

The School Closure Crisis

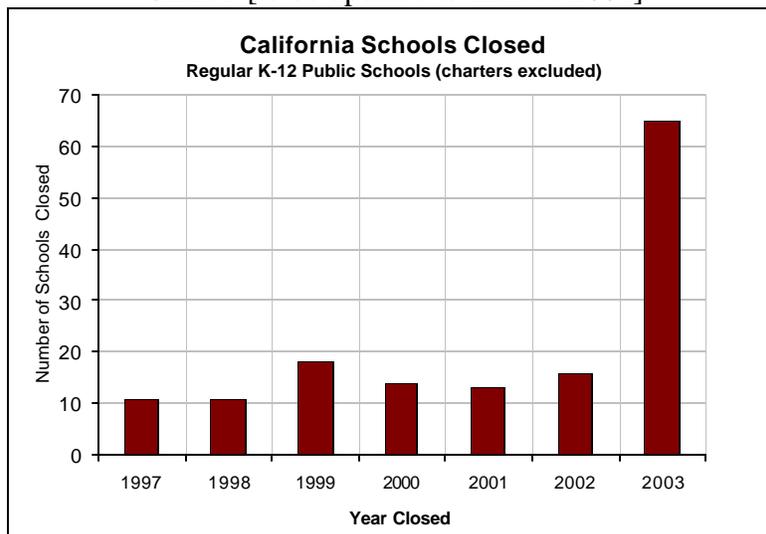
A Challenge for Demographers

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Extended Abstract

Recent funding problems and enrollment declines have caused many public school districts to close facilities. In 2003, the number of California public schools that closed was more than four times the 2002 figure (Chart 1). Many of the schools closed last year were in small districts with few schools (average daily attendance below 2,500), making decisions especially distressing.

Chart 1 [to be updated to include 2004]



Data source: California Department of Education, <http://www.cde.ca.gov>

Hundreds of additional schools are being considered for closure in 2004. Now, even large districts, such as San Diego, Oakland, Sacramento City, West Contra Costa, San Jose, and San Juan Unified, are considering closing one or more elementary schools. Today elementary schools are closing, and by the end of the decade, middle and high schools will follow. Closures are not limited to California: many other parts of the U.S. and Canada face this crisis.

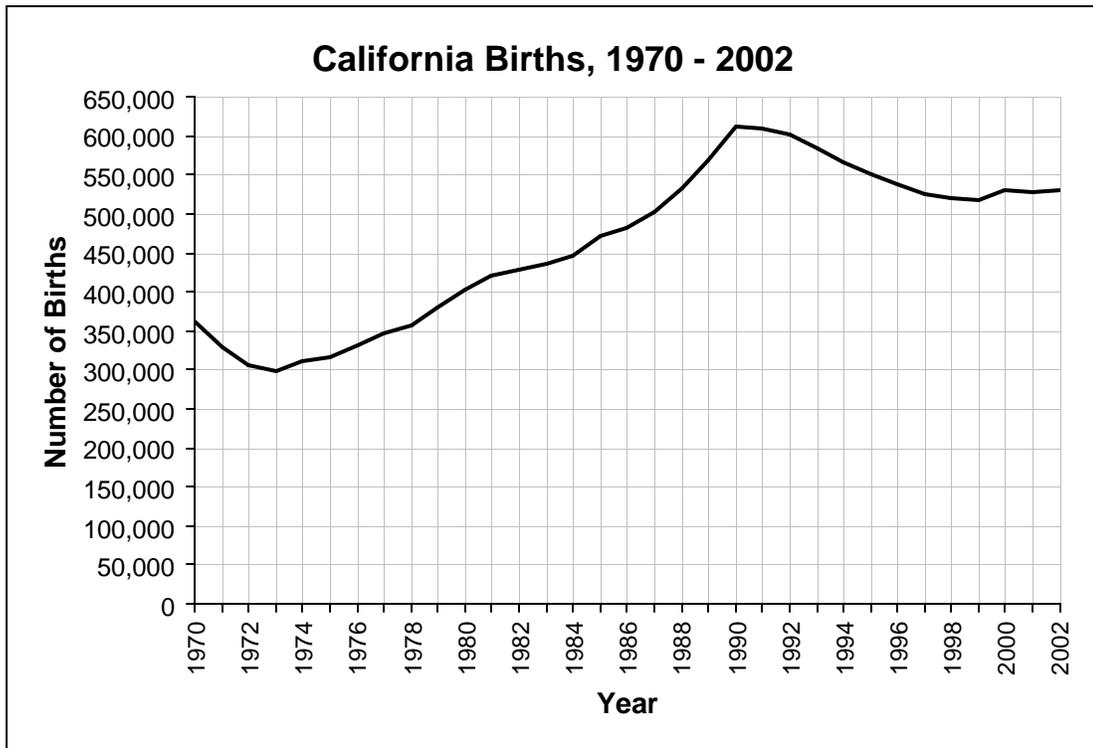
School closure is disruptive and traumatic for all concerned. Parents and children often identify strongly with their neighborhood school and dislike, even detest, changes.

Financial challenges and falling enrollments are prompting many districts to study school closure. Under-utilized facilities are expensive. Tight budgets make school closure an obvious alternative, particularly if districts have enrollment declines.

As demographers, we focus on the reasons enrollments decline, including:

1. Birth trends. The number of births dropped in many areas after a 1990 peak (Chart 2), producing elementary enrollment declines, which will be followed by middle and high school declines a few years later.

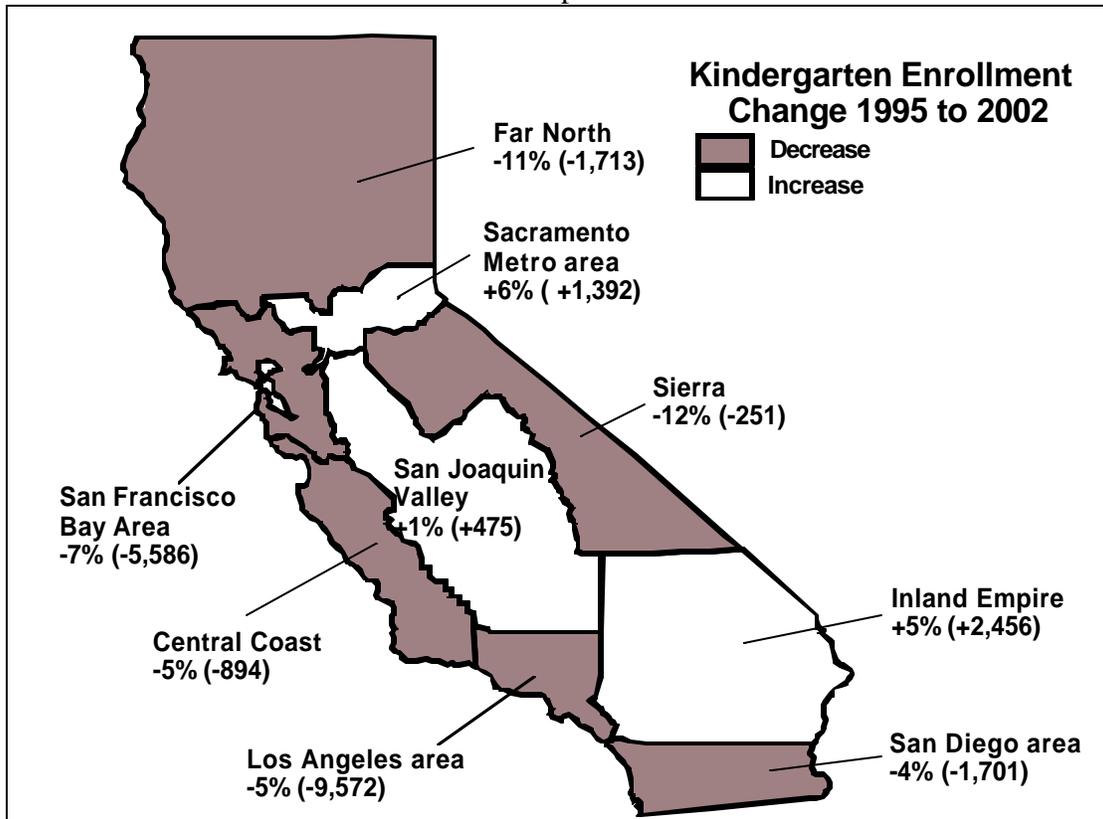
Chart 2



Data source: California Department of Finance, <http://www.dof.ca.gov>

2. Recession-related migration. Although a few areas had positive migration flows during recent years, most of California experienced some recession-related out-migration of families with school-aged children.
3. Housing growth (or lack thereof). The three regions of California with the most housing growth during the last decade were the only ones with kindergarten growth (Sacramento metro area, San Joaquin Valley, and the Inland Empire). All other regions have lost kindergartners, with the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas losing the most. In some cases, enrollment decline in one area with older housing (like Sacramento City and San Juan Unified Districts) is accompanied by housing and enrollment growth in another area nearby (Elk Grove Unified). See Map 1.

Map 1



The Closure Process

Because school closure is such a divisive issue, it is very important to pay attention to the process. Our experience leads us to recommend the following:

- Follow objective criteria. Before making any closure decisions, it is essential for a district to adopt and use specific, objective criteria. Some degree of subjectivity is unavoidable, but it is extremely important that the process be even-handed and that people perceive it as such. Inevitably, parents of children attending schools that might close will protest, but stating objective criteria in advance will help people understand the decision.
- Timing. Choose your timeline carefully. Do not close schools when bond or parcel tax measures or school board elections are imminent; closure decisions are always difficult, disruptive, and potentially politically disastrous. We have seen closure decisions lead to board member recall drives, resignations, litigation, and defeat of funding measures at the polls.
- Allow enough time for the process. A long process allows members of the public to get used to the idea of school closure and to give input. Public hearings can help lessen anger and are very important, although they can be quite time-consuming. Allow enough time to explore all reasonable options.
- Be transparent. A completely transparent public process can help subdue anxiety, rumors of “conspiracy,” and perceptions of unfairness. Public notification and publicity encourage district residents to be involved.

- Use a community group to review alternatives and make recommendations. Create a balanced advisory group that reviews criteria, hears community reactions, and makes recommendations. Broad-based involvement builds consensus and acceptance by those affected.
- Be sensitive. Neighborhood school closure is always an emotional issue, and those affected may need help dealing with the transition. They deserve special attention and detailed information about proposed changes.
- Terminology. Call the process something like “school consolidation,” “enrollment, school closure, boundary realignment study,” or “school facilities realignment.”

How Demographers Can Help

While non-demographic factors, particularly financial shortfalls, may be driving school closure, it is important to analyze the issue from a demographic perspective. If enrollments are likely to stabilize or decline, closure is probably indicated and demographers can help determine which school or schools are closure candidates.

The first demographic step, a district-wide forecast, helps indicate whether closure is in order. If enrollments are going to increase soon, closure is probably the wrong decision. If the district has experienced recent ethnic shifts, separate forecasts by ethnicity may yield important information because enrollments may grow faster than a straight-line forecast would suggest.

The second step is to decide which school or schools to close. Demographers can provide attendance-area resident forecasts showing which parts of the district have enrollment declines. It is very important to focus on where students live as well as on where they attend school. We have found large intra-district transfer flows that mask subarea enrollment in some districts.