



# Future Citizens

## On the Changing Demographics of Public-School Enrollments in South Carolina

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### **Abstract**

*Many public officials and community leaders in South Carolina stress the importance of finding solutions to problems as wide-ranging as workforce development, housing access and affordability, poverty alleviation, inadequate access to healthcare, and access to affordable transportation. However, when envisioning the state's socio-economic development and the inclusion of its minority residents in that process, researchers should place more emphasis on public education. Providing a growing, diverse population with the appropriate educational resources from preschool through secondary education is vital if the state's economic development objectives are to be met. This research looks at the state's changing public-school demographics to bring awareness to areas where specialized curriculum and administration changes might be made.*

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### **Age Cohorts and Demographic Transitions in South Carolina**

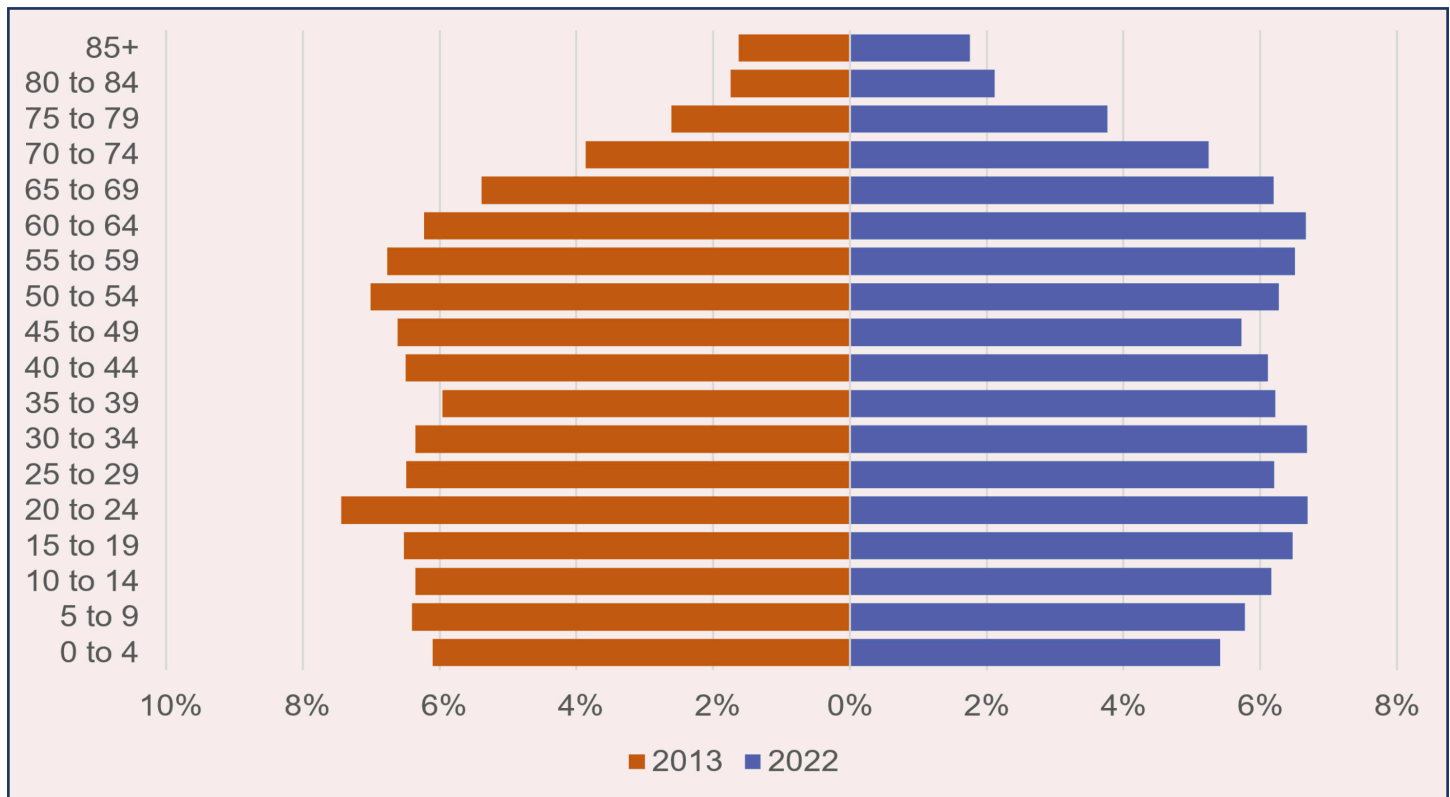
The South Carolina Commission for Minority Affairs (CMA) has its finger on the pulse of South Carolina as it relates to its changing racial/ethnic demographics. Recently some of the agency's research on these topics won a Notable State Document award from the State Library ([see here](#)). However, much of that research examined the past and focused heavily on the state's adult populations. In this brief, we retrain our lens on the racial/ethnic demographics of public school-aged children, as they represent the future of the state's economic prospects.

Unfortunately, South Carolina currently finds its future development ensnared in a tragic contradiction: on the one hand the state's population is aging rapidly which will contribute to a smaller share of its population participating in the labor force, while on the other, state- and local-level policy is being employed to attract global corporations to set up operations. Therefore, at the same time the state needs a more numerous and highly qualified workforce, it encounters demographic limits that may dampen further economic growth prospects. As such, South Carolina's current population remains in structural decline, only growing due to people relocating from different states and countries. Coupled with this, we find that geographical variation, principally between rural and urban areas, also contributes to populational and demographic dynamics that must be taken into consideration when examining future economic prospects.



This demographics problem can be understood from multiple angles, such as a visualization of the breakdown of the population by age cohort (see Image 1). Here we clearly see rapid decline in age cohort shares by those below 20 by 2022. In fact, even as the state’s overall population increased by 514,136 people, the under 20 population only increased by 48,328. In 2013, 25.4% of the population was under 20 years of age and by 2022, that proportion shrank to 23.8%! As the state’s White and Black populations age, these younger age cohorts are becoming increasingly populated by Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AA/PI), Hispanics, and people identifying as Two or More racial/ethnic identities. A sizeable number of these children are born to parents whose native language is not English and/or may have been born outside of the United States. This diversification of public school populations means the learning culture and relations between parents and faculty are also shifting.

Image 1. South Carolina Population Pyramid, 2013 and 2022



Given this situation, the subsequent task is to grapple with workforce readiness and training for those already residing in the state. As a planning conundrum, counties and school districts need to prepare current and future public-school students and teachers with appropriate educational resources to meet the needs of emerging and future labor markets while balancing the personal educational goals of students and their families. Provided that the state’s population is becoming more diverse, more global, and more plurilingual, ensuring that schools have both adequate material infrastructure and faculty awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity is of increasing concern. The next section explores how enrollment data might be employed in planning for these present and future conditions.



## Minority Public School Enrollment from 2013 to 2024

This brief primarily uses the South Carolina Department of Education's (SCDOE) Active Student Headcount reports as a data source. We specifically consulted the "District Headcount by Gender, Ethnicity and Pupils in Poverty" reports, and all except the 2024 (for the 2023-24 school year) entries were from the 180-Day count, with the 2024 data at the 45-Day count. To generate county-level results, we harmonized and normalized changing school-district classifications over time by projecting them onto the county level. However, there are several districts that do not neatly map onto county boundaries, including Lexington-Richland 5, Greenville 1, several Spartanburg districts, and others. In all cases, we attributed district data to the county namesake listed therein. In the case of Lexington/Richland 5, district data was attributed to Lexington County. In addition to geographical issues, SCDOE employed irregular racial/ethnic categories in the reports consulted during this study. For example, the concept "Two or More" as a racial/ethnic identity was not included in the 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2017 reports. Given these limitations, we are confident that our analysis may be usefully employed in assisting officials with planning and budget allocations for programs that would benefit an increasingly diversified public school student body.

### *Statewide Shifts*

From 2013 to 2024, the state's public student population increased by 9.3%, from 725,486 to 793,860. Over the same period, the number of students identifying as one- or more Minority ethnic categories jumped 22.4% from 344,518 to 419,507. In 2013, Minority students made up 47.1% of the state's total public school student body, and in 2024 they comprised 52.8%--contributing to 12.1% increase in the Minority share of the student body! Although these decade-long changes appear impressive, the jump from the end of the 2022-23 school year to the beginning of the 2023-24 period is beyond spectacular: a 1.1% increase in the student body and a 1.9% increase in the Minority student population in a matter of months! In other words, a growing Minority student population was responsible for 87.1% of all public-school enrollment growth from 2022-23 to 2023-24. Let's breakdown these changes by racial/ethnic category.

Much of this change over the past decade has been driven by two separate phenomena: 1) an absolute and relative decline of White and Black student populations and 2) an explosion of the state's Hispanic and Multiracial student populations. White student enrollment, compared to other groups, changed the least, due to a variety of factors. Although there were around 9,600 fewer White students in South Carolina public schools in 2024 than in 2013, this only accounted for a decline of 2.5%. Black students, on the other hand, saw a drop of 25,171 students, or a fall of 9.2% of the 2013 enrollment. However, it appears that much of the decline in Black and White (not to mention Native American) student enrollments can be attributed primarily to the creation of a "Two or More" races category.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to measure this effect precisely, but we can compare 2015, 2016, and 2017 data to track the rapid shifts to and from the "Two or More" races category first used in 2016. For Blacks, we find a swing of around 8% to and from; for Whites, around 0.1%; for AA/PI, around 20%; and for Native Americans, around 45%.



That said, from 2016 to 2024, we still observe declines of Black (-12,713) and White (-15,538) student enrollment, or an annualized decline of 0.61% for Black and 0.5% for White enrollment.

This category of “Two or More” races experienced the fastest and most consistent growth across all categories. From 2016, when it was first used, to 2024, the share of students identifying as “Two or More” skyrocketed by nearly 79%, or an average annual growth rate of 9.8%. Although Hispanic students increased by an astronomical 104% (or 51,894 to 106,117) from 2013 to 2024, the average annual growth rate was 9.5%, while it was 7.8% from 2016 onwards. For AA/PI and Native student enrollment, we find mixed results: AA/PI enrollment grew at an average annual rate of 3.2% and Native’s a -0.45% from 2016 to 2024. Students identifying as AA/PI, Hispanic, or “Two or More” races far exceeded the average annual growth rate of the total student population at 0.61%. Indeed, if we removed the data from Black and White enrollments, all other groups increased by an average annual rate of 5.52% from 2016 to 2024.

### ***Changes at the County Level***

Even as statewide public-school enrollments indicated strong growth, only fourteen counties saw their rolls increase. Eight counties saw their rolls increase by more than 4,000 students (Berkeley, York, Horry, Spartanburg, Charleston, Greenville, Dorchester, and Lexington Counties) and three more saw growth of more than 1,000 students (Lancaster, Anderson, Beaufort). Eight of these counties (Lancaster, Berkeley, Dorchester, York, Horry, Saluda, Charleston, and Spartanburg) grew by at least 10%, with Lancaster’s public school enrollments skyrocketing by 31.2% over the period analyzed.

At the other end of the spectrum, 32 counties witnessed declining public-school enrollments, with twelve seeing their rolls decline by more than 1,000 students. Orangeburg (-3,059) and Sumter (-2,283) were the two counties with absolute declines of more than 2,000 students. However, Florence, Williamsburg, Marion, Darlington, Cherokee, Colleton, Georgetown, Aiken, Hampton, and Barnwell counties, many of which are in rural areas and/or part of the historical “Black Belt”, also saw enrollments slump by more than 1,000 students. However, Lee (-38.4%), Williamsburg (-38.4%), McCormick (-33.1%), Hampton (-31.7%), Allendale (-29.9%), Marion (-25.9%), Barnwell (-24.3%), Orangeburg (-22.4%), and Colleton (-20.4%) counties led the pack, with 12 more counties having lost between 10 and 20% of their total enrollments over that period. In many cases, these changes are driven by dwindling rural African American public-school enrollment.

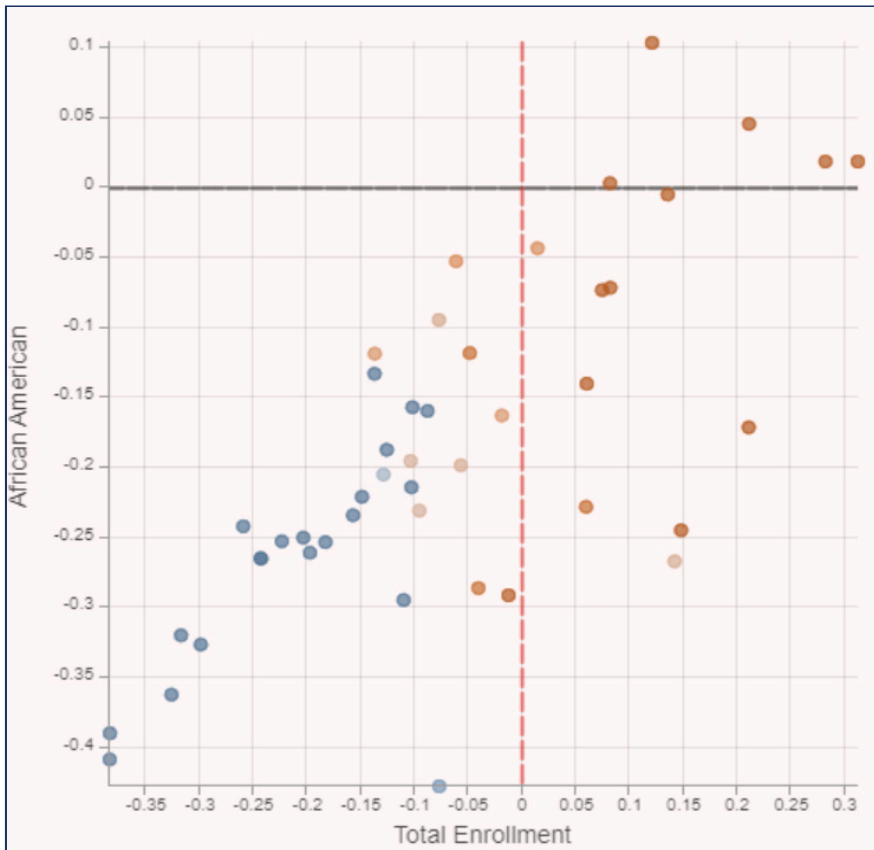
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<sup>2</sup> The Public Charter School District, a statewide entity, saw the most growth from 2013 to 2024 (+35,042 new students). However, county-level data is not available for this data.

<sup>3</sup> Kershaw, Richland, and Saluda Counties all grew by less than 1,000 new students.

<sup>4</sup> The Black Belt is the area across the Southeastern United States where, historically, large concentrations of African Americans have resided. Typically, these are more rural, agriculturally rich areas that closely correspond with former plantation and sharecropper economies.

Image 3. Change in Total and African American Enrollment from 2013 to 2024

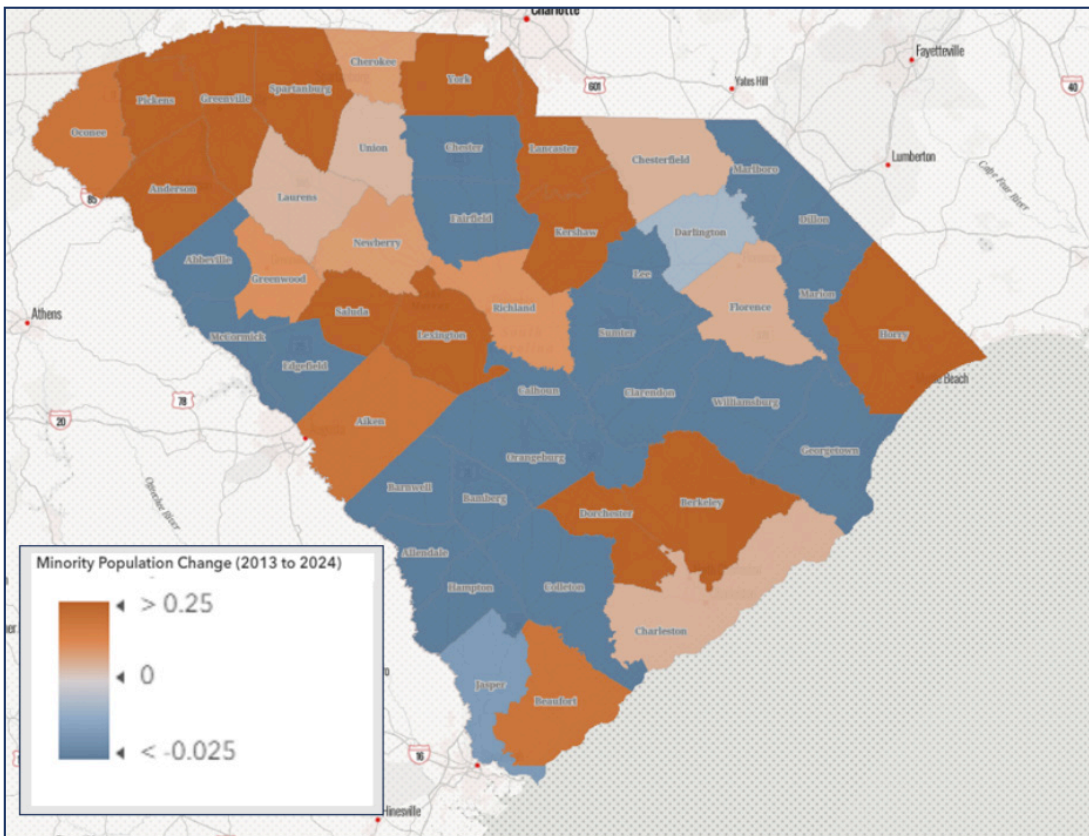


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Minority public school enrollment increased in 24 of the state’s 46 counties from 2013 to 2024. Those gains were largest in Greenville (9,283), York (8,358), Lexington (8,203), Berkeley (6,739), Horry (6,518), Spartanburg (6,106), Dorchester (5,095), Richland (3,877), and Anderson (3,121) Counties. Six other counties saw enrollments increase by at least 1,000 students: Lancaster, Beaufort, Aiken, Pickens, Kershaw, and Charleston. At the opposite end, 22 counties saw Minority student enrollments decline, but only two of these were by more than 1,000 students: Williamsburg (-1,660) and Orangeburg (-2,120). In many cases, the growth in Minority student populations exceeded the growth of the entire student population, often offsetting steep reductions in White student enrollment, such as in Greenville, Lexington, Richland, Anderson, Beaufort, Kershaw, and Saluda Counties. On the other hand, we find the opposite situation in Pickens, Oconee, Newberry, and Aiken Counties, where Minority student enrollment declined precipitously, which were offset by gains in White student enrollment.

<sup>5</sup> SC Public Charter Schools saw their Minority enrollments increase by 17,443 students to 46,170 students, of which Minority comprise 44.6%.

Image 3. Minority Student Population Change from 2013 to 2024



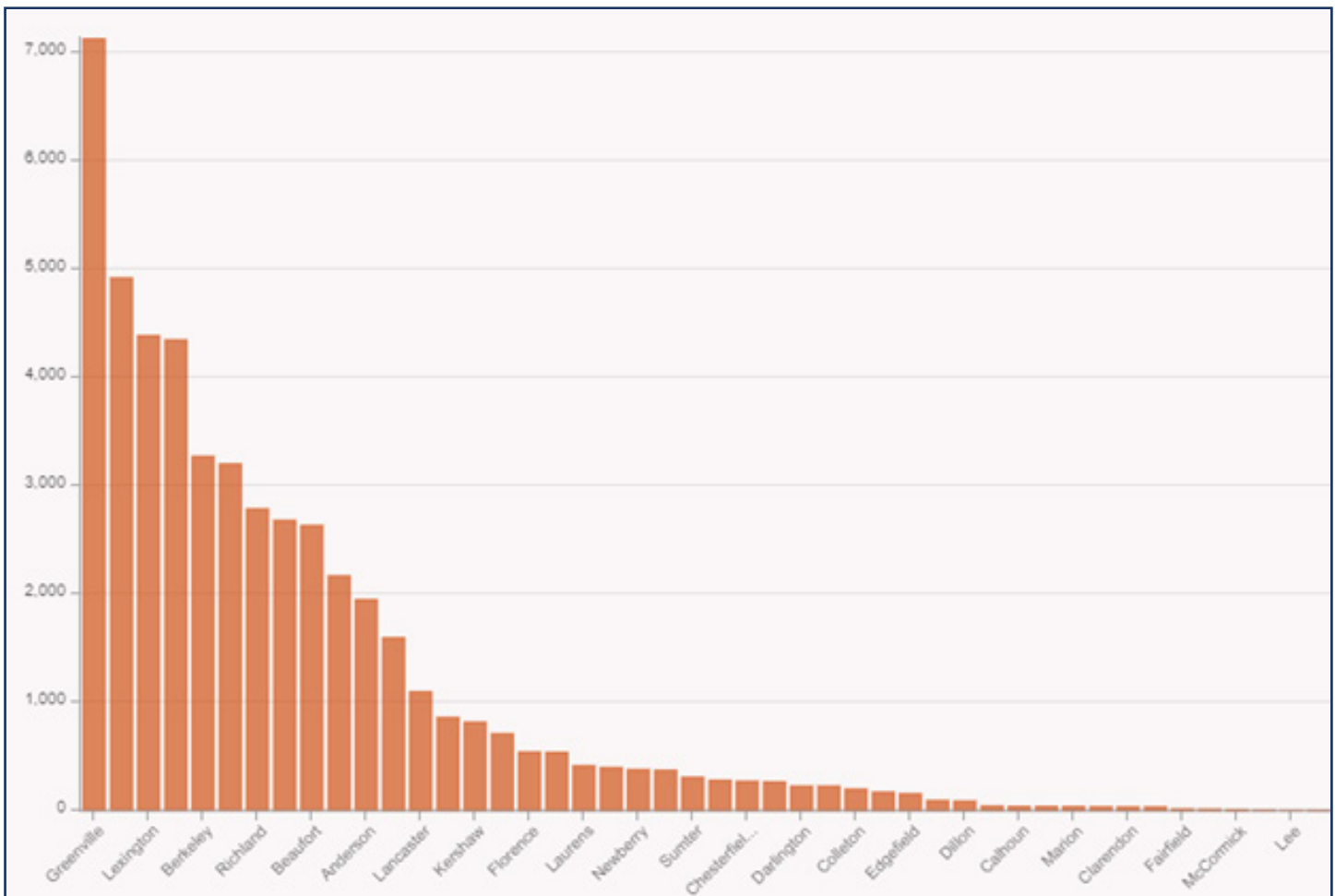
### ***Educational Services, Economic Development, and Inclusive Development: An Eye Towards the Future***

The break-neck pace of development that has transformed the state’s economy has made South Carolina a leading destination for transnational corporations and families from all walks of life has also unfurled in an uneven patchwork across the state. However, the impacts of how this uneven development affects public school funding and student enrollments has yet to be comprehensively analyzed. Additionally, how the changing needs of the public education system across the state intersect with its economic development needs is something that must be further interrogated.

Some school districts are growing so quickly that schools are rapidly becoming overpopulated before new construction of schools can begin. At the other extreme, some rural districts are hemorrhaging students, which magnifies and compounds preexisting funding shortfalls with even the most basic supplies and amenities not being available. Unfortunately, in some cases, the entire county may only be served by two or three high schools, forcing students to travel great distances for access to a basic education. With the influx of AA/PI and Hispanic students to certain areas, the cultural composition of student bodies can completely change within the span of a cohort. This puts pressure on districts to ensure that teachers and administrator are well-equipped to interact with students (and their families) that may have difficulties with English or who may not share the same cultural points of reference.



Image 4. Change in Hispanic Enrollment, 2013 to 2024



### Concluding Remarks

In all cases, schools and school districts need access to funding that provides more immediate spending flexibility to address the changing contours of educating the next generation of South Carolinian leaders and workers. That generation will not resemble the preceding one, and state and local leaders and agencies must prepare. Without more agility in funding for these changes, the economic development state officials so covet, may continue to be deferred and uneven. A more inclusive development ensures that the net positives of this development are more accessible to all members of the state’s diverse community, and educational access and acquisition are at the heart of that pursuit.

Note: Enrollment data taken from the South Carolina Department of Education’s Public Enrollment Active Headcount reports. Population Estimate data on age cohorts was pulled from the US Census Bureau’s Population Estimates Program for 2013 and 2022.