

Summary of Enrollment Decline and Fiscal Pressure in Massachusetts Public Schools: A Focus on English Learners

By Anthony Clough, Education Policy Analyst

English Learner Enrollment Trends

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, English Learners accounted for about **23 percent of statewide enrollment decline**.
- In FY 2027, English Learners accounted for about **46 percent of statewide enrollment decline**.
- English Learner enrollment declined in **22 out of 26 Gateway City districts** and declined by more than 5 percent in 14 Gateway Cities.
- **Rural school districts** eligible rural school aid in FY 2026 experienced roughly a **13 percent decline** in English Learners in FY 2027, more than double the statewide rate.

Massachusetts public schools are facing another year of declining enrollment, creating growing financial pressure for school districts across the Commonwealth. Public schools are largely funded based on the number of students they serve, but many of the operational costs districts face do not decline when students leave. Buildings still require maintenance and utilities, and districts must continue paying salaries, benefits, and student transportation costs. Because Chapter 70 aid is tied to enrollment, these declines can reduce state aid relative to what districts would have received if enrollment had remained stable.

English Learner Declines in FY 2027 Are More Concentrated Than During the COVID-19 Pandemic

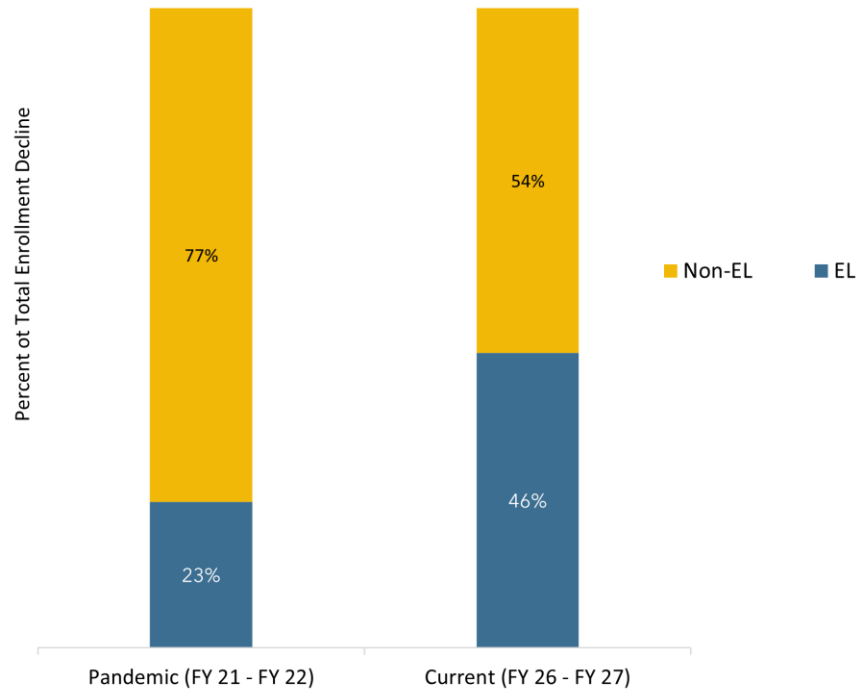
Research suggests that current immigration enforcement tactics may be affecting school attendance, participation, educational outcomes, and school funding in communities serving immigrant families. Given continual, harsh, and life-altering federal immigration enforcement activity, it is reasonable to suspect that these conditions are discouraging some immigrant children, and others perceived as not fully proficient in English, from attending school.

English Learner status is not synonymous with immigration status, but it is one of the closest publicly available proxies for understanding how these broader trends may be affecting students and school districts.

Enrollment decline has become far more concentrated among English Learner students in FY 2027 than during the COVID-19 pandemic. English Learners generate additional aid through the Chapter 70 formula because districts often need additional resources to support language acquisition and academic success. As a result, the loss of higher-need students like English Learners can create a larger financial strain on district budgets than the loss of other students.

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Enrollment Decline Far More Concentrated Among English Learners in FY 2027 than COVID-19 Pandemic Decline



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Foundation Budget Enrollment (FY 2021 to FY 2022 and FY 2026 to FY 2027)

Policy Solutions to Address Enrollment Decline

Massachusetts, like many states across the country, is experiencing enrollment decline with direct implications for school district finances. Recent federal immigration enforcement policies and related fears may also be contributing to enrollment declines in some communities, particularly among English Learner students.

The Commonwealth previously responded to enrollment-related fiscal pressure by creating a one-time [\\$40 million declining enrollment fund in FY 2022](#). The [House FY 2027 budget proposal](#) similarly includes a \$10 million declining enrollment reserve fund. This is an important step, but more is needed to fully address the enrollment-driven aid losses facing many districts. A statewide response large enough to make a meaningful fiscal impact for affected districts would likely require funding on the scale of at least \$100 million.

As a longer-term solution, MassBudget welcomes the inclusion of a Foundation Budget Review Commission in the [Senate Way and Means FY 2027 budget proposal](#). Among other issues, such as the [“inflation glitch,”](#) the Commission should examine the impact of both long-term and acute enrollment decline, and explore how the state can better support districts that have been disproportionately affected by those losses.

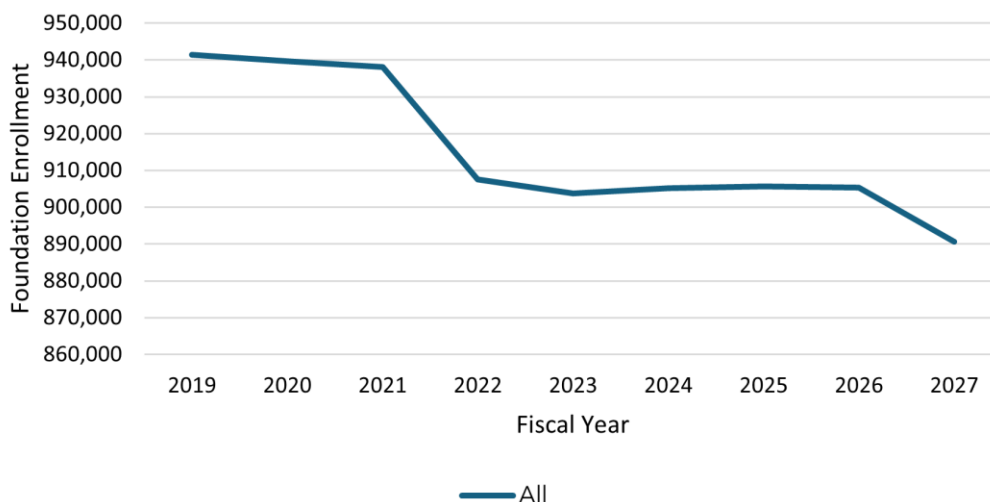
Enrollment Decline and Fiscal Pressure in Massachusetts Public Schools: A Focus on English Learners

By Anthony Clough, Education Policy Analyst

A parent or guardian bringing their child to school may not mind seeing fewer kids in the classroom. Smaller class sizes can sound like a good thing. But the statewide decline in school enrollment poses a big challenge. For public school districts, declining enrollment creates financial pressure because schools are largely funded based on the number of students they serve. Still, buildings require electricity and maintenance, and teachers still need salaries and benefits. As enrollment falls, but fixed costs¹ rise, districts are left with many of the same costs but fewer fiscal resources to provide an adequate education.

Massachusetts is in the midst of proposing and passing the Fiscal Year (FY) 2027 budget with another year of declining public school enrollment, which will have direct implications for school finance. According to the [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\) Chapter 70 Aid and Net School Spending Requirements data \(FY2019–FY2027\)](#), statewide enrollment fell by about 3 percent (30,579 students) during the COVID-19 pandemic and by 2 percent (14,684 students) from FY 2026 to FY 2027. Overall, since FY 2019, enrollment has declined by more than 5 percent (nearly 50,000 students).

Statewide Enrollment Declined Significantly during Pandemic and FY 2027



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Foundation Budget Enrollment (FY 2019 to FY 2027)

Foundation budget enrollment is a weighted full-time equivalent count of students, rather than a simple headcount. It is measured each year on October 1 and used to calculate foundation budgets and [Chapter 70 aid](#) levels for the following fiscal year. The foundation budget is the Commonwealth's estimate of the minimum cost to provide an adequate education. Because these calculations are tied to enrollment, the declines that public school districts are experiencing are impacting foundation budgets and can reduce the amount of Chapter 70 aid districts receive relative to what they would have received if enrollment had remained stable.

Disproportionate Declines in English Learner Enrollment Occur Only in the COVID-19 Pandemic and FY 2027

English Learner, or multilingual learner, enrollment declined significantly in FY 2027, with important implications for communities, students, and school district budgets.

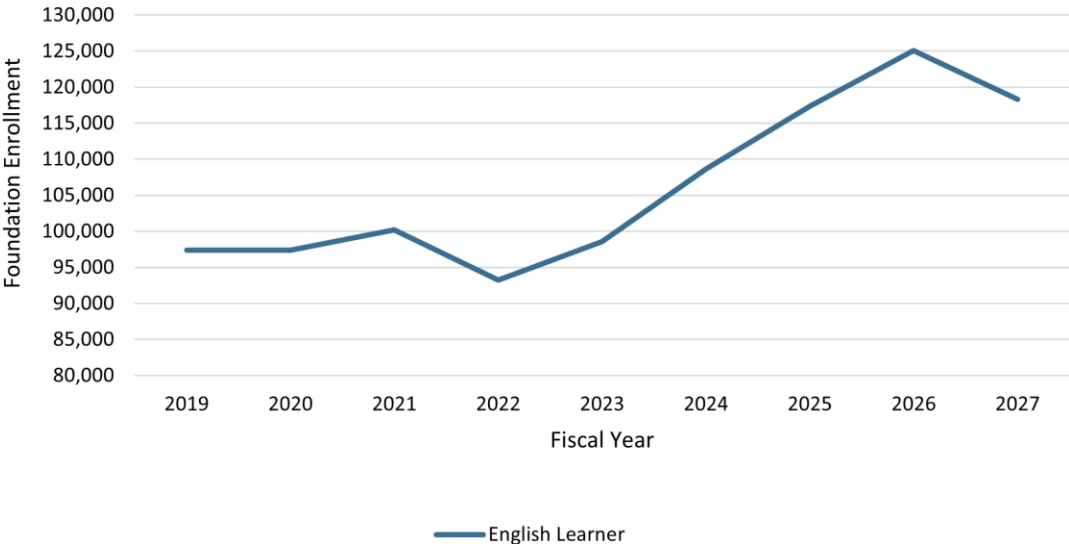
Because English Learners, like students from households with low incomes, are recognized in the formula as requiring additional resources, declines in their enrollment reflect real shifts occurring within communities. These declines can create added fiscal pressure for under-resourced school districts by reducing funding tied to higher-need students. They can also reshape the social fabric of schools and neighborhoods as communities lose students, classmates, friends, and families who were part of daily community life. For example, the city of Chelsea lost roughly 230 English Learners between October 2024 and October 2025, a change that carries both budgetary and community-wide implications for one of the state's most diverse school districts.

Who are English Learner students?

The [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education](#) defines an English Learner (EL) as a student whose first language is not English and who has not yet demonstrated full proficiency in English. Because of this, the student receives language support services (such as ESL/ELL instruction) to help them access academic content and develop English skills.

Since FY 2019, English Learner enrollment has generally increased, with only two periods showing notable declines. The first during the COVID-19 pandemic, when enrollment fell by nearly 7 percent from FY 2021 to FY 2022, representing a loss of about 7,000 students. The second in FY 2027, the year currently being budgeted for, when enrollment declined by 5.4 percent, or roughly 6,800 students.

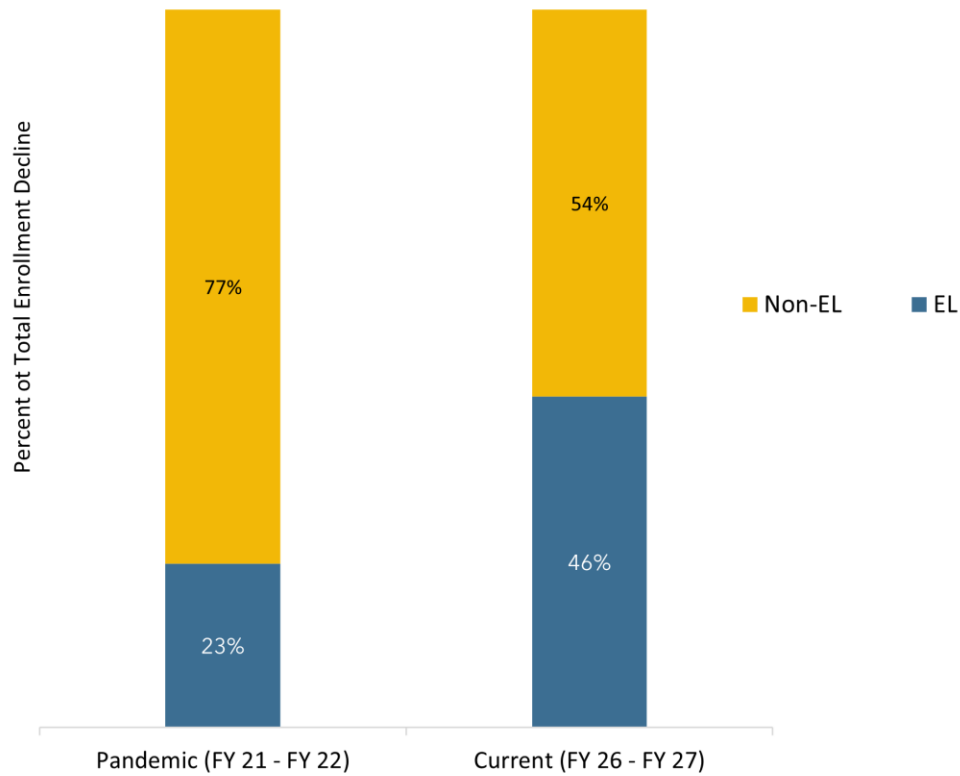
English Learner Enrollment Has Grown, Except During the COVID-19 Pandemic and FY 2027



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Foundation Budget Enrollment (FY 2019 to FY 2027)

During both the COVID-19 pandemic period and FY 2027, Massachusetts saw a similar number of English Learners leave public schools. Between FY 2021 and FY 2022, English Learner enrollment declined by 6,981 students. From FY 2026 to FY 2027, it declined by 6,770 students. However, the overall enrollment context is very different. During the COVID-19 pandemic, total statewide enrollment fell by 30,579 students, meaning English Learners accounted for just over one fifth of the decline, about 23 percent. In FY 2027, statewide enrollment declined by a much smaller 14,684 students overall, yet English Learners still accounted for 6,770 of those losses. As a result, English Learners now make up close to half of statewide net enrollment decline, about 46 percent.

Enrollment Decline Far More Concentrated Among English Learners in FY 2027 than COVID-19 Pandemic Decline



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Foundation Budget Enrollment (FY 2021 to FY 2022 and FY 2026 to FY 2027)

Why is English Learner enrollment decline outpacing non-EL decline so much more in FY 2027 compared to during the COVID-19 pandemic?

English Learner students are not synonymous with immigrants or children without status. There are United States-born students² who are developing English proficiency, and many immigrant students who are already proficient in English. However, English Learner status is currently the closest proxy available in publicly reported education data for tracking trends that may affect immigrant communities.

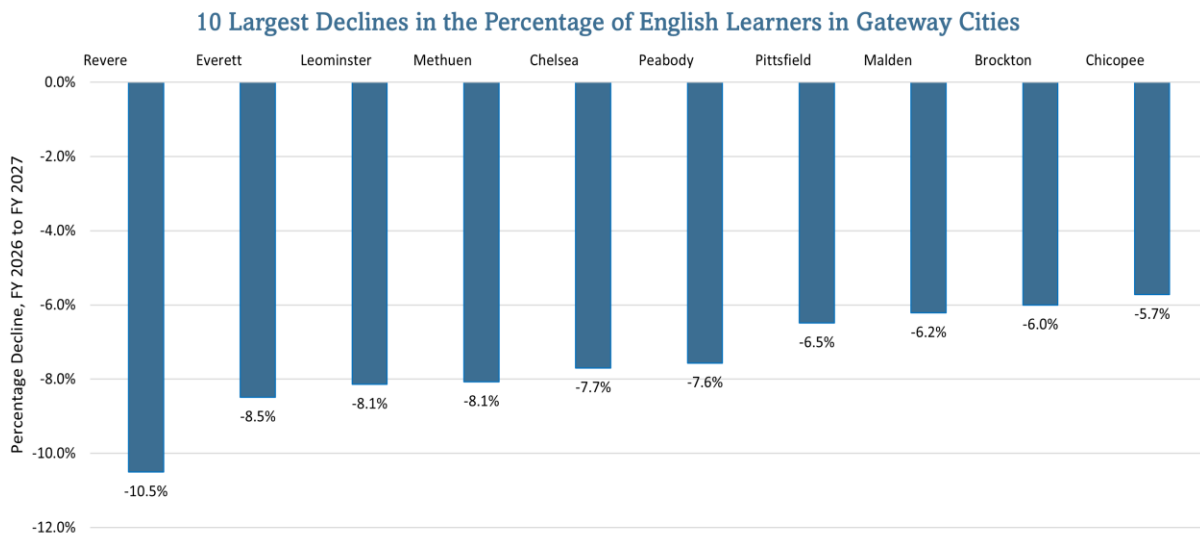
Recent reporting has highlighted growing concern within immigrant communities about immigration enforcement activity, including the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents across the country.³ Research shows that the current immigration enforcement tactics implemented by the Department of Homeland Security throughout the United States has affected school attendance among children from immigrant families, decline in school participation and educational outcomes, and school funding.⁴ Massachusetts is not the exception.

At a recent Massachusetts State House briefing with lawmakers, school leaders, educators, teachers unions, and advocates described how fear related to increased immigration enforcement may be contributing to school enrollment declines. Vatsady Sivongxay, executive director of the Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance (MEJA), said that “as ICE activities continue across the Commonwealth, immigrant families are living in fear... Children are being kept home to avoid enforcement.” In Lynn, Superintendent Molly Cohen emphasized “We are seeing fear. We are seeing instability. And we are seeing the financial consequences of that instability land squarely on the districts serving our most vulnerable students.”⁵

Given continual, harsh, and life-altering immigration enforcement actions at public institutions⁶, it is reasonable to suspect that these conditions discourage many immigrant children, and others perceived as not fully proficient in English, from attending school.

How is English Learner Enrollment Decline Impacting Gateway Cities?

English Learner enrollment declined in 22 out of 26 Gateway City public school districts. Defined in state law, Gateway Cities are mid-sized municipalities with lower incomes and lower educational attainment than the state average.⁷ Therefore, Gateway Cities already have fewer local resources available to absorb enrollment driven reductions in state aid. English Learner enrollment did not decline in four Gateway districts: Attleboro, Fall River, Fitchburg, and Taunton. In 14 Gateway Cities, English Learner enrollment declined by more than 5 percent.



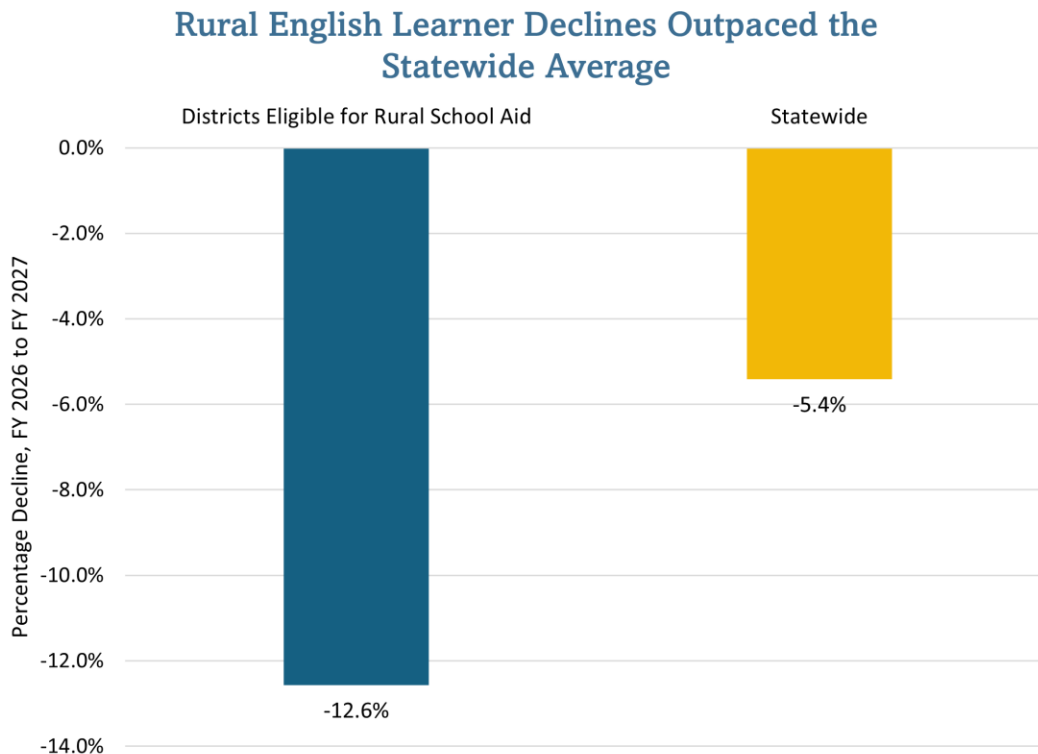
Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Foundation Budget Enrollment (FY 2026 to FY 2027)

English Learner Enrollment Decline Is Also Impacting Rural Districts

While declines in English Learner enrollment may be perceived as primarily affecting urban districts, these changes are being felt across Massachusetts. It is true that English Learners are disproportionately concentrated in cities, but many communities, including rural and regional districts, are also experiencing these declines. In these settings, even small changes in English Learner enrollment can have an outsized

impact on district finances. Because rural and regional districts often serve smaller student populations and have [already faced years of declining enrollment](#)⁸, the loss of even a handful of students can translate into meaningful percentage changes and added fiscal pressure.

Massachusetts DESE identifies [districts eligible for rural school aid](#) each fiscal year. In FY 2026, districts were eligible if they served no more than 35 students per square mile and had a per capita income below \$57,834. From FY 2026 to FY 2027, these districts experienced an English Learner enrollment decline from 1,082 to 946 students, a net decrease of about 13 percent, more than double the rate statewide. While these rural districts are experiencing smaller declines than urban districts in absolute numbers, the percentage decline is more substantial. It is important to acknowledge the impact on these communities because, like urban districts with households with lower incomes, they have more limited local fiscal capacity to absorb losses in Chapter 70 aid that result when high-need students leave the district.



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Foundation Budget Enrollment (FY 2026 to FY 2027) and list of districts eligible for Rural School Aid in FY 2026, Massachusetts Department of Public Health’s Rural Health’s State Office of Rural Health list of rural communities (2017)

Policy Solutions to Address the Fiscal Impacts of Enrollment Decline

Massachusetts, like many states across the country, is experiencing enrollment decline with direct implications for school district finances. Recent national immigration enforcement policies and related fears may be contributing to these declines in some communities, particularly among English Learner students.

While Chapter 70 includes a *hold harmless* provision that prevents districts from receiving less aid than the prior year through a uniform per-pupil minimum increase, this does not fully offset losses in districts that lose higher-need students, such as students from households with lower incomes or English learners, who generate additional aid in the formula. As a result, these mechanisms do not typically replace the full amount of aid associated with students who have left. This results in districts often experiencing reduced funding growth relative to expectations, even as they continue to face rising fixed costs that do not decline with enrollment.

The Commonwealth has responded to this challenge before. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when enrollment declines strained district budgets, the Legislature provided a one-time [\\$40 million declining enrollment fund](#) in the FY 2022 budget. As communities prepare their FY 2027 school budgets, a similar targeted, one-time investment could help offset enrollment-related losses in Chapter 70 aid. The size of this fund should be based on the actual budget impacts of losing higher-need students who are funded at higher rates in the formula. It should also be targeted to districts experiencing the steepest enrollment declines, ensuring resources reach those facing the greatest fiscal strain.

The state can pursue both short-term relief and longer-term structural fixes to address the fiscal impacts of enrollment decline:

Short-term: Targeted Stabilization Funding in the FY 2027 Budget

Create a one-time declining enrollment fund to help districts manage sudden revenue losses tied to enrollment declines in Chapter 70 aid. The fund should prioritize districts experiencing the greatest financial impact from declines in higher-need students such as English Learners—and those with the least local capacity to absorb these losses. The [House's FY 2027 budget proposal took an important step in this direction](#) by including declining enrollment support, but the scale of the funding proposed is insufficient relative to the magnitude of enrollment driven aid losses facing many districts.

Long-term: Strengthen the Foundation Formula

Convene a Foundation Budget Review Commission to:

- assess how the education funding formula responds to both acute and long-term enrollment decline, particularly for high-need student groups
- examine barriers to ensuring an adequate education for all students. This includes issues such as the [“inflation glitch,”](#) where the 4.5 percent cap on foundation budget growth suppressed Chapter 70 aid during periods of high inflation⁹, undermining some of the progressive intent of the Student Opportunity Act (SOA).
- evaluate how the funding formula accounts for geographic differences in income and fiscal capacity across rural, regional, and urban districts with households with low and middle incomes.

Identify reforms to ensure that state aid remains equitable and responsive across different district types and student populations. DESE is currently conducting [a local contribution study](#) authorized by the Legislature to examine the relationship between required local contributions and Chapter 70 aid amid growing reliance on Proposition 2 ½ overrides and other local fiscal pressures. This study focuses on who

pays to meet the foundation budget, the state’s definition of an “adequate” level of funding. That question is important, but it does not address the equally important question of whether that funding level is actually sufficient and equitable.

Conclusion

Enrollment declines erode school district finances in ways that disproportionately affect high-need students and communities, including English Learners, where both needs and fiscal impacts can be particularly acute. As it is, schools, school districts, teachers, and communities are dealing with the devastating effects of a federal immigration enforcement policy that targets families and education centers. While it is too early to measure the full effects on education attainment, public health, and workforce development, to name a few, the state can secure the fiscal stability of school districts to mitigate the damage of the enrollment decline. Pairing short-term stabilization with long-term reform offers a path to both immediate relief and a more equitable, durable funding system.

Endnotes

¹ Fixed costs are expenses that school districts cannot easily reduce in response to short-term enrollment declines. Examples include heating and cooling school buildings, utilities, basic maintenance, and operations or interest payments on accumulated debt.

² For example, individuals who migrate from Puerto Rico to the mainland United States are U.S. citizens at birth, yet many have received most of their education in Spanish, which can limit English proficiency upon arrival in U.S. public schools and create a need for English Learner supports and services. This is according to [García et al. \(2025\), “The Experience of Cultural Stress in the School System among Puerto Rican Hurricane María Migrant Families.”](#)

³ According to [Sattin-Bajaj, Carolyn \(2025\), “How Immigration Enforcement Is Harming U.S. Schools and Students,” Brookings Institution](#). The analysis summarizes research finding that immigration enforcement activity has been linked to increased student absences in California, declines in attendance and chronic absenteeism among English Learner students in Connecticut and Rhode Island, and higher risks of PTSD symptoms, emotional distress, and behavioral challenges among children of detained or deported parents.

⁴ [Pillai, Drishti, Samantha Artiga, and Matthew Rae \(2025\), Potential Impacts of Increased Immigration Enforcement on School Attendance and Funding, KFF.](#)

⁵ [Is ICE causing a drop in student enrollment? School leaders say yes, GBH News, March 4, 2026.](#)

⁶ According to reporting from the National Education Association highlighting stories and quotes from immigrant families, students, and educators, ICE raids and heightened immigration enforcement have created significant fear, trauma, emotional distress, and school absenteeism among immigrant communities. [Brenda Álvarez \(2025\), “The Trauma Immigration Raids Leave in Classrooms,” NEA Today, September 10, 2025.](#)

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⁸ According to the [2022 Massachusetts Rural Schools Commission Report](#), rural school districts lost about 4,200 students between 2012 and 2020, a decline of nearly 14 percent, compared to just a 0.5 percent drop statewide

over the same period. These districts are left carrying high fixed and legacy costs, particularly for employee and retiree benefits, even as enrollment falls.

⁹ In FY 2023 and FY 2024, inflation reached roughly 7 and 8 percent, respectively. Although inflation has since slowed, foundation budgets were never fully adjusted to reflect those earlier cost increases, meaning the state's estimate of the cost of providing an adequate education remains below what many districts are actually paying today, and Chapter 70 aid has not kept up either.