It's Count Day in Colorado schools. Here's why an accurate census matters.

BY ERICA MELTZER, YESENIA ROBLES - 2 HOURS AGO

Schools across Colorado are conducting a headcount Wednesday with high financial stakes in a rapidly changing state.
Colorado’s annual “Count Day” determines the official enrollment numbers that the state uses to set school funding. Districts want to accurately report not just how many students they have, but also how many are living in poverty or learning English, challenges that net districts some additional money to address student needs. When the numbers don’t match forecasts, districts can lose out on expected state funding.

Critically, this year’s count will also determine the actual cost of full-day kindergarten, which initial projections put at tens of millions more than lawmakers budgeted.

Last year’s count saw the smallest increase in student enrollment in nearly 30 years, as well as a decline in the number of students eligible for subsidized lunches, a measure of poverty. That change, along with an increase in local property values, led lawmakers to take back $77 million intended for schools.

Could enrollment actually decline this year? That hasn’t happened since the 1988-89 school year. Public results from this year’s count won’t be available until January.

Last year 911,536 students were enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade, just 0.1% more than in 2017-18. Twenty-seven districts saw their student count grow by 5% or more, fewer than in 2017-18, while 87 districts saw declines.

State Demographer Elizabeth Garner said the main factor driving changes in student enrollment is a slowdown in births that started with the Great Recession and continues in the face of high living costs, general pessimism about the future, and better access to long-acting birth control for teens. In 2007, Colorado registered 70,700 births. Last year it was 63,700.
Garner noted that this trend is playing out across the nation, not just in Colorado. Between student loan debt and housing and child care costs, some people who might want children don’t feel like they can afford them, while others simply don’t want to become parents.

But this demographic shift isn’t affecting all communities equally. In general, families aren’t moving away from Colorado, but they are moving to different parts of Colorado, Garner said.

“There are some counties where you are seeing lots of in-migration of young families,” Garner said. “Weld County as a whole, Adams County as a whole, and El Paso County as a whole, are really attracting young adults. If you are attracting young adults, you have a higher likelihood of getting kids.”

Count Day is a bit of a misnomer, in that districts can use a wider window to demonstrate that a student who misses school on the official day is in fact actively attending a particular school, but districts traditionally do all they can to encourage students to attend on Count Day, whether that’s sending sternly worded letters to parents and offering extra recess to children.

The 27J district north of Denver, which draws from the Adams County communities of Brighton, Commerce City, and Thornton, is one of the fastest growing in the state, though it is leveling off. Schools there are holding theme days like “hat day” and “pajama day” on Count Day.
"We are projecting continued growth through the next decade with an expectation of 26,000 students in 2028," district spokeswoman Tracy Rudnick said in an email. That's compared to 18,000 last year. "There are 36,000 new homes slated to be built in the coming years throughout our district area."

An accurate count ensures the district, which has not been able to convince voters to pass additional local property taxes, gets every cent of state funding that it can.

In contrast, Denver is predicting a 5% percent enrollment decline by 2023, which could force hard conversations about school consolidation. About 50% of the city's housing stock is rental units, much of the new housing being built consists of one- and two-bedroom units, and homes are expensive. For families looking for the stability of homeownership, other parts of the metro area are more accessible.

Enrollment in some Denver suburbs has also been affected by rising housing prices and aging residents, though some districts expect those trends to stabilize as long-planned new developments come online. Jeffco Public Schools, the state's second largest district, stretching from the Denver border to the foothills, saw the largest decrease in enrollment last year, almost 1,500 students. Other districts with major enrollment declines last year included District 11 in Colorado Springs, Aurora Public Schools, Pueblo 60, and Adams 14, a long-struggling district that sees thousands of potential students enroll in neighboring districts.

These districts are just as invested in an accurate count, though a spokesman for Pueblo 60, which has seen declining enrollment for years, said the district is more focused on sustained attendance than a single day. The district is running a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of school attendance among parents, as well as connect them with resources to deal with emergency car repairs and other barriers. Spokesman Dalton Sprouse said Pueblo 60 is also making sure students know about the district's own online programs after losing students to similar programs authorized through other districts.

Colorado's online schools have seen enrollment increases. One complaint of critics is that these schools get funding for students they have enrolled on Count Day, but if those students leave before the end of the school year — as many of them do — funding doesn't follow them to their new schools. A new law passed this year will better track these students and could eventually lead to other policy changes.

Another number to watch will be the number of students who qualify for subsidized lunches. Colorado gives schools extra money for students whose family income is low
enough to qualify for free lunch, but not for those who earn a little more and only qualify for reduced-price lunch. The federal income thresholds are so low that fewer Colorado students qualify for free lunch, but many of these students still struggle with the challenges of poverty. A group of lawmakers is considering changing how Colorado measures and pays for these students.

Tracie Rainey of the Colorado School Finance Project said the student count carries high stakes for districts, but they’ve gotten better at doing their own forecasting and making adjustments before state numbers come out.

For example, in 2016-17, the Aurora district had to cut $3 million from its budget mid-year after being caught off guard by a sharp drop in enrollment. In response to that hit and three years of ongoing enrollment declines, the district made conservative estimates for this year and got a pleasant surprise: more students than predicted, though still fewer than last year.

“Contrary to popular belief we do not wait until October 1st to make adjustments,” said Damon Smith, Aurora’s chief personnel officer. “This school year the very first adjustments in personnel were made at the end of the week of Aug. 16.”

That happened at Iowa Elementary when officials realized three days into the school year that the school’s two kindergarten classes each had 36 students and had to hire another teacher. Kindergarten enrollment across the district is up, Aurora officials said — for the first time since 2012.

Officials believe they may be seeing the beginning of enrollment stabilization. Projections always showed the district returning to growth, based on developments that are in the works in the east, near E-470.

Similarly, Jeffco has experienced a steady decline in enrollment for years, but some neighborhoods in the district are expecting significant growth based on planned development.

Districts plans can still collide with competing priorities at the state level, though, once the official count is finalized. When districts have lower enrollment in the fall than was predicted in the spring, when lawmakers were finalizing the state budget, legislators tend to see an opportunity to recoup a portion of state funds that would otherwise have gone to schools.
“The state’s position has been, ‘We’ll take that money and put it in the ed fund or apply it to some other need,’” Rainey said. “The state seems to feel the districts don’t have a use for that money mid-year, and districts will probably disagree with that. It depends on which side of the budget conversation you’re on.”

That conversation is particularly intense this year, as full-day kindergarten could cost anywhere from $10 million to $40 million more than the $175 million that was allocated in the state budget, as the Colorado Sun reported. If there are fewer students than expected in other grades, some of that savings could offset kindergarten costs for the state.

“It’s a big issue for school districts, given that they’ve implemented it on the premise that they would be paid for it,” Rainey said.

By Erica Meltzer  EMELTZER@CHALKBEAT.ORG
Yesenia Robles  @YRIENAROBLES  YROBLES@CHALKBEAT.ORG

IN THIS STORY: COUNT DAY, FULL-DAY KINDERGARTEN, SCHOOL FINANCE

View Comments

RELATED STORIES

Colorado  Updated 3 hours ago

Some Denver school bus drivers may not show up for work Wednesday in response to incident

Colorado  17 hours ago

In Jeffco school board race, union favorites raising more money than challengers
On the verge of Colorado’s third teacher strike, one mountain district waits in limbo