

Newark Public Schools – Enrollment Trends

The Newark Public Schools (NPS) serve a complex city which has undergone dramatic change in the last 30 years. For most of that time the city was in decline, with housing abandonment, population flight, and increasing poverty. In recent years, Newark has seen explosive growth in new housing and a gradual increase in population, with a broader ethnic population mix. The public schools have mirrored those trends.

This chapter sketches recent trends in the City of Newark which affect the public schools, and broad NPS enrollment trends.

POPULATION TRENDS: Public schools reflect the communities they serve. Families with children either commit to the community and send their children to school there, or move to other communities as they gain resources and their children grow. In turn, neighborhood schools affect the areas around them – schools perceived as “good” affect property values and draw buyers and developers, and schools perceived as “bad” may reflect declining neighborhoods and reinforce their decline.

Newark struggled for 30 years to overcome middle-class flight, a business exodus, an eroded tax base, and growth of suburbs around the city. Those trends had a profound effect on its schools, starving them of resources and draining their enrollments. But during the 1990’s, those trends finally reversed. The U.S. Census shows that the population has stabilized:

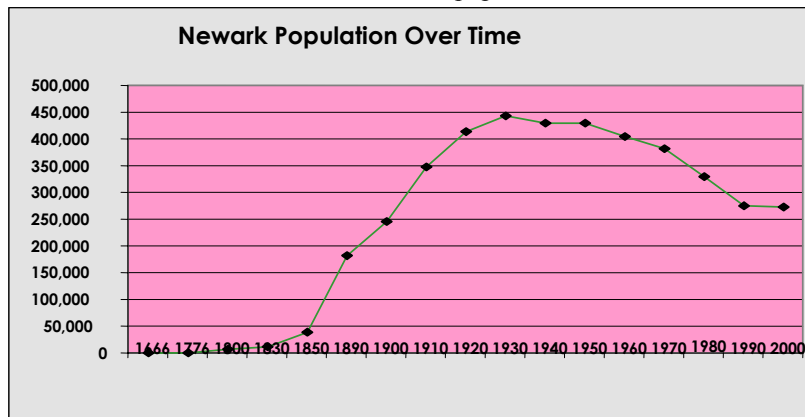


Table B.9

But that stabilization lagged for families with children. The adult population grew slightly in 2000, but the population of school-aged children declined slightly (birth records show that that decline has since ended).

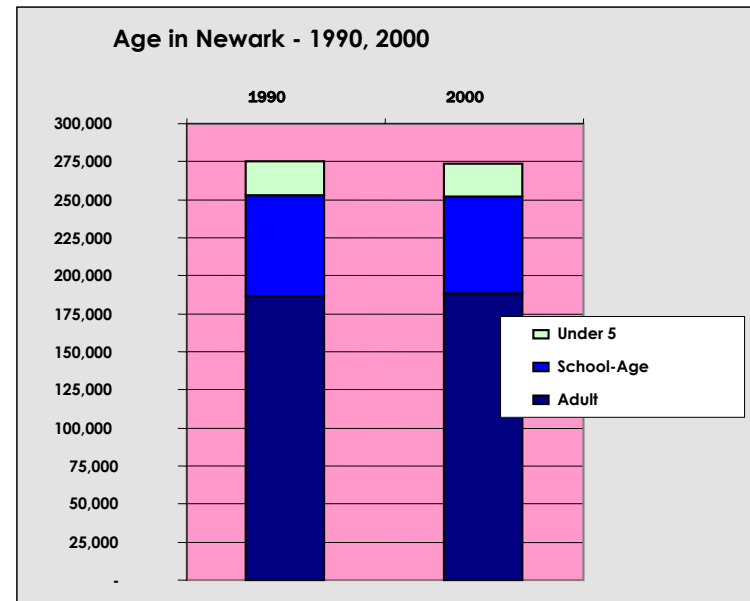


Table B.10

The population shifts were not uniform across ethnic groups. There was a sharp drop in African-American residents (from 160,000 in 1990 to 146,000 in 2000) but the number of African-American children under 18 was relatively stable and increased as a share of all African-Americans. All segments of the white population declined, but modestly. The Hispanic population grew (from 71,000 in 1990 to 80,000 in 2000) but the share of Hispanics under 18 dropped (from 33% to 30%).¹

¹ Source for population data: U.S. Census. Census data can be inaccurate for population sub-groups, particularly in urban areas and among individuals who may have problems with documents.

In the last 10 years, Newark's efforts to rebuild have finally taken hold. Those efforts had an indirect effect on schools until recently. New commercial construction was lured with tax write-offs, so it had little effect on property tax revenues. The Newark Housing Authority (NHA) began demolishing its high-rise towers housing families, and relocated many of the displaced families outside the city while replacement townhouses – still being built – were put in place, resulting in declining enrollments in affected areas. But those trends, too, are turning around (see below).

At the same time, like much of the northeast, Newark has undergone shifts in population. Many families leaving the city were replaced by families immigrating to the country through nearby airports, and by families leaving nearby New York City and elsewhere to find affordable housing, resulting in severe overcrowding in some schools.

Newark has seen an explosion in housing construction, both by NHA, which has built thousands of townhouse units to replace its demolished high-rise public housing, and by the private and non-profit sectors. NPS has worked with NHA to get detailed information on its planned housing, and incorporated into enrollment projections estimates of school-aged children who will live in that housing. Despite many efforts, it has not been possible to get similar details on planned private and non-profit housing.

Finally, NPS itself has been undergoing rapid and profound change. New administrations instituted educational reforms, and undertook urgently-needed capital improvements. One new school has opened, and others are under construction. Charter schools were authorized by the state legislature, and have opened (and closed) in several areas of the city. And several parochial schools have closed, along with a private school. These population trends are discussed more fully below.

PUBLIC SCHOOL TRENDS: Tracing the trends of recent enrollment, and estimating enrollments to come, is an essential part of planning future building needs. It is a systematic process, but it is not perfect. The decisions made by individual families when and whether to have children, and where to live with their children, are based on many factors outside

the control of schools – employment opportunities, available housing, community perceptions, available options, and dreams for the future. The trends of decisions families make can change quickly. Enrollment projections are based on past trends, which may change.

Projecting enrollments starts with births. How many babies were born to mothers living in Newark in a given year? How many children started first grade six years later? What's the ratio of babies born to children entering first grade six years later? That ratio (or percentage) is averaged over five years, and projected into the future, so the number of babies born two years ago is multiplied by the average ratio to estimate the number of children who will be in first grade four years from now.

In the same way, the number of children in first grade one year is divided by the number of children in second grade the next year, to come up with a "survival ratio." Those ratios are also averaged for five years to arrive at a more stable number, and second grades are projected into the future by multiplying the current first grade by that ratio. The same thing is done for every grade. But it all starts with the ratio of births to first grade six years later, because we know now how many babies were born two years ago, even though they haven't showed up in school yet.

If the choices parents make in the future are like those they made in the past, enrollment projections will be very precise. But because they may change, projections are expressed with a "plus/minus" qualifier. NPS has chosen a "plus/minus" of five percent for its projections, and planned future buildings based on the higher estimate.

BIRTHS: Newark births have fluctuated wildly since 1985, when there were 5,642 babies born. They rose sharply, peaking in 1989 at 6,469, and then plunged to a low of 4,748 in 1998. The number of births has begun to creep up since then (although the 2002 total was the lowest yet, at 4,606). This stall and apparent turn-around makes accurate projections of future births difficult.

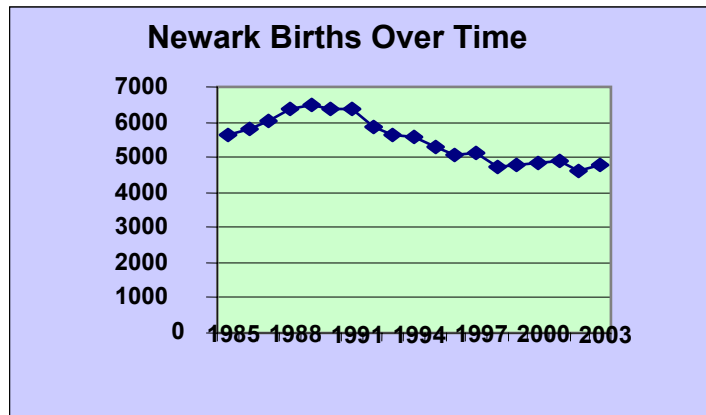


Table B.11

These fluctuations are reflected in school enrollments. The last of the 1989 “bubble” is now completing high school.

BIRTH RATIOS: A second measure is equally important in projecting enrollments – the ratio of births to first graders six years later. The number of births doesn’t matter much if those babies – or other children moving in – don’t end up in Newark schools. That ratio has fluctuated just as sharply as births, but at different times. Although births were rising between 1985 and 1989, the share of babies who entered first grade six years later (1991-95) was dropping, from 77% to 70%. The ratio continued to drop, hitting a low of 57% in 2000-01, before it began to rise again. Last year, it was 67% and on a clear upward track. That will have a significant impact on future enrollment estimates.

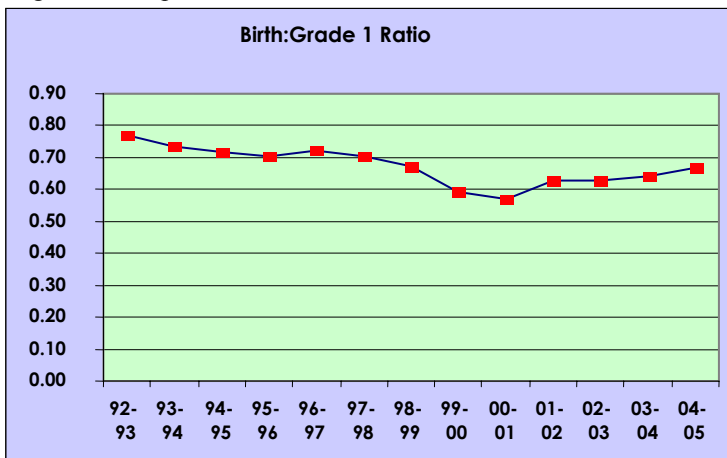


Table B.12

ENROLLMENT IN GRADES: The abrupt shifts in NPS enrollment, not only in total regular education enrollment but in the grade levels of students, has taxed every aspect of Newark’s school system, not least its physical plant. The district was fortunate in that its typical school configuration was K-8 (now PK-8), permitting greater flexibility in the deployment of available classroom space in a neighborhood. But even that benefit could not alleviate the strain of accommodating extreme shifts in enrollment, particularly in the PK-2 grade range, as this graph makes clear:

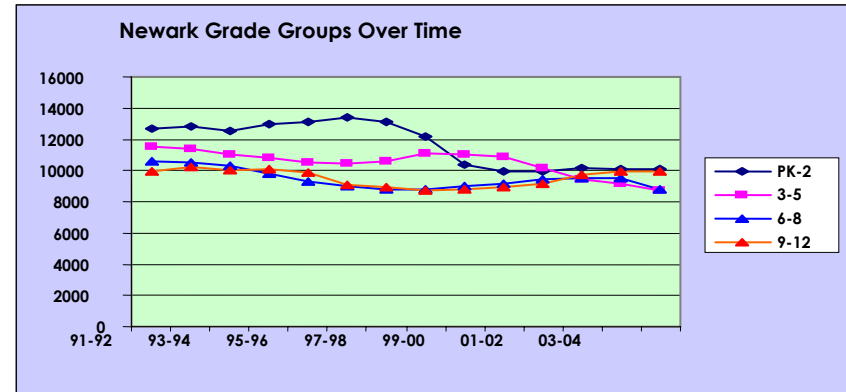


Table B.13

The decline in PK-2 enrollment is particularly striking because NPS did not offer pre-kindergarten until 1995, and did not offer full-time kindergarten for all students until 1996. The increase in students from those program additions could not erase the effects of a sharp decline in births

SPECIAL EDUCATION: Some of the decline in enrollment resulted from a shift to special education over time:

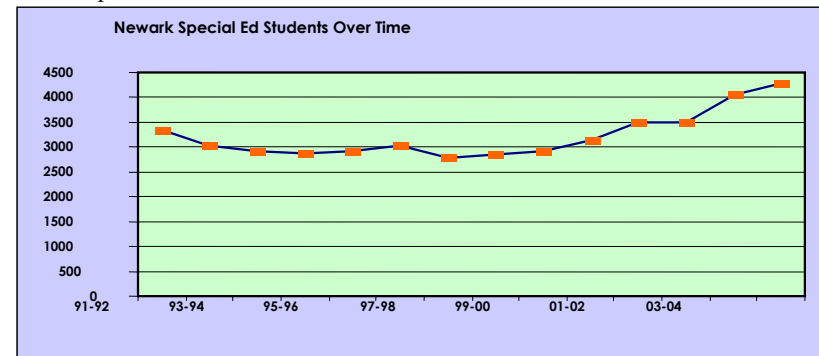


Table B.14

Newark had a low referral rate at the beginning of this period, often providing supportive services without classifying students. A change in classification categories, and a sharp increase in classifications, resulted in a dramatic increase in special education enrollment at a time when regular education enrollment was falling steadily. A part of the special education increase was the result of a push for early identification of students with learning problems, which may have had a particular effect on PK-2 regular education totals.

The special education student totals do not include special education students who are primarily educated in regular education classrooms. Those students are part of the regular education classroom counts. Special education totals include only students in self-contained classes, because those students have a significant impact on calculations of space needs.

Special education totals do not include various categories of students sent out of district for specialized services, which may include residential and correctional services as well as day programs. The district is trying to develop in-district services which would serve a portion of those students (or similar students in the future) closer to home, and at less cost.

CHARTER SCHOOLS: New Jersey has encouraged establishment of charter schools for the past 10 years, and the number of charter schools has grown. Ten charter schools programs operated in Newark during the 2005-06 school year with additional programs expected in the following year. Some of these schools have been successful; others have closed abruptly, sometimes after their enrollments were recorded for funding purposes. Approximately 3,000 students attend these schools.

NPS is assembling data to identify the direct impact of charters on individual schools and regions. It is predictable that some public schools are affected more than others, either because they are overcrowded or because their academic quality has lagged. However, there are some indications that the impact on parochial and private schools has been greater than that on public schools, because some parents may see charters as a tuition-free alternative to schooling in an independent setting.

MAGNET SCHOOLS: In the past decade, Newark has opened several district-wide magnet and alternative schools and programs at the high school level, and plans more. That increase in options for students, together with a decline in available non-public high school choices, has complicated the process of projecting future enrollments in neighborhood

high schools. NPS has relied more heavily on regional projections as older students begin to travel to schools outside their neighborhoods.

ETHNICITY: Despite dramatic changes in births and enrollments, the ethnicity of NPS' student body has remained remarkably stable (in percentage terms) over the past 14 years. The share of Hispanic students has increased from 26% to 32%, and the share of African-American students has declined from 63% to 60%, but these are not significant changes over such a long period of time. The share of white students has dropped from 10% to 8%, with a sharp drop in the last year, and has seen more fluctuation over time than other ethnic categories. (Shares of Asian students and of American Indian students remain negligible – less than one percent – and are not represented on this graph).

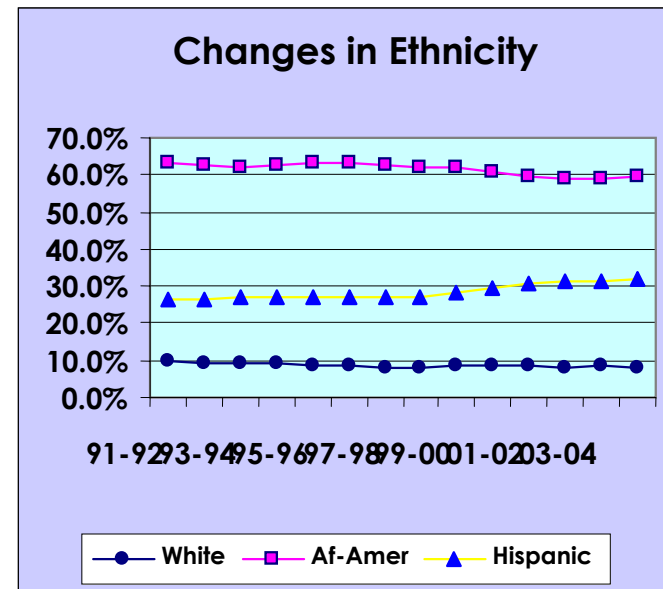


Table B.15

PROJECTING ENROLLMENTS: Based on these complex factors, enrollment was projected forward for five years for the district, the five SLT's (four PK-8 regions of the city and a city-wide high school unit), and two sub-SLT's (geography-based subdivisions) for each of the four PK-8 regions. The base enrollment overall, with today's housing stock, will decline slightly. However, the lower number of students moving through middle and high school grades (reflecting a drop in births) once the "bubble" of high-school students graduates who entered school when births peaked, will flatten enrollments for several years:

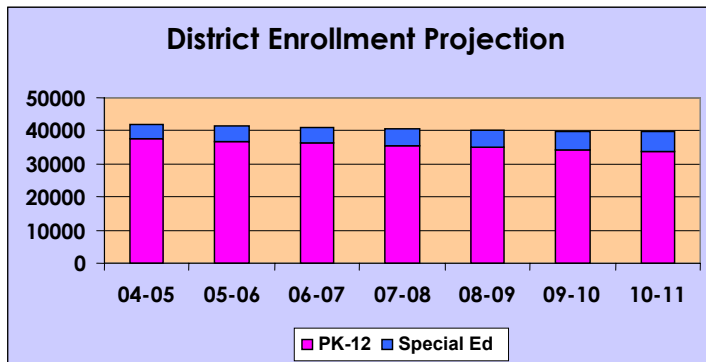


Table B.16

The base enrollment projection is not the whole story. The Newark Housing Authority continues to add townhouses to replace the high-rise towers it has demolished. Counting school-aged occupants of those new units, enrollment will be flat toward the end of the decade, with the greatest stability in early grades:

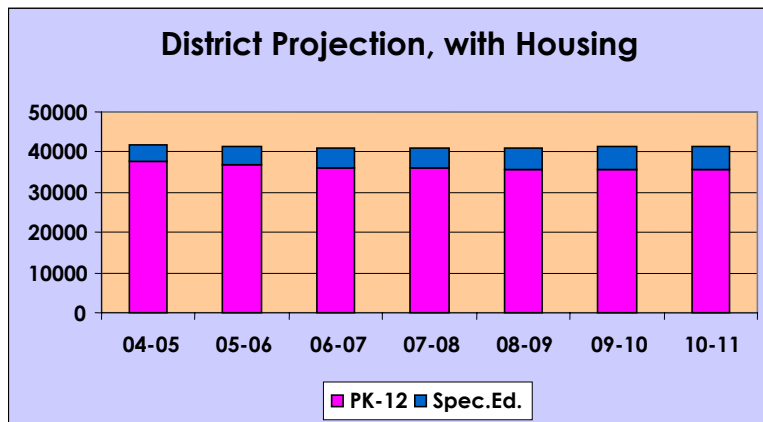


Table B.17

PRE-KINDERGARTEN: A new element has entered into enrollment projections and facility planning. New Jersey now mandates that all three- and four-year-olds be served in pre-kindergarten programs, either in district facilities or with contracted service providers. For the first time, NPS developed a method for estimating the "universe" of three- and four-year-olds which will need those services, and projected facility needs based on a plan to serve most four-year-olds in district buildings (if state funding makes appropriate facilities available) and most three-year-olds with contracted providers. The results of that estimate are shown in the following graph.

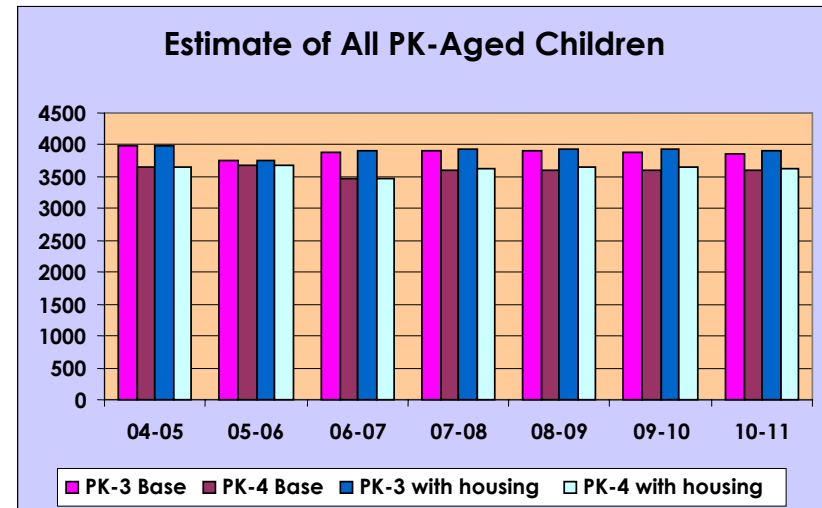


Table B.18

The district's implementation of full-day kindergarten in 1996 may have helped generate a gradual increase in the percent of babies born who attended first grade six years later. Implementation of pre-kindergarten services for all toddlers may also have a positive influence on the choices parents make about where they will live and where they will send their children to school in the future, but that possibility cannot influence enrollment projections until there is experience to back it up.

CONCLUSION: Two strong trends emerge from NPS' analysis of population and enrollment trends: Newark is growing, and its parents are becoming more confident in its public schools. But the effects of past years will continue to wash through the public schools for some time to come, as children born in years when the number of births declined sharply progress through school.

More recent trends show a clear shift from teen-age to young students, as the number of births begins to head upward, and more parents choose to stay in Newark and send their children to public schools. That trend has important implications for the future beyond the immediate projected period. If current trends continue, enrollments will gradually build as those young children grow and are replaced by similar numbers in early grades. Those trends will become more apparent in the years beyond those projected now.

Because recent birth trends appear show a change in direction, it is critical that these trends continue to be closely monitored. The increases may falter, but it is more likely that they will accelerate because of NPS academic gains, and because of Newark's larger population trends, discussed above. That will put new demands on public school facilities, and create even more urgent need for new school buildings.