



# No Room to Learn

## Immigration and School Overcrowding

**FAIR**

Federation for American Immigration Reform

# About FAIR

The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) is a national, nonprofit, public interest membership organization of citizens united by their belief in the need for immigration reform. Founded in 1979, FAIR believes that the U.S. can and must have an immigration policy that is non-discriminatory and designed to serve the environmental, economic, and social needs of our country. FAIR advocates immigration rates consistent with U.S. population stabilization: annual levels of approximately 200,000, our traditional average.

With more than 70,000 members nationwide, FAIR is a non-partisan group whose membership runs the gamut from liberal to conservative. Our grassroots networks help concerned citizens use their voices to speak up for effective, sensible immigration policies that work for America's best interests.

FAIR's publications and research are used by academics and government officials in preparing new legislation. National and international media regularly turn to us to understand the latest immigration developments and to shed light on this complex subject. FAIR has been called to testify on immigration bills before Congress more than any organization in America.

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# Executive Summary

The overcrowding crisis in American schools is directly attributable to high immigration.

- Without school-age immigrants and the children of immigrants, school enrollment would not have risen at all during the past decade.
- One in every five students has an immigrant parent. One-quarter of these children were foreign-born themselves.
- Immigration will account for 96 percent of the *future* increase in the school-age population over the next 50 years.

**If immigration continues at current rates, classrooms will be overcrowded well into the future, and efforts to reduce school and class size will be doomed to failure.**

## NO ROOM TO LEARN: Immigration and School Overcrowding

While much attention has been paid to the challenges of educating immigrant children—from growth in the limited-English-proficiency student population to high immigrant drop-out rates to gaps in teacher training—little attention has been paid to a far-reaching side effect of immigration on schools: immigration’s contribution to school overcrowding.

Crowding in America’s schools is at crisis levels. Throughout the country, schools are struggling to meet the needs of growing student populations. In county after county, students must attend classes in portable classrooms and eat lunch in staggered schedules starting as early as 10:30 to ease the strain on crowded cafeterias. Teachers say classes are too large to be managed effectively and they can’t assist students who need extra help. In Mesa, Arizona, schools have even run out of room for portable classroom trailers, so 700 elementary school students attend classes in an old grocery store.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, U.S. school enrollment is at an all-time high. At 53.1 million students, current enrollment has even exceeded the record set in 1970 by the baby boomers.

Between 1990 and 2000, enrollment increased by 14 percent.<sup>2</sup>

About 14 percent of schools exceed their capacity by six to 25 percent, and eight percent exceed it by more than 25 percent.<sup>3</sup> To alleviate overcrowding, more than one-third of schools use portable classrooms, and one-fifth hold classes in temporary instructional space, such as cafeterias and gyms.<sup>4</sup>

The student population explosion poses daunting challenges for schools already overwhelmed by classroom crowding and teacher shortages. At the same time that they are struggling to find more space and teachers, school systems must still meet basic educational challenges, such as raising academic achievement levels, reducing dropout rates, and meeting the needs of an increasing share of non-English-speaking students. Yet rather than being used to improve the quality of education for current students, communities’ limited tax dollars are instead being diverted to build new schools to accommodate population growth.

### Smaller Schools Are Better

Education researchers say that ideal enrollments are no more than 300 students for an elementary school, no more than 500 for a middle school, and 600 to 900 for a high school.<sup>5</sup> Yet 71 percent of all U.S. high school students go to schools larger than 1,000 students.<sup>6</sup> High schools with 3,000 or more students are now common in large cities such as Los Angeles and New York. Some schools have as many as 5,000 students.<sup>7</sup>

Smaller schools have higher attendance and graduation rates, lower drop-out rates, less violence, and higher grades and test scores.<sup>8,9</sup> Small schools have been shown to be particularly helpful to inner-city students, African-American and Latino students, and students from low-income families.<sup>10</sup>

But putting smaller schools into practice is virtually impossible while school populations continue to expand. “Would (smaller schools) make sense instructionally? Would everybody love it? Sure,” said one assistant school superintendent. “Then you look at the demands of the rising population and the demands of space. Frankly, where do you put schools?”<sup>11</sup>

# Outlook for the Future

The number of school-age children is expected to increase steadily for the next nine decades. Enrollment in grades 9-12 is projected to reach an all-time high of 15.8 million in 2005.<sup>13</sup> Total enrollment will reach 55 million by 2020 and 60 million by 2030, according to the U.S. Department of Education. By 2100, the nation's schools will have to find room for 94 million students—almost double the number of school-age children the nation has now.<sup>14</sup>

Nationwide, more than 2 million new teachers will need to be hired in the next decade.<sup>15</sup>

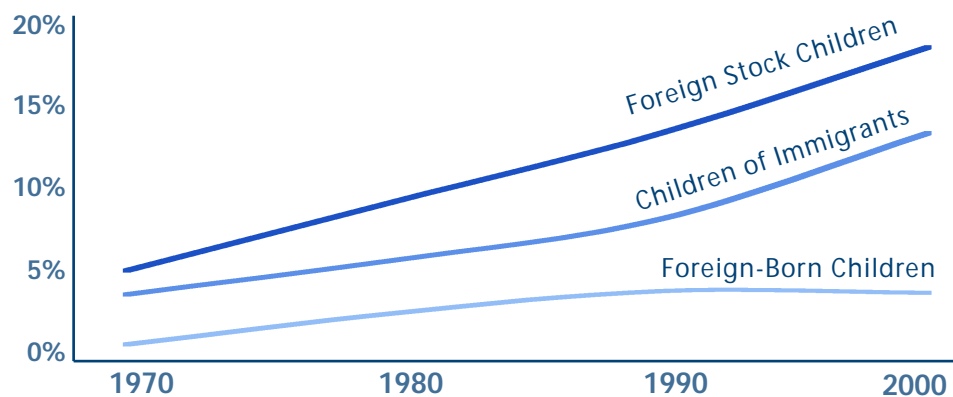
Desperate for additional space, school districts nationwide are building schools on or near polluted and toxic sites, according to the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice.<sup>12</sup>

## Immigration is the Root of School Enrollment Increases

Where is the growth in the school-aged population coming from? U.S. Census Bureau figures show that immigration has been responsible for almost 70 percent of population growth in the last decade; immigrants arriving since 1994 and their descendants will account for two-thirds of future population growth.<sup>16</sup>

Of the 53,445,000 school-aged children living in the U.S. in 2000, five percent (2,548,000) were born in other countries.<sup>17</sup>

Immigrants and their children account for an increasing share of enrollment



Source: "Overlooked & Underserved," Urban Institute, 2000.

But that's just part of the story. The largest group of adult immigrants are in their prime years for child bearing: ages 25 to 34.<sup>18</sup> Immigrants also tend to have more children, on average, than native-born women. The fertility rate of foreign-born women is 37 percent higher than the fertility rate of native women.<sup>19</sup> This is reflected in schools: Today, one in every five students (10,121,000) is the child of immigrants.<sup>20</sup>

Seven percent of New York City students immigrated to the U.S. in the past three years. In Queens, schools are scrambling for space for 30,000 additional students. "That's almost exclusively driven by immigration," according to Harold Levy, New York City's school chancellor.<sup>21</sup>



“All of this means a lot of scrambling by communities to come up with more schools, teachers, and the services that children need.”

—Deborah Weinstein, Children’s Defense Fund, on the growing child population<sup>22</sup>

# A Gauge for Measuring the Impact of Immigration on School Enrollment

The total U.S. school-aged population in 2000 was 53,445,000. This is a 19 percent increase (or 7 million) from 1990.<sup>23</sup>

Nineteen percent of today’s school-aged population are foreign-born or the children of immigrants.<sup>24</sup>

However, some of these “foreign-stock” (to use the Census Bureau’s term) are the children of “mixed nativity” parents (one foreign-born parent and one native-born parent).

Specifically, of the 10,121,000 foreign-stock students in 2000:

- 2,957,000, or 29 percent, were native-born but had just one immigrant parent;
- 4,616,000, or 46 percent, were native-born but had two immigrant parents; and
- 2,548,000, or 25 percent, children were themselves foreign-born.<sup>25</sup>

## CASE STUDY: California

In California, where schools are the most crowded in the nation, classes often exceed 35 students per teacher (18 is considered ideal).<sup>26</sup> Lack of space forces some students to attend class on school stages or in the gym.<sup>27</sup> Yet the state is still adding 100,000 new students each year.<sup>28</sup>

The state Department of Education estimates that 16 new classrooms will need to be built every day, seven days a week, for the next five years.<sup>29</sup> The number of teachers will need to be doubled within ten years, meaning that 300,000 new educators will need to be hired.<sup>30</sup>

In Los Angeles, where schools are so crowded that some have lengthened the time between classes to give students time to make their way through packed halls,<sup>31</sup> crowding in the next decade is

In California, where

projected to become so severe that some schools will have to hold double sessions (one in the morning and one in the afternoon) and Saturday classes. Even if the district builds 86 new schools, all 49 existing high schools will still have to adopt year-round schedules to keep pace with enrollment increases.<sup>32</sup>

California’s Class Size Reduction program calls for adding thousands of new K-3 teachers, but finding classroom space has proved impossible in some areas. Many schools have had to give up libraries, art and music classrooms, and science and computer labs to create additional space. Playgrounds are being transformed into parking lots for portable classroom trailers.<sup>33</sup>

Half of all children in California have at least one immigrant parent. Nearly one in ten are foreign-born themselves.<sup>34</sup>

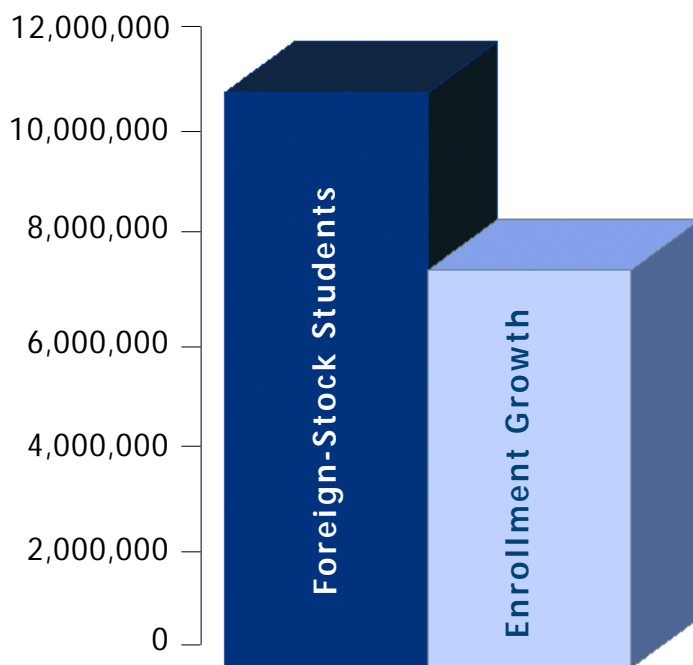
How to fairly account for the children of mixed nativity parentage? Since half of the parents of the students of mixed nativity parentage are native-born, we shall attribute half (1,478,500) of these students to the native-born and half to the foreign-born.

This puts immigration's contribution to student enrollment at 8,642,500 in the year 2000. Since the student population grew by 6,997,000 from 1990 to 2000, *immigration accounted for all of the increase, and then some.*

**Without school-age immigrants and the children of immigrants, school enrollment would not be rising at all.**

“Class size reduction is something that is so clearly beneficial to the ability of our students to learn and our teachers to teach that I am bewildered by any effort to stand in its way ... Research has shown that class size reduction in the early grades with a qualified teacher leads to higher student achievement in reading and math. And the benefits are greatest for disadvantaged and minority students.”  
—former Secretary of Education Richard Riley<sup>35</sup>

### Foreign-Stock Student Population Compared to Enrollment Growth Over the Last Decade



#### CASE STUDY: Nevada

Nevada had an 83 percent increase in children aged 10-to-14 during the 1990s. The number of children aged 4 and younger increased by 58 percent. Las Vegas' school enrollment doubled during the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> Clark County school district (which includes Las Vegas) projects that it will add 10,000 to 15,000 students every year.<sup>37</sup> Already, schools there are so crowded that students complain that they can't find available restrooms in between classes.<sup>38</sup> The average student-teacher ratio in the district's secondary schools is 32 to 1; some classes have more than 40 students.<sup>39</sup>

Twenty-eight percent of Nevada children have immigrant parents. Six percent of Nevada children are foreign-born themselves.<sup>40</sup> Nevada's total foreign-born population increased by 202 percent from 1990 to 2000.<sup>41</sup>



“We are finding even more schools in more places holding classes in hallways and increasing class sizes in an age where we are talking about the need to reduce it.”

—Kathleen Lyons, National Education Association<sup>42</sup>

## Immigration’s Impact on Future Enrollments

The *future* impact of immigration on school enrollments is illustrated by the U.S. Census Bureau’s population projections.

The Census Bureau projects growth in the school-age population under several different scenarios, allowing for varying levels of immigration and fertility. Under the middle series (the most commonly used projection series), the school-age population will

### CASE STUDY: Texas

Texas’s under-18 population increased by 23 percent between 1990 and 2000.<sup>43</sup> The resulting teacher shortage is becoming so acute that one-quarter of all new Texas teachers are not

fully certified in the field they were hired to teach.<sup>44</sup> In Austin, portable classrooms account for about 30 percent of the district’s elementary classrooms.<sup>45</sup>

Texas faces an enrollment increase of 414,000 additional students by 2007.<sup>46</sup> Texas will need to build two new schools a week to keep up with enrollment increases.<sup>47</sup>

One in four children in Texas have immigrant parents.<sup>48</sup> Texas’s total foreign-born population jumped by 90 percent from 1990 to 2000.<sup>49</sup>

### CASE STUDY: Florida

Florida’s schools are so

overcrowded that legislators are considering paying students to go to private schools instead of public ones.<sup>50</sup> In Miami-Dade County, 41 percent of schools are at least 150 percent over capacity<sup>51</sup>, and locker rooms and custodial closets have been converted into classrooms.<sup>52</sup> In Sarasota, some classrooms have more than 40 students at a time.<sup>53</sup> In Manatee County, lunch lines are sometimes so long that students don’t have time to eat unless they miss class.<sup>54</sup> Pasco County has opened six new schools in the last three years, has three more scheduled to open in the upcoming months, and still projects that by 2005, two high schools each will receive 700 more students than they have room for. No affordable land is available for further school construction.<sup>55</sup>

Twenty-eight percent of Florida children have immigrant parents.<sup>56</sup>

Because Florida’s high immigration rate means that population growth often exceeds projections, school enrollment projections frequently underestimate actual enrollments, “leaving school districts scrambling to provide additional personnel and programs without fresh infusions of cash.”<sup>57</sup> Recently, lawmakers discovered they needed an extra \$500 million to pay for an enrollment that exceeded projections by tens of thousands of students.<sup>58</sup> In Miami-Dade alone, almost 15,000 foreign-born students registered in the first half of the 2000-2001 school year—after funding had already been calculated.<sup>59</sup>

“Our anticipated gains in the number of foreign-born students alone will require us to build one elementary school a month just to keep up,” Miami-Dade school superintendent Roger Cuevas says. Every year since 1994, between 12,000 and 20,000 new foreign-born students have enrolled in the district’s schools.<sup>60</sup>

increase to 68.8 million by 2050. With zero net migration (calculated from 2000 onward), the school-age population would stay close to today's level—53.6 million by 2050.<sup>61</sup>

**That means immigration will account for 96 percent of the increase in the school-age population over the next 50 years.**

As the number of immigrant children has grown, the share that they represent of all students in schools also has risen dramatically, from 6 percent in 1970 to 16 percent in 2000.<sup>62</sup>

**Projected Population  
Ages 5 to 17 Years  
With and Without Immigration**

	2000	2010	2020	2030	2040	2050
With Immigration	52,989,000	52,001,813	55,200,191	60,030,278	63,85,346	68,834,895
Without Immigration	52,989,000	49,854,026	49,881,022	52,146,298	52,611,791	53,610,768

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau*

Growth with immigration	15,845,895
Growth without immigration	621,768
Growth due to immigration	15,224,127
Percent of growth due to immigration	96.1%

If we are serious about meeting the needs of children already living in the U.S.—immigrants and native-born alike—it is imperative that we stop burdening our already struggling schools with the effects of mass immigration. When education resources are already scarce, continuing the high flow of immigrants and their children into American schools is shortchanging our children and sentencing them to crowded classrooms and schools.

If mass immigration continues, the education of all American children will continue to be undermined. State and local governments will continue to be forced to bear much of the fiscal burden resulting from immigration decisions made purely at the federal level, and schools will be left constantly playing catch-up as they attempt to absorb the ever-increasing flow of immigrant children.

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