disruption to teachers and students.

State Leaders and Policymakers

State policymakers can clear policy barriers that make it harder for districts to maintain a diverse and effective workforce and protect high-need students from staffing instability.

- Eliminate LIFO policies.
- Adopt policies that ensure cuts are applied equitably, or that allow districts to protect certain schools or staff from disproportionate layoffs.
- Support districts on ways to thoughtfully manage staff reductions through long-term planning and equitably respond to more urgent staff reduction needs. This may include ways to negotiate fair and equitable reduction-in-force processes through collective bargaining.

Many districts will eventually need to close or consolidate schools in response to declining enrollment.

Districts cannot afford to operate under-enrolled schools for a sustained length of time, and efforts to do so risk spreading resources so thinly across schools that students experience reduced learning opportunities. Despite being necessary from a fiscal sustainability standpoint, school closures do not *always* follow prolonged periods of declining enrollment, and Californians have not yet seen the significant wave of closures one might expect, given the severity of enrollment declines. For example, less than 1% of traditional schools in California have closed every year since SY17-18, when enrollment declines began in earnest.[66]

It could be that widescale school closures have not occurred because district leaders see closures as a last resort.[67] Schools often serve as community hubs and hold historical and cultural importance for community members, and closing these institutions can elicit significant public outcry. It could also be that a strong state economy and pandemic relief funds have allowed district leaders to temporarily delay decision-making about closures or consolidations despite continued enrollment declines.

That is about to change. The district leaders and other experts interviewed for this report noted that closures and consolidations will be inevitable in districts with significant and prolonged declining enrollment. A former district superintendent who oversaw periods of declining enrollment during their tenure found that the "short-term solution is to lay people off," and generally avoided that option because of the negative effects of LIFO policies. Nonetheless, the former district leader noted that "dealing with layoffs is episodic; what becomes perpetual [during a sustained period of declining enrollment] is closing schools."

School closures may be necessary for the long-term fiscal sustainability and academic success of a district, but if implemented poorly, they risk exacerbating inequities. Closures have historically been more likely to occur in under-resourced communities and at schools that serve higher proportions of students who are economically disadvantaged, Black, and ELs.[68] Districts with wider income disparities across their schools are more likely to close schools serving higher proportions of students who are economically disadvantaged and ELs.[69] School closures in urban areas have been shown to exacerbate racial segregation[70] and contribute to gentrification in some communities.[71] The displacement of students from school closures can also have negative short-term impacts on academic performance, though the research is mixed overall.[72]

For these reasons, district leaders are tasked with closing schools in ways that do not harm particular student groups or the broader community. California Education Code[73] requires that districts in "fiscal distress" engage their communities and perform an "equity impact analysis" before approving the closure or consolidation of a school. In 2023, Attorney General Rob Bonta issued guidance cautioning district leaders to comply with federal and state civil rights laws when making school closure decisions.[74]

District and state leaders can equitably navigate school closures and consolidations.

District Leaders

The Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) report, "Centering Equity in the School-Closure Process in California," offers suggestions for ways district leaders and their boards can equitably approach school closures and consolidations (Disclosure).

- Use an inclusive and transparent community engagement process for school closures and consolidations.
- Share the criteria the district will use to make school closure and consolidation recommendations and decisions.
- Create a strategy for providing students displaced by school closures with high-quality options.[75]

State Leaders and Policymakers

State leaders can provide districts with support on how to plan for school closures and consolidations, effectively engage community members in the process, and make decisions that are both equitable and designed to strengthen teaching, learning, and opportunities for students.

- Leverage the statewide system of support, including staff at the California Department of Education (CDE), the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, and county offices of education, to provide technical assistance on closures and consolidations. Importantly, this support should focus not only on reducing the number of school sites, but also how to do so in ways that support school redesign efforts aligned with educational best practices.

- Create space for statewide conversations (e.g., legislative hearings or working groups) grounded in analyzing and reflecting on declining enrollment data and potential solutions. District leaders who have already navigated school closures and consolidations can share insights with legislative leaders about what worked in their communities and what kinds of resources and state support would be helpful to districts going forward.

Districts cannot afford to operate under-enrolled schools for a sustained length of time, and efforts to do so risk spreading resources so thinly across schools that students experience reduced learning opportunities.

At a time when district leaders are navigating budgetary pressures, they are also tasked with improving the high school experience.

As researchers from the Learning Policy Institute note, high schools today resemble those that existed a century ago:

> *Many teachers, principals, and district leaders, along with students and parents, understand that schools must change in fundamental ways if they are to accomplish the goal we now have for them: teaching our diverse student population for higher-order thinking and deep understanding. ... Too many of our young people still experience the factory model evident in most of our high schools, which were designed to put young people on a conveyor belt and move them from one overloaded teacher to the next, in 45-minute increments, to be stamped with separate, disconnected lessons seven or eight times a day … the fundamental features of the factory model live on in both our policies and many of our practices.*[76]

This way of schooling is not working for most high school students, with surveys showing a concerning pattern of students becoming less motivated and engaged in school as they progress through grade levels. For example, on the California Healthy Kids Survey, 90% of elementary school students[77] reported being motivated in school as compared to only 56% of secondary students.[78] Perhaps most concerning, 26.2% of high school students in California were chronically absent in SY22-23, missing at least 10% or more of instructional days.[79]

Research on chronic absenteeism points to a complex set of causes for school disengagement, including personal health reasons, unsafe or unwelcoming conditions at school, and students and/or families not seeing the value in being at school.[80] Students may not see value in education because the current structure of high schools often restricts their ability to pursue their interests and limits their choices in what courses they take, how they demonstrate academic progress, and the pace at which they learn.[81] Students also may not think what they are being asked to learn will be relevant to their futures. For example, a survey administered by YouthTruth found that less than half (42%) of California high schoolers felt what they learn will be relevant outside of school.[82] As one former teacher who now provides technical assistance to districts argued, "Chronic absenteeism is a symptom of kids not feeling like school is relevant."

High schools need to be redesigned to better align with the science of adolescent learning and development.

District leaders can leverage the period of fiscal change brought on by declining enrollment to redesign high schools to improve student engagement, motivation, and attendance in school. Decades of research from multiple fields shows that the areas of the brain that influence the academic, emotional, and social development of adolescents are inextricably connected.[83] For example, how a student engages in a difficult group project is determined partly by their ability to self-regulate their learning using different metacognitive strategies[84] and their ability to read social cues and collaborate with others.[85]

As students transition into adolescence and early adulthood, their brains are more vulnerable to stress, and they need space to explore their interests and develop strong technical skills within a supportive environment.[86] However, high schools are often structured in ways that treat academic learning as separate from the emotional and social parts of the brain, limit choice and the opportunity for students to pursue their interests, and make it difficult for students to form strong relationships with teachers and other students.[87] For example, barely half (51%) of high school-aged students in California say they had a caring relationship with a teacher or another adult at school.[88]

Fortunately, several research centers, nonprofits, and advocacy organizations are leveraging research on the science of adolescent learning and development to build frameworks for high school redesign and school improvement. A recent report from Arizona State University's Center for Whole-Child Education describes how specific initiatives at the high school level support the whole child, including college and career pathways, community schools, dual enrollment, and social-emotional learning practices.[89] The report authors highlight initiatives in three districts (Anaheim Union High School District, Los Angeles Unified School District, and Oakland Unified School District) and one county office of education (Sacramento) that show some districts are building systems and designing high schools to better align with the science of learning and development.

Recent reports from the Learning Policy Institute may represent the most comprehensive and detailed examples of school redesign efforts. In two related reports, researchers provide dozens of examples of school structures and practices that align with the science of learning and development. In its extensive "Redesigning High Schools: 10 Features of Success" report, researchers detail 10 lessons learned or features of effectively redesigned high schools.[90]

1. Positive developmental relationships
2. Safe, inclusive school climate
3. Culturally responsive and sustaining teaching
4. Deeper learning curriculum
5. Student-centered pedagogy
6. Authentic assessment
7. Well-prepared and well-supported teachers
8. Authentic family engagement
9. Community connections and integrated student supports
10. Shared decision-making and leadership

A complete description of each of these features is outside the scope of the current report. District leaders and the entities and individuals that support them can and should use frameworks such as these to guide their decision-making as they adjust spending amid declining enrollment and engage in subsequent high school redesign efforts.

The specific school and district examples in these reports show that redesigning traditional public high schools is possible. They also show that the most effective approaches to redesign are not ad hoc, one-time, or disconnected from other school or district initiatives. Instead, the most powerful redesign efforts are cohesive, integrated, and target multiple outcomes (e.g., creating small learning communities that promote positive developmental relationships, encourage student choice, and build connections with the broader community through hands-on project-based work). Finally, many of these examples also show how savvy districts and schools leverage state funding opportunities to initiate or accelerate redesign efforts.

Most examples of successfully redesigned high schools miss one crucial element: guidance on how to restructure schools while also achieving fiscal sustainability in the face of budgetary pressures brought on by declining enrollment. In fact, high school redesign efforts often call for more spending, not less. And while some school district budgeting resources offer guidance on how various budget strategies and choices affect learning opportunities for students,[91] this is an underdeveloped area in terms of research, technical assistance, and support. These two separate areas of educational practice and research — school district budgeting and school redesign — exist largely in silos and rarely speak to each other effectively, leaving district leaders with the difficult task of determining how various budget realignment strategies do or do not influence teaching and learning. The next section aims to fill that gap.

Strategies for Strengthening High Schools While Also Achieving Fiscal Sustainability

District leaders can use periods of budget realignment to also improve programming and services for students, particularly those furthest from educational opportunities. These moments force districts to make decisions about how to consolidate and reimagine programs, how to redeploy staff more effectively, how to achieve economies of scale, and how to create more equity in access and opportunity across school sites. Balancing budgets and strengthening schools at the same time is a tall order, but many leaders interviewed for this report believe it is possible — even if, in some cases, that means consolidating schools to provide richer learning opportunities within a more optimally sized system. According to one superintendent, "It all comes down to providing good instructional programs for students, and we can't do that when we're operating more schools than we need."

Due to their scale, complexity, and breadth of programs and opportunities, high schools are particularly fertile ground for redesign efforts. Many leaders agree that they are also places that desperately need restructuring.

As districts adjust budgets and staffing in response to declining enrollment, they can concurrently leverage three redesign strategies to expand access to relevant learning opportunities and improve student engagement and sense of belonging. If implemented thoughtfully, each of these three strategies can also help districts reduce costs, achieve fiscal efficiencies, and leverage existing resources to broaden opportunities for students.

1. **Adopt flexible course delivery models to maximize student choice amid a smaller workforce.**

2. **Partner with local organizations, agencies, and businesses to provide high school students with services and supports through blended funding models.**

3. **Lease or sell closed or underutilized facilities and district property to support learning and address community needs.**

This section describes each strategy, addresses various implementation considerations including challenges district leaders might face, and identifies ways state policymakers can support districts and remove barriers to effective implementation (Table 2). Implementing these strategies may, in some cases, require initial up-front investments to build infrastructure and capacity. But in the long run, these strategies can be fiscally sustainable in the face of declining enrollment.

TABLE 2: STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING HIGH SCHOOLS WHILE ALSO ACHIEVING FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

Strategy and Examples	Implementation Considerations	State Policy Recommendations
1. Adopt flexible course delivery models to maximize student choice amid a smaller workforce. • Expand dual enrollment to share costs with colleges while expanding access to college-ready opportunities. • Offer specialty courses at hub locations rather than every school site. • Expand access to work-based learning during the school day to free up time for teachers to take on additional core classes.	• Districts may need to adapt their master schedule so that students can participate in flexible delivery models. • Districts may need to provide students with transportation assistance. • Districts may need to invest time and capacity to implement flexible delivery models. • Districts can intentionally provide flexible options to expand access to A-G and career and technical education pathways (see Page 23 for an overview).	• Encourage innovation by relaxing rigid requirements in state law about where, when, and for how long learning must take place. • Offer districts coaching and support around bargaining during challenging budget times.
2. Partner with local organizations, agencies, and businesses to provide high school students with services and supports through blended funding models. • Utilize non-education funding streams to provide behavioral health and wraparound supports. • Share facilities, staff, and other resources with other agencies. • Leverage partnerships to provide academic and extracurricular activities and supports.	• Districts can invest in staffing and knowledge management systems to help sustain community-school partnerships across time. • Districts, especially rural and small districts, can form cross-district partnerships to share resources and programming. • Districts can collaborate with employees to design community partnerships and ensure employee protections.	• Provide district support and training on how to braid and blend funding sources to create coherent local programming.
3. Lease or sell closed or underutilized facilities and district property to support learning and address community needs. • Lease space to early childhood education providers to generate revenue. • Develop district lands into workforce housing to generate revenue from rent and turnover due to high costs of living. • Lease facilities to other agencies and organizations to expand access to community services while generating revenue.	• Districts can collaborate with stakeholders to more inclusively determine how to repurpose vacant facilities. • Districts may need to invest significant time and capacity to plan and eventually build workforce housing.	• Support districts in using surplus property to generate revenue and provide community services. • Support districts in partnering with community-based organizations and agencies to share facility space.

1. Adopt flexible course delivery models to maximize student choice amid a smaller workforce.

Students benefit from having choices across a variety of pathways that allow them to explore and access high-quality courses aligned to their interests and aspirations. Families want this for their children, too. Family members and high school students interviewed for this report frequently mentioned a desire for more engaging course options that would prepare students for college and their future careers. As one teacher noted, districts need to offer courses that reflect the interests of students to improve student engagement and sense of belonging. However, offering every course at every school site is costly since the district needs to hire teachers for each of those classes and schools. This is especially true when some classes are under-enrolled, which is increasingly common in districts experiencing declining enrollment.

To maximize student choice and sustain a diverse course selection amid enrollment declines, districts can adopt more flexible course delivery models, including dual enrollment, courses offered at hub locations rather than at individual school sites, and work-based learning models.

Examples of Flexible Course Delivery Models

Expand dual enrollment to share costs with colleges while expanding access to college-ready opportunities.

Dual enrollment provides students with access to college-level coursework and unique electives that might otherwise be unavailable to them, enabling students to earn both high school and college credits. Participation in dual enrollment is positively correlated with higher college enrollment rates, increased persistence, and improved college GPAs.[92] Students interviewed for this report state that they appreciate that dual enrollment courses provide them with more course options and a glimpse into what the college course load could be like. While there are multiple dual enrollment programs in California, the College and Career Access Pathways dual enrollment program can be fiscally advantageous for school districts, especially if these courses are taught by college professors on high school campuses for credit.[93] To establish this type of program, district leaders and their community college partners must agree to a memorandum of understanding and determine how to share responsibilities, funding, and even facilities — all of which may impact the cost savings a district might realize.[94] Districts continue to receive ADA funding for dual-enrolled students so long as they attend school 180 minutes per day,[95] and community college partners receive funding.[96] Districts can realize savings if their partner colleges cover staffing costs.[97] Typically, these costs are covered by the district when appropriately credentialed high school faculty teach the class and by the college when the course is taught by a professor.[98] This model can create savings for districts if the courses are taught by professors on high school campuses. This also frees up time for district teachers to teach additional core classes and take on other responsibilities.

Offer specialty courses at hub locations rather than every school site.

Rather than offering every course at each school site, districts can offer specialized courses and pathways, including advanced placement courses and career pathway programs, at centralized hub locations — such as an existing school site in the district, local community colleges, or county offices of education. By centralizing some course offerings, districts may be able to avoid duplicating low-enrolled or specialized courses across

multiple locations. This can allow districts to reduce the number of required full-time equivalent teachers at each school site by sharing teachers across the district, enabling them to focus on hiring and retaining the most effective ones, even while preserving or expanding course opportunities for students.[99] District leaders can allow students from anywhere in the district to access these courses either by joining the class remotely from their neighborhood school locations, which may require staffing to support, or by traveling to those locations during the school day, which may require providing students with transportation services. Although learning hubs may require an up-front investment, districts can create these concurrently with school consolidations and other reductions.

For instance, in SY23-24 San Francisco Unified School District completed its pilot year operating a Health and Life Sciences learning hub. The district has secured additional funding and partnered with several industry partners to further develop this hub even while preparing for school closures, consolidations, and co-locations in SY25-26 in response to enrollment declines.[100] In its current model, students in grades 11-12 from five partner schools participate in the Mission Bay Hub, which currently uses classroom space at the University of California San Francisco Mission Bay campus for half-day programs running both in the morning and afternoon. District partners such as University of California San Francisco, Kaiser Permanente, and the Golden State Warriors with a combination of health and life science practitioners and graduate students have helped provide real-world learning opportunities for students as part of a project-based learning model. Through this hub, students also earn high school credits aligned with college admissions requirements.[101] Rather than offer such courses, equipment, and staff at each school site, the district can consolidate resources at a shared site — which students from each of the five schools can access. The program complements existing career-themed pathways in the district's high schools.

Expand access to work-based learning during the school day to free up time for teachers to take on additional core classes.

Districts can partner with businesses, local agencies, and community colleges to provide students with high-quality work-based learning opportunities, including project-based learning, mentorship, internships, pre-apprenticeships, and volunteer experiences, linking students' learning to the real world and allowing them to further explore their interests and career opportunities. Credentialed teachers play a crucial role in these learning experiences by providing related instruction and collaborating with employers, but they do not necessarily need to be present when the work-based learning is happening.[102] This could free up time for teachers to plan and collaborate, and it might even lead to some savings if teachers can take on additional sections or other assignments during this time. Some work-based learning experiences have created more direct savings for districts. For example, Porterville Unified School District in the San Joaquin Valley partnered with Climate Action Pathways for Schools, a nonprofit raising students' environmental awareness while also working to lower their school's carbon footprint.[103] Students from different career pathway programs in the district have worked as paid interns with the nonprofit, focused on various climate mitigation projects for the district. The interns have conducted audits of the district's energy expenditure, street infrastructure, and bus paths; they have saved the district an estimated $850,000 while developing a variety of professional and technical skills.[104]

Implementation Considerations

Districts may need to adapt their master schedule so that students can participate in flexible delivery models.

Implementing flexible course delivery models requires districts to create longer blocks of time that allow students to access dual enrollment, travel to learning hubs, participate in online classes, or take internships during the school day. Block schedules can also free up time and resources for advisories, teacher collaboration, planning, professional development, or additional classes. For example, Irvine High School, a part of Irvine Unified School District in Orange County, has been using a blended block schedule since 1996.[105] In this model, core academic courses meet every day, allowing students to complete a year's curriculum in a semester, while other courses such as nonacademic electives meet every other day. With four 85-minute periods each school day, students have longer blocks of time for learning. The blended schedule also increases opportunities for students to participate in electives[106] and has allowed juniors and seniors to spread out their courses in such a way that they can take vocational and college courses and participate in internships and other work-based learning experiences.[107] Irvine High School's schedule guarantees teachers 90 minutes of daily preparation time and allows them to teach fewer students per day.[108]

Districts may need to provide students with transportation assistance.

If students need to travel to community colleges, other school sites, learning hubs, or internships during the school day, they may need transportation. Some districts and schools, such as those in Alameda County in the San Francisco Bay Area, have built partnerships with their local transportation services to provide transit passes either to all students or to students eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Participating students receive unlimited free bus rides in their area and a 50% discount on the Bay Area Rapid Transit.[109] These passes have expanded transportation options for the county's middle and high school students, enabling students to travel from school sites to other academic programs, internships, and extracurricular activities.[110] San Francisco Unified School District pays for a chartered bus to offer students direct transportation between the Mission Bay Hub and its partner schools when needed and provides additional accommodations as necessary. Students can also use public transportation or other arrangements to get to or from the Hub.[111]

Districts may need to invest time and capacity to implement flexible delivery models.

As districts establish partnerships with local community colleges, leaders from both institutions must work closely together to design dual enrollment programs. This includes aligning on which courses are developmentally appropriate and working to ensure college faculty have experience teaching adolescent learners. To secure preferred schedules and fully realize the cost-saving potential of dual enrollment, they may also need to build demand among schools and students.[112] When developing hub programs and work-based learning opportunities, district leaders and teachers need to invest capacity into planning, developing, and coordinating the programs. Such coordination includes transportation and scheduling, along with hiring faculty and identifying employers. For work-based learning, teachers may also need to invest time to collaborate with employers and provide related instruction during class time.[113]

Districts can intentionally provide flexible options to expand access to A-G and career and technical education pathways.

A more complex array of course options and delivery models, if not carefully curated and communicated, could make it harder for students to complete "A-G" — the sequence of courses students are required to pass to be eligible to apply to the University of California or California State University systems or to an aligned career and technical education pathway. As districts adopt more flexible delivery models, including dual enrollment, career academy hubs, and virtual learning, they will want to promote courses that are A-G aligned and/or help students complete career pathways,

not just a smattering of high-interest electives. Linked Learning pathways do just this since they combine rigorous, A-G-aligned coursework with real-world learning opportunities associated with in-demand careers.[114] Districts will also want to equip students and families with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate course selection through strong advisory programs or counseling and family engagement, enabling students and families to craft academic pathways that cater to their unique needs while putting them on track for college and career readiness.

State Policy Recommendations

Encourage innovation by relaxing rigid requirements in state law about where, when, and for how long learning must take place.

District leaders who want to create more opportunities for students to pursue their interests inside and outside of school in a budget-constrained environment must think creatively about seat time and instructional minutes, opportunities for learning outside the classroom, and how students accrue credits and demonstrate competency in coursework. However, numerous state laws and regulations — while intended to establish minimum expectations for quality and ensure equity across the state — collectively stifle innovation and create a rigid high school structure that is difficult for districts to alter. This rigidity makes it harder for district leaders to achieve economies of scale and fiscal efficiencies by using time, space, and staffing more creatively. For example, local and state-mandated course requirements, in addition to the A-G requirements, result in students needing to take seven to eight courses at a time. Additionally, the state continues to layer on more course requirements such as Ethnic Studies, starting with the 2030 graduation cohort.[115] Some advocates are also calling on the state to implement a financial literacy requirement.[116] The many requirements can restrict student participation in high-interest pathways and can also constrain a district's ability to design alternative staffing and scheduling scenarios that might help reduce costs. Policymakers should explore options for students to earn credit for learning outside of the school walls or at a different pace.

Offer districts coaching and support around bargaining during challenging budget times.

Union contracts introduce another layer of requirements and constraints that can make it difficult for districts to easily modify or redesign high school structures. Collective bargaining agreements between districts and teachers unions often dictate maximum class sizes, maximum school day and year lengths, and limits on nonteaching duties. Of course, districts negotiate these agreements in the first place and can renegotiate current contracts to better support high school redesign. State leaders can support districts by offering coaching and support around bargaining during challenging budget times, as well as examples of contractual approaches that support innovative and fiscally sustainable high school design.

Students benefit from having choices across a variety of pathways that allow them to explore and access high-quality courses aligned to their interests and aspirations.

2. Partner with local organizations, agencies, and businesses to provide high school students with services and supports through blended funding models.

Well-designed, culturally responsive, integrated student supports address students' academic, extracurricular, social, and emotional needs, leading to improvements in student attendance and achievement.[117] But it can be difficult for budget-strapped districts with declining enrollment to maintain a rich array of programs across multiple school sites.[118] When faced with the significant budget pressures of the Great Recession, many districts cut support staff such as counselors, instructional aides, and librarians.[119] Such cuts have harmed student achievement and increased educational inequality.[120]

By partnering with community-based organizations, other agencies, and businesses, districts can capitalize on the resources and funding streams available to these partners to provide critical services to youth in alignment with the goals and missions of both sets of partners. While there are costs associated with planning, launching, and maintaining partnerships and providing facility space, these collaborations can result in financial efficiencies if coordinated intentionally.[121] By braiding funding from one-time and ongoing local, state, federal, and private grants, districts can maximize resources and sustain these community-school partnerships over time.

Examples of Community-School Partnerships

Utilize non-education funding streams to provide behavioral health and wraparound supports.

Integrated student supports in schools can address students' unique health, mental health, and social service needs and contribute to an inclusive school climate.[122] Such wellness supports, in turn, can benefit students' social-emotional regulation, reduce stress, and ease transitions through different periods of the school day.[123] The California Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative, a five-year grant passed in 2021, has allocated $4.7 billion to enhance mental and physical health services in schools, enabling districts to create wellness centers, expand behavioral health services, and increase early intervention for students.[124] The nonprofit Campus Clinic is just one organization that has leveraged the grant, along with other grant funding and insurance billing, to offer Universal Mental Health Screenings at no or minimal cost to district partners.[125]

Districts have used other funding sources and partnerships as well. For instance, the Napa Valley Unified School District in Northern California has blended several different grants, including the Community Schools Partnership Program and the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative, redirecting some of its general operating budget and partnering with the Napa Valley Education Foundation, Kaiser Permanente, and Napa Valley Vintners to create wellness centers on its campuses.[126] At these centers, students can meet with peer support, staff, and community providers and receive support in a variety of areas, from academics and health to employment and housing.[127] The district also has a robust network of community partnerships that district families can be referred to for financial support, food, mental health, and other assistance.[128] The district has expanded such services even while closing several of its elementary and middle schools, thereby deepening rather than cutting services for students and families.[129]

Share facilities, staff, and other resources with other agencies.

Districts can forge partnerships with other city agencies and community organizations to enhance students' educational experiences, share facility space, and — in some cases — generate revenue. By sharing facilities,

staffing, and other resources with other agencies, districts may reduce infrastructure and overhead costs. For instance, the city of Inglewood is spending $40 million to improve the Inglewood Main Library.[130] Inglewood Unified School District, which is closing five of its schools due to declining enrollment, plans to partner with the city to design and use this library as an education and innovation center rather than build and operate a district library when it renovates Inglewood High School, one of the district's remaining high schools.[131] High school students will have exclusive access to the space during specific hours of the week. The district's high schools are all within walking distance of the library, and the district plans to build a bridge between one of the high schools and the library and erect gates during school hours so that students have safe access between sites.[132] This district-city partnership may save the district upwards of $20 million, according to one district leader.

Leverage partnerships to provide academic and extracurricular activities and supports.

Districts can partner with community organizations to provide a range of student services and programs in a fiscally efficient way to improve students' sense of belonging and mental health.[133] Oakland High School in the San Francisco Bay Area, for instance, has partnered with more than 40 external organizations for academic support, visual and performing arts programs, and support for college applications and career explorations, among many other services — offering students electives during the school day, tutoring, college readiness activities, and after-school programming.[134] As one district leader interviewed for this report noted, "There are a lot of folks who want to help. There are incredible partnerships out there. It's about finding them."

Implementation Considerations

Districts can invest in staffing and knowledge management systems to help sustain community-school partnerships across time.

Districts should invest in coordinators and knowledge management so that partners and relationships can

be effectively maintained. Districts with successful community-school partnerships sustain these relationships over time, often employing a coordinator to manage programming and communication between community partners and schools. Since staff turnover can lead to the disruption or even termination of programs, districts also need to invest in succession plans and document correspondence to ensure programs and community relationships are not lost when staff leave.[135] Districts can also track outcomes to help make the case for continued funding, especially when they can demonstrate improvement in student attendance, engagement, achievement, relationships, and health because of the partnership.[136]

Districts, especially rural and small districts, can form cross-district partnerships to share resources and programming.

Districts in rural areas often have less access to organizations or agencies that offer support services.[137] Rural districts have also been less likely to apply for Community Schools Partnership Program grants and less likely to receive funding through the grant program — potentially due to less administrative capacity or the grant's prioritization of districts with majority high-need student populations.[138] Rural districts, small districts, and others with little access to partner organizations may be able to build cross-district partnerships to share resources, support one another, and address their specific community needs. For example, in 2018, three rural districts in Kern County, located in the San Joaquin Valley, built the West Kern Consortium for Full-Service Community Schools. The consortium has since added three more districts to its partnership, two of which are high school districts. The districts share resources, staffing, and programming responsibilities to offer after-school programming, preschools, and mental health services.[139]

Districts can collaborate with employees to design community partnerships and ensure employee protections.

Partnerships among community partners, schools, and families can be enormously effective in supporting student success. Districts should collaborate with employees when designing new community partnerships. The California Labor Management Initiative advises that school design initiatives "should be jointly undertaken through a collaborative labor-management process. Implementing and contextualizing these types of transformative approaches, including Community Schools models, are far more likely to be successful if they are jointly designed by labor and management."[140] Labor-management agreements could include solidifying classroom teachers in community schools, ensuring staff have sufficient support and capacity to connect students and families to resources, and determining which functions can be provided through partnerships versus traditional staffing.

State Policy Recommendation

Provide district support and training on how to braid and blend funding sources to create coherent local programming.

State leaders in California can support districts by providing training and other supports on how to effectively braid and blend funding sources to strengthen coherence in vision-setting, budgeting, and programming. They can do this by leveraging the statewide system of support — including the CDE, the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, and county offices of education — and by partnering with federal and private technical assistance providers who can work alongside district leaders. Several district leaders interviewed for this report emphasized that coaching, mentorship, and participation in communities of practice helped them navigate tough budget cycles, especially when those conversations focused on how to redesign systems and enhance teaching and learning. Navigating declining enrollment-related budget challenges requires strong leadership, political acumen, and a laser focus on how to strengthen teaching and learning — not just an ability to draw up a three-year budget that keeps the district in the black.

3. Lease or sell closed or underutilized facilities and district property to support learning and address community needs.

Declining enrollment means many school districts have underutilized school sites. As they close or consolidate schools, districts may also own vacant school buildings — often on valuable land. These vacant properties may require ongoing maintenance, change the character of neighborhoods, and serve as reminders of the loss community members experienced when those sites closed.

To ensure these properties provide fiscal benefit as well as value to the community, districts can sell or lease unused buildings or facility space to other agencies or organizations that provide services to students, teachers, families, and the community. Revenue generated through leasing or selling underutilized facility space or property could be directed toward strengthening programs and services across the district, including for high school students.

Examples of Repurposed School Facilities

Lease space to early childhood education providers to generate revenue.

Empty or underutilized facility space could be leased by early childhood providers who receive funding from the California State Preschool Program, Head Start, Early Head Start, local early childhood funding streams, and philanthropic sources.[141] Not only could this address facility needs for early childhood centers, as many providers lack affordable space, but it could also offer families a more integrated educational experience, especially if early childhood center services are co-located on elementary campuses.[142] For example, Alum Rock Union School District closed César Chávez Elementary School and turned the campus into an early childhood center.[143] The new César Chávez Early Learning Center is managed by three partners: the Alum Rock Union School District, which runs the TK program; Kidango, which operates the preschool and child care; and the nonprofit SOMOS Mayfair, which runs a family resource center and provides supports such as legal advice, health and wellness programs, and workshops for parents and caregivers.[144] This saved the district an estimated $1 million annually while providing targeted supports to its families and students.[145]

Develop district lands into workforce housing to generate revenue from rent and turnover due to high costs of living.

District leaders can develop subsidized workforce housing for their staff and teachers on unused, district-owned lands as one effort to address teacher recruitment and retention challenges. Local educational agencies (LEAs) own more than 75,000 acres of land across California that could be developed for workforce housing, with 61% of that land in areas where teachers face housing affordability challenges.[146] Districts that have built workforce housing have leveraged low-income housing tax credits and certificates of participation — a commitment to use the revenue collected from rent once a project is complete to pay back investors — to enable construction.[147] For instance, Jefferson Union High School District, a small suburban high school south of San Francisco, built a 122-unit apartment complex on a property owned by the district in 2022, providing housing for up to 25% of the district's staff.[148] The district received a bond of $33 million to build teacher and staff housing in the district and financed the remaining $42 million through certificates of participation.[149] Though the average one-bedroom apartment in the area rents for more than $2,000 a month, a one-bedroom in the complex starts at a little over $1,400, meaning teachers and staff can pay below market rate to live in the district.[150] The district started SY23-24 fully staffed with certified teachers.[151]

Lease facilities to other agencies and organizations to expand access to community services while generating revenue.

Districts can lease facilities to the city to create community centers for the students and families of the district to use. Well-designed community spaces such as youth recreational centers or arts and cultural centers create safe spaces for all students, including high school students, to explore interests, build relationships, access a variety of support services, and develop holistically during their formative years.[152] Community centers can also house satellite health clinics, job training organizations, arts organizations, or immigration services. Not only can the district recoup the savings from renting the facility and direct the money toward its students, but it can also do so with the expectation that the entity to which it leases its facility will direct resources back into the community. Additionally, the district could leverage the space in these buildings for teachers and students to use for professional development, classes, project-based learning, and as hub locations.

Implementation Considerations

Districts can collaborate with stakeholders to more inclusively determine how to repurpose vacant facilities.

Multiple district leaders who have successfully navigated school closures called out the importance of engaging with stakeholders *early* and making sure community members feel their voices and input are heard, considered, and ultimately reflected in the final recommendations that leaders present to their boards. Multiple district leaders who have successfully navigated school closures emphasized the importance of engaging stakeholders early and ensuring community voices are heard, considered, and reflected in final recommendations. For example, when considering how to repurpose unused facilities, these leaders often partnered with state-recommended District Advisory Committees, known as 7-11 committees.[153] District leaders also sought broader input through surveys of staff, families, and community members to develop a long-term vision for facility space representative of the views of the district at large.[154]

Districts may need to invest significant time and capacity to plan and eventually build workforce housing.

While building workforce housing can be a long and complicated process, there are a range of programs, fiscal resources, and organizations available to districts. It can take a district up to 10 years to plan, develop, construct, and finally operate a new housing development.[155] During this time, district leaders must navigate a lengthy list of planning, financial, and logistical considerations, most of which are out of the wheelhouse of a typical district. Nevertheless, more and more districts are considering developing workforce housing to address housing affordability and staffing challenges, with approximately 46 districts pursuing such development projects as of 2021.[156] Several state policies and programs make this easier for districts by providing access to funding and removing statutory hurdles.[157] For example, new legislation that took effect in January 2024 will allow districts to construct workforce housing units without requesting zoning changes from city or county governments as long as other conditions are met.[158] Moreover, organizations such as the Center for Cities + Schools, cityLAB-UCLA, the Terner Center for Housing Innovation, and the California School Boards Association have provided resources and support to districts exploring whether and how to build workforce housing in their communities.[159]

State Policy Recommendations

Support districts in using surplus property to generate revenue and provide community services.

Pandemic-era changes to state law made it simpler for districts to dispose of surplus property and generate revenue for one-time general fund purposes.[160] For example, the state relaxed restrictions on how proceeds from the sale or lease of district property could be used and streamlined the plan approval process.[161] However, these changes have since expired.[162] State policymakers

should continue to explore options for loosening restrictions on the use of surplus property and the expenditure of funds generated from those properties.

Support districts in partnering with community-based organizations and agencies to share facility space.

State leaders in California can offer updated guidance and support to districts on ways to successfully partner with community-based organizations and governmental agencies to share school facilities in order to provide the community with a broader range of services before or after school, throughout the school day, or during school breaks. Such support can include state-approved templates for joint-use agreements,[163] resources on how to apply for and acquire funding for facilities and programming, and training on how to build successful partnerships — which requires careful planning, oversight, coordination, and communication.[164]

Well-designed community spaces such as youth recreational centers or arts and cultural centers create safe spaces for all students, including high school students, to explore interests, build relationships, access a variety of support services, and develop holistically during their formative years.

Conclusion

Nearly every part of California will experience TK-12 enrollment declines in the years ahead. As district leaders align their budgets with new enrollment realities and as pandemic relief funds expire, staff reductions and school closures and consolidations will be inescapable in many communities. Many districts will use this moment to rethink how staff, programs, and services are distributed to students. This makes it a fitting time for district leaders, in collaboration with their communities, to design smaller school systems that provide more and better opportunities to every student, especially those who have been historically marginalized. Changes are particularly possible — and needed — at the high school level. Too many of California's high school students report a lack of motivation in school and do not see how what they are learning is relevant to their future; more than one-quarter are chronically absent from school. As California district leaders adjust their budgets and staffing, they can concurrently leverage three strategies to achieve greater fiscal efficiencies while also expanding learning opportunities, student supports, and community partnerships.

1. **Adopt flexible course delivery models to maximize student choice amid a smaller workforce.**

2. **Partner with local organizations, agencies, and businesses to provide high school students with services and supports through blended funding models.**

3. **Lease or sell closed or underutilized facilities and district property to support learning and address community needs.**

This does not need to be a time of cuts and scarcity. California leaders can build better, stronger, more equitable school systems even as they serve fewer students. But getting there demands that district and state leaders seize the opportunity to innovate, confront barriers and political challenges head-on, and prioritize teaching and learning as they make tough budgetary decisions.

SUMMARY OF STATE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is plenty California state leaders can do to help districts navigate what is perhaps the most challenging fiscal environment since the Great Recession. Leaders can:

- Clear policy barriers that make it harder for districts to maintain a diverse and effective workforce and protect high-need students from staffing instability.

- Provide districts with support on how to plan for school closures and consolidations, effectively engage community members in the process, and make decisions that are both equitable and designed to strengthen teaching, learning, and opportunities for students.

- Encourage innovation by relaxing rigid requirements in state law about where, when, and for how long learning must take place.

- Provide district support and training on how to braid and blend funding sources to create coherent local programming.

- Support districts in using surplus property to generate revenue and provide community services.

- Support districts in partnering with community-based organizations and agencies to share facility space. ✦

Appendix

SELECT LIST OF CALIFORNIA FUNDING STREAMS THAT HOLD POTENTIAL TO STRENGTHEN THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Grant	Funding
California Community Schools Partnership Program Supports schools in collaborating with community agencies and local governments to align resources and enhance student outcomes. These partnerships integrate academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement.	$4.1 billion
Career Technical Education Incentive Grant Supports the implementation and delivery of high-quality career and technical education, curriculum and instruction, career exploration opportunities, counseling, and support services, with the aim of providing K-12 students with the knowledge and skills necessary to transition to employment and postsecondary education.	$300 million
Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative — School-Linked Partnership and Capacity Grants Funds programs that increase the availability, equity, and range of behavioral health services to enable LEAs to build the capacity, infrastructure, and partnerships needed to build a sustainable model that supports behavioral health. Funds are direct to individuals ages 25 and younger who are in schools, providers in schools, school-affiliated community-based organizations, or school-based health centers.	$550 million
College and Career Access Pathways Grant Funds the authorization of college courses to be offered on a high school campus exclusively to high school students and strengthens student advising and support services. The grant incentivizes LEAs to establish partnerships with community colleges that give students access to college courses while in high school.	$100 million
Golden State Pathways Program Funds partnerships between LEAs, IHEs, local and regional businesses, and other local organizations to expand the availability of college and career pathways that align with the LEA's local labor market needs. The grant aims to provide LEAs with the resources to promote pathways in high-wage, high-skill, high-growth areas.	$500 million
Proposition 28 — Arts and Music in Schools Funding Provides a funding guarantee to supplement arts programs, with funds distributed based on overall enrollment and the number of economically disadvantaged students. The measure includes accountability measures such as public reporting of spending and oversight by the CDE.	1% of K-12 Proposition 98 funding ($938 million in fiscal year 2023-24)

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit **bellwether.org**.

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DISCLOSURE

Bellwether works with organizations and leaders who share our viewpoint-diverse commitment to improving education and advancing equity for all young people — regardless of identity, circumstance, or background. As part of our commitment to transparency, a list of Bellwether clients and funders since our founding in 2010 is publicly available on our website. An organization's name appearing on our list of clients and funders does not imply any endorsement of or by Bellwether.

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