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(In)Effective Responses to Shrinking Enrollment: The Pressures of Demographic Change on California's Schools

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May 2026

Stanford | SCALE Initiative
Accelerator for Learning

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Across California, school district leaders are learning how quickly enrollment can become a governance problem. When student enrollments fall, districts lose revenue, which often leads to financial difficulties. Faced with decreased state revenue, local school boards have few options: they can lay off staff, or they can consolidate or close schools. Both options are typically painful and controversial. In many cases, school closures become hot button political conflicts because of the ways they reshape community life (LaFortune et al., 2023). Since 2015, 630 schools across the state have closed, and 57 were closed in the 2024-25 academic year (Xie & Willis, 2026).

In a district-level analysis of California enrollment from 2014–15 to 2024–25, we found that nearly two in three districts (637 of 998 with reportable data) lost enrollment over the last decade, a figure which is present across all levels of urbanicity[1]. This is not simply an issue for California. As a result of lower birth rates, many states and communities throughout the nation are now facing similar challenges.

In California, enrollment decline has been projected as an inevitable part of the state's future (State of California Department of Finance, 2025). Declining birth rates, reduced immigration, and outward migration, are trends that are impacting schools throughout the state. Recent projections suggest continued losses across most regions through at least the next decade (Lafortune et al., 2023). However, while some districts are shrinking, others are holding steady, and a small number are growing. Variations in the degree and pace of enrollment decline among school districts, cannot be

[1]Urbanicity is the degree to which a specific geographical area is considered urban, ranging from rural remote settings to large cities. The National Center for Education Sciences' (NCES) urbanicity framework distinguishes four broad locale types with subcategories (e.g., fringe/distant/remote for rural and town; small/midsize/large for city and suburban) (NCES, 2024). These categories capture differences in population density, labor markets, and service infrastructure.

explained by birthrates alone. As we will show, variations in enrollment patterns are evident even within the same county or region.

This paper analyzed how districts throughout the state are responding to challenges caused by enrollment decline. Prior research on school closures and district fiscal stress suggests that the costs of downsizing are often borne first, and most heavily, by schools serving historically marginalized students (Hahnel & Marchitello, 2023). In California, where district funding is closely tied to enrollment and per pupil attendance through the Local Control Funding Formula (O'neal et al., 2025), enrollment decline can quickly translate into reductions in state funding allocations to schools that constrain resources and limit what districts can offer families (Lafortune et al., 2023).

In a previous paper (Makori and Noguera, 2025), we focused on how urban districts, specifically Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and Inglewood Unified School District (ISUD), have been impacted by enrollment decline. In the paper, we treat enrollment shrinkage as a structuring condition that shapes how districts plan for the future. We also explore the role of local city governments and civic leaders in addressing the accompanying challenges.

In this paper we use NCES locale classifications to analyze enrollment patterns in urban, suburban, and rural districts, and we explore the variety of factors that may contribute to enrollment loss or gain (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). We show that patterns of enrollment change are shaped by the unique factors and conditions present within each locale. Our analysis shows that districts with the steepest percentage decline in student enrollment are overwhelmingly rural. We also show that the districts with the greatest growth are often located in suburban communities where housing growth is greatest, and at present, most affordable for families. Rural districts face the most immediate fiscal threats because they have fewer resources to deploy to counter the effects of enrollment decline on financial volatility..

Large urban districts throughout the state are also experiencing significant declines in enrollment, but as we show, they exhibit a different set of challenges and potential opportunities for buffering the effects of change. High population cities across California are grappling with sustained enrollment losses that predated the pandemic and persisted after schools reopened (California Department of Education, 2023; Lafortune & Prunty, 2023). At present, Los Angeles, San Francisco, West Contra Costa, Oakland, San Diego, Sacramento and Long Beach, are all facing the combined

challenge of declining enrollment, mass layoffs, and labor unrest. However, unlike rural communities, California's cities possess other resources that can be deployed to support local schools. Additionally, a small but growing number of districts are showing that declining enrollment can also open up new opportunities as they develop creative options for utilizing shuttered schools in ways that benefit neighborhoods, key constituencies, and stabilize revenue. We argue that if local policy makers address the disjuncture between school districts and local municipalities caused by "loose coupling" - a point we focused upon in our 2025 paper (Makori and Noguera, 2025), declining enrollment need not result in a downward spiral of system collapse.

Suburban districts, by contrast, present a mixed and fairly complex set of patterns. While some experience decline, others are experiencing growth as housing production, boundary adjustments, and district reputation attract new families and students (LaFortune et al, 2023). Given the variation in patterns, enrollment change is an issue that cannot be approached through a single policy framework. Instead, a distinct place-based dynamic must be considered in order for policy responses to be tailored to local conditions.

To make sense of these patterns, this paper borrows from organizational theory and prior work on the "loose coupling" of school systems to their surrounding communities (Weick, 1976; Makori & Noguera, 2025). We use the concept of loose coupling to describe the ways in which educational systems and municipal governments are interdependent but weakly connected. This disconnect allows local leaders to treat the fate of their school systems separately from other community needs despite the importance of district operations and employment to the local economy, and the dependence of many residents on their local public schools. We argue that enrollment decline must be treated as an institutional stressor and should be addressed by local officials in concert with district officials. Collaborative problem solving will make it possible for local housing policies, governance procedures, and family decision-making processes to be considered as student populations decline.

Additionally, we utilize the concept of urbanicity to assess how different kinds of school districts throughout the state are experiencing changes in enrollment. Through a descriptive analysis of statewide enrollment patterns, our paper maps enrollment decline across school districts and student demographics. Such an analysis is important for identifying areas that may need support as student populations decline.

Finally, we provide an embedded case study of three districts in Sacramento County to illustrate how demographic and economic pressures can yield different enrollment trajectories, and influence how local jurisdictions respond to declining enrollment in urban, suburban and rural communities.

Holistically, the patterns revealed in our paper indicate that demographic pressure does not perfectly translate into district enrollment trends. Instead, enrollment change is mediated by the strength of alignment between districts and the local ecosystems that shape family residence and schooling decisions, particularly housing markets, municipal planning, and schooling alternatives. By distinguishing between demographic pressures and institutional conditions, our paper aims to contribute a clear analysis of how California's enrollment decline is impacting various school districts, as well as offer a conceptual framework that we hope will be useful to improving the effectiveness of districts as they manage the effects of enrollment decline.

Research Questions

Guided by the statewide enrollment patterns summarized above, as well as prior research on demographic change, school finance, and organizational adaptation, our study addresses the following questions:

1. 1.Across California, what patterns of district enrollment change are evident between 2014–15 and 2024–25?
2. How do these enrollment patterns vary by urbanicity (City, Suburban, Town, Rural), including differences between small and large districts?
3. What county and regional clustering patterns are visible among districts experiencing the most pronounced enrollment declines and increases? What contextual factors highlighted in prior research (e.g., housing constraints, demographic change, schooling alternatives) help to interpret these patterns?
4. Can a case study of three districts in Sacramento County help illuminate how districts can manage the challenges that accompany enrollment change?

Conceptual Framework

Our paper adapts the concept of loose coupling to interpret how districts respond to enrollment change. Weick (1976) first introduced the concept of loose coupling to describe organizations where component parts of an organization operate in a siloed manner despite being structurally connected and integral to the functioning of the system as a whole. Weick recognized that a potential design benefit of loosely coupled systems is that component parts can function with some degree of autonomy without being impaired by dysfunction elsewhere in the system. However, he also recognized that loose coupling can exacerbate fragmentation and lack of recognition of shared interests among the parts of the system. By not acknowledging their inter-dependence, loosely coupled systems can fail to operate in the interest of the whole.

When school districts are loosely coupled from the municipalities where they are situated, problems facing schools may not be treated as threats to the municipality as a whole. Weick warned that in a loosely coupled system, chronic dysfunction can result because disconnected operation of the parts of the system prevents lead actors (i.e. mayor, superintendent, civic leaders, elected school boards, etc.) from coordinating their activities, sharing information, and operating with a sense of shared responsibility for the larger system. In this paper, we extend Weick's (1976) organizational concept to consider how school districts might coordinate their planning efforts with local municipal and county institutions to devise effective responses to enrollment shrinkage. By recognizing the ways in which school closures influence community conditions (e.g., housing, planning, transportation), local actors can make decisions that benefit the entire ecosystem. We propose that the alternative to loose coupling is a tight embrace from civic leaders and local government.

In a previous paper on large urban districts, we applied loose coupling to explain the structural disconnect between local municipal government and public school systems. We argued that the disconnect obscures the centrality of schools to the social and economic health of neighborhoods and the municipality as a whole (Makori & Noguera, 2025). In loosely coupled systems, as public school enrollment declines, district decisions about staffing, programming, and facilities, often generate political conflict and have financial impacts that affect the local economy and contribute to a cycle of continuous decline. Without support and coordination from local officials at the city and county level, opportunities to align housing policy, neighborhood development, and schooling alternatives may not

be considered. Loose coupling can perpetuate a cycle of district decline as downsizing decisions alienate local residents from schools, increase political conflict with labor, and intensify neighborhood instability. The alternative to loose coupling is what we term a "*warm embrace*" between local public officials and civic leaders who work closely with district officials to plan a managed transition toward a smaller, but improved school system. Warm embrace can include coordinated planning around housing and school capacity, shared strategies to stabilize local neighborhoods and schools, and joint public communication when consolidating K-12 resources.

In this paper, we analyze how three factors are influencing how districts respond to enrollment change:

1. *Demographic Pressures*
    - Birth rates, immigration trends, and migration patterns shape the size and composition of K-12 populations (Lafortune et al., 2023).
    - Housing costs and availability influence where families with children reside, especially in metropolitan regions where affordability shapes family formation and mobility (Lafortune et al., 2023).
    - These pressures do not translate neatly into district enrollment. This is because where students enroll is mediated by both contextual circumstances and the schooling decisions that families make.
2. *Institutional Mediation*
    - When making decisions about where to enroll their children in school families often respond to perceived school quality, safety, stability, and programmatic offerings. Can these perceptions be influenced by changes made in the community by local and district officials (Campos & Kearns, 2024)?
    - Enrollment change is also influenced by competition among schools, particularly when significant alternatives are available among charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling/microschooling (Lafortune et al., 2023).
    - District actions, such as boundary changes, the creation of magnet options, and school consolidations, can either reduce friction for families (retention) or increase it (exit).
3. *Governance*

- Governance conditions shape whether districts and local institutions can coordinate a response, or whether districts must respond to enrollment change in relative isolation.
- District governance structures are generally separate from municipal governance, limiting coordinated responses to fiscal and enrollment challenges even though district decisions have far-reaching consequences for local communities (Makori & Noguera, 2025).
- The degree of loose coupling varies across contexts. As we will show, in some communities, schools are treated as integral civic infrastructure. In other areas, public schools operate without the benefit of broader civic support (i.e. the warm embrace) in part because they disproportionately serve low-income residents (Makori & Noguera, 2025).
- When coupling is weak, enrollment decline is more likely to trigger controversy, financial hardships, and a loss of confidence in district leaders as austerity leads to closures which contributes to further shrinking, rather than strategic redesign. When coupling is tight, and districts operate with a *warm embrace* from local partners, they can more effectively manage enrollment decline or plan for growth in ways that benefit long-term community interests.

In the following section of this paper, we analyze how the degree of urbanicity influences how these domains interact. In rural locales, small enrollment bases and limited housing markets can produce high volatility in enrollment. A major fire or a new housing development can drastically alter enrollment in a short period of time. In urban locales, pressure created by rising housing costs and sectoral alternatives such as charter and micro schools, can contribute to gradual but steady enrollment decline. In suburban locales where there is housing growth and strong civic support, enrollment decline may not be an immediate threat.

One of the questions we address throughout this paper is the measures districts can enact to attract families to offset enrollment decline, or to strategically shrink local schools when decline is inevitable. Conceptually, we assess the effectiveness of policy approaches to declining enrollment through the lens of loose coupling. Effective responses to shrinking should include coordinated planning efforts among local officials to address the consequences of enrollment decline. Ineffective

policy responses to shrinking occur when districts respond to enrollment decline in isolation, without the benefit of support from local actors. Fragmented decision making accelerates district instability and invariably, controversial school closures that undermine public confidence and support for public schools. The statewide analysis maps where decline and growth are concentrated, and shows how this correlates with student characteristics. The embedded case study is used to provide an account of how local housing markets, perceptions of school quality, and the availability of alternatives interact with district decisions to shape enrollment trajectories.

Methods

This study uses a descriptive, district-level analysis to map patterns of K–12 enrollment changes across California between the 2014–15 and 2024–25 school years. Our aim is to document the contours of enrollment decline and growth across place and student composition, and to surface patterns that can guide further explanatory work and inform district planning under the conditions of demographic decline.

Data sources. We compiled annual district enrollment counts from the California Department of Education enrollment reports from the 2014-15 and 2024-25 school years. We link these counts to district locale codes using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) locale framework (City, Suburban, Town, Rural and subcategories such as fringe/distant/remote) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). We supplement enrollment totals with district characteristics commonly used in research on enrollment decline and school finance: student race/ethnicity distributions, socioeconomic indicators (e.g., measures related to economic disadvantage), and indicators of K-12 alternatives such as charter school enrollment where available. We also reference statewide and regional demographic context, including policy-relevant factors associated with declining enrollment to contextualize the descriptive patterns (Lafortune et al., 2023).

Sample and inclusion. The analytic sample includes all California districts with reportable enrollment values in both 2014–15 and 2024–25. Districts without comparable values across the full window were excluded from decade-change computations. This yielded 998 districts with reportable data for the decade comparison.

Measures. Our primary measure is percent change in district enrollment between 2014–15 and 2024–25. This builds on our previous paper, which focused more on absolute change to give more focus to large, urban districts losing thousands of students. Because percent change can be unstable for very small districts, we interpret extreme percentage changes alongside baseline enrollment levels and locale context.

Analytic strategy. We proceed in four steps. First, we describe the statewide distribution of enrollment change across districts and summarize the share of districts experiencing decline, stability, or growth. Second, we identify the 50 districts with the greatest percentage enrollment declines and characterize their locale composition and county distribution. Third, we replicate this approach for the 50 districts with the greatest percentage enrollment increases. Fourth, we use these patterns toward a case study profiling of Sacramento County as further described below.

Case study. To complement the statewide descriptive analysis, our paper includes a short case study profile of three school districts in Sacramento County. We use these cases to 1) examine the role that local contexts, district strategies, and trends in the local housing market play in response to changes in enrollment, and 2) consider the strongest policies that might be considered in response to the specific challenges presented to enrollment decline. We selected three districts in Sacramento County to represent observable trends in urban, suburban, and rural. We profile these three districts—Sacramento City Unified, Elk Grove Unified, and Galt Joint Union Elementary and high school districts[2]— to consider the potential factors shaping enrollment trends and future trajectories. Specifically, we draw from district-level enrollment and demographic profiles (including charter/private sector context where available), local housing data, and district and community responses to enrollment-related pressures (e.g., layoffs, deficits, facilities planning). We organize this evidence around housing costs and housing supply, perceptions of school quality and family schooling decisions, and the availability of schooling alternatives, which we then interpret through our loose coupling framework to assess the extent to which local municipal support aligns with district actions. In doing so, the Sacramento profiles are used to illustrate the mechanisms behind (in)effective shrinking that the statewide district typology cannot fully capture on its own.

[2] Galt Joint Union Elementary School District and Galt Joint Union High School District are two separate districts. However, we profile them as one entity in our study given the rural commonalities of being situated in the same town (e.g. same housing market, same town governance, etc)

Limitations. These descriptive analyses are not intended to identify causal drivers of enrollment change. In addition, district boundaries do not align neatly with census geographies used for demographic estimates; to standardize this process, we analyzed the locale of each California district office address. Finally, extreme percentage change among small districts should be interpreted as volatility rather than as a direct proxy for systemwide transformation.

Statewide Enrollment Change, 2014–15 to 2024–25

The following statewide descriptive analysis addresses RQ1 by documenting the overall distribution of district enrollment change in California between 2014–15 and 2024–25, showing that enrollment decline is the dominant condition across districts. This also addresses RQ2 by demonstrating that enrollment change is patterned by urbanicity, with the most extreme percentage declines concentrated among rural and remote districts, and sustained losses continuing among large urban districts, while suburban and city locales appear more mixed in the growth tail. The "top 50" decline and growth analyses speak to RQ3 by revealing county and regional level clustering among the most pronounced changes, suggesting that demographic decline is mediated by place-based conditions rather than operating uniformly across the state. Finally, because statewide descriptive patterns cannot fully explain why districts within the same region diverge on enrollment change, the paper addresses RQ4 through a case profiling of Sacramento County. In the profiling, we analyze three districts (urban, suburban, rural) to illustrate the mechanisms (e.g. housing dynamics, perceived school quality, availability of schooling alternatives) that help translate demographic pressure into distinct enrollment trajectories.

We organize findings around the statewide distribution of enrollment change and two "tails" of the distribution: districts with the greatest decade-long declines and districts with the greatest decade-long increases. Throughout, we use urbanicity as an organizing lens to show how patterns of shrinking and growth are structured by place.

Across 998 California districts with reportable enrollment in both years, enrollment decline is the dominant condition. Over the decade, 637 districts experienced enrollment decreases, 42 showed no change, and 319 increased (see Table 1). Nearly two in three districts reported declining enrollment during the last ten-years.

Table 1

Enrollment Change, All CA Districts 2014–15 to 2024–25

Total # of CA districts with reportable data	# of districts with decreased enrollment	# of districts with no enrollment change	# of districts with increased enrollment
998	637	42	319

This distribution matters for two reasons. First, it suggests that shrinking is not confined to a small set of "distressed" systems, but rather a statewide condition. From a loose coupling perspective, statewide enrollment decline means that districts must make decisions that affect staffing, facilities, and neighborhood life. But in many communities, these decisions unfold with limited alignment to municipal planning, housing policy, and other institutions that shape whether families stay, leave, or choose alternative schools.

Second, the share of districts with enrollment growth indicates that decline is not inevitable in every California context. This helps explain why the same statewide condition can produce very different local responses and outcomes. Even under statewide demographic decline, some locales and districts are able to attract or retain students. The question then becomes: where is enrollment decline the sharpest, and what do the patterns of variation suggest about how demographic pressure is being mediated by communities and institutions?

Districts With the Greatest Enrollment Losses

To identify where shrinking is most intense, we examined the 50 California districts with the greatest percentage declines in enrollment between 2014–15 and 2024–25 (see Appendix A). Several cases reflect extreme contraction, including Ravendale-Termo Elementary (Lassen County), which fell from 665 students to 3 (a 99.5% decline). 28 districts in the top-50 decline list lost at least half of their enrollment over the decade.

A key statewide pattern is that the largest percent-decline districts are overwhelmingly rural. Of the 50 districts with the greatest percentage declines, 36 are classified as rural locales under NCES. Notably, 13 of these are "remote" rural locales, NCES' strongest indicator of rurality; 12 are "rural distant," and 11 sit on the fringe of rural/town categories. Only 14 of the top-50 decline districts are in

City, Suburban, or Town locales (see NCES locale definitions: National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

This rural concentration does not necessarily mean that rural districts are uniquely "declining," and doomed to ultimately fail. Rather, it highlights two realities that are easy to miss when looking only at statewide averages. First, small baseline enrollments make rural districts more susceptible to dramatic percentage swings when local populations shift. Second, rural districts often face limited housing markets and constrained capacity to replace population losses through in-migration (Ward et al., 2022; Winikoff, 2026), which can make even modest demographic change feel system-threatening. Essentially, rural decline is often both real and amplified by scale.

Additionally, loose coupling can intensify this vulnerability. In many rural settings, districts have fewer nearby institutions with the capacity to share planning, stabilize services, or repurpose facilities amidst declining. When coordination is weak, districts are less likely to experience decline as a managed transition that protects educational quality and community stability.

County clustering also appears in the top-decline tail. Humboldt County shows up repeatedly among the most rapidly shrinking districts, alongside counties such as Santa Barbara and San Benito. While county patterns require careful interpretation, these clusters suggest that regional dynamics (e.g. labor markets, housing, population redistribution) may be producing concentrated shrinkage in specific parts of the state. These county clusters may also reflect differences in how local ecosystems are coordinated. Where housing, labor markets, and civic planning are weakly connected to school planning, enrollment change can concentrate and accelerate, particularly when districts must face the demographic shifts without broader regional strategies.

Some large districts also appear among notable decliners (e.g., Baldwin Park Unified in Los Angeles County declined from 18,316 to 9,565 students, a 48% drop). These cases remind us that shrinking is not only a rural story; large urban and suburban districts can lose tens of thousands of students even when percentage changes are less extreme than those observed among small districts.

Districts With the Greatest Enrollment Increases

To identify where enrollment growth is occurring, we examined the 50 districts with the greatest percentage increases between 2014–15 and 2024–25 (see Appendix B). Growth in the upper

tail can be dramatic. Winship-Robbins Elementary School District (Sutter County) increased from 197 students to 2,843—more than a 1300% increase over the decade. Thirty-one districts in the top-50 growth list at least doubled their enrollment (≥100% increase) (authors' compilation).

Urbanicity again plays a central role, though the pattern differs from the decline tail. Rural districts remain strongly represented among the largest growers: 29 of the 50 top-growth districts are rural. However, the growth tail also includes a larger share of city and suburban districts than the decline tail: 21 of the 50 top-growth districts are in City, Suburban, or Town locales. In the growth tail, city districts are disproportionately "large city" locales, and suburban districts include large, midsize, and small categories (authors' compilation).

This mixed composition underscores an important point: rurality is associated with volatility (both decline and growth), while suburban and urban growth often reflects different mechanisms, including housing production, boundary dynamics, and the geographic re-sorting of families with children. Counties that appear frequently in the growth tail include San Diego, San Bernardino, and Fresno, suggesting that enrollment gains are concentrated in particular regions—often those experiencing housing expansion or population redistribution within and across metro areas. As we explore more deeply in the case study profiling, growth in these contexts can be understood as a form of recoupling, where housing expansion, municipal planning, and district capacity decisions align in ways that make it easier for families with children to enter and remain. Essentially, then, some districts appear to benefit from an implicit "warm embrace" in which local development and school planning reinforce one another rather than operating in separate capacities.

The growth tail also includes notable large districts. For example, Twin Rivers Unified (Sacramento County) increased from roughly 31,000 to 43,000 students over the decade (about 40% growth). These cases challenge a simple narrative of statewide decline and highlight how growth can occur in the same broader regions where nearby districts are shrinking.

What These Statewide Patterns Suggest

Taken together, the statewide patterns suggest that enrollment decline in California is widespread, but not uniform. The distribution is structured by urbanicity, and the "tails" of decline and growth are disproportionately rural, indicating that many rural districts operate under conditions of heightened volatility. At the same time, the presence of both growing and shrinking districts within the

same counties and metro regions signals that demographic pressure is being mediated by institutional and contextual factors, including housing and the availability of schooling alternatives (Lafortune et al., 2023).

These descriptive findings also clarify what a statewide analysis cannot resolve on its own. District enrollment is not simply a reflection of how many children live in an area; it reflects where families choose to enroll, how districts reduce or increase friction in enrollment processes, and how districts align programmatic offerings with community expectations. In terms of our conceptual framework, the statewide patterns point to variation in the coupling between districts and their surrounding communities—variation that likely differs across locale types and across racial and socioeconomic contexts. Within this loose coupling context, enrollment is shaped not only by how many children live in a region, but by whether local institutions coordinate around the conditions that retain families, such as housing, school quality, enrollment processes, and educational alternatives. When those institutional connections are weak, demographic pressure may be more likely to translate into contentious school closures and further decline.

For this reason, we pair the statewide analysis with an embedded case study of Sacramento County, profiling one urban, one suburban, and one rural district. The case study is designed to make visible the mechanisms behind divergence: why decline persists in some settings even when a county's population grows, and why other districts in the same region may stabilize or expand. In the language of loose coupling, the Sacramento profiles allow us to examine what "re-coupling" can look like in practice—and to identify the local conditions under which shrinking is managed effectively versus ineffectively (Weick, 1976; Makori & Noguera, 2025).

A Tale of Three Districts

We have chosen to profile three school districts in northern California to analyze enrollment trends. The three—Sacramento City Unified, Elk Grove Unified, and Galt Joint Union—also provide a way to contrast enrollment trends in urban, suburban, and rural school districts. We use the three-district comparison to examine coupling in practice, specifically whether and how municipal actors, civic institutions, and district leaders coordinate around housing, planning, and family decision-making during enrollment change. Essentially, the profiling is intended to illustrate how the

presence or absence of “warm embrace” shapes whether enrollment decline becomes manageable or destabilizing, in addition to the policy responses that can improve warm embrace.

As the tables in this section show, both Sacramento and Galt Joint Union have experienced a significant decline in enrollment (9.7% in Sacramento, 8.4% in Galt Joint Union Elementary), while Elk Grove has experienced an increase of 2.3% over a ten-year period (2014–15 to 2024–25). It is notable that, while births and cohort sizes matter, available district-level data do not allow us to attribute divergence across these communities to birth rates alone. We therefore investigate other plausible explanations for differences in enrollment patterns.

As we conducted our analysis of enrollment trends in the three districts we sought to understand which factors might be most relevant to explaining observable patterns. Specifically, we considered: (1) housing costs and availability for families with children, (2) perceptions of school quality, and (3) changes in enrollment in charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling. We analyze each of these factors as we profile the three districts in the sections that follow.

Sacramento Unified School District (Urban)

Located in the state’s capital, the Sacramento City Unified School District bears features typically associated with a large, urban district. Approximately 40% of the students enrolled are Latino, 18% are Asian and Pacific Islanders, 18% are White, 12% are Black and 7% are two or more races)Ed Data 2025). This contrasts with the city population which is 36% non-Hispanic White, 29% Latino/Hispanic, 20% Asian and Pacific Islander 12% Black and 15% two or more races (US Census 2025). With over 80% of students from households that qualify for free or reduced price lunch, the district’s enrollment is not only disproportionately composed of racial minority students, the district serves also a disproportionate percentage of children from low-income households. Out of 80 schools in the district, 100% of students at 70 schools meet the federal criteria for free lunch.

Although Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) has experienced a decline of 9.7% over the last ten-years (see Table 2), housing cost does not appear to be a major factor. In 2025, the average cost for a house in the Sacramento metropolitan area was $465,000 (Zillow, n.d.-a). This compares favorably to the median cost for a single-family home in the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Area which was 1.275 million in 2025 (Zillow, n.d.-b).

Table 2

Enrollment Change, Sacramento USD 2014–15 to 2024–25

Enrollment, 2014-15	Enrollment, 2024-25	Enrollment Change
46,868	42,337	-9.66%

Newly developed communities such as East Sacramento, Natomas, Tahoe Park, Land Park, and Pocket have newer housing stock, and a reputation for safety and good schools. However, the housing market in the city is tight and demand far outstrips supply. While the population of the Sacramento metro area increased by 11.6% from 2010–2020, the housing supply grew by only 7.1% (Bhargava, 2025).

Despite Sacramento's relatively affordable housing market and the growth of the city's population, district enrollment has declined steadily. Some reports point to the ongoing effects of the pandemic because many families with children moved from the area when schools were closed from the spring of 2020 through the reopening period. However, district data reveal that enrollment declines preceded the pandemic and have not been reversed since the reopening of schools (Ed-Data, n.d.-a). This suggests that housing affordability and lower birth rates may also be driving the decline in enrollment.

Charter school enrollment in the city of Sacramento is relatively high, but it does not appear to be a major factor in the district's overall enrollment decline. While there are several charter schools in Sacramento, charter school enrollment has not increased in recent years and has been relatively stable (Ed-Data, n.d.-a). Close examination reveals that Black students are disproportionately more likely to enroll in charter schools. Charter schools in Sacramento enroll about 3% more Black students than traditional public schools. Some evidence shows Black students enrolled in charter high schools are more likely to complete A–G requirements and enroll in the UC or CSU systems (California Charter Schools Association, 2024). Additionally, at 8%, private school enrollment in the city of Sacramento is lower than the statewide average for major cities (California Department of Education, 2025).

Recent studies suggest that a major driver of enrollment decline in Sacramento may be perceptions of school quality and families' schooling decisions. In an editorial for the Sacramento Bee, PACE CEO Heather Hough and Jaime Estrada-Miller reported on a study showing that 31% of area

parents surveyed reported switching schools and an additional 40% said they were considering a switch. Parents cited a desire for a different educational experience and dissatisfaction with COVID-related safety measures among key reasons for exit (Hough & Estrada-Miller, 2023).

Sacramento City Unified School District is managed by an elected board of education and an appointed superintendent. In recent years the district has been compelled to lay off hundreds of employees and close several schools in order to close a deficit of 134 million dollars (Valle, 2026). Preoccupied with financial challenges, the district appears to have undertaken few measures to attract parents to district schools or to address parental concerns about poverty. Furthermore, even as the local board has been consumed with financial controversy, city and county officials have largely allowed district officials to manage the challenges they face on their own without the benefit of local support. We will return to this point in the conclusion.

Elk Grove Union School District (Suburban)

With 64,358 students and 68 schools (see Table 3), Elk Grove is one of California's larger school districts (fourth largest). Located just outside of Sacramento, the school district is racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse and serves families in Elk Grove as well as parts of Rancho Cordova, Sacramento, and unincorporated areas of Sacramento County. According to district profile data, approximately 30% of students are Asian American (including Filipino), 28% are Latino, 15% are White, 10% are Black, 9% are two or more races, 2% are Pacific Islander, and less than 1% are Native American (Ed-Data, n.d.-b). In 2024–25, 53% of students were identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and 36.7% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (Ed-Data, n.d.-b).

Table 3

Enrollment Change, Elk Grove USD 2014–15 to 2024–25

Enrollment, 2014-15	Enrollment, 2024-25	Enrollment Change
62,888	64,358	+2.33%

While older, more established neighborhoods have experienced some decline in enrollment, newer bedroom communities in Rancho Cordova and Anatolia have experienced increases that are

attributed to the development of new housing for middle-income households. Elk Grove has also experienced an increase in new, affordable housing. In 2025, a new housing development called MOSA added 1,200 units to the community's housing stock (Sacramento Bee). Over 800 new homes were built in 2023–24, and large new developments have been approved by the City Council. The average home in Elk Grove is valued at around $600,000, though there is considerable variation across neighborhoods (Smith, 2025).

In comparison to Sacramento City Unified, charter school enrollment in Elk Grove Unified School District (Elk Grove USD) is relatively low (about 1.9%) and has held steady for the last five years (Ed-Data, n.d.-b). New residents to the district often cite the performance of the public schools as one factor influencing their decision to move to the area. District schools are generally perceived as "high quality" and safe, and with its graduation rate and college enrollment rate at over 90%, local schools have become a source of community pride. In 4th and 8th grades, more than 50% of students meet or exceed proficiency rates in math and language arts (Ed-Data, n.d.-b).

The city of Elk Grove actively supports its schools in a variety of ways. In 2025, the city sponsored a scholarship of $1,000 for students with a GPA of 2.0 or higher who are actively involved in their school or community. Additionally, several of the cities that are served by EGUSD work closely with the school district to make parks and other city facilities available for district programs. "People move here for the high quality of life," said Elk Grove Mayor Bobbie Singh-Allen. "We have one of the best school districts. It's a safe community. We have great parks, so of course, you want to be part of this place."

Galt Joint Union (Rural)

Located at the northern border of Sacramento County, the Galt Joint Union Elementary and High School districts serve students from the city of Galt as well as children from unincorporated areas in Sacramento and San Joaquin counties. Sixty-three percent of students are identified as Hispanic and 34% are identified as White (district website). In 2025, the elementary district served approximately 3,470 students, and the high school district served approximately 1,943 (Ed-Data, n.d.-c). Fifty-five percent of students come from households that qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (Galt Joint Union Elementary District, n.d.).

No charter schools are located in either district, and despite an influx of new residents, both districts project continued enrollment decreases as cohort sizes decline and as families navigate affordability constraints in the broader region (see Table 4; see Table 5). In rural settings such as Galt, even modest declines can create outsized fiscal stress because the district is heavily dependent on per pupil allocations to address its fixed costs.

Table 4

Enrollment Change, Galt Joint Union Elementary 2014–15 to 2024–25

Enrollment, 2014-15	Enrollment, 2024-25	Enrollment Change
3,693	3,382	-8.4%

Table 5

Enrollment Change, Galt Joint Union High 2014–15 to 2024–25

Enrollment, 2014-15	Enrollment, 2024-25	% Change
2,263	1,943	-14.14%

Although city leaders in Galt occasionally attend local school district meetings, the two entities largely function separately. At a recent meeting of the school board, an Assistant City Manager presented plans for new housing construction, and asserted that this may lead to an increase in enrollment in the future (Valencia, 2026a). However, district leaders appear more concerned with immediate fiscal challenges, namely avoiding being forced to accept “differentiated assistance” from the County Office of Education due to poor student performance. District leaders have been encouraged by the prospect of modest growth in enrollment which has made it possible to avoid fiscal challenges (Valencia, 2026b).

Summary of the Case Studies

As described in our prior work on loose coupling and the “warm embrace” of urban schools (Makori & Noguera, 2025), of the three districts profiled, Elk Grove has received the most significant civic support, while Galt Unified and Sacramento City Unified have been largely left to fend for themselves as they

cope with steady declines in enrollment. Despite being located in the state's capital, a major urban center, SCUSD is foundering—facing large deficits and political instability. Recent reporting indicates the district has faced a $43 million deficit, high chronic absenteeism, and the possibility of state intervention (Keavy, 2025). Faced with huge fiscal challenges in Sacramento, and academic challenges in Galt, both districts are primarily focused on stabilizing, and have shown little ability to devise strategies to attract new families.

In our 2025 paper, Makori and Noguera described how declining enrollment in Los Angeles and Inglewood were contributing to financial challenges in both districts. These challenges were attributed in part to the unwillingness of city and civic leaders to recognize the ways in which the fate of public schools were intertwined with the economic and social wellbeing of cities due to separation in governance. In both cities, neither city, county, nor state officials bear direct responsibility for local public schools, and although LAUSD is one of the largest employers in the region, the elected school board is the only body addressing the challenges facing the schools as enrollment declines.

Similarly, in Sacramento Unified School District responsibility for the fate of public schools lies solely with the elected school board and an appointed superintendent. This separation creates the perception that it is not in the interest of the city, county, or state to address challenges facing local public schools. Instead of a "warm embrace", local officials appear quite willing to remain on the sidelines as the district founders. Even though there is no other provider of education services that can replace the district at scale, and though the district is a major employer in the region, it has been left to fend for itself. Loss of jobs and the disruptions to communities created by school closures, will undoubtedly have damaging effects in low-income neighborhoods throughout the region.

It is noteworthy that when the *Sacramento Kings*, a professional sports franchise, threatened to leave the city, civic and business leaders rallied to generate financial support for the team. Instead of allowing this to happen, civic leaders rallied support to raise 223 million or the 500 million needed to construct the state of the art Golden 1 Center in 2016 where the Kings now play. So far, Sacramento City Unified has not been able to muster equivalent community support. The question is: why?

Elk Grove Unified School District provides a useful contrast. The district serves several municipalities and is part of a region adjacent to Sacramento that is growing rapidly. Schools continue to experience steady though modest growth in enrollment, and the city of Elk Grove in particular has

provided a “warm embrace”. Local elected officials, particularly the mayor of Elk Grove, recognize that the reputation of local public schools has great bearing on whether or not the city and region will attract new residents. For this reason, it has sponsored scholarships for students and engaged in planning efforts with district staff to ensure that a favorable reputation for local public schools is maintained. In addition, the district itself has initiated efforts to address the needs and concerns of parents by building community partnerships through robust community service programs and volunteer opportunities. As a result of these efforts, it has received active support for new construction. The district has built new elementary schools in recent years, and planning for additional facilities continues as growth concentrates in particular neighborhoods (Ed-Data, n.d.-c).

Finally, given that the Galt Joint Union districts are located in rural areas, one would expect that its public schools would experience the “warm embrace” from the communities they serve. Strong community support is a common feature of public schools in rural communities throughout the United States because they often serve as hubs for community activities such as sports, civic, and cultural events (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). However, in Galt, the communities served by the public schools are largely low-income, and they lack the resources to provide significant support. Instead, many residents look to public schools to provide basic services to children (e.g. food, clothing, after school activities, etc.) that families cannot afford. Furthermore, the vast geographic area served by the districts and the relatively small number of students served makes it difficult to garner supplemental resources from parents or local businesses. Unlike Sacramento City Unified—which should be able to form partnerships with local stakeholders to supplement and reinforce the needs of schools as enrollment declines—it is not clear where schools in Galt could obtain comparable support (Maier, 2024).

Policy Recommendations

In the final section of this paper we offer a set of policy recommendations that the state and local government officials can pursue to prepare for declining enrollment. Demographic trends show that lower birth rates are not a temporary phenomenon. This is a global issue facing wealthy nations throughout the world (Nargund, 2009), and some nations have begun planning to cope with the new

reality. A recent report from the International Monetary Fund pointed out that while a lower birth rates will produce challenges, it will also produce opportunities:

> "...fewer children and smaller populations will mean less need for spending on housing and childcare, freeing resources for other uses such as research and development and adoption of advanced technologies. Declines in fertility rates can stimulate economic growth by spurring expanded labor force participation, increased savings, and more accumulation of physical and human capital. Population decline may also reduce pressures on the environment associated with climate change, depletion of natural resources, and environmental degradation." (Bloom et al., 2025)

Given that declining enrollment is likely to be a major issue that all schools throughout California (including Elk Grove) will eventually face, it would be wise to begin planning to address the issue. As an alternative to the siloed approach of district planning, we recommend a "warm embrace" of public schools by local officials and civic leaders. Here are a few recommendations that we believe will be necessary for the state and local governments to consider as part of an effort to plan for shrinkage.

1) C**hange the funding formula -** Rather than pegging budget allocations to average daily attendance, the state could use a three-year rolling average so that districts have time to plan for reductions in budgets based on near-term forecasts. While this will not eliminate the need to reduce funding as enrollment declines, it will give district leaders more time to plan and prepare. The state is also considering a shift to enrollment-based funding, which would send over $6 billion dollars in additional funding to California's K-12 schools.
2) **Devise a plan to equitably close and consolidate schools** - While school closures may not be a particularly effective cost saving measure, when enrollment at a school drops so low that a district is no longer able to provide adequate resources, closure or consolidation may be necessary. Given that such actions are almost always controversial, even when the affected school has a history of under-performance, district and local leaders can provide parents and community groups with the opportunity to participate in the planning process so that they can provide input into alternative uses for shuttered school sites. In many California communities recently closed school sites are being used to develop new housing, recreation centers, and

even retail projects that can generate revenue for the district (Loudin, 2025) . By engaging local stakeholders in the planning process district leaders can ensure that closure decisions are made in a fair and equitable manner, and reduce the political fallout that often occurs when closures are necessary.

3) **Planning and Coordination at Local Level**: District officials should coordinate plans for school closures and consolidations with local officials. This will allow districts to devise plans to create newly consolidated schools that are more attractive to residents because they offer services such as after school programming that were not previously available. Additionally, if the decision to close schools is accompanied by the adoption of academic programs at nearby schools that appeal to parents such as dual immersion, STEM, and arts-focused schools, the impact of loss can be mitigated.
    a) **City and County Responsibility:** In urban locales, enrollment decline can be amplified by housing pressures and perceptions of school quality. City and county leaders should treat public schools as integral to neighborhood stability and local economic health by explicitly incorporating schools into economic development and neighborhood investment plans. This can include coordinating housing affordability strategies with school stability, investing in youth-serving supports that reduce chronic absenteeism, and partnering with districts to improve the coherence and accessibility of enrollment processes. Essentially, city officials should adopt a “warm embrace” in cities that signals a civic commitment to improving local education.
4) **Rural communities will require County and State support:** As our profile of Galt Union suggests, rural school districts may not be able to devise effective strategies for responding to declining enrollment on their own. With support from County and other local officials, new uses for school properties can be devised which provide critical services (e.g. food pantries, health clinics, etc.) to enhance community development.
5) **Early Warning Dashboard**: Using publicly available indicators (e.g., multi-year enrollment decline, chronic absenteeism, fiscal stress signals, staffing shortages), the state can develop an early warning dashboard of significant enrollment decline and pair it with a tiered support model. Districts experiencing rapid decline would receive targeted planning support, facilitation

for consolidation efforts, and assistance identifying redesign options that can stabilize enrollment and protect educational quality.

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Appendix A

CA districts with the greatest % decrease in enrollment, 2014-15 to 2024-25

District	County	Enrollment (2014-15)	Enrollment (2024-25)	% change
Ravendale-Termo Elementary	Lassen	665	3	-99.55
Mattole Unified	Humboldt	780	42	-94.62
Amador County Office of Education	Amador	209	23	-89.00
Mt. Baldy Joint Elementary	San Bernardino	167	20	-88.02
Mupu Elementary	Ventura	917	175	-80.92
Lassen County Office of Education	Lassen	30	6	-80.00
Los Olivos Elementary	Santa Barbara	471	159	-66.24
Santa Barbara County Office of Education	Santa Barbara	309	107	-65.37
Loleta Union Elementary	Humboldt	227	82	-63.88
Sonoma County Office of Education	Sonoma	769	278	-63.85
Jefferson Elementary	San Benito	11	4	-63.64
Big Lagoon Union Elementary	Humboldt	40	15	-62.50
Green Point Elementary	Humboldt	8	3	-62.50
Golden Feather Union Elementary	Butte	176	67	-61.93
Mono County Office of Education	Mono	519	209	-59.73
Big Creek Elementary	Fresno	51	21	-58.82
Tuolumne County Superintendent of Schools	Tuolumne	178	77	-56.74
Tres Pinos Union Elementary	San Benito	141	61	-56.74
Pleasant Valley Joint Union Elementary	San Luis Obispo	133	58	-56.39
San Benito County Office of Education	San Benito	116	54	-53.45
San Mateo County Office of Education	San Mateo	403	188	-53.35
Mendocino County Office of Education	Mendocino	92	43	-53.26
Westwood Unified	Lassen	382	182	-52.36
Plumas County Office of Education	Plumas	31	15	-51.61
Vallecitos Elementary	San Diego	396	195	-50.76

District	County	Enrollment (2014-15)	Enrollment (2024-25)	% change
Round Valley Joint Elementary	Inyo	136	68	-50.00
Laguna Joint Elementary	Marin	18	9	-50.00
Kashia Elementary	Sonoma	16	8	-50.00
Lost Hills Union Elementary	Kern	574	291	-49.30
Stony Creek Joint Unified	Glenn	106	55	-48.11
Baldwin Park Unified	Los Angeles	18,316	9,565	-47.78
Midway Elementary	Kern	120	65	-45.83
Linns Valley-Poso Flat Union	Kern	40	22	-45.00
Vista del Mar Union	Santa Barbara	118	65	-44.92
Del Norte County Office of Education	Del Norte	619	342	-44.75
Julian Union Elementary	San Diego	4,142	2,289	-44.74
Pioneer Union Elementary	Butte	74	41	-44.59
Klamath River Union Elementary	Siskiyou	9	5	-44.44
Paradise Unified	Butte	4,265	2,394	-43.87
Lagunitas Elementary	Marin	286	161	-43.71
Placer County Office of Education	Placer	718	408	-43.18
Snelling-Merced Falls Union Elementary	Merced	96	55	-42.71
Fieldbrook Elementary	Humboldt	157	90	-42.68
Inyo County Office of Education	Inyo	2,440	1,420	-41.80
Coffee Creek Elementary	Trinity	12	7	-41.67
Raisin City Elementary	Fresno	883	516	-41.56
Death Valley Unified	Inyo	35	21	-40.00
Ravenswood City Elementary	San Mateo	4,216	2,532	-39.94
Mt. Pleasant Elementary	Santa Clara	2,502	1,516	-39.41
Bradley Union Elementary	Monterey	89	54	-39.33

Appendix B

CA districts with the greatest % increase in enrollment, 2014-15 to 2024-25

District	County	Enrollment (2014-15)	Enrollment (2024-25)	% change
Winship-Robbins	Sutter	197	2,843	1343.15
Warner Unified	San Diego	297	3,258	996.97
Trinity County Office of Education	Trinity	15	144	860.00
Lake Elementary	Glenn	173	1,165	573.41
Maricopa Unified	Kern	2,438	15,701	544.01
Nuestro Elementary	Sutter	145	884	509.66
Westside Elementary	Fresno	854	4,460	422.25
SBE - San Francisco Flex Academy	San Francisco	89	457	413.48
Dehesa Elementary	San Diego	2,809	13,578	383.37
Lucerne Valley Unified	San Bernardino	2,921	14,031	380.35
Blake Elementary	Kern	5	23	360.00
Banta Elementary	San Joaquin	795	3,563	348.18
Helendale Elementary	San Bernardino	1,959	8,145	315.77
Kit Carson Union Elementary	Kings	411	1,495	263.75
Borrego Springs Unified	San Diego	864	3,066	254.86
Yolo County Office of Education	Yolo	189	647	242.33
Bogus Elementary	Siskiyou	6	20	233.33
Acton-Agua Dulce Unified	Los Angeles	4,043	13,443	232.50
SBE - Magnolia Science Academy Santa Ana	Orange	160	524	227.50
Alta Vista Elementary	Tulare	573	1,869	226.18
Orange County Department of Education	Orange	5,306	14,203	167.68
El Dorado County Office of Education	El Dorado	985	2,405	144.16
San Bernardino County Office of Education	San Bernardino	3,029	7,260	139.68

District	County	Enrollment (2014-15)	Enrollment (2024-25)	% change
Lammersville Joint Unified	San Joaquin	3,433	7,949	131.55
Solano County Office of Education	Solano	470	1,075	128.72
Beaumont Unified	Riverside	9,256	19,503	110.71
Buckeye Union Elementary	El Dorado	5,157	10,761	108.67
Liberty Elementary	Tulare	414	861	107.97
San Diego County Office of Education	San Diego	3,788	7,826	106.60
Humboldt County Office of Education	Humboldt	409	837	104.65
Liberty Elementary	Sonoma	958	1,923	100.73
Merced River Union Elementary	Merced	150	295	96.67
Duarte Unified	Los Angeles	3,896	7,547	93.71
Riverside County Office of Education	Riverside	7,629	13,942	82.75
Fresno County Office of Education	Fresno	2,380	4,278	79.75
Orange Center	Fresno	1,031	1,801	74.68
Meridian Elementary	Sutter	978	1,701	73.93
Alpaugh Unified	Tulare	629	1,074	70.75
Roberts Ferry Union Elementary	Stanislaus	117	199	70.09
San Luis Obispo County Office of Education	San Luis Obispo	496	823	65.93
Fort Sage Unified	Lassen	313	519	65.81
Sacramento County Office of Education	Sacramento	1,704	2,760	61.97
New Jerusalem Elementary	San Joaquin	4,536	7,267	60.21
Pacific Elementary	Santa Cruz	108	173	60.19
Oro Grande Elementary	San Bernardino	3,857	6,163	59.79
Contra Costa County Office of Education	Contra Costa	3,812	6,048	58.66
San Joaquin County Office of Education	San Joaquin	3,520	5,496	56.14

District	County	Enrollment (2014-15)	Enrollment (2024-25)	% change
Golden Valley Unified	Madera	1,923	2,997	55.85
Siskiyou County Office of Education	Siskiyou	450	697	54.89
Reeds Creek Elementary	Tehama	126	195	54.76