



Illustration by Darrick Rainey

## The Number of Children in L.A. Is Shrinking — Which Could Be a Disaster

[HILLEL ARON](#) | MARCH 2, 2017 | 6:48AM

School board member Ref Rodriguez's Eastside district — one-seventh of the Los Angeles Unified School District — is a sprawling, crescent-shaped piece of land that manages to include Katy Perry's home in Los Feliz and the notoriously poor and corrupt cities of Vernon, Bell and Cudahy. Rodriguez maintains a satellite office in the far-flung outpost of South Gate, across the street from a Bimbo factory, in an empty school.

This was once Tweedy Elementary, a peach-colored building and a collection of shabby bungalows set atop a black field of asphalt. When the school district built a new Tweedy Elementary a few blocks away, in 2004, the older campus was converted into an adult learning center. Rodriguez's office is inside one of the bungalows, which also includes a room full of unused textbooks.

Today, LAUSD finds itself in a curious position: cash-poor and land-rich. It owns 750 properties, making up more than 6,600 acres of land, or more than 10 square miles — an area larger than the city of Santa Monica. But many of its schools are under-enrolled.

"There are places where we have schools that are basically four blocks away from each other — and at a time, that made sense," Rodriguez says. Now, he says, "Buildings built for 1,000 kids may have something like 400.

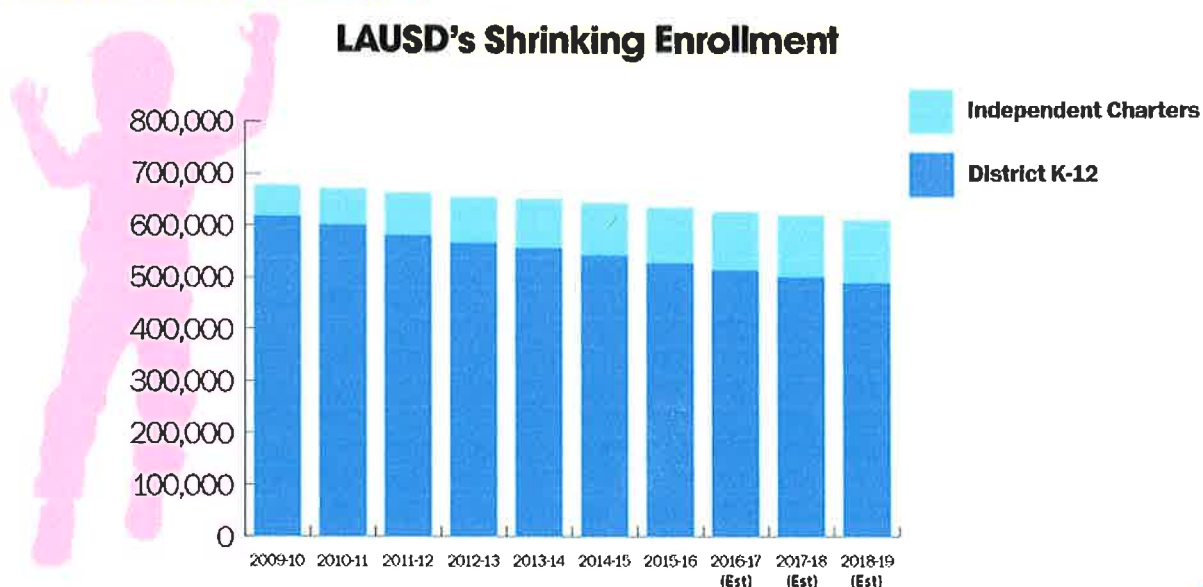
"It's expensive."

Between 1980 and 2000, LAUSD's population exploded from about 500,000 to more than 700,000, causing classrooms to become seriously overcrowded. Elected officials responded to the crisis by moving schools to a year-round schedule, by busing students to less crowded schools, and by hiring hundreds of teachers and throwing up hundreds of cheap, prefab bungalows on playgrounds.

Then, in the 1990s and 2000s, voters passed a series of bond measures to fund the construction of more than 100 new schools. Some, like the \$578 million Robert Kennedy School, built on the site of the Ambassador Hotel, became among the most expensive public schools in the country.

"We had overcrowding, we were busing kids — some of them were on the bus for a couple of hours," says LAUSD superintendent Michelle King, who's been with the school district since 1978. "At that point, we really wanted to ensure every child could attend their neighborhood school. No one could have foreseen, I think, that the landscape would change."

A little more than a decade ago, something unexpected happened. The district's enrollment, which peaked in 2004 at just under 750,000, began to drop. Some of the loss was to independent charters, a growing trend that would soon amount to a veritable exodus of students. But the total number of kids being served by both the district and charters also was dropping. The reason was simple: People are having fewer children. They're also having them later in life — and they're often leaving L.A. once they do.



This is no small problem. School districts in California receive money from the state based on a formula that depends, in part, on how many kids attend their schools. Fewer students means less money.

Today, LAUSD's enrollment is around 514,000, a number that the district estimates will fall below half a million by 2018. But L.A. Unified's costs have not gone down. They've gone up. This year's \$7.59 billion budget is half a billion dollars more than last year's.

The nation's second largest school district is facing a looming fiscal crisis, one that could have devastating consequences for the city.

"Everyone just hopes they can keep the ship afloat for a while and something will happen to change the vectors," says former state treasurer Bill Lockyer. "I don't see that happening. But it's easy to decide that when the alternative is making some hard and unpopular decisions."

In his 2015 campaign, Rodriguez, a former charter school operator, spoke about the need for the district to shrink — or, as he put it, to "contract elegantly." Like any company faced with fewer customers, it needed to downsize but in a way that didn't actually make its "product" worse.

"We're trying to stay away from the biggest impact to kids in classrooms," he says. "But I do believe that we need to talk about school closures at some point. It's inevitable. And we need to talk about it in a way that's truthful."

**The declining birthrate** in the United States is a sort of political sleeping giant. Dr. Dowell Myers, a USC professor who studies demographic change, describes the issue like this: In Los Angeles County, the ratio of people over 65 to people between the ages of 25 to 64 — the ratio of retirees to workers — is likely to double between now and 2030.

"That's never happened before, ever, in the United States," he says. "This rising ratio is the central political driver for the next 20 years. The facts of life are this ratio. It's everywhere in the country, in every state."

This demographic shift could have devastating consequences for public institutions such as Social Security and health care. But the first victim might be public education. A school district like Los Angeles Unified relies on a steady supply of young people for its revenue, and it pays for its retired workers' benefits. It's easy to see how one decreasing and the other increasing could be a problem.