

MASTER & SPACE PLANNING

The New Math of Campus Space

Challenges Facing K-12 and Higher Ed in the United States and Canada

By Roth IAMS | August 2026

Summary. Enrollment forecasts have stopped being reliable, and the reasons differ by country: demographics in the U.S., immigration policy in Canada. Both leave institutions holding buildings sized for a student population that may not arrive. K-12 districts face the same uncertainty on top of aging buildings and enrollment that shifts from one school to the next. Here's where the numbers stand, and the five shifts that hold a space plan together when the forecast doesn't.

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For decades, campus and facility master planning was built on a simple assumption: enrollment goes up, so buildings follow. That assumption no longer holds on either side of the border, or at either end of the education pipeline. K-12 districts and colleges and universities in both Canada and the U.S. are now planning space around a much harder question, not "where do we grow?" but "what do we do with the space we already have?"

The U.S.: A Demographic Cliff Meeting an Empty-Space Problem

The long-predicted "enrollment cliff" in U.S. higher education has arrived. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) projects that the number of U.S. high school graduates peaked in 2025 at roughly 3.8–3.9 million and will decline about 13% through 2041, a structural, not cyclical, decline rooted in falling birth rates after the 2008 recession.¹

Undergraduate enrollment nationally has followed its own volatile arc: after peaking at roughly 18.1–18.2 million in 2010, undergraduate headcount fell for most of the following decade, bottoming out in the 15–15.9 million range in the early 2020s.² More recent data shows a modest recovery: total postsecondary enrollment rose about 1% in fall 2025 to 19.4 million students, with undergraduate enrollment climbing to roughly 16.2–16.8 million, driven mainly by community colleges and public four-year institutions.³ Private four-year nonprofit and for-profit institutions, however, continued to see undergraduate losses even as the overall number ticked up.³ In short, the "enrollment cliff" and today's modest enrollment recovery are both true at once. The recovery hasn't undone a decade-plus of net decline, and it's uneven across institution types, which is exactly the kind of variation that makes single-point enrollment forecasts risky for planners.

The space planning consequence is showing up in the data: a February 2026 report from Occuspace, an occupancy-intelligence platform, found that average U.S. campus building utilization fell to 45% in fall 2025, down from 53% the year before which is well below the roughly 70% utilization most institutions target.⁴ That's a lot of expensive square footage sitting empty, at exactly the moment when operating budgets are under pressure from softer state funding and a pullback in international student enrollment at some institutions.

K-12 districts face a parallel but distinct version of the same problem. According to a 2024 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey, 38% of U.S. school buildings were built before 1970, and the average main instructional building is 49 years old.⁵ Many districts are simultaneously carrying deferred maintenance backlogs. In fact, a 2020 GAO survey found that an estimated 54% of districts needed to update or replace multiple building systems in at least half their schools⁶ all while managing declining or uneven enrollment across their building portfolios. That combination, aging infrastructure plus shifting student populations, is exactly why long-range facility master planning has become a near-universal exercise for districts, rather than a one-off project tied to a single bond.

Canada: A Different Driver, a Similar Space Problem

Canada's higher education sector is under comparable pressure, but from a different source: federal immigration policy. After introducing an international student cap in 2024, Ottawa has

continued tightening it: the 2026 target of 408,000 total study permits represents a 7% decrease from the 2025 target (437,000) and a 16% decrease from the 2024 target (485,000).⁷ Within that total, new international student admissions (155,000) are down nearly 50% from 2024 levels which is a steeper cut than the overall permit number alone suggests.⁸ The number of active study permit holders in Canada has already dropped from over one million in January 2024 to roughly 725,000 by September 2025.⁹

For institutions that built enrollment strategies, and in some cases, capital and housing plans, around sustained international growth, this is a significant reversal. Ontario and British Columbia carry the largest allocations under the 2026 cap and have been especially exposed to the resulting revenue pressure.¹⁰ A partial offsetting measure which is a new exemption for master's and doctoral students from the provincial attestation letter requirement, effective January 1, 2026, helps research-intensive institutions more than the undergraduate- and diploma-heavy programs that drove much of the last decade's enrollment (and space) growth.¹¹

Canadian K-12 systems, meanwhile, are grappling with their own version of the planning uncertainty facing U.S. districts. A February 2026 discussion paper from the EdCan Network, a Canadian education research organization running a multi-year strategic foresight process on K-12 trends, points to a system facing pressures from technological change, staffing gaps, and student wellbeing challenges as complicating factors for long-range planning.¹² It's one organization's foresight analysis rather than a settled consensus, but it reflects the kind of planning uncertainty districts are contending with.

What This Means for Master Planning, Specifically

Across both countries and both sectors, the same shift is happening as master planning is moving from a growth-management exercise to a portfolio-optimization exercise. That changes what a good plan actually needs to do:

- 1. Plan for flexibility, not just capacity.** With utilization rates falling well below target on many campuses, the strategic question is less "do we need a new building" and more "can our existing buildings do more than one job." Convertible classrooms, shared-use spaces, and buildings designed for adaptive reuse are becoming core planning assumptions, not amenities.
- 2. Right-size before you build.** Districts and institutions that go to a bond referendum, capital campaign, or provincial funding request with an honest, defensible data-backed asset management story of current utilization, not just aspirational need, are in a stronger position with both funders and the public. Overbuilding into a declining or uneven enrollment curve is now a real financial risk, not a hypothetical one.
- 3. Build scenario-based plans, not single-point forecasts.** Enrollment uncertainty, whether driven by demographics in the U.S. or immigration policy in Canada, means a master plan built around one enrollment projection is fragile. Institutions are increasingly planning around a range of enrollment scenarios and building decision points into the plan for when to expand, hold, or consolidate.

4. **Treat underutilized space as a financial and community asset, not a maintenance burden.** Space that isn't used for its original purpose can often be repurposed for career and technical education, community programming, research partnerships, or shared institutional space, turning a cost center into a source of new value.
5. **Separate the political case from the technical case, but make both.** In both countries, the data supporting a facility plan (utilization studies, condition assessments, demographic projections) and the public narrative for why it matters need to be built together. A technically sound plan that the community doesn't understand, or a compelling narrative without rigorous data behind it, both struggle to get funded or approved.

The Bottom Line

K-12 and higher education institutions in both the U.S. and Canada are facing a version of the same challenge: real, sometimes severe, uncertainty about how many students will show up and when, combined with aging or underused facilities that were planned for a different reality. Good master planning in this environment isn't about predicting the future perfectly. It's about building space plans flexible enough to be right even when the enrollment forecast isn't.

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