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Education Indicators in Canada: Fact Sheet

Demographic Echoes: Generational Waves and the Changing School-Age Population in Canada

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The demographic foundations of Canada's education systems

The size and composition of the school-age population are key factors shaping the scale of education systems. Changes in the number of children attending elementary and secondary school influence demand for teachers, classrooms and education funding, while shifts in population characteristics affect the diversity and needs of students. For education planners and policy makers, demographic trends provide an important foundation for understanding current pressures on schools and anticipating future requirements.

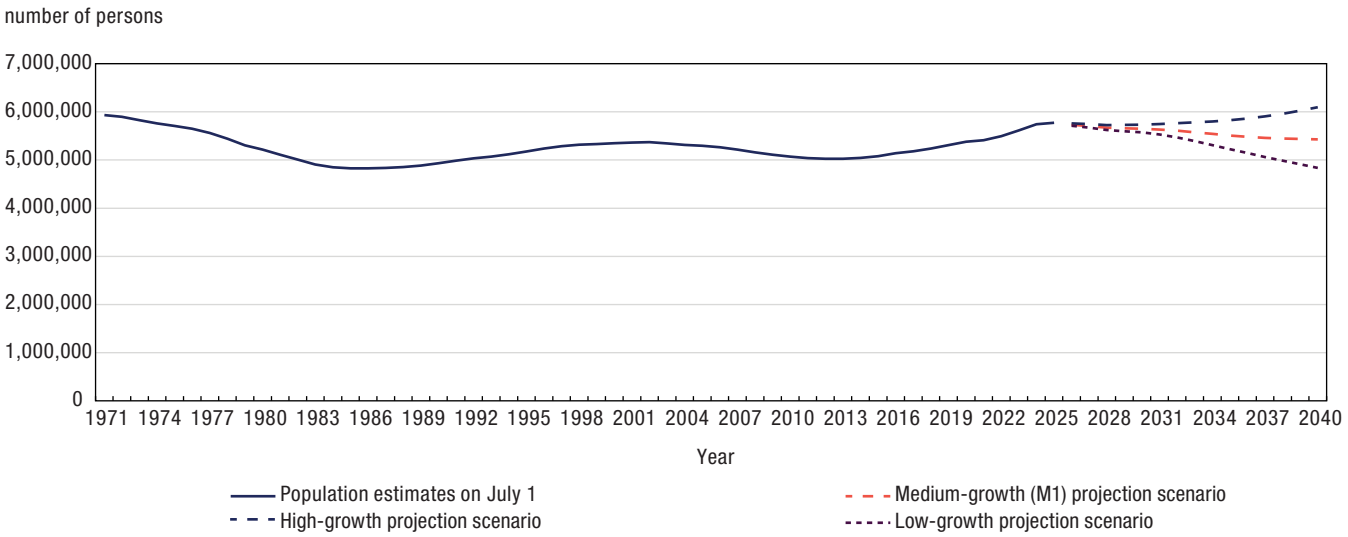
This paper explores how factors such as fluctuations in birth rates, generational cohort sizes and behaviours, and immigration have influenced the number of children moving through Canada's education system over the past several decades, and how these demographic shifts have shaped education expenditures and the demand for teachers.

Booms, busts and echoes: Generations moving through Canada's schools

The evolution of Canada's school-age population over the past several decades reflects a series of demographic waves tied to changing birth patterns and population growth through immigration.

The first major crest occurred in the 1960s, as large cohorts born during the post-war baby boom moved through the school system. By 1971, the population aged 5 to 17 years reached 5.9 million, reflecting the later stages of these cohorts as they progressed through the school-age population. As fertility declined in the late 1960s and 1970s, smaller cohorts followed, and the school-age population fell to 4.8 million by 1986, marking a low point. Numbers rose again in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the children of younger baby boomers and older members of Generation X—millennials (also known as the echo-boom generation)—reached school age. This trend pushed the population to 5.4 million in 2002, before it declined again to about 5.0 million by 2012 as these cohorts moved through and aged out of this group. Since 2012, the number of school-aged children has steadily increased, reaching nearly 5.8 million in 2025, approaching the levels observed in the early 1970s.

Chart 1
Population aged 5 to 17, observed estimates and projected population under alternative growth scenarios, 1971 to 2040



Source: Statistics Canada. 2025. Table 17-10-0005-01 Population estimates on July 1, by age and gender [Data table]. Retrieved April 28, 2026. https://doi.org/10.25318/1710000501-eng. Statistics Canada. 2026. Table 17-10-0057-01 Projected population, by projection scenario, age and gender, as of July 1 (x 1,000) [Data table]. Retrieved March 10, 2026. https://doi.org/10.25318/1710005701-eng.

What is notable is that these fluctuations have occurred within a relatively narrow range, even as Canada's total population grew steadily and nearly doubled from 22.0 million in 1971 to 41.7 million in 2025 (Statistics Canada, 2025b). This reflects the complexity of the demographic processes shaping the school-age population. While the size of previous generations matters, it interacts with a range of demographic behaviours—including the timing of departure from the parental home, union formation, marriage patterns, fertility intentions, the age at first birth and the total number of children—which influence when and how many children are born.

Immigration adds a further layer to this dynamic. In recent years, the school-age population has grown again, reaching 5.8 million in 2025. Unlike earlier increases, this growth occurred during a period of historically low fertility (Statistics Canada, 2025d) and was influenced in part by strong overall population growth associated with immigration (Statistics Canada, 2024).

That said, immigration does not translate into proportional growth in the school-age population, as the age structure of immigrants admitted annually to Canada differs markedly from a standard population pyramid: most newcomers are of working age rather than school age. The age structure of recent immigrants has a particularly narrow base, with just over 1 in 10 (10.9%) being youth and young adults aged 15 to 24, while nearly two-thirds (64.2%) are in the core working-age group (aged 25 to 54) (Statistics Canada, 2022).

As a result, immigration shapes the school-age population partly through the direct arrival of school-age children and partly through children born in Canada to foreign-born parents, who now make up a significant share of the population of reproductive age (Provencher, 2025).

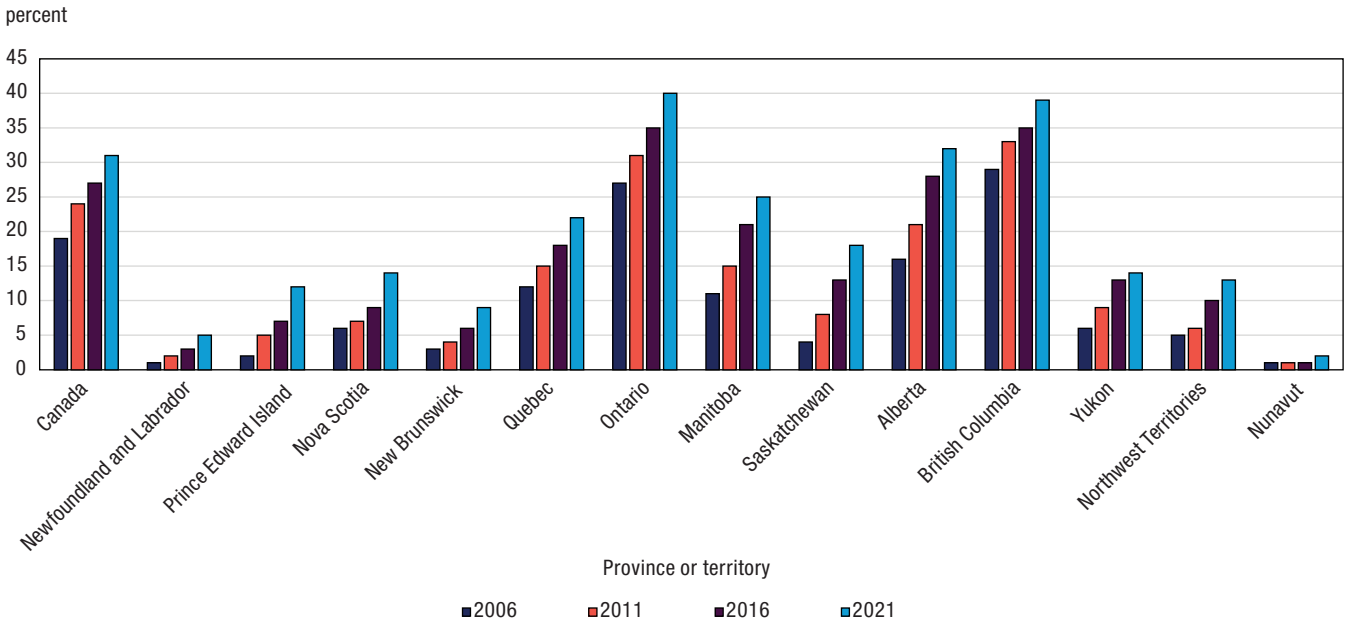
Taken together, these factors help explain why the school-age population has fluctuated over time without following the same sustained upward trajectory as the total population, underscoring the importance of demographic structure and dynamics in shaping education system pressures.

Classrooms in transition: The growing diversity of Canada's students

Changes in the size of the school-age population have also been accompanied by important shifts in its composition. Over the past two decades, the proportion of children aged 5 to 17 who belonged to a racialized group[1] has increased substantially across Canada, reflecting broader demographic changes and population growth. Nationally, the share of the school-age population that belonged to a racialized group rose from 19% in 2006 to 31% in 2021, representing nearly one-third of school-age children in Canada.

The increase has been particularly pronounced in Canada's largest urban centres. In Toronto, the share of racialized children in the school-age population rose from 50% in 2006 to 63% in 2021, while Vancouver saw a similar increase from 48% to 60% over the same period. Other large metropolitan areas also recorded notable growth. In Calgary, the proportion rose from 26% to 46%, and in Edmonton it climbed from 20% to 40%.

Chart 2
Proportion of children aged 5 to 17 belonging to a racialized group, provinces and territories, selected census years

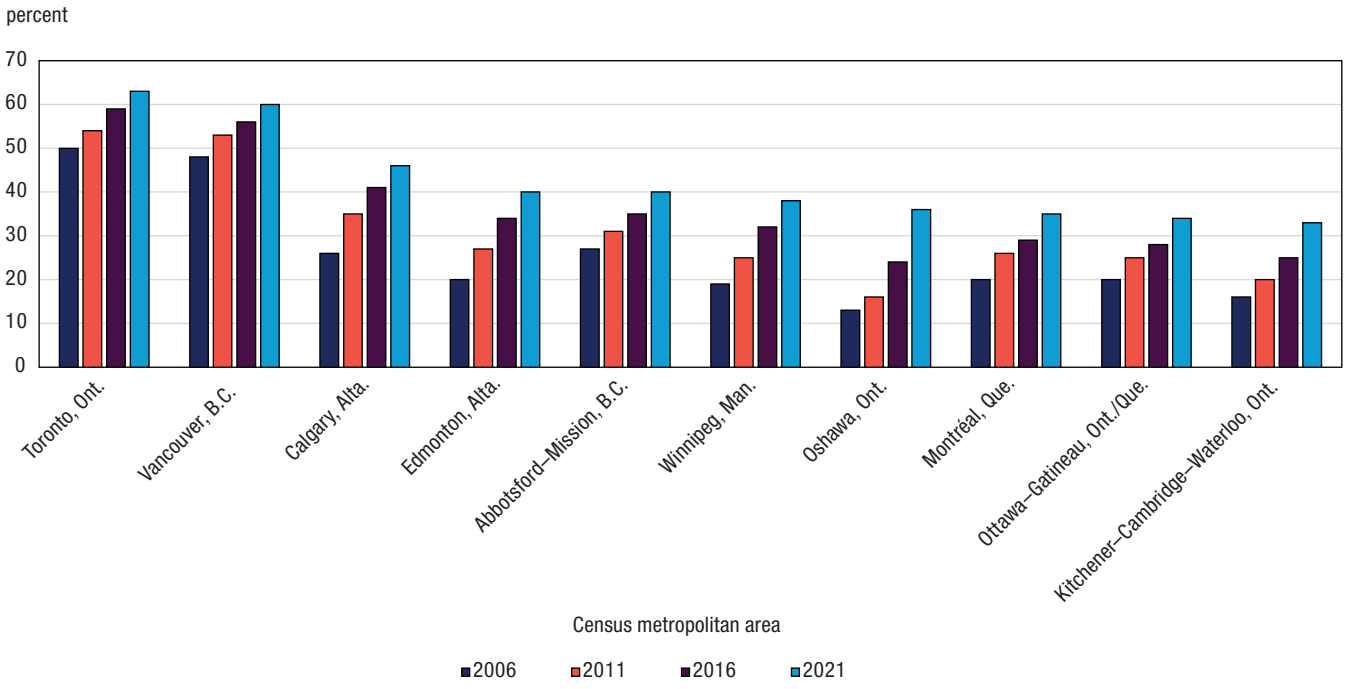


Note: As census metropolitan area (CMA) boundaries change over time, population data for all reference years (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021) were tabulated using the 2021 CMA boundaries to ensure consistency.
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey; and 2006, 2016 and 2021 Census of Population.

Although the levels remain lower, the proportion of racialized children among the school-age population has also grown in smaller provinces and urban centres. For example, the proportion rose in Nova Scotia from 6% in 2006 to 14% in 2021, while Prince Edward Island experienced one of the largest relative increases, rising from 2% to 12% over the same period. Similar upward trends were observed in Saskatchewan, where the share increased from 4% to 18%, and in Newfoundland and Labrador, where it rose from 1% to 5%.

1 In this paper, belonging to a racialized group or being considered a racialized person is measured by the visible minority variable. The term "visible minority" refers to whether a person belongs to one of the visible minority groups defined by the *Employment Equity Act*. The act defines visible minorities as "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour." The visible minority population, including children, consists mainly of the following groups: South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean and Japanese.

Chart 3
Proportion of children aged 5 to 17 belonging to a racialized group in the 10 census metropolitan areas with the highest values in 2021, selected census years



Note: As census metropolitan area (CMA) boundaries change over time, population data for all reference years (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021) were tabulated using the 2021 CMA boundaries to ensure consistency.
Sources: Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey; and 2006, 2016 and 2021 Census of Population.

These trends suggest that classrooms across Canada are becoming increasingly diverse, although the pace and scale of change continue to vary considerably across regions. This demographic shift has prompted education systems to consider how teaching and learning environments can better reflect the diversity of students they serve. For example, Ontario has adopted Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy, which seeks to align teaching practices with students' identities, experiences and cultural backgrounds to ensure that every student has the opportunity to succeed (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024).

The next demographic turn: Projections for Canada's school-age population

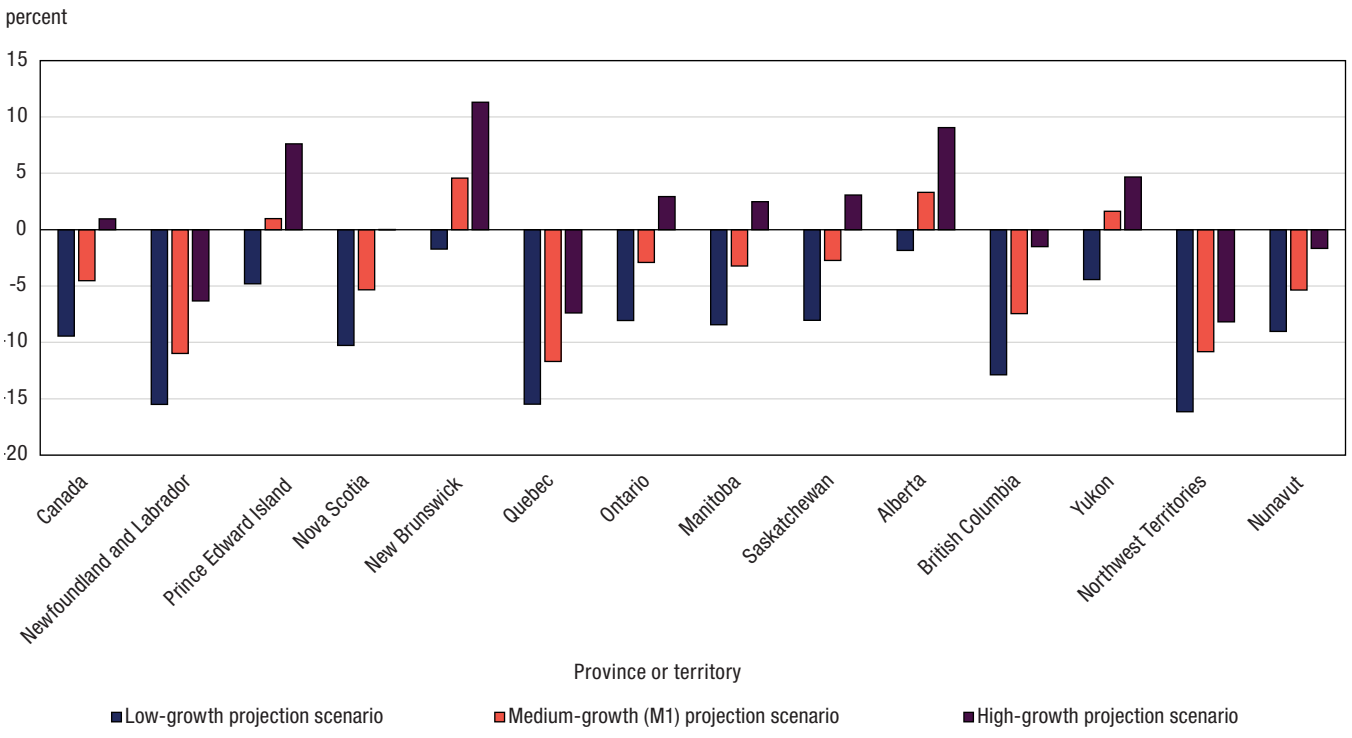
Recent demographic patterns in Canada suggest that growth in the school-age population may begin to moderate in the coming decades. One early indicator of this decline is the number of children aged 0 to 4 years, the cohort that will soon enter elementary school. This group grew from 1.7 million in 2004 to 2.0 million in 2018 (Statistics Canada, 2025b), helping drive recent increases in school enrolment, but has since begun to decline and is projected to reach about 1.8 million by 2035 under the medium-growth (M1) projection scenario (Statistics Canada, 2026a). As younger cohorts move through the education system over time, this decline suggests that enrolment growth may slow or reverse as smaller cohorts enter schools—a pattern also observed in many member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), where falling numbers of young children are expected to lead to future contractions in school-age populations (OECD, 2024b).

Under the medium-growth (M1) projection scenario, the number of children aged 5 to 17 is expected to decline from 5.8 million in 2025 to about 5.5 million by 2035, representing a decrease of 4.5%. This projected decline occurs alongside continued growth in the overall population, which is expected to increase from 41.7 million to 44.1 million (+5.9%) over the same period. Under the low-growth (LG) projection scenario, the decline in the

school-age population would be more pronounced, falling to about 5.2 million by 2035 (-9.4%), while the total population would still increase modestly to 42.3 million (+1.7%). Even under the high-growth (HG) scenario, where Canada's total population would rise to 46.2 million by 2035, the school-age population would remain relatively stable at about 5.8 million.

This divergence reflects the combined effects of persistently low fertility and the age profile of newcomers, who include relatively few individuals aged 5 to 17. Consequently, even substantial immigration levels have only a limited direct impact on the size of the school-age population. While immigration may help moderate declines in the absolute number of children, it typically does not rejuvenate the overall age structure of a population (Caron Malenfant et al., 2011; United Nations, 2000).

Chart 4
Projected percentage change in the population aged 5 to 17 years, Canada, provinces and territories, 2025 to 2035



Source: Statistics Canada. 2025. Table 17-10-0005-01 Population estimates on July 1, by age and gender [Data table]. Retrieved April 28, 2026. https://doi.org/10.25318/1710000501-eng. Statistics Canada. 2026. Table 17-10-0057-01 Projected population, by projection scenario, age and gender, as of July 1 (x 1,000) [Data table]. Retrieved March 10, 2026. https://doi.org/10.25318/1710005701-eng.

Projection scenarios suggest that several provinces and territories are likely to experience declines in the school-age population over the next decade regardless of the growth assumptions used. In Quebec, the population aged 5 to 17 is projected to decline between 7.4% under the high-growth scenario and 11.7% under the medium-growth scenario. Similar results are observed for Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories, British Columbia, and Nunavut. Under the low-growth scenario, however, all provinces and territories would experience declines in their school-age populations by 2035.

In contrast, under the medium-growth scenario, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan would experience modest declines in their school-age populations, while the high-growth scenario would see similarly modest increases in each province.

Some jurisdictions would experience growth in the school-age population under both high and medium growth scenarios. In New Brunswick, the population aged 5 to 17 would see increases between 4.6% and 11.3% by 2035, while Alberta would see growth between 3.3% and 9.1%. Prince Edward Island and Yukon would also experience growth over the period, reflecting differences in regional migration patterns and population age structures.

Overall, these projections suggest that the recent growth in Canada's school-age population may be followed by a period of stabilization or gradual contraction over the next decade. Under the medium-growth scenario, smaller cohorts of young children and expectations of low fertility contribute to a projected decline in the number of children entering and moving through the school system. Even under the more optimistic high-growth scenario, the school-age population is projected to remain relatively stable at the national level, while many provinces and territories are still expected to experience declines. These demographic trends may have important implications for education planning, including future demand for teachers, school infrastructure and education funding across provinces and territories.

Funding education in a changing demographic landscape

Demographic changes in the school-age population can have important implications for education funding. As student numbers rise or fall, education systems must adjust resources to maintain classroom instruction, staffing levels and school infrastructure.

Recent financial data for Canada illustrate how spending has continued to grow as the number of students has increased. In the 2023 school year, total expenditures by public elementary and secondary school boards reached $86.0 billion, up from $81.6 billion in 2022, after adjusting for inflation (Statistics Canada, 2026c). Compensation remains the largest component of spending, reflecting the labour-intensive nature of education systems.

Personnel costs account for the majority of school board expenditures. In 2023, salaries, wages and benefits for teachers, educational assistants and other public-school personnel totalled $63.1 billion (Statistics Canada, 2026b). As enrolment increased in several regions in recent years, education systems expanded staffing and services to meet growing demand. Capital spending has also risen in response to enrolment pressures. Public school boards reported $9.1 billion in capital expenditures in 2023, a 6.0% increase compared with the previous year, after adjusting for inflation, reflecting investments in new schools and expansions in rapidly growing communities.

Staffing Canada's schools: Teachers and demographic change

Over the past two decades, the number of educators in Canada's public elementary and secondary schools has continued to grow.

Nationally, the number of educators[2] in public schools increased from 350,619 in the 2002/2003 school year to 422,151 in the 2023/2024 school year, representing a 20% increase (Statistics Canada, 2025c).

Some OECD countries facing similar trends have reported teacher shortages. For example, *Education at a Glance 2024* found that 18 of 21 countries[3] with available data reported shortages of teachers at the start of the 2022/2023 school year (OECD, 2024a).

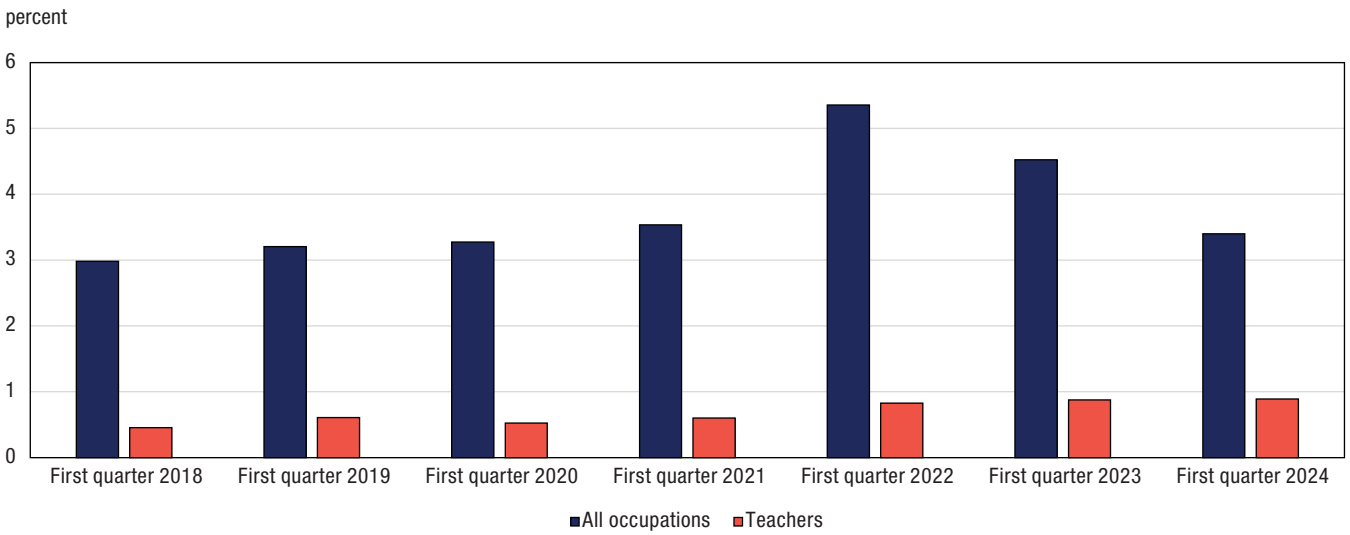
2 The term "educator" does not refer exclusively to classroom teachers. It includes teachers, school administrators, and pedagogical support personnel, whose roles and qualification requirements may vary across jurisdictions. Beginning in 2013/2014, substitute or supply teachers were excluded from educator counts (2014/2015 in Quebec), affecting reported totals in Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

3 Canada did not participate in this particular data collection effort.

In Canada, labour market indicators suggest a more nuanced situation. While job vacancies for elementary and secondary school teachers more than doubled from 2,200 in 2018 to 5,050 in 2024, employment estimates also rose substantially over the same period, indicating growth in the teaching workforce alongside rising demand. As a result, vacancy-to-employment ratios for teachers increased gradually from 0.5% in 2018 to 0.9% in 2024, even as employment in the profession grew over the same period.

In contrast, the vacancy-to-employment ratios across all occupations rose sharply during the tight labour market conditions of 2022 and 2023—peaking at 5.4% in 2022—before declining to 3.4% in 2024. Despite the upward trend among teachers, the vacancy-to-employment ratio in the profession remained comparatively low relative to the broader labour market.

Chart 5
Vacancy-to-employment ratios for all occupations and teachers, Canada, 2018 to 2024



Notes: Data on job vacancies for secondary, elementary and kindergarten school teachers (National Occupational Classification [NOC] code 4122) and all occupations are from Statistics Canada table 14-10-0443-01, Job vacancies, proportion of job vacancies and average offered hourly wage by occupation and selected characteristics, quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality. Data on quarterly employment estimates for secondary, elementary and kindergarten school teachers (NOC code 4122) are from custom tabulations of the Labour Force Survey. Data on quarterly employment estimates for all occupations are from quarterly averages derived from Statistics Canada table 14-10-0310-01, Employment by occupation, monthly. Vacancy-to-employment ratios were calculated by dividing the number of job vacancies by the number of employed persons in the corresponding occupations.
Sources: Statistics Canada. 2026. Table 14-10-0443-01 Job vacancies, proportion of job vacancies and average offered hourly wage by occupation and selected characteristics, quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality [Data table]. Retrieved May 12, 2026. https://doi.org/10.25318/1410044301-eng. Statistics Canada. 2026. Table 14-10-0310-01 Employment by occupation, monthly, seasonally adjusted, last 5 months (x 1,000) [Data table]. Retrieved May 21, 2026. https://doi.org/10.25318/1410031001-eng. Custom tabulations from the Labour Force Survey.

That said, unevenly distributed teacher shortages may persist even when national indicators suggest that overall supply remains relatively stable—a point increasingly reflected in recent media coverage highlighting staffing pressures and the use of uncertified teachers (Rachini, 2024; Bongiorno, 2025; McCormack, 2025; Wong, 2025). Shortages can vary by region, subject area and school system. Urban areas experiencing rapid population growth may face recruitment challenges, while rural or remote areas may struggle to attract or retain educators as enrolment declines and schools consolidate.

In Canada, while systems prioritize fully qualified teachers, provinces and territories may, under exceptional circumstances, hire non-fully qualified individuals through mechanisms such as letters of permission or interim certifications. That said, important data gaps remain. National educator counts are based on administrative reporting by provinces and territories, and the composition of this workforce may vary across jurisdictions. In addition, Canada does not currently have comprehensive national data on the use of non-fully qualified teachers, replacement teachers, or class sizes. Without such information, it is difficult to determine whether stable national indicators reflect a true balance between teacher supply and demand, or whether they mask differences in how staffing pressures are managed across education systems. As a result, assessing the extent and nature of teacher shortages remains challenging, particularly across regions, subject areas, and staffing arrangements.

The same can be said with respect to infrastructure, particularly schools. Rapid population growth is occurring primarily at the peripheries of large metropolitan areas, where new schools are often required. By contrast, central urban areas are densifying through internal migration and international inflows. Meanwhile, many rural regions are experiencing population decline, often more pronounced among school-age children.

In short, the relatively stable school-age population hides the rapid pace at which demographic changes are happening in Canada, which has implication for its education systems. Canada's population growth is entirely driven by immigration concentrated in major urban areas, leading to increasing regional disparities.

How classroom complexity is reshaping teacher demand

Historical trends in Canada and internationally suggest that teacher numbers do not necessarily fall in line with enrolment. For example, the number of educators in Canadian public schools increased from 350,619 in 2002/2003 to 395,691 in 2012/2013 (Statistics Canada, 2025c), even as the school-age population experienced a decline over this period. Similar patterns have been observed across OECD countries, where teacher numbers have often grown faster than student populations, contributing to lower student–teacher ratios and rising spending per student—even in periods of stable or declining enrolment (OECD, 2024b).

One explanation for this pattern may be the complexity of classrooms, as student needs—and the demands placed on teachers—continue to evolve in scope and intensity. Recent indicators point to changes in student well-being as one dimension of this shift. Findings from the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth indicate a decline in self-reported mental health among children. The share reporting excellent or very good mental health fell from 83.2% in 2019 to 78.1% in 2024, while the proportion reporting fair or poor mental health increased from 4.1% to 5.9% (Statistics Canada, 2025a).

At the same time, parents reported lower life satisfaction and higher stress, with the share reporting high stress increasing from 26.2% in 2019 to 31.9% in 2024. Over this period, diagnosed conditions among children have also shifted, with increases in attention deficit disorders (from 6.7% to 9.6%), autism spectrum disorder (from 2.0% to 3.8%) and anxiety disorders (from 5.1% to 5.5%). The proportion of children diagnosed with learning disabilities declined from 8.4% in 2019 to 6.6% in 2024, now representing 1 in 15 school-age children.

While comparable data on classroom complexity are not yet available nationally, a 2026 release from Alberta offers a useful case study, shedding light on the range of student needs within individual classrooms (Alberta, 2026). These data show that 71% of classrooms containing at least 10 students in Alberta were characterized by having four to six overlapping complexity categories[4] among students, underscoring the concentration of diverse needs within individual classrooms.

In addition, 39% of classrooms containing at least 10 students had 5 to 10 students requiring English as an Additional Language support. These findings highlight the extent to which multiple and overlapping student needs are present within individual classrooms.

Taken together, these figures suggest that even as the number of students may decline in the coming years, the complexity of supporting those students may continue as a persistent pressure within the system. This may help explain why teacher numbers and education spending have continued to rise despite demographic fluctuations, as education systems respond not only to the number of students, but also to the range and intensity of their needs.

4 Complexity categories were based on nine factors, including whether students are learning English as an Additional Language; have mild or moderate learning disabilities; have severe learning disabilities; have an individualized program plan; identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit; are gifted; are refugees; are on a waitlist for assessment; or have other complexities.

The bottom line

Demographic change continues to shape Canada's education system. The country's population growth is now driven entirely by immigration and largely concentrated in major urban areas, and this contributes to increasing regional disparities in enrolment pressures and system needs. Over the past several decades, waves of larger and smaller cohorts have moved through the school system, influenced by fertility trends, generational dynamics and immigration. Recent growth in the school-age population has occurred alongside rising diversity in classrooms, pressures associated with complexity in student needs, and continued expansion in the number of educators and overall education spending.

However, smaller cohorts of young children and the age profile of newcomers suggest that the number of students entering the school system may begin to decline in the coming decade. This potential shift could create opportunities to adjust the allocation of resources within the education system, but it also underscores that planning cannot rely on enrolment trends alone. As classrooms become more complex, with a broader range of learning, linguistic and well-being needs, education systems may need to balance efficiency with the capacity to provide targeted supports—ensuring that resources, staffing and infrastructure remain aligned not only with the number of students, but also with the evolving nature of their needs across regions.

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