September 1997

The children of the Baby Boom generation have set off a population explosion in the nation’s public schools. This dramatic enrollment growth, known as the Baby Boom echo, began in the nation’s elementary schools in 1984, and elementary enrollment has increased annually since then. At the secondary level, annual enrollment increases began in 1991 and are expected to continue through the year 2007. Combined public and private high school enrollment is expected to reach 16.4 million by the year 2007, a 13 percent increase from 1997.

National Enrollment Trends

After reaching a peak of 51.3 million students in the fall of 1971, total enrollment in elementary and secondary public and private schools in the United States declined annually through the 1984–85 school year. The current enrollment upturn began in fall 1985 and is expected to continue through the year 2006. Total enrollment in elementary and secondary public and private schools is projected to reach 52.2 million in the 1997 school year, the highest in U.S. history.

By the year 2006, total enrollment is expected to swell to 54.4 million (enrollment in the year 2007 is projected to decline slightly, to 54.3 million). However, enrollment growth in the next 10 years is not projected to be as fast as the 1987–97 rate. Whereas high school enrollment is expected to increase steadily from fall 1997 to fall 2007, elementary enrollment over that time period is expected to rise slightly and then return to 1997 levels.

The primary reason for the timing and rate of the enrollment increase is the rising number of annual births since 1977, which is referred to as the Baby Boom echo. Other key reasons include: a higher birth rate among Hispanics and other minorities; increases in immigration, particularly in point-of-entry cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami; a greater number of children enrolled in pre-K and kindergarten; and a larger share of young people remaining in high school to receive their diplomas. Since 1984, these factors have combined to produce large enrollment increases in some of the fastest-growing areas of the country. For example, table 1 shows individual school districts that experienced the greatest increases in enrollment from 1984 to 1994.

Impact on Regions, States, and Districts

The increases in U.S. enrollment are not spread equally across all areas of the country, and there is a distinct regional pattern to the effects of the Baby Boom echo. From 1997 to 2007, enrollments are expected to increase in all but one Western state and in most states in the South, but enrollments are expected to decrease in five of nine Northeastern states and in 10 of 12 Midwest states (table 2). In all, enrollments are expected to hold steady or increase in 30 states and decline in 20 states and the District of Columbia.

Over the next decade, student enrollment is expected to increase by 16 percent in California, making it the fastest-growing state. States that will experience a decline in overall student population include the District of Columbia (by 7 percent), Wisconsin (by 7 percent), Iowa (by 7 percent) and Maine (by 8 percent).

Within states, the rate and timing of the enrollment changes also differ across school districts. In Nevada, overall enrollment is expected to grow by about 15 percent from 1996 to 2001. However, the number of students in Nevada’s Clark County School District is projected to increase by about 28 percent from 1996–97 to 2000–01 (179,000 students to 223,000 students). This kind of rapid and uneven growth places additional burdens on state and local education agencies.

How Will the Schools Keep Up?

The number of classroom teachers is expected to increase from 3.1 million in fall 1997 to 3.3 million by the fall of 2007. Overall, total yearly current expenditures for public elementary and secondary schools are projected to increase 22 percent from 1996–97 to 2006–07, from $257 billion to $314 billion (1994–95 dollars).

Table 1.—Ten public districts with the largest enrollment increases: Fall 1984 to fall 1994

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NOTE: Some changes may be affected by school district boundary changes.

Table 2.—Enrollment in grades K–12 in public and private elementary and secondary schools, by region and state: Fall 1987, 1997, 2002, and 2007 (in thousands)

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