Andrea Thomas Brandley
Senior Education Analyst

Phil Dean
Chief Economist and Public Finance Senior Research Fellow

Heidi Prior
Public Policy Analyst

Opportunity Knocks

The Fiscal Impacts of Declining School-age Population in Utah

Utah's changing demographics, marked by a projected decline in the school-age population, present unique fiscal opportunities for state and local leaders.

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Kem C. Gardner POLICY INSTITUTE
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
DAVID ECCLES SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

411 East South Temple Street
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111
801-585-5618 | gardner.utah.edu

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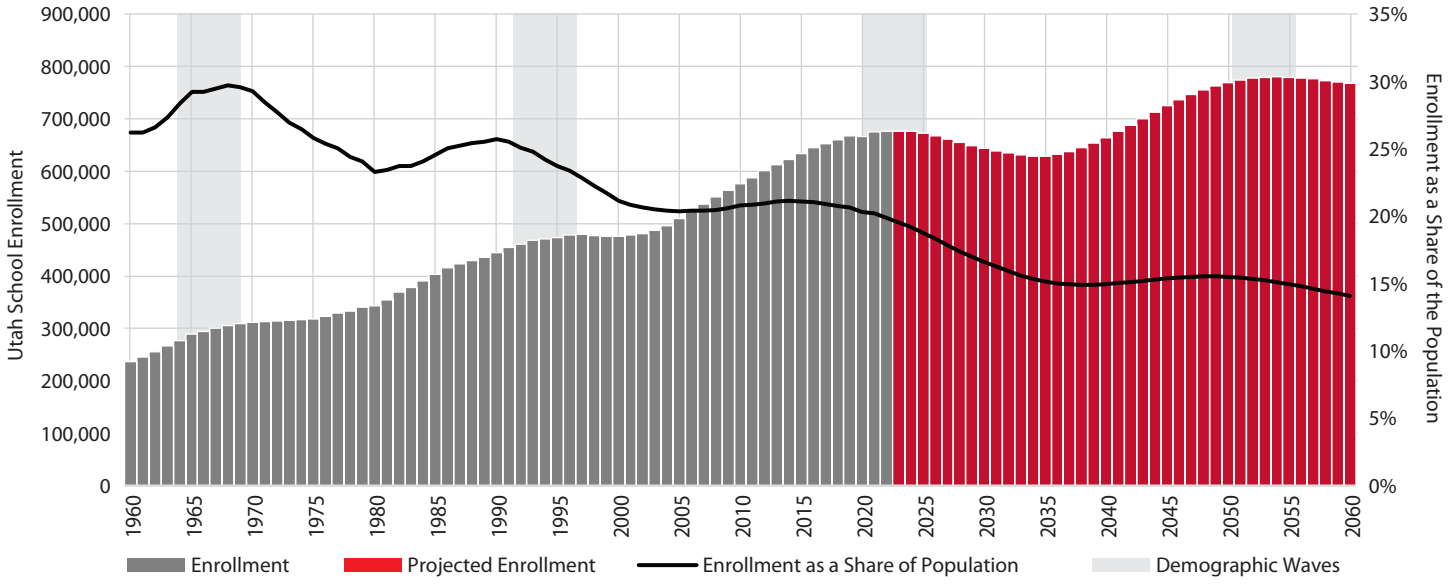
Analysis in Brief

Utah's demographic changes significantly impact school enrollment and related funding. Projections show declining K-12 school enrollment over the next decade resulting from lower fertility rates and demographic waves. These demographic shifts will relieve the fiscal pressures of funding enrollment growth in Utah's K-12 education system, providing unique budgeting opportunities for state and local leaders.

Key Findings:

- **Youth Population Decline –** Demographers project meaningful declines in Utah's school-age population (age 5-17) over the next decade, beginning in 2024. This projected decline results in both a smaller absolute count (about 40,000 fewer school-age youth by 2032) and school-age youth making up a smaller share of Utah's total population (dropping from 19.5% in 2023 to 15.9% in 2032).
- **Uneven Youth Population Change –** Youth population declines will not uniformly impact Utah communities. Projections suggest some areas may experience youth population declines of nearly 50%, while others will experience much smaller declines. Other areas (particularly Utah County) will continue to grow rapidly.
- **Sizable Fiscal Shifts –** Slowing, declining, and changing student counts foreshadow major fiscal shifts, with some effects already occurring. Because student enrollment counts drive a large share of school operational funding, enrollment changes can greatly alter school budgets. Shifting student counts also heavily impact capital facility costs (largely funded locally).
- **Unique Fiscal Opportunity –** Historically, funding enrollment growth placed high demands on Utah taxpayers. Youth population declines will provide some relief from these cost pressures, creating opportunities to sizably increase K-12 per-pupil spending, alter tax levels, or shift funding to other programs.

Utah School Enrollment and Enrollment as a Share of the Total Utah Population, 1960-2060



Note: Enrollment projections calculated using the average enrollment share of the school-age population from 2020-2022 (94.5%). Demographic waves are impacted by the number of women in childbearing years and migration. In the population projections, larger populations in childbearing years result in larger school-age populations 5-17 years later.
Source: Utah Superintendent's Annual Reports and Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Population Estimates and Long-term Population Projections

Table of Contents

Figures:

Utah's changing demographics will significantly impact school enrollment and related funding. Projections indicate declining K-12 school enrollment over the next decade. These population declines will affect different areas of Utah unevenly in coming decades, with some regions experiencing nearly 50% drops, while others, notably Utah County, continue to grow rapidly. These shifts in student populations will have substantial fiscal consequences, impacting school budgets and local funding for capital facilities and staffing. However, this demographic change also presents a unique fiscal opportunity as it can alleviate the financial strain of supporting a large and growing youth population. This allows for potential increases in K-12 per-pupil spending, tax adjustments, or reallocation of funds to other programs.

Utah K-12 Education Funding

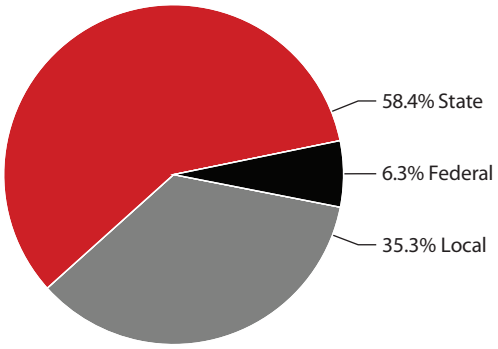
The State of Utah and local school districts largely fund public education, with an estimated 58.4% of FY 2024 funding from state funds, 35.3% from local funds, and the remaining 6.3% from federal funds (Figure 1). Combined state and local revenue jointly fund school operations, while local funding covers the vast majority of capital facility costs. In the state's FY 2024 budget, the Legislature allocated more than $5.4 billion (29% of all state own-source funds) to public education. This total includes more than 70% of all income tax revenue.[1] This means public education is the single largest state-funded program (Figure 2). In addition, 60% of local property taxes statewide ($3 billion) fund K-12 education, along with comparatively minor local school revenue sources such as fees and interest earnings. Federal funding makes up the remainder.

Student enrollment plays a large role in Utah public education funding. The state allocates nearly two-thirds of its K-12 funding on a per-student basis through the Basic Program portion of the Minimum School Program. The state distributes this funding based on a weighted pupil unit (WPU), with funding allocated per student with some adjustments made including for part-time kindergarten students, economically disadvantaged students, English language learners, and students with disabilities among others. Some other Minimum School Program sub-programs also incorporate student counts into allocation methodologies. Local funding, primarily from property taxes, does not necessarily tie directly to pupil counts.

Public Education Funding in Recent Decades

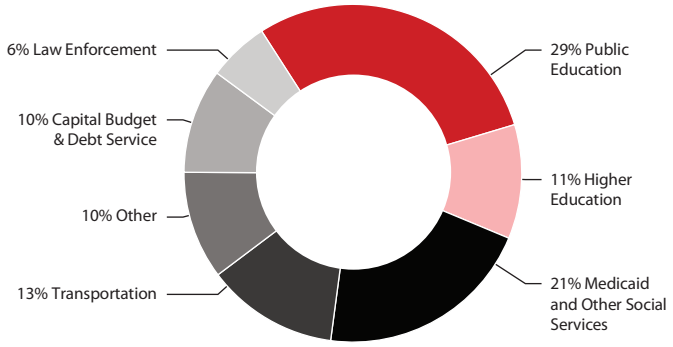
Total nominal public education funding more than tripled from $2.6 billion in FY 2000 to $9.5 billion in FY 2024. However, even with these substantial nominal dollar increases, sizable enrollment increases (more than 200,000 over the period) and inflation constrained real per-pupil funding growth (Figure 3). Nominal per-pupil funding increased from about $5,500 in FY 2000 to just over $14,000 in FY 2024. After adjusting for inflation, the per-pupil increase moderates from about $9,500 in FY 2000 to just over $14,000 in FY 2024.

Figure 1: Utah Public Education Funding Sources, FY 2024



Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of Governor's Office of Planning and Budget data

Figure 2: State of Utah Appropriations by Program Type from State Own-Source Funds, FY 2024



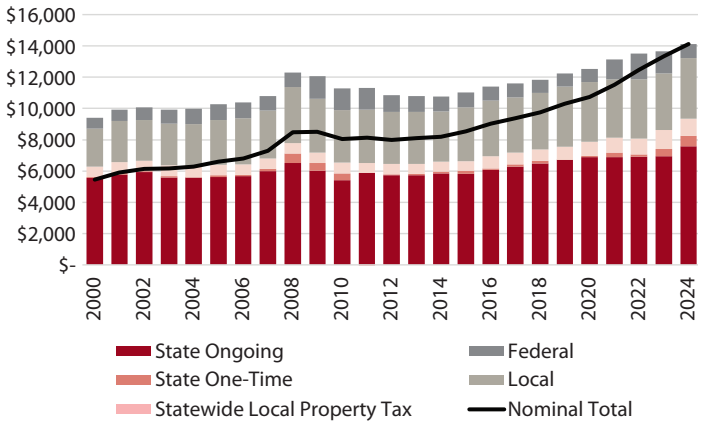
Note: Own-source funds include the total operating and capital budget from state collected resources, excluding federal funds, local property tax, and higher education tuition and fees.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of Governor's Office of Planning and Budget data

Although some economies of scale can occur, educating more students over time drives higher costs. For example, even adjusting for inflation, educating about 675,000 students in 2023 simply costs much more than educating Utah's 475,000 enrolled students in 2000, due to both student count increases and changing student composition.

Another way of measuring public education funding is as a percentage of total personal income. This metric sheds light on a state's funding effort since it incorporates financial capacity and does not directly correspond to the number of students in the public education system. Utah's education funding as a percentage of total personal income fluctuated and ultimately fell from FY 2000 to FY 2021 despite sizable increases in total nominal funding (Figure 4). Higher than average nominal increases in FY 2021-2024 contributed to a flattening and projected slight uptick in the share of total personal income, from 3.7% in FY 2021 to 4.0% in FY 2024.

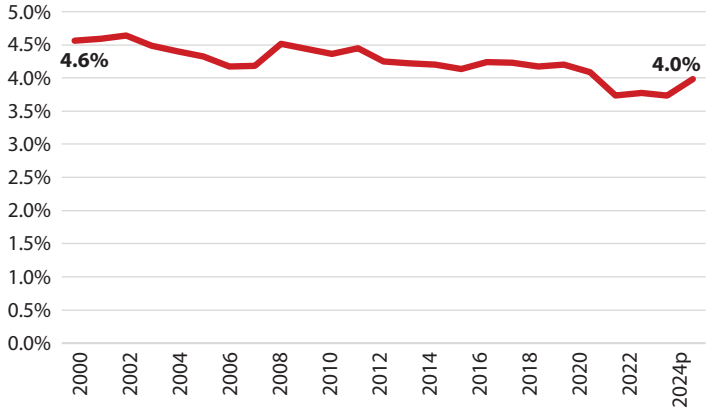
Figure 3: Utah Public Education Funding Per Pupil, FY 2000-2024

In FY 2024 dollars



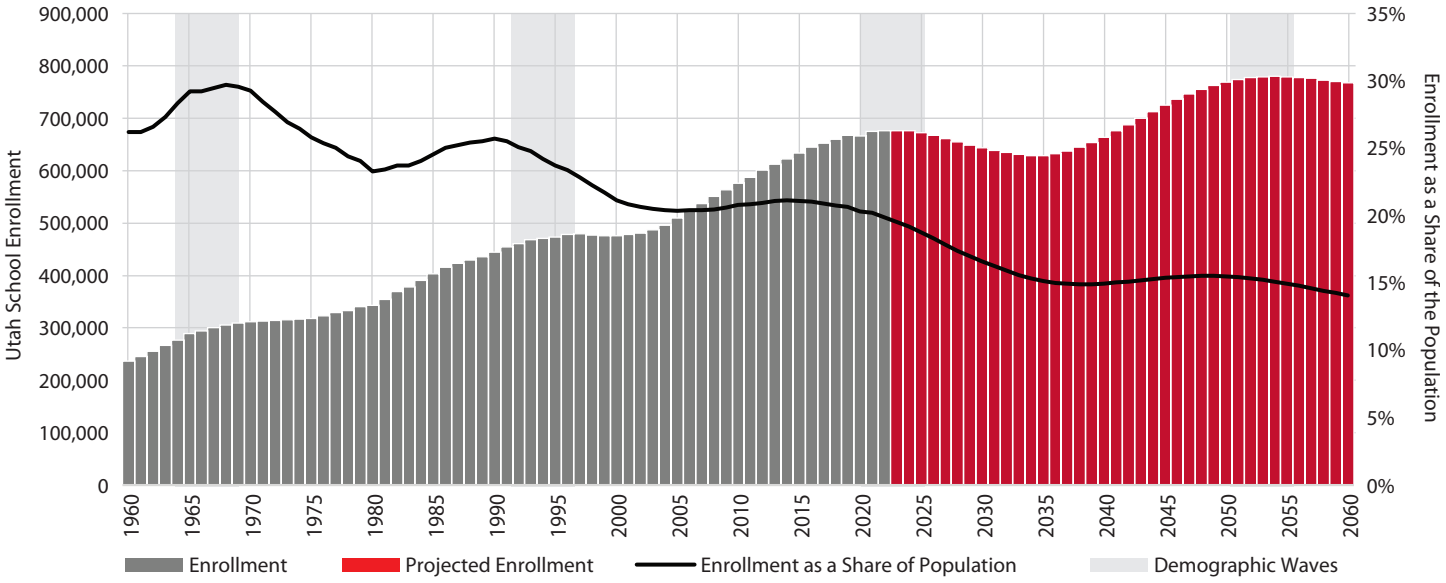
Note: Inflation adjustment uses CPI-U fiscal year averages.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data from Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Utah State Board of Education, Utah Economic Council, and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Figure 4: Utah State & Local Ongoing Public Education Funding as a Percentage of Personal Income, FY 2000-2024p



Note: Personal income estimates for FY 2024 average the 2023 and 2024 estimate from the June 2023 Utah Economic Council forecast
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data from the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget and U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and Utah Economic Council

Figure 5: Utah School Enrollment and Enrollment as a Share of the Total Utah Population, 1960-2060



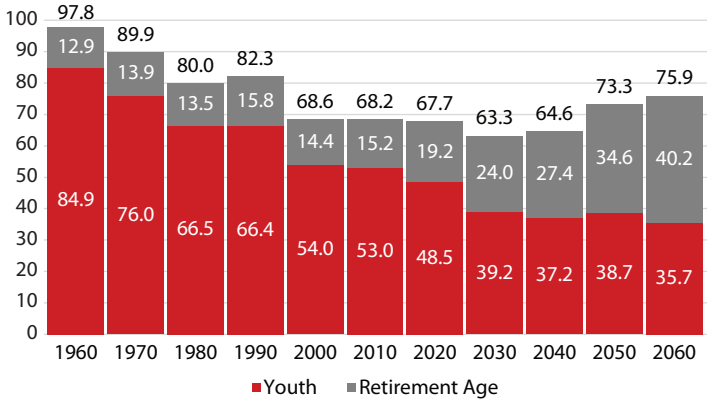
Note: Enrollment projections calculated using the average enrollment share of the school-age population from 2020-2022 (94.5%). Demographic waves are impacted by the number of women in childbearing years and migration. In the population projections, larger populations in childbearing years result in larger school-age populations 5-17 years later.
Source: Utah Superintendent's Annual Reports and Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Population Estimates and Long-term Population Projections

Long-term School Enrollment Trends

While school enrollment grows over the long term, enrollment experiences short-term rises and falls, largely in line with the post-WWII baby boom and subsequent demographic waves largely caused by changes in the number of women of childbearing age. School enrollment as a share of the total Utah population also fluctuates, but largely declines through time, peaking at nearly 30% in the late 1960s and projected to fall to about 14% in 2060 (Figure 5).

Dependency ratios for youth have also fallen significantly in recent decades. These ratios compare people at ages most likely to work and not work, computed as the youth and retirement age (under 18 and 65 and older) populations per 100 working age (18-64) year old) persons. While in 1960 Utah's population included nearly 85 youth for every 100 working age adults, in 2020 there were less than 49. Projections indicate these ratios will continue to fall (Figure 6). This shift potentially mitigates the taxpayer burden to fund education at historically higher levels. While demographers project retirement-age dependency ratios to increase, the federal government currently funds many of the largest programs for the retirement-age population (i.e. Medicare and Social Security). Thus, if programs are similarly funded in the future, the aging population will likely have a smaller direct impact on state budget spending than school-age declines.

Figure 6: Utah Dependency Ratios, 1960-2060



Note: Dependency ratios computed as the number of nonworking age persons per 100 working age (18-64 year old) persons in the population. Youth are less than 18 years old and retirement age is 65 years and older.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census data and Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute 2020-2060 State and County Projections

Projecting Statewide School Enrollment

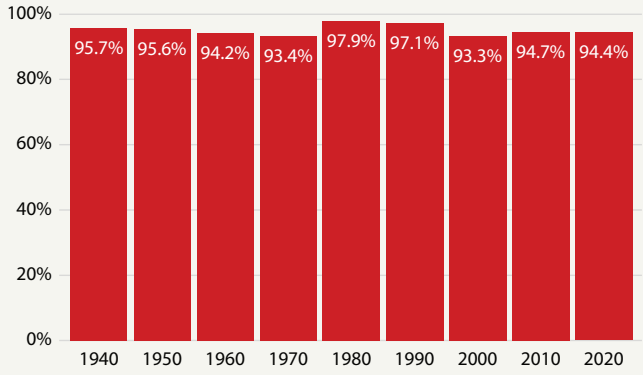
Actual birth data and school-age population projections serve as a critical input to estimating future enrollment. School enrollment from Utah's internal population over the next five years can be informed by births of those potentially entering the public education system (born five years prior to enrolling) and those aging out (born 17 years prior). The children who come to Utah through migration are less directly predictable, along with historically-less-volatile shifts to and from private or home schooling. The passage of HB 215 in the 2023 General Session providing funding for students and families choosing home school or private school options may also affect this relationship.

Actual enrollment changes and Utah birth difference data tend to track well (Figure 7). Migration changes (mainly driven by economic conditions) largely explain the differences. For example, Utah's economy suffered in the 1980s, creating out-migration that pulled school enrollment below the expected trend. Strong economic times in the 1990s drove strong in-migration, so enrollment changes exceeded the birth difference. This pattern again reversed with the Great Recession in the late 2000s when weaker in-migration and one year of out-migration resulted in school enrollment falling below the birth difference. More recently, strong in-migration drove enrollment above the internal birth trend.

A Note on Methods

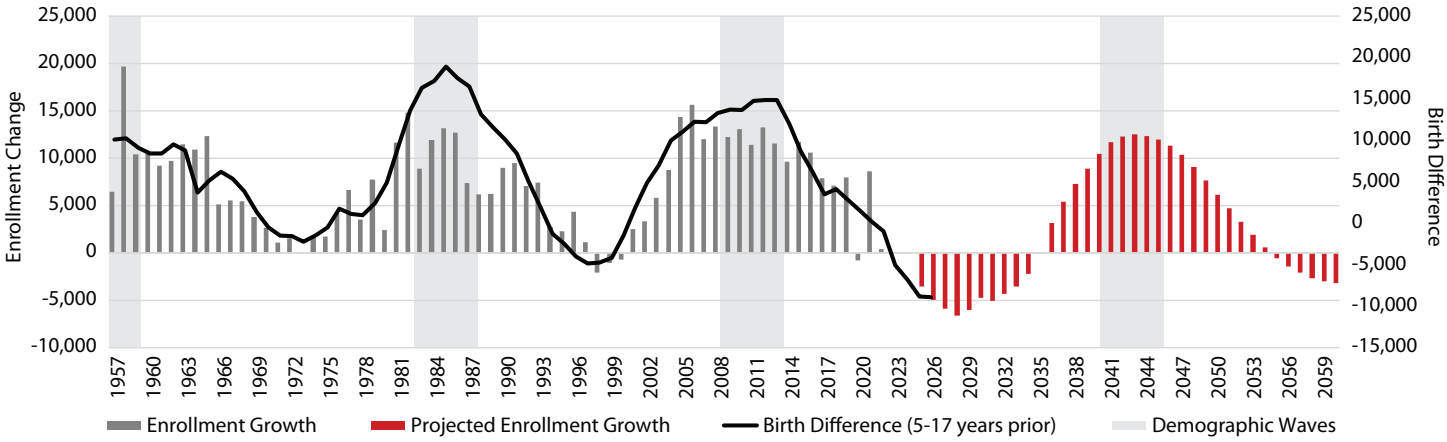
The share of school-age children enrolled in Utah public schools has remained stable and high historically (Figure 8). This share consistently averaged in the mid- to upper-90% range since the 1940s, averaging 94.5% over the most recent three data years (2020-2022). Enrollment projections in this publication assume this recent enrollment share continues in the future. If enrollment patterns change with a larger share of students opting for non-public school options (e.g. private or home school), these numbers may change.

Figure 8: Utah K-12 Enrollment as a Share of the School-Age Population, 1940-2020



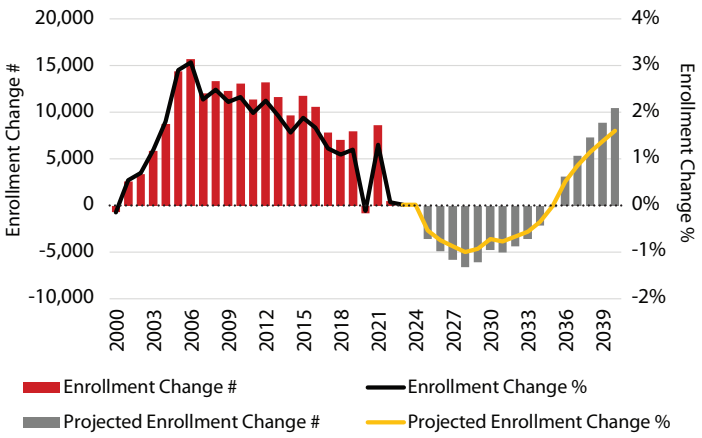
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data from Utah State Board of Education, Utah Superintendent Annual Reports, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, and Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Population Estimates

Figure 7: Public Education Enrollment Change and Difference in Births Five to Seventeen Years Previous, 1957-2060



Note: Demographic waves are impacted by the number of women in childbearing years and migration. In the population projections, larger populations in childbearing years result in larger school-age populations 5-17 years later.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data from Utah State Board of Education, Utah Superintendent Annual Reports, Utah Population Committee Historical Estimates, and Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Population Estimates and Long-term Population Projections

Figure 9: Utah Change in School Enrollment, 2000-2040



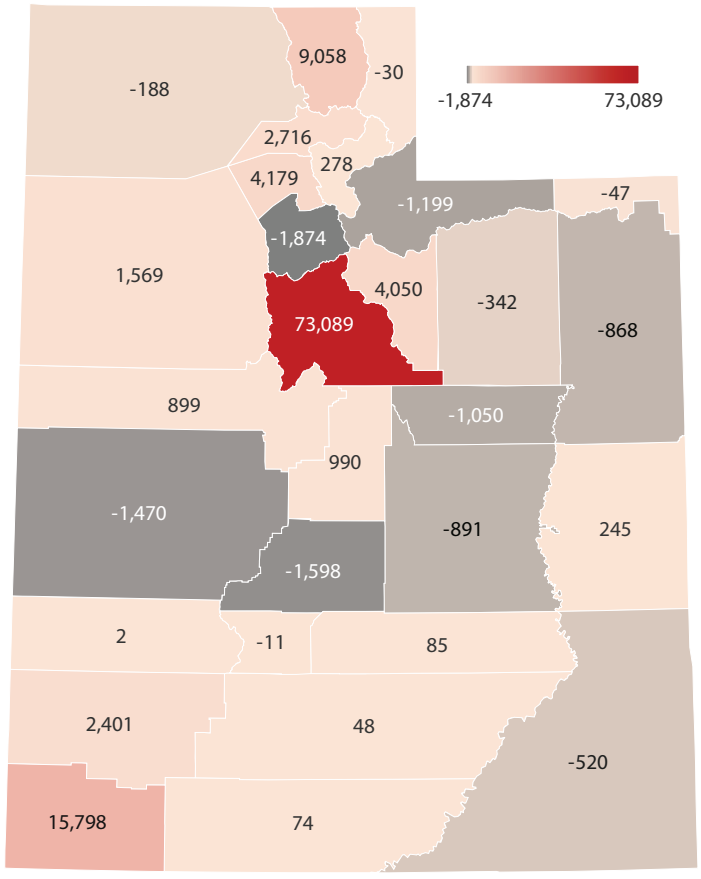
Note: Enrollment projections calculated using the average enrollment share of the school-age population from 2020-2022 (94.5%).
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data from Utah State Board of Education, Utah Superintendent Annual Reports, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, and Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Population Estimates and Long-term Population Projections

While long-term enrollment projections are likely directionally correct, difficult-to-predict short-term economic fluctuations or other changes may alter annual school enrollment trends. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered enrollment patterns, as many parents either delayed enrolling their children or put them in private school or home school in fall 2020 and then enrolled (or re-enrolled) them in fall 2021, leading to unexpected enrollment shifts.

Utah at a Turning Point

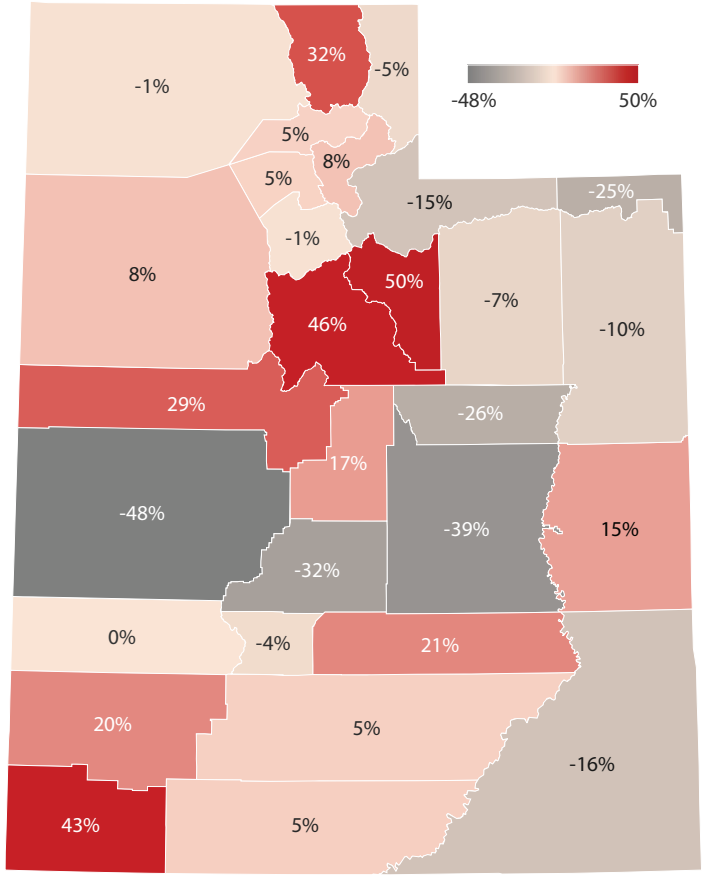
After two decades of strong growth, enrollment projections indicate Utah's schools will experience a period of enrollment decline, beginning in the next few years. Even with the 2020 pandemic-related enrollment decline, school enrollment increased 1.1% per year on average over the past decade (2013 to 2023), after growing by 2.2% per year on average from 2003 to 2013. Moving forward, projections indicate enrollment will decline 0.6% per year on average from 2023 to 2033 before beginning to rise again in 2036 (Figure 9). The near-term projections rely on actual birth data over the past five years, while the later years use projected births.[2] Although projections show continued population increases from in-migration, those new Utahns and their potential children are not enough to alter this trend.

Figure 10: Absolute Change in School-Age Population by County, 2020 to 2060



Note: School-age reflects population ages 5 to 17.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute State and County Projections 2020-2060

Figure 11: Percent Change in School-Age Population by County, 2020 to 2060



Note: School-age reflects population ages 5 to 17.
Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute State and County Projections 2020-2060

Uneven Enrollment Shifts Statewide

While projections show declining K-12 enrollment at the state level, individual school districts and charter schools will experience unique dynamics. Some schools should expect enrollment declines in the long-term, while other schools will likely experience enrollment increases. These changes will impact both staffing and facility demands. Some local education agencies (LEAs) will grapple with school closures and re-purposing facilities. Areas facing strong growth pressures may look to invest in new capital facilities. School district and charter school leaders should carefully consider long-term projections in their respective geographic areas.

Five counties (Utah, Washington, Cache, Davis, and Wasatch) show projected increases of more than 4,000 school-age children from 2020 to 2060 (Figure 10).[3] Except for Davis County, all these increases exceed 30% growth (Figure 11). Projections show Utah County will grow immensely, adding nearly 75,000 school-age children by 2060. But even within Utah County, Provo School District may need to plan differently than Alpine and Nebo School Districts given land availability. LEAs in counties expecting large growth may want to plan for needed infrastructure, increased staffing, and a potential increased demand for charter schools.

Conversely, projections show five counties (Salt Lake, Sevier, Millard, Summit, and Carbon) will lose more than 1,000 students over this 40-year period. Several rural counties show declines of 25% or more, including Carbon, Daggett, Emery, Millard, and Sevier counties. Particularly for districts and charter schools already experiencing declining enrollment, this could point to a need for school closures, further shared services among schools and LEAs, and reduced staffing.

A Unique Opportunity

The fiscal relief from flattening and likely declining K-12 enrollment provides an opportunity for policymakers to (1) increase per-pupil funding, (2) alter tax levels, or (3) allocate revenue growth funds previously allocated to public education enrollment growth for other purposes. Policymakers could also use some combination of these approaches. That is, each of these options carries tradeoffs and opportunity costs.

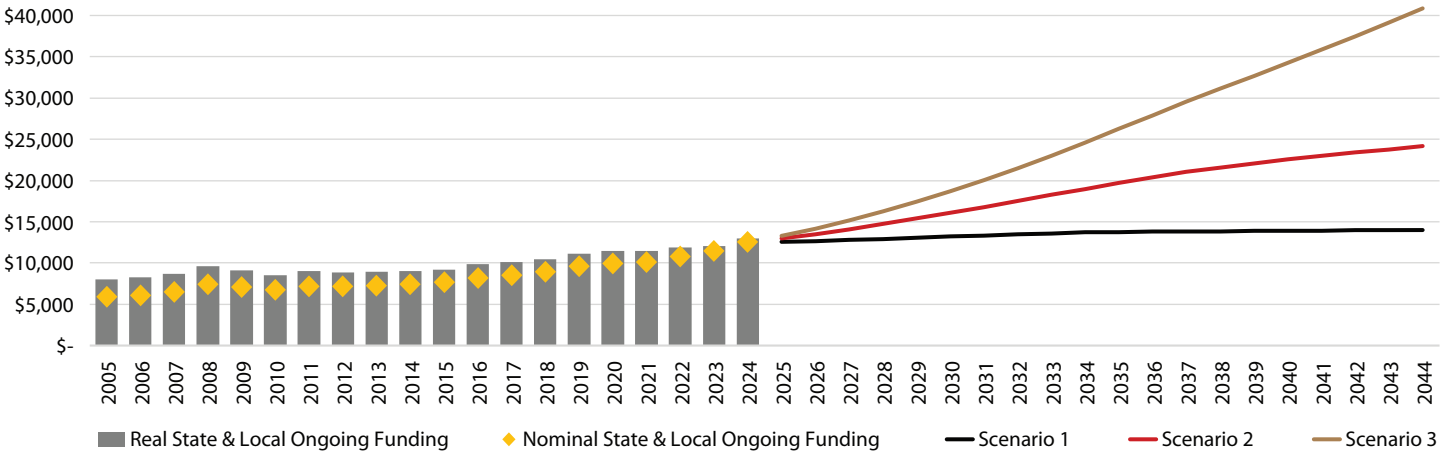
Increase Per Pupil Funding

Given its large youth population and strong enrollment growth, Utah has historically faced challenges significantly increasing real per-pupil funding, even with significant total nominal dollar increases. Historically, although receiving comparatively lower per pupil funding than other states, Utah's schools still achieved commendable student outcomes overall when compared to other states. A key policy consideration is whether and how higher real funding levels can drive even better student outcomes. With enrollment declines on the horizon, increasing the real dollar investment in each Utah K-12 student will be a real possibility.

Figure 12 shows nominal and real (inflation-adjusted) ongoing state and local public education funding for the last 20 years from FY 2005 to FY 2024, along with three potential funding scenarios over the next 20 years from FY 2025 to FY 2044. While the nominal data shown in Figure 12 provides context for budgeting purposes (since budgeting uses current dollars), real funding provides a more complete representation of the purchasing power of funding moving forward and thus is referenced throughout the narrative and used for the funding scenarios in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Per-Pupil Public Education Funding Scenarios, FY 2005 – FY 2044

In FY 2024 dollars



Note: Enrollment projections calculated as the average enrollment share of the school-age population from 2020-2022 (94.5%). Inflation adjustment uses CPI-U fiscal year averages. Future inflation assumes an annual 2.3% inflation (the average from FY 2005 to FY 2024).

Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of data from Utah State Board of Education, Utah Superintendent Annual Reports, Bureau of Economic and Business Research, and Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute Population Estimates and Long-term Population Projections

- ***Scenario 1: Hold Harmless for Inflation and Enrollment Growth***

  This scenario shows projected real per pupil spending with no total spending decreases from one year to the next when enrollment falls, and funding increases to pace with inflation and student growth when enrollment increases. Under Utah Code §53F-2-208, which took effect when voters expanded the use of income taxes by passing Constitutional Amendment G on the 2020 ballot, the Legislature currently prioritizes in its budget process funding for school enrollment growth and an inflationary adjustment (calculated using a five-year inflation average) for the Basic School Program. The Legislature also recently created and funded an economic stabilization account to help ensure monies remain available to fund enrollment growth and inflation, even during an economic downturn. Notably, H.B. 394 *Hold Harmless for Public Education Enrollment Decline* of the 2023 General Session addresses per pupil funding increases, if voters approve the proposed 2024 constitutional amendment further expanding the potential uses of income taxes. Under the bill, the Legislature will increase the weighted pupil unit's value for a period of 5-10 years by maintaining Minimum School Program funding that would normally decrease with fewer students. While real per-pupil funding increases slightly in this scenario when enrollment declines, over time it remains relatively flat.

- ***Scenario 2: Continue to Invest at Historical Growth Rates***

  Over the last twenty years (FY 2005-2024), combined state and local ongoing funding increased a nominal 5.9% annually on average. If combined state and local funding continued to increase consistent with this historical rate, real per-pupil spending would rise significantly in the next two decades. While enrollment growth and inflation constrained the real-per-pupil impacts of these nominal increases previously, declining enrollment would allow continuation of that same investment growth rate to go much further, with per-student spending nearly doubling from $13,000 in FY 2024 to nearly $22,000 in FY 2044, accounting for inflation.

- ***Scenario 3: Increase Funding Higher Than Historical Growth Rates***

  In Scenario 3, projected funding shows increases for inflation *in addition* to the nominal 5.9% increase seen historically, for an overall nominal increase of 8.4%. This scenario shows how significantly real per-pupil funding would increase if lawmakers chose to increase nominal funding for education while enrollment declines, with per-pupil spending tripling from $13,000 in FY 2024 to more than $40,000 in FY 2044.

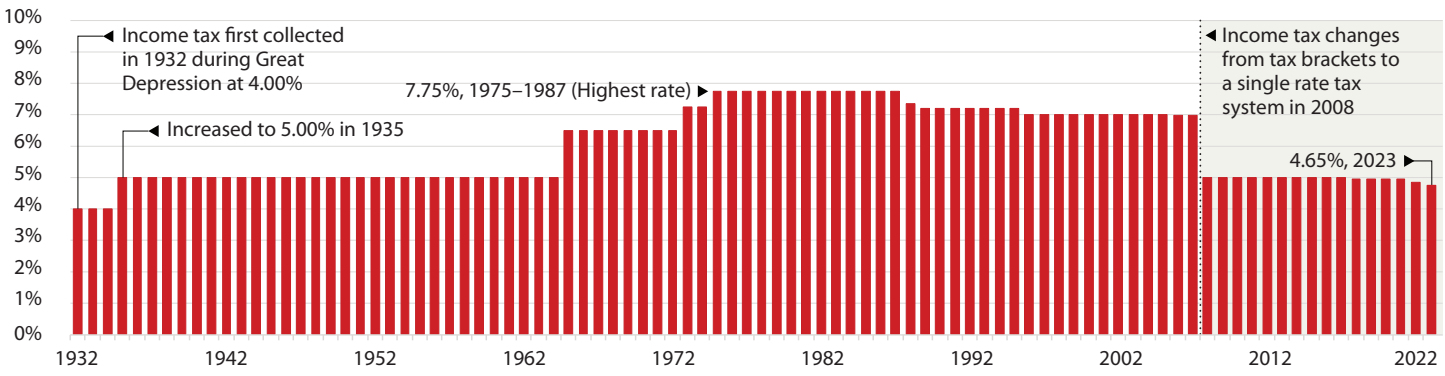
Increased per-pupil funding could be used in a variety of ways including but not limited to targeting funding to at-risk students, increasing salaries, reducing class sizes, professional development, providing more access to extra-curricular programs, investing in early childhood programs, improving school facilities, and providing wrap-around supports for students. To the extent state and local policymakers decide to continue increasing per-student funding over the coming decades, they may also wish to closely examine the link between specific funding approaches and ultimate student outcomes. Not all spending increases equally impact student outcomes.

Alter Tax Levels

An alternative fiscal response to flat or declining enrollment is to further reduce tax rates. The Legislature focused on reducing the state's income tax rate in recent decades, including five rate cuts since 2005 (Figure 13). If taxable income grows as it has over the past two decades and the Utah Legislature and local elected officials hold real per pupil spending relatively flat (scenario 1 above) instead of continuing to invest at historical growth rates (scenario 2 above), or investing at even higher levels (scenario 3 above), the state could use the difference in funding to reduce its income tax rate potentially further from 4.65% to a rate in the high 3% to low 4% range.

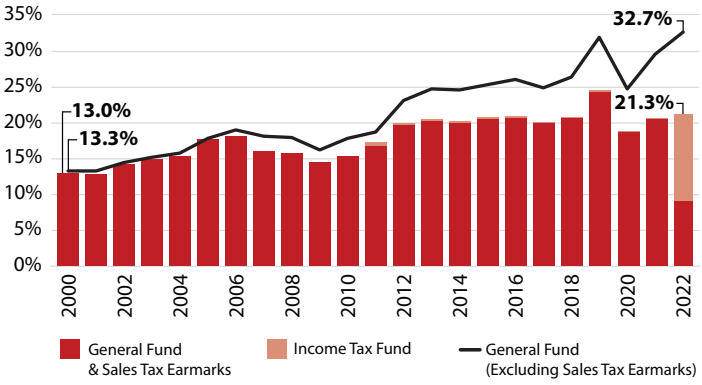
Although income tax historically has the closest school tie among state revenue sources, lawmakers could also choose to reduce other taxes, such as the sales tax, local property taxes, or excise taxes.

Figure 13: Utah Top Statutory Marginal Income Tax Rate, 1932-2023



Source: Utah State Tax Commission

Figure 14: Utah Medicaid Spending from Major Funds as a Share of General Fund Spending, FY 2000-2022



Note: "General Fund (Excluding Sales Tax Earmarks)" includes Income Tax Fund spending. In FY 2022, the Legislature shifted nearly $375 million of Medicaid spending from the General Fund to the Income Tax Fund (renamed from Education Fund in 2022 following voter passage of Amendment G).
Source: Governor's Office of Planning and Budget and Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst

Redirect Funds to Other Programs

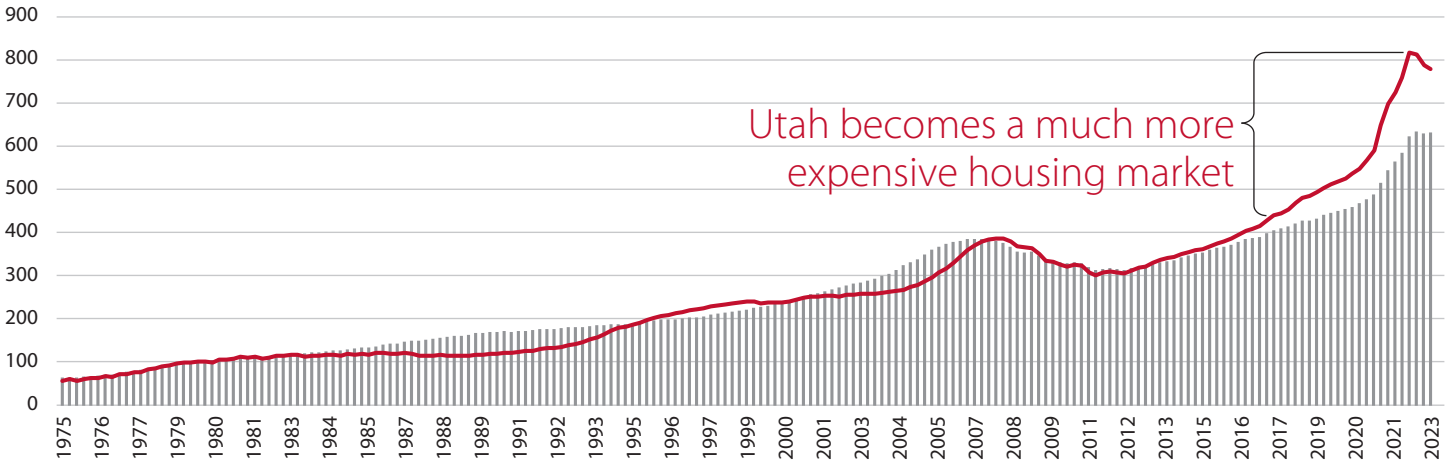
Instead of increasing per-pupil spending or cutting taxes, another fiscal alternative would be to redirect funds to other programs. For example, Utah could redirect funds to create budget buffers offsetting increased revenue volatility, cover increasing Medicaid costs or expand other health care benefits, increase state employee salaries, fund transportation and other infrastructure, address air quality, enhance law enforcement, augment programs for Utah's aging population, invest in childcare or other non-school programs for children, or expand housing services.

For example, as health care costs grow faster than overall inflation, the state faces upward pressure on Medicaid expenses (Figure 14). Utah's increasing per capita personal income will also likely increase the state's share of Medicaid costs in coming years, as Utah's federal medical assistance percentage (FMAP) declines.[4] The state also continues to face major transportation costs with a continuously growing population. Another major Utah issue is high housing costs (Figure 15). The state could address these costs through its spending policies, such as by using fiscal incentives to encourage housing-friendly zoning changes or directly delivering more housing services.

Conclusion

Current and pending demographic changes will have significant impacts on school enrollment and related funding. While individual counties and school districts will experience unique school-age population dynamics, Utah's overall K-12 enrollment is forecasted to decline over the next 10 years. This demographic shift presents new opportunities to Utah's state and local leaders: raise per pupil funding without increasing tax rates, alter tax levels, redirect funds to other state priorities, or some combination of these options. Equipped with knowledge of approaching demographic shifts, Utah's educational and legislative leaders can make informed decisions and support a bright future for our state.

Figure 15: Housing Price Index: Utah and United States, 1975-2023



Source: U.S. Federal Housing Finance Agency

Endnotes

1. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute analysis of Governor's Office of Planning and Budget data
2. Hollingshaus, M., Harris, E., & Bateman, M. (2023). Demographic Inputs for Utah's Long-Term Baseline and Scenario Planning Projections. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/Assumptions-June2023.pdf
3. Bateman, M., Prior, H., & Brandley, A. (2022). Utah's School- and College-Age Populations 2021 Long-Term Planning Projection Update. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/SchColAgeFS-Dec2022.pdf?x71849
4. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. (2023). Medicaid: What is FMAP and Why Does it Matter? https://gardner.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/FMAP-Jul2023.pdf?x71849

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Brandy Grace
Jeremy Hafen
Rachel Hayes
Clark Ivory
Mike S. Leavitt
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Ann Millner
Sterling Nielsen
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Ray Pickup
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Jennifer Robinson, Chief of Staff
Mallory Bateman, Director of Demographic Research
Phil Dean, Chief Economist and Senior Research Fellow
Shelley Kruger, Accounting and Finance Manager
Colleen Larson, Administrative Manager
Nate Lloyd, Director of Economic Research
Dianne Meppen, Director of Community Research
Laura Summers, Director of Industry Research
Nicholas Thiriot, Communications Director
James A. Wood, Ivory-Boyer Senior Fellow

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Samantha Ball, Senior Research Associate
Parker Banta, Public Policy Analyst
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Preston Brightwell, Dignity Index Field Director
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Nate Christensen, Research Economist
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Levi Pace, Senior Research Economist
Praopan Pratoomchat, Senior Research Economist
Heidi Prior, Public Policy Analyst
Natalie Roney, Research Economist
Shannon Simonsen, Research Coordinator
Paul Springer, Senior Graphic Designer

Faculty Advisors

Matt Burbank, College of Social and Behavioral Science
Elena Patel, David Eccles School of Business
Nathan Seegert, David Eccles School of Business

Senior Advisors

Jonathan Ball, Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst
Silvia Castro, Suazo Business Center
Gary Cornia, Marriott School of Business
Wes Curtis, Community-at-Large
John C. Downen, Camoin Associates
Dan Griffiths, Community-at-Large
Emma Houston, University of Utah
Beth Jarosz, Population Reference Bureau
Darin Mellott, CBRE
Pamela S. Perlich, University of Utah
Chris Redgrave, Community-at-Large
Wesley Smith, Northbound Strategy
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