

Schools adapt in a shrinking Los Angeles Unified

LAUSD is coping with the loss of 300,000 students and the prospect of even more loss through 2030.

BY **KATE SEQUEIRA** MAY 27, 2022 <https://edsource.org/2022/schools-adapt-in-a-shrinking-los-angeles-unified/672760>

When music teacher Julio Sequeira attended Belmont High School before graduating in 2002, there was a constant hum that echoed through the school hallways. It was the backdrop to every conversation and school lesson. The Westlake school was home to more than 5,000 students at that point, making it easy to get lost in the craziness of the school day, Sequeira remembers.

But numbers have dwindled since then. Belmont is no longer the largest school in California — though in part due to Los Angeles Unified’s building spree in the early 2000s. The school now enrolls under 600 students and splits its campus with Sal Castro Middle School. A charter school might be added to the campus next year as well.

Now, Sequeira says, that familiar hum is no longer there. Students remain sparse in the three- and four-story buildings the school occupies across the 15-acre campus.

“That was the first thing I noticed when I got back here in 2018 — how quiet it was,” said Sequeira (no relation to reporter).

Though Belmont’s enrollment decline has been significant, it isn’t the only school that is grappling with the issue. Schools across LAUSD have watched their student populations dwindle as birth rates continue to decrease, immigration slows and families move away because of the rising cost of living, particularly housing. Some families have also turned toward charter schools within the district, which have more than doubled their student population over the last two decades to nearly 156,600 in 2019.

These trends are also clear across the state. For the first time in two decades, K-12 enrollment has dropped to under 6 million students.

“It’s just not sustainable,” USC policy, planning and demography professor Dowell Myers said, referring to the enrollment loss of the youngest students.

At its peak 20 years ago, LAUSD enrolled 737,000 students. The district now enrolls 430,000 students, [officials reported](#) last week amid predictions that enrollment will continue to drop by another 28% by the 2030-31 academic year. That would be at a significantly faster rate than predictions for both Los Angeles County and California. It’s a reality the district is preparing for financially as it plans the budget for the upcoming fiscal year and reevaluates staffing, programming and priorities. The district’s budget [swelled this year to \\$20 billion](#) due to federal Covid-19 funds, but officials worry about how declining enrollment will affect funding for its nearly 1,000 K-12 schools when the aid runs out.

“I can remember hearing about L.A. becoming the next New York and having an enrollment that would exceed 1 million students,” district CFO David Hart said at a budget presentation to the school board last week. “Now we are at the point in time where we are forecasting for a third of that student population.”

As part of Superintendent Alberto Carvalho’s [100-day plan](#), the district is currently analyzing enrollment trends as well as taking a look at where students have gone as it makes plans to attract families back to LAUSD schools. But, given the number of students the district has lost, it’s clear that its future will look very different from its past.

“We will have to navigate through difficult but important conversations and decisions in order not only to plan for the future, but also to ensure that, during a very unstable and unsustainable set of practices and processes, we come out the other end on solid footing without compromising the viability of our school district,” he said at the board meeting.

Schools like South L.A.'s Trinity Street Elementary School and Central L.A.'s Pio Pico Middle School have felt some of the more drastic impacts of enrollment decline. Both schools have been threatened with closures while navigating some of the largest drops in enrollment in the district. Though LAUSD confirms both will remain open through next school year, Pio Pico will not welcome a new class of sixth graders in August, according to district documents.

In addition, Westchester's Orville Wright Middle School may face displacement as LAUSD considers handing over its campus to a charter school and moving the 417-person school to a Westchester high school campus.

"The main way that school districts adapt is by closing the schools and consolidating, which is very disruptive," USC professor Myers said, referring to enrollment declines. "Communities and people hate that, but [districts] kind of have to."