



Clarifying
Complex
Education
Issues

Who Are California's Students?

California is the nation's most populous state. It is, therefore, not surprising that California has the largest school enrollment. But the sheer size is still dramatic. In 2000–01, California's K–12 enrollment totaled 6,050,895 (plus 648,564 private school students)—a number almost equal to the entire population of the state of Indiana.

This EdFact looks beyond that awe-inspiring number to examine in more detail who these children are, including their ages, their family backgrounds, and how they are distributed throughout this vast state. All the data are from the 2000–01 school year or the 2000 U.S. census.

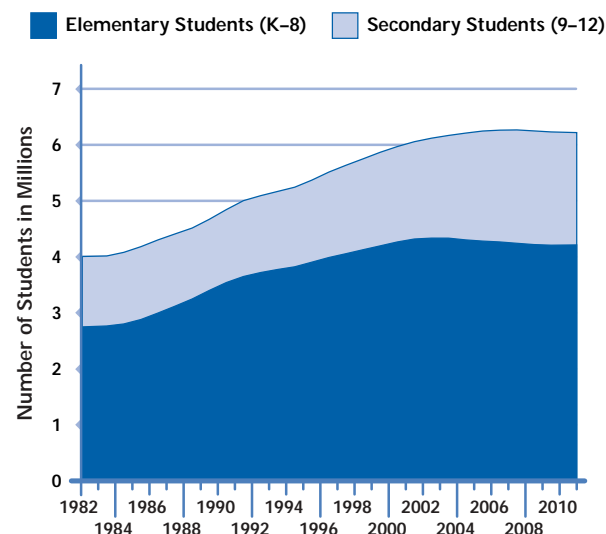
While population growth may be slowing, diversity is increasing in the state

About 20% of California's population is in the school-age years between 5 and 17, and almost 90% of the state's students are enrolled in public schools. Moreover, California's child population has grown faster than the general population. School enrollment increased by 99,283 from 1999–2000 to 2000–01 and by almost 1.1 million students in the past decade.

However, this trend may be reversed within a few years. Some demographers say that the birth rate is starting to decrease, and as a result growth in the child population will begin to level out. The California Department of Finance projects a slight decrease in the K–6 population over the next five years. As Figure 1 demonstrates, California's secondary schools can expect an increase in students well into the 21st century.

Figure 1

Projections indicate California's high enrollment growth is leveling off



Data: California Department of Finance, Demographic Research Unit, 11/01

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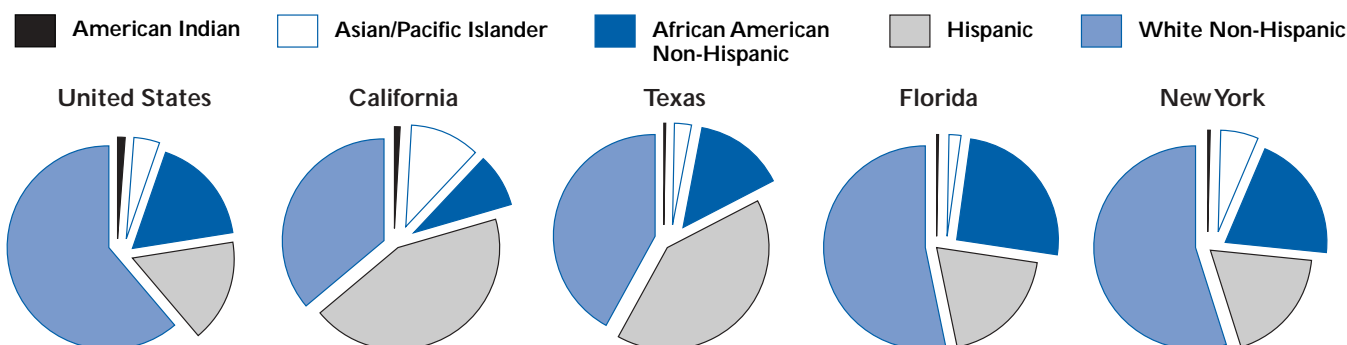
Diversity is California's middle name

California's student population reflects not only the state's size, but also its ethnic and cultural diversity. The state's Hispanic student population has surpassed the number of whites as the largest group and accounts for a significant portion of the growth in enrollment. As Figure 2 shows, Asian/Pacific Islander and African-American students also represent sizeable student populations in California as a whole.

In its schools, the state has a majority of minorities. With four ethnic subgroups of significant size, its make-up differs substantially from the United States as a whole and also differs from other states with large minority populations. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2

With four major ethnic subgroups, California stands alone in terms of student diversity



Data: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, Common Core of Data, 2000–01

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The school population is more diverse than California's population as a whole. Whites make up 36% of students and 47% of all Californians. In other words, many of the students in California's K–12 schools rub shoulders with a much wider variety of people than do their parents.

There are many different Californias

Although racial diversity exists throughout California, neither the student population overall nor the ethnic groups are evenly spread. More than half of the state's students are enrolled in Los Angeles (1,681,787), Orange (494,178), San Diego (488,377), and San Bernardino (380,830) counties. The student population is less dense in the Bay Area and Central Valley, and it is sparse in the far north and mountain areas of the state.

While K–12 enrollment overall is weighted toward the south, specific ethnic groups are most concentrated in different parts of the state. So while a student attending school in Imperial County would find that Hispanic students form the majority, another student in San Francisco might go to a school with Asian, African-American, and white students in nearly equal numbers.

Students with special characteristics form a sizeable group

While the majority of students in California schools share typical educational needs, a sizeable group has special requirements of one type or another. A variety of state and federal programs provides some funding for these students. (The data that follow in this EdFact are based on the numbers of students who qualify for these various services.) Local school districts are also legally bound to use some of their resources to meet the particular needs of these identified groups.

It may be tempting to add together the numbers of students who qualify for each service to determine how many are receiving extra services, but that approach is misleading because the children often fall into more than one of the categories listed below.

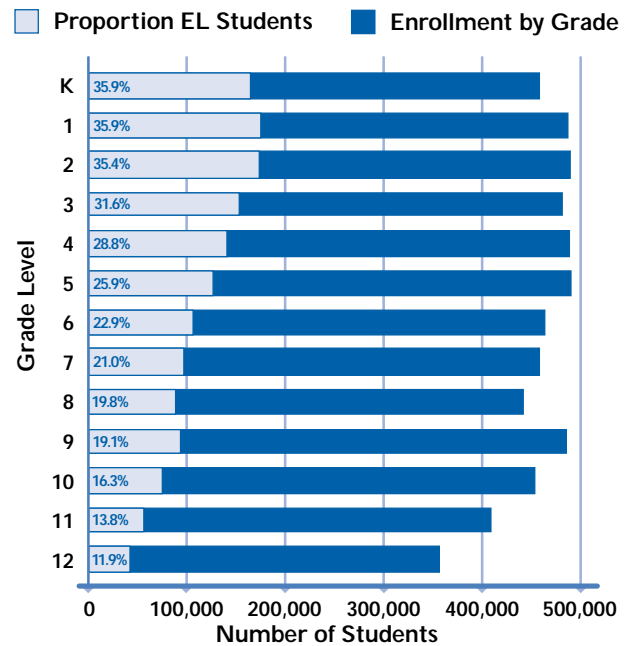
More than 25% of California's students are English learners

Each year, California students whose native language is not English are classified either as fluent English proficient (FEP) or English learners (EL). In 1990–91 California had 986,462 EL students or 20% of all students. By 2000–01 EL students had increased to 1,490,666, or 25% of the student body. The largest proportion of these students is in the primary grades. (See Figure 3.)

Spanish is the primary language of 83% of these students, but significant numbers speak other languages, including a variety of Asian/Pacific languages. Many school districts report that they are serving students from between

Figure 3

About one out of three California students in the primary grades is learning English



Data: California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit, 2000–01

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50 and 100 different linguistic backgrounds. Again, the distribution of languages throughout the state is inconsistent, and the language needs and primary languages spoken by students in one school can differ completely from those found in another school, even in the same district or county.

Migrant students make up 4.2% of public school enrollment

With California's strong agricultural base, students whose parents are migrant workers numbered 252,292 in 2000–01. This was nearly a third of all the students in the United States who were eligible for services paid for with federal funds through the Migrant Education Program.

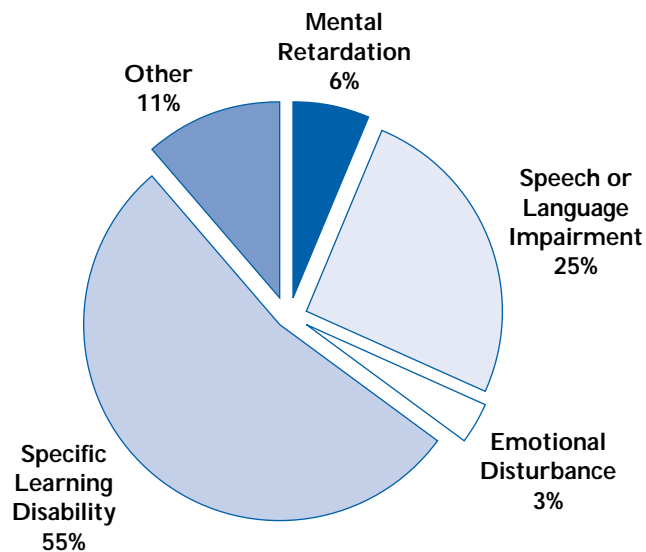
A U.S. Department of Education study in the mid-1990s estimated that 84% of adult migrant workers nationwide speak little or no English. The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education reports that "the migratory lives of these students impose various disadvantages, including discontinuity in education, social and cultural isolation, extreme poverty, and poor health." While the total number of migrant students is small, they form a large proportion of the student population in some agricultural communities in California.

About 7% of California students qualifies for assistance through the GATE program

In 2000–01 more than 408,322 public school students, or 6.7% of the student body, were identified as eligible for the

Figure 4

Students with specific learning disabilities comprise more than half of all Special Education students



Data: California Department of Education, Special Education Division, 12/00

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Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. When assessed against their peers, these students perform at a remarkably high level in some aspect of intellectual, creative, leadership, or performing/visual arts ability or in some other way exhibit extraordinary potential.

Approximately 11% of the state's students qualify for Special Education services

In California, 650,719 children qualify for Special Education programs. They include nearly 350,000 identified as specific learning disabled (e.g., dyslexia) and more than 165,000 who are "speech or language impaired." The remaining 135,000 students have a variety of disabilities, including mental retardation and physical and emotional impairments. (See Figure 4.)

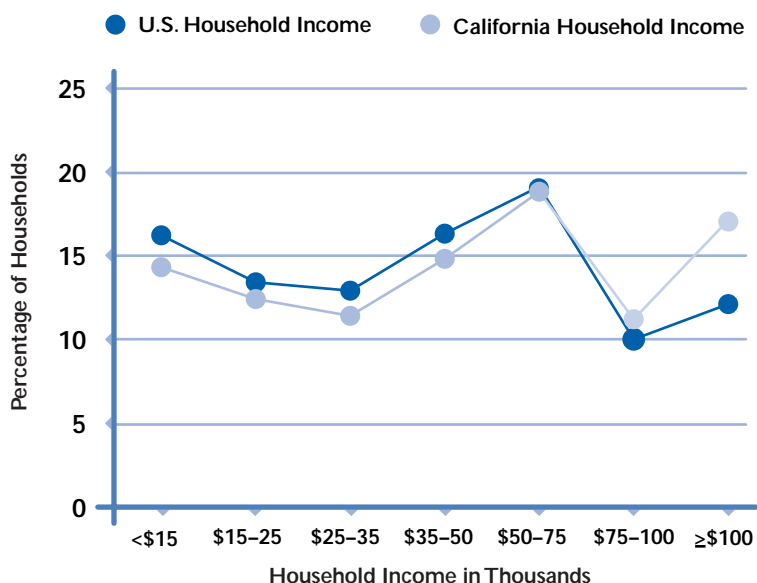
"Other" in Figure 4 includes a wide range of low-incidence, physical disabilities such as deafness, blindness, orthopedic impairments, and autism.

Families influence students and their performance

When students walk through the classroom door, they bring with them the strengths and weaknesses, assets and liabilities of their families. Factors like family income and home stability can have a strong influence on a student's school performance. Therefore, any examination of California's students is incomplete without a look at their families. The data in this section come from the 2000 U.S. census.

Figure 5

Household income in California varies most from the nation at the upper income levels



Data: U.S. Census Bureau, Income 2000

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Median household income is higher in California than the nation

Poverty is a highly accurate predictor of poor student performance. Conversely, the wealthier a family is, the more likely their children will perform well in school. The correlation between high scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and high family income is well documented.

A look at income distribution in California, based on the 2000 census, reveals that about one in six households managed on an income of less than \$15,000 per year, as Figure 5 shows. Thirty-nine percent of California households were between \$15,000 and \$50,000. Thirty percent of households earned between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and 17% of households earned more than \$100,000. The 2000 census shows that the median household income for California was \$46,802, about 11% higher than the national median.

Married couples make up a little more than half of California households

Statistics on households in California do not reveal if children are of school age or how many children are in each household. Family households are defined as those in which two or more related individuals live together.

Married couples head the majority of households with children, but a large segment is headed by single adults. The 2000 census data indicate that married couples account for 51% of all the households in California, down from about 54% in 1990. During the same time, the proportion of single-adult family households increased from 16.4% to 17.8%, an additional 278,000 households. In 1980, women headed 77% of these households, compared with about 66% in 1990 and 71% in 2000. Just over half of single-adult households have children.

More than 20% of California's children live in poverty

U.S. census data provide comparisons of individual states and the United States as a whole. As Figure 6 shows, California is similar to New York and Texas in its high rates of general poverty and especially child poverty. The largest states—with some of the biggest cities—generally have higher poverty rates than the rest of the nation, with the difference seen most dramatically among young people. Nationally, the definition of poverty in 2000 was an annual income of \$17,463 or less a year for a family of four.

Another measure of relative poverty is the number of children who participate in the free and reduced-price meal programs offered in schools. In 2000–01 nearly 2.8 million, or about 47% of all students, participated in these school meal programs in California. For their children to be eligible for this meal program in 2001–02, a family of four must have earned no more than \$32,653 a year.


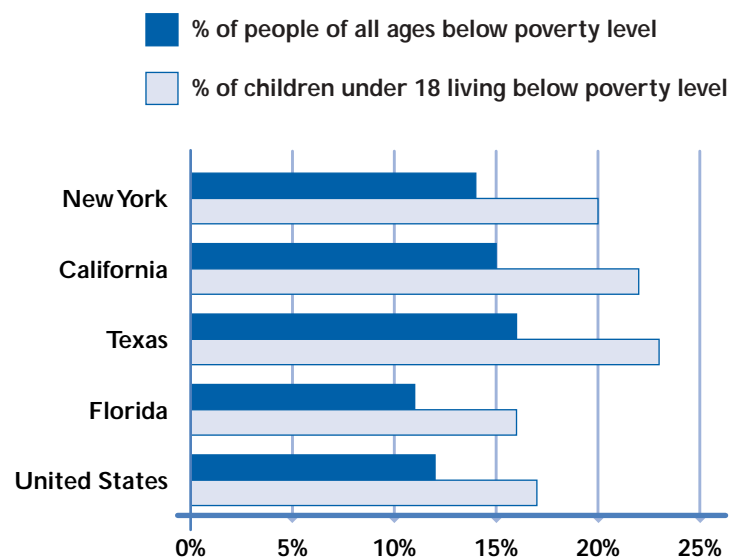
Poverty correlates strongly with the breakdown of the family unit and with lower student performance. According to 2000 census data for California, 37% of female-headed households with children live in poverty. When looking at households with young children, the poverty rate is about half for female-headed households compared to 12% for two-parent families. 

Figure 6

The three largest states—New York, California, and Texas—all have high levels of child poverty



Data: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000

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To Learn More

For an overview of data based on the 2000 census, go to the U.S. Census Bureau at: www.census.gov For quick, easy access to facts about people, business, and geography, go to: <http://quickfacts.census.gov> A good source for population, housing, economic, and geographic data is: <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet>

For California Department of Education Data about students, go to DataQuest: <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/> For a user-friendly approach to state data, visit the Education Data Partnership at: www.ed-data.k12.ca.us

California Counts. Published by the Public Policy Institute of California, this series of reports looks at population trends and includes profiles. Go to www.ppic.org and click on California Counts. Phone: 415/291-4400.