



TRANSITIONS

Kentucky's Enrollment Squeeze

Trend analysis and recommendations addressing Kentucky's declining high school population

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The Council on Postsecondary Education is Kentucky's higher education coordinating board overseeing state public universities and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. The Council also licenses non-profit and for-profit higher education institutions to operate in the Commonwealth. The Council facilitates a positive return on investment of public funds by monitoring academic quality, affordability, and student success through policy and accountability measures.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kentucky needs to increase its college-going rate

Bottom line: By 2040, Kentucky will need about 53% of its public high school graduates to enroll directly in a Kentucky college, up from 47.5% for the class of 2024, just to maintain current enrollment levels of traditional-age students.

Kentucky is facing two pressures at the same time. Fewer students are finishing public high school, and a smaller share of those graduates are enrolling in Kentucky colleges and universities. Even if the in-state college-going rate held steady from this point forward, the smaller graduating classes would still leave fewer recent Kentucky graduates entering college in the state. Halting the decline would therefore leave Kentucky short. To maintain the 2024 number of enrollees, the rate would need to rise from 47.5% for the class of 2024 to about 53% by 2040.

This brief focuses on one measurable pipeline: Kentucky public high school graduates who enroll at a Kentucky college during the following academic year. It does not include adult learners, transfer students, private school graduates, students from outside Kentucky, or Kentucky graduates who attend college out of state. Those groups matter for total enrollment, but they are outside the pipeline measured here.



Key takeaways:

- The number of Kentucky public high school graduates is projected to fall from 47,254 in 2024 to roughly 42,300 in 2040, a drop of about 10.5% along an uneven path.
- The in-state college-going rate fell from 56.0% for the class of 2011 to 47.5% for the class of 2024, with only a partial recovery since the pandemic years.
- Holding in-state enrollees steady at 22,462 a year would require the rate to reach about 49.7% by 2030 and 53.1% by 2040, within three percentage points of Kentucky's 2011 peak.
- If the rate simply held flat at 47.5%, Kentucky would see roughly 20,100 in-state enrollees in 2040, about 2,400 fewer than the 2024 level. Under that flat-rate scenario, the entire decline would result from the smaller graduating class.
- FAFSA completion was the clearest predictor of immediate college-going. Completion rebounded from 53.3% for the class of 2024 to 60.9% for the class of 2025 and stood at 63.9% for the class of 2026 as of August 14, continuing Kentucky's progress toward its 70% goal.

BACKGROUND

What is at stake

How many Kentucky high school graduates go on to college matters for the state's postsecondary institutions, workforce, and economy. The economic returns are substantial. Research commissioned by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) found that Kentuckians with a bachelor's degree earn about \$1.2 million more than high school graduates over a lifetime, even after accounting for tuition costs and wages forgone while enrolled (Center for Business and Economic Research 2025).

Those benefits also reach beyond individual graduates. The same study estimated that every dollar the General Assembly invests in postsecondary education generates about \$4.50 in state and local tax revenue and about \$17 in consumer spending. That makes the future college pipeline important for both campuses and the state economy. Yet Kentucky's in-state college-going rate is falling just as the pool of high school graduates begins to shrink, which means the state will need to raise the rate and absorb a smaller graduating class at the same time. The next section shows how much smaller that pool is likely to get.

RESULTS

Kentucky's high school graduating classes are shrinking in size

Kentucky's shrinking high school pipeline is part of a broader national demographic shift. The number of births fell sharply during and after the 2007 to 2009 recession, and those smaller birth cohorts are now reaching high school graduation and college age (National Center for Health Statistics 2025). The result is a pattern often called the national enrollment cliff. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) projects a 13% decline in public high school graduates nationally between 2025 and 2041 (Lane, Falkenstern, and Bransberger 2024).

Kentucky is part of that national pattern, but the timing and size of the decline depend on the state's own enrollment and birth cohorts. The projection below uses those Kentucky-specific data to estimate the graduating class through 2040.

Projecting the pipeline forward

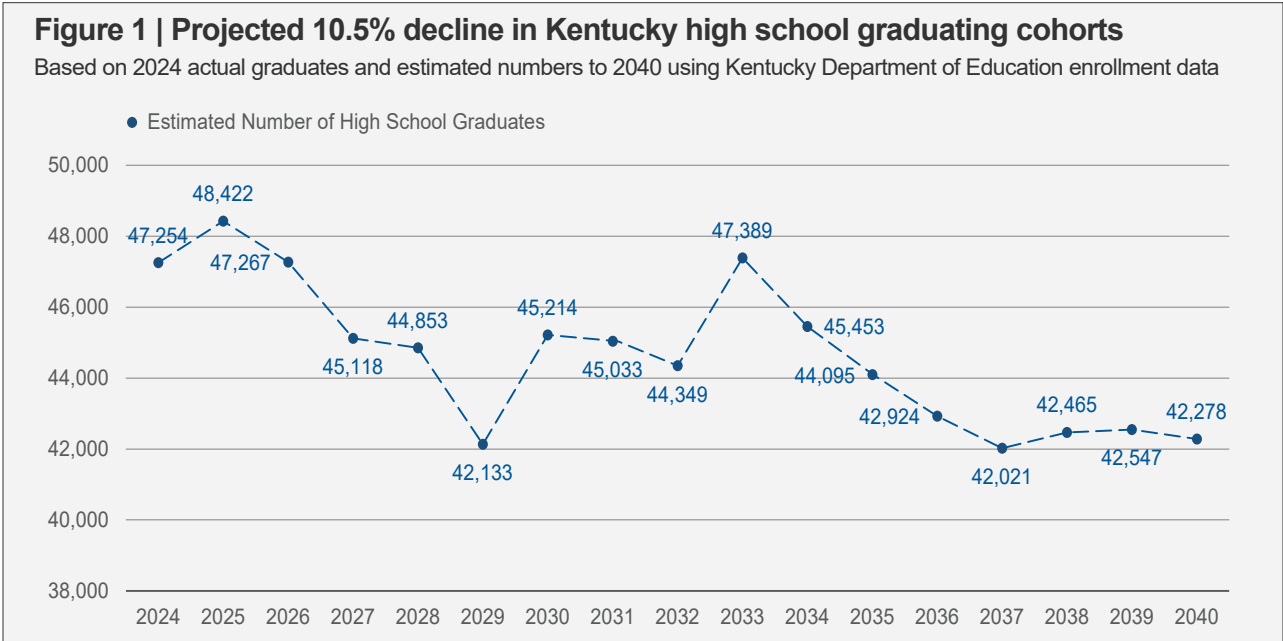
The projection follows each K-12 grade level forward using recent grade-to-grade progression patterns from Kentucky Department of Education enrollment data (Kentucky Department of Education 2025a). That method projects graduating classes through 2036, using the youngest students already present in the 2024 data. For 2037 through 2040, the model switches to Kentucky birth records, because those

children have been born but are not yet old enough to appear in school enrollment counts (National Center for Health Statistics 2025). Those later years are less direct, but they still rest on actual administrative counts rather than guesses about future births.

Two checks support the projection. First, the model was backtested by rebuilding it with grade-to-grade changes through 2019 and then using it to project 12th-grade enrollment for 2020 through 2024, a period that included the COVID-19 disruption. Those projections differed from what Kentucky schools actually reported by 0.6% on average in absolute terms. Second, the results were compared with WICHE’s independently produced Kentucky projection. The two differ by an average of 2.7% across the period and land within 1% of each other in 2040. The technical notes at the end describe both checks, and their limits, in more detail.

Figure 1 shows the result of that projection: Kentucky’s public high school graduating class is projected to fall from 47,254 in 2024 to roughly 42,300 by 2040. The decline is uneven rather than smooth, because it reflects the specific demographic patterns already present in Kentucky’s school-age population.

A smaller graduating class is only half of the story. The share of those graduates who enroll in Kentucky has been falling at the same time.



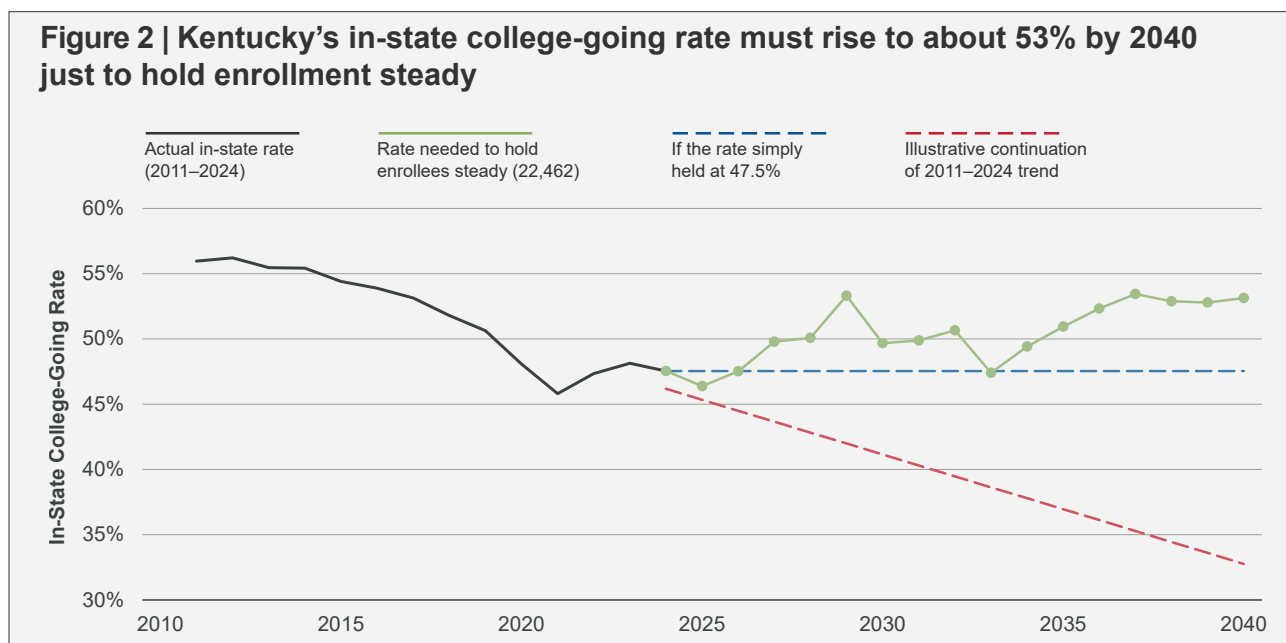
Source: KDE enrollment records; NCHS birth records; CPE analysis.

Kentucky's in-state college-going rate has fallen for more than a decade

Kentucky's in-state college-going rate, tracked by the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS), shows the share of each year's public high school graduates who enroll at a Kentucky public or independent college or university at any point during the next academic year. Because the numerator and the denominator both come from the same graduating class, the measure stays consistent from year to year.

That consistency comes with a tradeoff, so it is important to be precise about what the measure includes. The rate counts only graduates who enroll at a Kentucky institution. In recent cohorts, roughly 5% of Kentucky public high school graduates enrolled at an out-of-state institution; they remain part of the graduating cohort but are not counted as in-state enrollees (Kentucky Center for Statistics 2025). The measure also excludes adult learners, transfer students, students from outside Kentucky who enroll at Kentucky institutions, and private high school graduates. Those groups matter for total enrollment, and they represent real opportunities for growth. They simply fall outside the traditional pipeline this brief examines.

Kentucky's in-state college-going rate stood at 56.0% for the graduating class of 2011 and had fallen to 47.5% for the class of 2024, an average decline of about 0.8 percentage points a year. The drop was steady through the 2010s, sharp during the pandemic years, and only partially reversed since. The longer-term decline predates the pandemic and has not yet been reversed.



Source: KYSTATS college-going data; cohort-progression projections based on KDE enrollment and NCHS birth records.

A simple linear continuation of the 2011 to 2024 trend would reach roughly 33% by 2040. Figure 2 shows that line as a warning about where the historical pattern points if nothing changes. It should not be read as a forecast of future student behavior.

Holding enrollment steady requires a rising rate

Putting the graduate projection together with the in-state college-going rate produces the central finding of this brief. For any future year, the required rate is the enrollment target divided by the projected number of graduates. Figure 2 focuses on two planning questions: What happens if the rate stays where it is, and what rate would be needed to keep the 2024 number of enrollees? Table 1 adds two growth scenarios, at 1% and 2% a year. Those scenarios are examples for planning, not official state targets.

Because the graduating class is shrinking, maintaining the 2024 number of in-state enrollees requires the college-going rate to rise. The hold-steady scenario reaches 49.7% by 2030 and 53.1% by 2040,

Table 1 | Required In-State College-Going Rate by Target and Year

Year	High School Graduates	Hold Steady (22,462)	1% Growth (Illustrative)	2% Growth (Illustrative)	Trend Continuation
2024	47,254	47.5%	--	--	--
2030	45,214	49.7%	52.7%	55.9%	41.2%
2035	44,095	50.9%	56.8%	63.3%	37.0%
2040	42,278	53.1%	62.3%	72.9%	32.8%

Note: 2024 shows the observed rate. Growth scenarios are illustrative, not state targets. Source: KYSTATS college-going data; cohort-progression projections based on KDE enrollment and NCHS birth records.

putting the 2040 requirement within three percentage points of Kentucky’s 2011 peak. Scenarios that grow enrollment would require rates above anything observed in the 2011 to 2024 series.

The flat line in Figure 2 isolates the demographic pressure. If the rate stopped falling immediately and stayed at 47.5% through 2040, Kentucky would still have about 20,100 in-state enrollees that year, roughly 2,400 fewer than the 22,462 recorded for the class of 2024. In other words, demographics alone would reduce the number of Kentucky graduates in Kentucky classrooms unless the college-going rate rises.

The gap also widens over time. By 2040, holding enrollees steady would require a rate about 20 percentage points above the illustrative trend line. As the graduating pool becomes smaller, the improvement required to maintain enrollment grows. That is the case for acting early, and it leads to the question the rest of this brief takes up: What can Kentucky actually do to raise the rate?

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

What could help raise the rate?

The findings above identify the scale of the problem but do not, by themselves, explain why the in-state college-going rate fell or which interventions would raise it. The statewide data can point toward promising directions, but with only six to eight usable years, they cannot estimate the independent effect of any one factor. The sections below therefore treat Kentucky's data as a starting point and pair it with stronger evidence from student-level research and other states.

FAFSA completion: The clearest predictor

FAFSA completion, the share of high school seniors who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, was the clearest predictor of college-going in Kentucky's data. In years when FAFSA completion was higher, college-going also tended to be higher. Kentucky's own completion rate has moved a great deal over the past decade. It fell from 66.5% for the class of 2017 to 55.1% in 2021, recovered to 60.6% by 2023, then dropped to 53.3% amid the troubled 2024 FAFSA rollout, which produced widespread technical problems and delays. Completion rebounded to 60.9% for the class of 2025. As of August 14, the class of 2026 had reached 63.9%, one of Kentucky's highest completion rates in the series and a continuation of the recent rebound (National College Attainment Network 2025; 2026).

Kentucky's six years of data cannot establish that FAFSA completion causes higher enrollment. A broader national research literature provides much stronger causal evidence. Studies, including randomized evaluations, have found that hands-on help with financial aid applications increases college enrollment, especially for lower-income students (Bettinger et al. 2012; Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2013; Page and Scott-Clayton 2016). Tennessee provides a useful example of the emphasis states have placed on this work. It has consistently ranked among the national leaders in FAFSA completion while making FAFSA outreach a central part of its college access strategy (Tennessee Higher Education Commission 2026).

Two things make this a practical near-term priority for Kentucky. First, the state already has a target. CPE has set a statewide goal of 70% FAFSA completion by 2030 (Council on Postsecondary Education 2026a). Second, the stakes are rising. The amount an undergraduate must cover after grants and scholarships climbed 29% in a single year, an increase of more than \$1,600 per student. CPE attributes much of that increase to inflation and rising costs that outpaced recent increases in institutional aid (Council on Postsecondary Education 2026a). As the gap between college costs and available aid grows, helping students access the aid they already qualify for becomes more important.

Dual credit: Building on a strong college-going strategy

Dual credit offers a second practical lever. Kentucky has dramatically expanded access and is now close to its statewide attainment goal: The share of public high school graduates completing at least one dual credit course with a grade of C or better rose from 22.8% in 2016 to 47.5% in 2024, leaving the state 2.5 percentage points short of its 50% goal for 2030 (Council on Postsecondary Education 2026c).

That expansion has been accompanied by strong student-level outcomes. CPE's analysis finds that dual credit participants have a 71.6% likelihood of enrolling directly in college after high school, compared with 52.7% for non-participants, and that each additional dual credit course is associated with a greater likelihood of enrollment (Council on Postsecondary Education 2026b). The statewide model in this brief cannot isolate how much dual credit expansion contributed to the overall college-going rate, but the student-level evidence points in a positive direction.

Recent CPE work also shows that the expansion is reaching a broader set of students. Successful dual credit completion increased across every demographic group measured, including an increase of nearly 20 percentage points among students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch since 2016. More than 52,000 Kentucky students enrolled in dual credit in the most recent academic year, an increase of nearly 50% over five years (Council on Postsecondary Education 2026c).

The next challenge is to build on that progress by expanding access to high-quality courses and ensuring the credits students earn are transferable, applicable to degree pathways, and supported by strong advising. Student-level trend analysis could help identify where additional expansion is most likely to reach students who otherwise would be less likely to enroll.

Other factors examined

The analysis also examined the unemployment rate, Advanced Placement completion, median household income, and adult educational attainment. None produced a stable relationship with the in-state college-going rate. The labor market is still worth a closer look, since a strong job market may pull some students directly into work rather than college. The unemployment results pointed in that direction, but the evidence was not strong enough to establish the relationship.

Strategies

Taken together, the demographic projection and the evidence point to five priorities.

- **Plan now for smaller graduating classes.** This part of the analysis does not wait on further research. Kentucky's institutions and workforce planners can act today on a graduating class projected to fall by roughly 10.5% by 2040. The path is uneven, so institutions should not assume a smooth annual decline when planning enrollment, budgets, and staffing.
- **Push FAFSA completion toward Kentucky's 70% goal by 2030.** As of August 14, completion for the class of 2026 stood at 63.9%, up from 60.9% for the class of 2025 and 53.3% for the class of 2024 (National College Attainment Network 2026). That leaves Kentucky about six percentage points short of its 2030 goal and extends a strong recent rebound. This remains the recommendation with the strongest national causal research behind it.
- **Continue expanding access to high-quality dual credit.** Kentucky is 2.5 percentage points from its 50% attainment goal, and CPE research shows dual credit participation is strongly associated with college enrollment. The next phase should focus on students who remain underrepresented in dual credit and on ensuring credits are transferable, applicable to degree pathways, and paired with effective advising and support (Council on Postsecondary Education 2026b; 2026c).
- **Target outreach geographically and by student group.** Statewide averages cannot show where or among which groups college-going has fallen fastest. County- and student-level analysis could identify those patterns and help direct limited outreach resources toward the students and communities where they are most likely to change enrollment behavior.
- **Use the demographic projection to set annual college-going benchmarks.** The rate required to maintain enrollment rises as the graduating pool contracts. Translating the 2030 and 2040 requirements into annual benchmarks would give the state and institutions a clear way to track whether progress is keeping pace with the demographic challenge.



Conclusion

Kentucky faces two pressures on its traditional college pipeline, and only one of them is about student behavior. The number of public high school graduates is projected to fall by roughly 10.5% by 2040, reflecting birth cohorts that have already been observed. The share of those graduates enrolling in-state has also declined. Even if that second decline stopped immediately, demographics alone would reduce the number of recent Kentucky graduates entering college by about 2,400 by 2040.

Kentucky has real options, and some are already showing progress. FAFSA completion has rebounded sharply since the class of 2024, reaching 63.9% for the class of 2026 as of August 14, while dual credit has expanded to nearly half of graduates and participants continue to enroll in college at substantially higher rates. But those gains do not erase the demographic challenge. By 2040, Kentucky will need roughly 53 of every 100 public high school graduates to enroll in a Kentucky college simply to maintain the 2024 number of enrollees. Stopping the decline in college-going will not be enough. The rate has to rise.



Technical notes and limitations

The analysis draws on eight primary data sources: Kentucky Department of Education enrollment and attendance data and early postsecondary opportunity records; the Kentucky High School Feedback Report public access data file from KYSTATS; National College Attainment Network FAFSA completion figures; National Center for Health Statistics birth records; Census Bureau American Community Survey data; Bureau of Labor Statistics unemployment data; and federal Private School Universe Survey data. WICHE's Kentucky projection serves only as an external benchmark and is not an input to the model.

Two points qualify the validation checks described earlier. The 0.6% backtest error is a mean absolute percentage error, and it measures the grade-progression component through 12th-grade enrollment only. A separate step converts projected 12th-grade enrollment into projected graduates using a recent average graduation ratio of about 92.1%, and that step is not covered by the backtest. The WICHE comparison is also useful rather than fully independent. Both projections use the same Kentucky birth data and similar cohort-survival methods, so close agreement in the later years should be expected.

A few limitations are worth keeping in mind.

- The cohort projection becomes less certain the further it extends. Years through 2036 rest directly on students already enrolled in Kentucky's public schools. The final years, 2037 through 2040, rest on actual recorded Kentucky births, which are real administrative counts but one step further removed from an enrolled cohort.
- The outcome measured here is in-state enrollment among recent Kentucky public high school graduates. It is not total Kentucky postsecondary enrollment. Adult learners, transfer students,

students coming to Kentucky from other states, and graduates who enroll out of state all fall outside the measure. Those populations represent complementary enrollment strategies rather than substitutes for improving college-going, and institutions can pursue both at once.

- Kentucky's enrollment and college-going data generally exclude private school students, and no equivalent data exists on the rate at which private school graduates enroll in college. Private school graduates account for roughly 6 to 8% of Kentucky's graduating population, estimated from limited federal survey observations that require interpolation and extrapolation between reporting years. That estimate is contextual only and is not included in Figure 1 or in the rate calculations.
- Homeschooled students are also outside the projection because comparable statewide grade-level data are not available.
- A change in how the Kentucky Department of Education counted student enrollment beginning in the 2017 to 2018 school year created a one-time jump of roughly 7% in the underlying data. This analysis identified and excluded that jump. It is a reminder that changes in how data is collected can look, at first glance, like changes in the underlying reality.



Explore more Kentucky higher education data

Looking for more data on Kentucky's postsecondary education landscape?

Visit CPE's Data Center for interactive dashboards on student enrollment, completion, workforce outcomes, degrees and credentials and other key measures of higher education.



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