# London faces pupil decline crisis as inner boroughs experience sharpest drops in primary school numbers



Nine of the 10 local authorities experiencing the sharpest declines in primary school pupil numbers across England are located in London, with some areas enduring nearly 16% drops in just five years. The Education Policy Institute (EPI) analysis reveals that Westminster tops this list, followed closely by boroughs such as Lambeth, Southwark, Hackney, Camden, and Islington. While nationwide primary pupil numbers have fallen by 150,000 since 2019 and are predicted to shrink by an additional 400,000 by the end of the decade, London’s decline outpaces the rest of the country markedly, highlighting a crisis in the capital's education sector.

The steep fall in London’s pupil rolls cannot be attributed solely to declining birth rates, although these do play a significant role. The capital has seen a 17% drop in birth rates from 2012 to 2021, but this demographic shift is compounded by broader socio-economic factors. Families are increasingly relocating from London due to high housing costs, cost of living pressures, and regional variances in school provision and quality. The EPI notes that over recent years approximately 20% of primary pupils entering reception in London have left the city by Year 6, and many more move within London or leave the state education system altogether. This outflow has particularly benefited local authorities in the East of England and the South East, which have recorded the largest influxes of pupils migrating from London.

The implications for schools facing shrinking enrolments are severe. Schools in London are funded on a per-pupil basis, and falling rolls translate directly into financial strain. This pressure threatens the long-term viability of numerous primary schools, with Southwark alone having seen six school closures amid a more than 12% drop in pupil numbers. Experts warn that a continuation of these trends could force more closures or mergers, further disrupting communities. Paul Whiteman, general secretary at the school leaders’ union NAHT, urges the government to maintain or increase investment to allow schools to sustain staffing and resources. He advocates that continued funding could enable schools to improve special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) inclusion, reduce class sizes, and tackle staff workload concerns.

Analyses from several sources, including the Evening Standard and The Guardian, underline a multifaceted crisis. Contributing factors include Brexit-related family relocations, the Covid-19 pandemic’s urban exodus, and the high cost of housing in central London boroughs. For instance, data from 2021/22 indicate a net loss of 12,000 pupils in London’s primary and secondary schools combined, as 50,000 children left the city’s education system while fewer than 38,000 joined. Boroughs such as Southwark, Camden, and Westminster face drops exceeding 10%, with the decline in reception pupils in many inner London boroughs expected to continue sharply through at least 2027-28.

Government responses include schemes to repurpose underutilised school spaces to support early years provision, helping address the mismatch between demand and capacity. Recent initiatives have allocated significant funding—some £37 million—to transform spare school space into nurseries, creating thousands of childcare places in London primary schools. According to a Department for Education spokesperson, per-pupil funding nationally is at record levels, with allocations projected to reach £69.5 billion by 2028-29. Nonetheless, concerns remain that the current per-pupil funding model may not adequately support schools navigating dramatic roll fluctuations, as reflected in calls from former Education Secretary Damian Hinds for reconsidering this funding approach in light of declining enrolments.

In sum, the long-term sustainability of London’s primary school system hinges on policymakers’ ability to adapt to demographic and socio-economic shifts. Strategies must be data-driven, flexible, and sufficiently funded to manage the complexities of pupil migration, economic pressures on families, and the resultant impact on education infrastructure. Failure to act risks deepening inequalities and disrupting access to quality education for London’s young learners.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/nine-in-10-areas-with-biggest-fall-in-primary-school-pupil-numbers-are-in-london-UHZHP3QRANMJJPIXXRJTXHZGZ4/), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly559jnd2zo), [[4]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/04/17/london-primary-school-demand-falls-to-record-low/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/nine-in-10-areas-with-biggest-fall-in-primary-school-pupil-numbers-are-in-london-UHZHP3QRANMJJPIXXRJTXHZGZ4/), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jan/12/primary-schools-in-london-may-need-to-merge-or-close-as-intakes-dwindle), [[6]](https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/test-newsroom/2024/managing-falling-school-rolls-london)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/nine-in-10-areas-with-biggest-fall-in-primary-school-pupil-numbers-are-in-london-UHZHP3QRANMJJPIXXRJTXHZGZ4/), [[3]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/london-schools-face-crisis-pupil-numbers-plummet-b1084718.html), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9857r973xgo)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/nine-in-10-areas-with-biggest-fall-in-primary-school-pupil-numbers-are-in-london-UHZHP3QRANMJJPIXXRJTXHZGZ4/), [[3]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/london-schools-face-crisis-pupil-numbers-plummet-b1084718.html), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jan/12/primary-schools-in-london-may-need-to-merge-or-close-as-intakes-dwindle)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/nine-in-10-areas-with-biggest-fall-in-primary-school-pupil-numbers-are-in-london-UHZHP3QRANMJJPIXXRJTXHZGZ4/), [[2]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly559jnd2zo), [[4]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/04/17/london-primary-school-demand-falls-to-record-low/), [[6]](https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/test-newsroom/2024/managing-falling-school-rolls-london)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/nine-in-10-areas-with-biggest-fall-in-primary-school-pupil-numbers-are-in-london-UHZHP3QRANMJJPIXXRJTXHZGZ4/), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9857r973xgo)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/nine-in-10-areas-with-biggest-fall-in-primary-school-pupil-numbers-are-in-london-UHZHP3QRANMJJPIXXRJTXHZGZ4/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly559jnd2zo> - An article from the BBC reports that primary school numbers in London are predicted to fall by another 52,000 pupils by 2028, double the national average. The Education Policy Institute attributes this decline to a combination of falling birth rates, the cost of housing, and the cost of living. Central London boroughs such as Westminster, Southwark, and Camden are expected to experience the largest drops, with primary numbers falling by more than 10%. The government has committed to repurposing empty classrooms into nurseries to address this issue.
3. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/education/london-schools-face-crisis-pupil-numbers-plummet-b1084718.html> - An article from the Evening Standard highlights the crisis facing London schools due to plummeting pupil numbers. Over 50,000 children left London's education system last year, leading to school closures and mergers. Factors contributing to this decline include a falling birth rate, families leaving due to Brexit, the pandemic, lack of affordable housing, and the cost of living. The analysis shows that more than 28,000 children left London's primary schools and 22,000 left secondary schools in 2021/22, while fewer than 38,000 joined, resulting in a net loss of 12,000 pupils in one year.
4. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/04/17/london-primary-school-demand-falls-to-record-low/> - An article from The Telegraph reports that demand for primary school places in London has fallen to a record low as families move out of the capital and the birth rate declines. The number of children seeking a place at a primary school in London in September fell to 87,277, a decline of 15% since 2014. The drop in demand is attributed to families leaving the capital for more affordable housing and a decline in the birth rate, which fell by 17% in London between 2012 and 2021.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jan/12/primary-schools-in-london-may-need-to-merge-or-close-as-intakes-dwindle> - An article from The Guardian discusses how primary schools in London may need to merge or close due to dwindling pupil numbers caused by a falling birthrate, Brexit, and the Covid-era flight from cities. A report by London Councils found that 29 of its 32 members are expecting a sharp fall in the numbers of children entering reception classes until 2026-27. The forecast is that the number of four- and five-year-olds starting in state primary schools will drop from 96,000 last September to 89,000 in 2026, a fall of 7%.
6. <https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/test-newsroom/2024/managing-falling-school-rolls-london> - A report from London Councils discusses managing falling school rolls in London. It states that most London boroughs are expected to see a decline in reception pupil numbers from 2023-24 to 2027-28, with a forecast drop in demand of 4.4% at reception on average across London. Inner London boroughs are expected to experience the drop in demand for reception places most intensely. The report also highlights the impact of falling pupil numbers on school budgets, with many schools already in deficit and facing further budgetary reductions due to fewer pupils.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9857r973xgo> - An article from the BBC reports on the impact of falling pupil numbers in London, with inner London appearing to be the hardest hit. The forecast is a 12% drop in the number of pupil rolls from 2023-24 to 2028-29, a reduction of nearly 27,000 places needed by 2028-29. The falling pupil numbers have an impact on finances, as schools in London receive between £7,000 and £9,000 per pupil based on the National Funding Formula.