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Opinion: Arizona is closing schools. Where did all the students go?

Declining birth rates and increased educational choices are creating a fiscal problem that Arizona schools are struggling to solve.

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What happened to overcrowded classrooms? We went from that to empty schools and financial shortfalls, triggering a crisis.

From Los Angeles to Philadelphia, districts have lost as much as 20% of their enrollment since the pandemic.

A school board in Jackson, Miss., having lost 30% of its enrollment, voted last December to close 11 schools and merge two more. Clark County, Nev., saw a 20% enrollment decrease between 2019-2021.

And the school board in Cupertino, Calif., voted to close three schools last year due to enrollment decline.

Difficult choices are also being made in Arizona.

Arizona schools are losing enrollment

Last spring, Osborn School District eliminated more than 30 full-time jobs, citing declining enrollment.

Tempe Union High School District's governing board referenced a 14% drop in enrollment as the reason to cut \$5 million in jobs for the 2025-26 school year.

And Paradise Valley Unified School District's governing board voted to close three schools last spring due to lack of enrollment.

Arizona has a plethora of school choice, including charter schools, micro schools, online learning, 38,000 students being homeschooled and an explosion of ESA voucher usage — from 11,000 in 2022 to 77,450 as of May 2024.

Educational choice, however, isn't the only reason public schools are facing an enrollment decline.

Arizonans aren't having as many babies, a trend mirrored nationally. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of births nationally decreased 17% since 2007.

In Arizona during the same time period, birth rates plummeted 36.1% — the second-highest drop in the nation.

The combination of declining birth rates and increased educational choices means Arizona's public schools are fighting for a share of a pie that's getting smaller.

Roosevelt may close 1 or more schools

School districts focused on the future must meet this challenge head-on.

Roosevelt School District, one of my clients with a 100-plus-year history in south Phoenix, is having difficult conversations about the future of its schools now, before its reserve funds run out.

The district is grappling with a \$4.7 million deficit. It has seen an 18-year decline in enrollment — from a 2007 high of 12,600 students to a current enrollment of approximately 7,400 students.

The district also cites a number of aging buildings, collectively filled at only 45% capacity.

In our conversations, however, officials do more than point to the proverbial rain. They look to the rainbow.

As the governing board considers closing one or more campuses, its vision remains on resolving the district's deficit while also expanding learning opportunities that create brighter futures for students.

More schools will have to repurpose buildings

Closing schools is painful, a choice no one wants to make.

But when all other cost-savings efforts come up short, it can be a way to ensure fairness in how programming and resources are distributed across all schools within a district.

This fairness of resource distribution improves education and outcomes for students. Fully enrolled schools can usually afford full-time art and music classes. They can expand

gifted and accelerated learning, sports and clubs.

Half-filled schools lack funding for these things, leaving districts with a choice of either short-changing students at underfilled schools or spreading those losses among all campuses.

Redesigning school districts requires innovative thinking for both programmatic improvements and repurposing closed campuses.

For example, districts can make their surrounding communities stronger by leasing closed schools to community-based agencies providing services such as health care, workforce development, adult learning or maker spaces.

In the coming months and years, more districts will have to take steps to consolidate and/or close schools.

A focus on building lives rather than maintaining buildings is what will make the conversations productive, resulting in better outcomes for students and communities.

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