Executive Summary: School Opening Data (Enrollment, Membership, Demographic Update)
This report presents data and analysis of SY2026-2027 school opening data, focusing on average daily membership (ADM), student movement patterns, longitudinal cohort trends, kindergarten entry demographics, and five-year demographic shifts. Grounded in Pillar 4 of Engage Orange: OCS Strategic Plan and guided by our core commitments to equity and communication, these data provide a framework to optimize facility operations and long-term resource allocation.

Key findings:

- Overall district membership for SY26-27 decreased by 212 students from SY25-26. The majority of the 212 students were from elementary and high school and the Black and White student populations.
- Student movement in and out of the district demonstrates that population mobility, rather than district dissatisfaction, is the primary driver of student movement.
- Cohort stability tracking indicates strong cohort survival rates across transition years (elementary to middle school and middle school to high school), while cohorts begin to shrink from 9th to 12th grade due to credit shortfalls leading to grade retention, student departure from the district, and early graduation.
- Kindergarten cohort size has decreased steadily since SY22-23, with SY26-27 having the smallest cohort in over a decade at 375, continuing a trend of smaller entering classes that will compound funding drops as they progress through higher grades.

Background
Opening school data are provided each year to the OCS Board of Education to understand student population shifts and trends. Understanding these shifts and trends helps the district make strategic operational and programmatic decisions as state funding is tied directly to student membership.

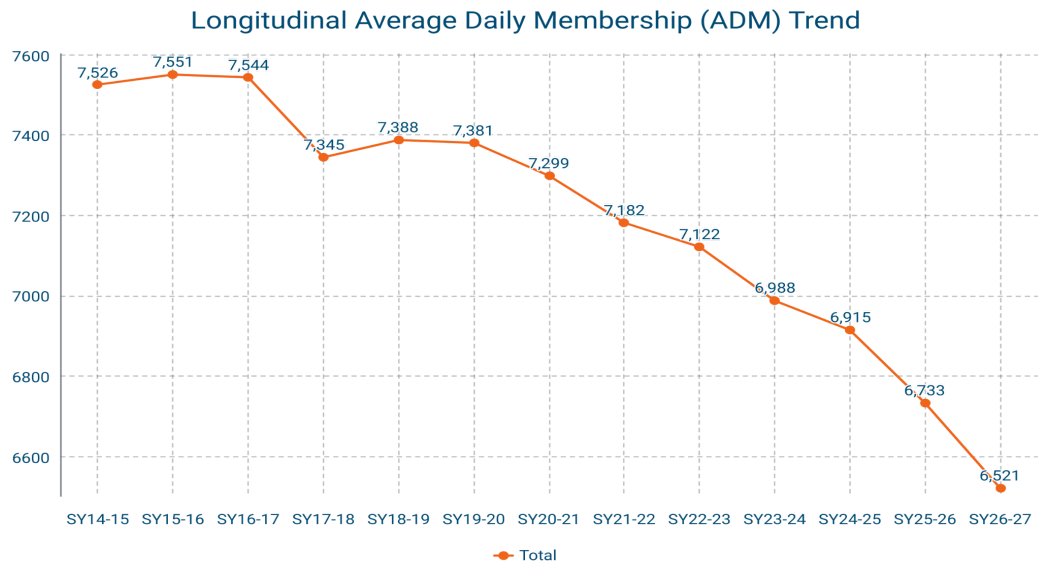
School districts are funded based on average daily membership (ADM) calculated by the best of the Principal's Monthly Report (PMR) for month 1 and month 2. The best of month 1 and 2 report compares a school's ADM for month 1 and month 2 by grade level, and reports the higher ADM for each grade level of the two months and then totals the ADM across grade levels to determine the district's ADM. ADM does not include Pre-K or visiting students or students who are chronically absent during the collection period.

Please note that student enrollment is inherently dynamic, with new enrollments and departures occurring continuously throughout the school year. The enrollment numbers and movement analyses presented in this report represent specific, point-in-time snapshots (e.g., Month 2 ADM, October 19 movement data) and may fluctuate as the academic year progresses.

Key Data Analysis

1. **Average Daily Membership (ADM) Trends**

The ADM for SY26-27 is 6,521 students, which is 212 fewer students than in SY25-26. The graph below shows a decline in membership since SY15-16, which is negatively impacting funding.



The chart below shows ADM comparisons by schools from SY25-26 to SY26-27.

School	SY25-26	SY26-27
Central Elementary	237	225
Efland Cheeks Elementary	480	445
Grady A. Brown Elementary	390	349
Hillsborough Elementary	435	429
New Hope Elementary	514	489
Pathways Elementary	303	313
River Park Elementary	480	443
Subtotal Elementary	2839	2693
A. L. Stanback Middle	605	592
Gravelly Hill Middle	443	445
Orange Middle	551	562
Subtotal Middle	1599	1599
Cedar Ridge High	1174	1146
Orange High	1079	1056
Partnership Academy	42	27
Subtotal High	2295	2229
Total	6733	6521

An analysis of the data shows that despite an overall decrease in student membership across the district, Pathways Elementary, Gravelly Hill Middle School, and Orange Middle School are slightly above last year's ADM. Also, total middle school ADM held steady from last year to this year, indicating that the loss of 212 students was from elementary and high schools.

2. Student Movement Trends

Student mobility patterns help us determine where our students are going and from where they are coming. The table below shows student movement into and out of OCS impacting SY26-27 as of October 19, 2026. These data do not include incoming kindergarten students or graduating seniors.

Direction	Student Count	Context/Primary Driver
Movement ***Out of*** OCS	639	Enrolled in OCS for SY25-26 but did not return for SY26-27
Movement ***Into*** OCS	397	Enrolled in OCS for SY26-27 but were not enrolled in SY25-26
Net Change	-242*	Net student loss

**The 242 net student loss differs from the ADM total because ADM reflects an ongoing average, whereas student movement data represents a single snapshot as of October 19.*

The chart below shows where students are going when they leave OCS and where they are coming from over the last two years.

Location	Percentage of Students Moving Out of OCS		Percentage of Students Moving Into OCS	
	SY25-26	SY26-27	SY25-26	SY26-27
Another School District	53.2%	47.0%	48.3%	44.8%
Out of State	10.6%	11.9%	17.3%	14.9%
Out of Country	1.7%	3.4%	1.4%	4.0%
Charter School	12.4%	15.5%	19.7%	20.4%
Home School	0%	5.6%	4.1%	4.3%
Private School	14.2%	7.7%	8.9%	11.6%
Unknown	7.3%	8.9%	NA	NA
Other (Death, Medical Treatment, etc.)	>1%	0%	NA	NA

While charter and private schools account for a noticeable share of individual student entries and exits, their net financial and membership impact on the total 242 student decline is minor compared to

residential movement. For SY26-27, there was a net loss of 18 students to charter schools and a net loss of three students to private schools. The primary driver of student mobility continues to be movement to and from other North Carolina school districts as well as other states and countries, with a combined net loss of 145 students. Housing affordability and changing demographics are important factors to consider when examining declining public school enrollment in Orange County. As one of North Carolina's most expensive housing markets, Orange County faces significant affordability challenges, with 55% of renters and 18% of homeowners spending more than 30% of their income on housing, according to the North Carolina Housing Coalition's 2025 Housing Need Assessment. These costs can make it difficult for young families to move into or remain in the county. Additionally, approximately 23% of Orange County residents are age 60 or older, and the greater concern is the county's projected demographic shift. According to the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' 2022 Aging Profile, Orange County's population ages 60 and older is projected to increase by 40% between 2022 and 2042, compared with just 11% growth among children ages 0–17. As older residents age in place and housing costs limit opportunities for younger families, the number of school-aged children may not keep pace with overall population growth. These trends suggest that declining enrollment is influenced not only by educational choices but also by broader housing and population changes that affect the future of Orange County Schools.

3. **Cohort Stability Tracking Data**

Cohort stability tracking is a longitudinal data analysis method to monitor cohorts of students as they progress from grade level to grade level over the course of their schooling. Cohort stability tracking indicates student retention and persistence within the same group of students over time. The chart below shows longitudinal cohort tracking starting from SY15-16 to SY26-27 based on PMR month 2.

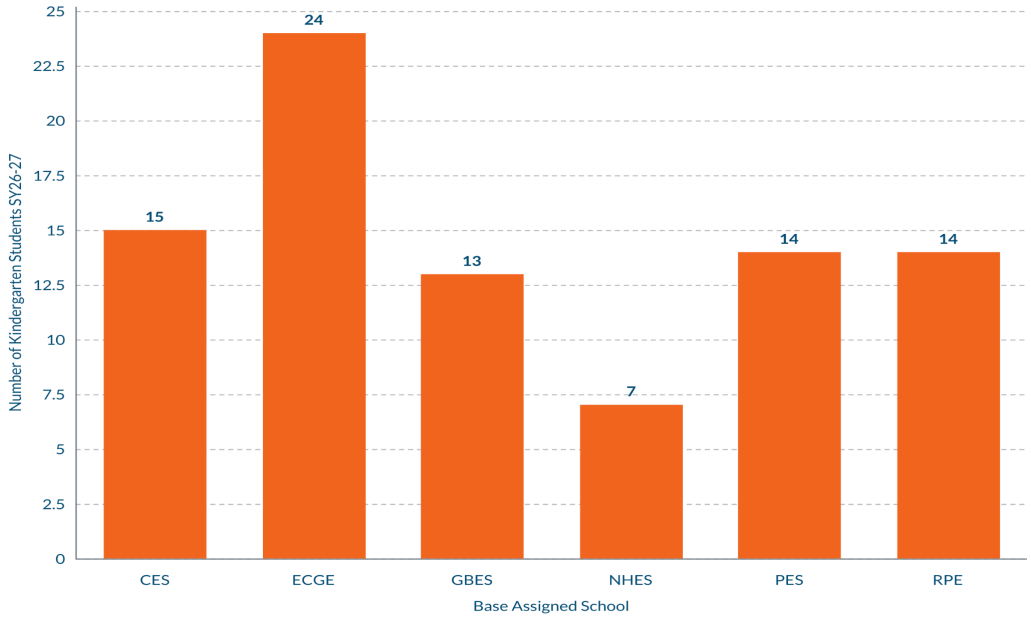
	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21	21-22	22-23	23-24	24-25	25-26	26-27
K	518	491	503	518	530	462	470	489	452	450	424	375
1	490	531	503	509	533	495	470	493	499	475	444	429
2	563	497	530	512	538	513	510	492	490	498	463	437
3	569	563	496	559	522	498	536	538	500	493	502	452
4	607	584	565	505	569	503	505	534	547	510	493	497
5	566	613	586	569	529	556	517	499	553	551	503	496
6	517	573	620	591	557	505	548	517	482	553	540	493
7	602	525	575	609	596	550	524	546	524	497	552	545
8	616	620	530	572	610	596	576	532	564	527	507	557
9	672	665	691	605	678	634	735	685	635	655	605	614
10	639	602	624	612	553	629	631	657	610	579	610	543
11	614	642	583	605	614	543	605	613	622	599	568	584
12	545	532	546	526	548	537	477	510	506	524	506	488

An analysis of the cohort stability tracking data indicates strong cohort survival across transition years (i.e., elementary to middle school and middle school to high school). However, once the cohort reaches high school, the cohorts show a pattern of decreasing from freshman to senior year. There are three main drivers of cohort shrinkage in high school: credit shortfalls leading to grade retention; student departure from the district; and early graduation. When students fail to obtain enough credits, they are retained in their current grade designation, which causes the advancing cohort size to drop from one grade to the next. A portion of each cohort exits the district due to moving, transferring out, or noncompletion. Some students complete their graduation requirements ahead of schedule and are able to graduate after their 11th grade year. For example, of the 568 eleventh graders in SY25-26 moving to twelfth grade in SY26-27, 44 were not promoted, 18 graduated, and 18 did not return to OCS. Of the 18 who did not return to OCS, 3 went to another NC school district, 9 went to private school, and 6 have a current status of unknown.

4. **Kindergarten Student Data**

Analyzing kindergarten cohort size is critical because entering kindergarteners serve as the leading indicator for the entire district's 13-year enrollment pipeline. As demonstrated in the table above, the kindergarten cohort size has decreased steadily since SY22-23, with SY26-27 having the smallest cohort in over a decade at 375, continuing a trend of smaller entering classes that will compound funding drops as they progress through higher grades.

Based on the 2026 September charter school billing, 87 kindergarteners who were zoned for OCS schools went to charter schools this year. The graph below shows the breakdown of base schools those students were assigned.



Within the district, we have movement of kindergarteners from base-assigned schools to Hillsborough Elementary School (HES), which has an assignment lottery to enter the year-round calendar program.

The chart below shows the percentage of the 72 kindergarteners attending HES from the other OCS elementary schools.

Base Assigned School	Percentage of HES Kindergarteners SY25-26	Percentage of HES Kindergarteners SY26-27
Central Elementary	17.8%	36.1%
Efland Cheeks Global Elementary	15.1%	16.7%
Grady A. Brown Elementary	19.2%	9.7%
New Hope Elementary	26.0%	12.5%
Pathways Elementary	5.5%	8.3%
River Park	15.1%	12.5%
Out of District (Staff Transfer)	1.3%	4.2%

Each year, there are slight fluctuations in where the Hillsborough kindergarteners come from. For SY26-27, Central Elementary was the most impacted by kindergarten enrollment into Hillsborough Elementary, with over a third of the entering kindergarten base assigned to that school, which is a shift from the previous year. Continuing to track and analyze kindergarten cohort size and movement is important for long-term funding and building utilization forecasting.

5. Five-Year Demographic Shifts

The chart below shows the demographic breakdown of students over the past five years based on PMR month 2. An overview of the data shows the decline in total district membership is primarily driven by drops in the Black and White student populations.

Demographic Group	SY22-23	SY23-24	SY24-25	SY25-26	SY26-27
Asian	129	132	141	151	150
American Indian	10	17	20	13	18
Black	959	986	946	929	867
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5
Hispanic	1932	1938	2027	1994	1966
Two or More Races	552	520	493	506	476
White	3533	3388	3286	3137	3021