

Declining enrollment in Wis. public schools

The impact of demographics and the pandemic

Demographics have played a large role in how public school enrollment patterns have changed in Wisconsin over time. The combination of the state's aging population and declining birth rates have driven an overall decrease in school enrollment since births peaked in 2007. When the pandemic hit, the decline in the number of public school students accelerated.

Because school funding is tied to enrollment, Wisconsin schools face an ongoing challenge to stabilize their revenues and budgets while enrollment trends continue to decline for the foreseeable future.

This article explores some of the key factors driving declines in Wisconsin's public school enrollment and discusses some of the roles both districts and the state could play to mitigate the



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ongoing fiscal and educational challenges these trends present. First, let's look at what has been happening with certain populations of students. Overall, the youth population in the State of Wisconsin has been declining for decades. In 1990, 26% of the population was under 18.

Three decades later in 2020, that share dropped to just 22%. It is important to note that the main demographic driver of the youth population is births. Wisconsin births peaked in 2007 with 72,718 births, just before the Great Recession began. From 2007 to 2019, Wisconsin saw a 15% decline in births (1.1% annually). But between 2019 and 2020, Wisconsin births declined by 4.4% in that one



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year alone. By 2021, the number of births statewide rebounded slightly with a 2% increase to 61,814 births.

Change in enrollment by school type

As has been well documented in Wisconsin and across the nation, school enrollment shifted dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those shifts varied significantly depending on the school type (Figure 1). Perhaps not surprisingly, during the beginning of the pandemic, between 2020 and 2022, public and private school enrollments declined, while public virtual charters and homeschooling saw significant increases.

Overall, public school enrollment decreased by 3.8% between 2020 and 2023, while private schools rebounded with an increase of 3.1%. Meanwhile, the number of home-schooled students increased by over 33% in that time.

Enrollment declines posed a major challenge to K-12 education prior

Figure 1: Enrollment by School Type

School Type	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	% Change 2019-20 to 2022-23
Public*	854,959	829,935	829,143	822,804	-3.8%
Home-schooled	21,644	31,878	29,402	28,853	33.3%
Private	120,705	118,862	121,729	124,447	3.1%
TOTAL	997,308	980,675	980,274	976,104	-2.1%

*Includes public charter schools | Source: [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#)

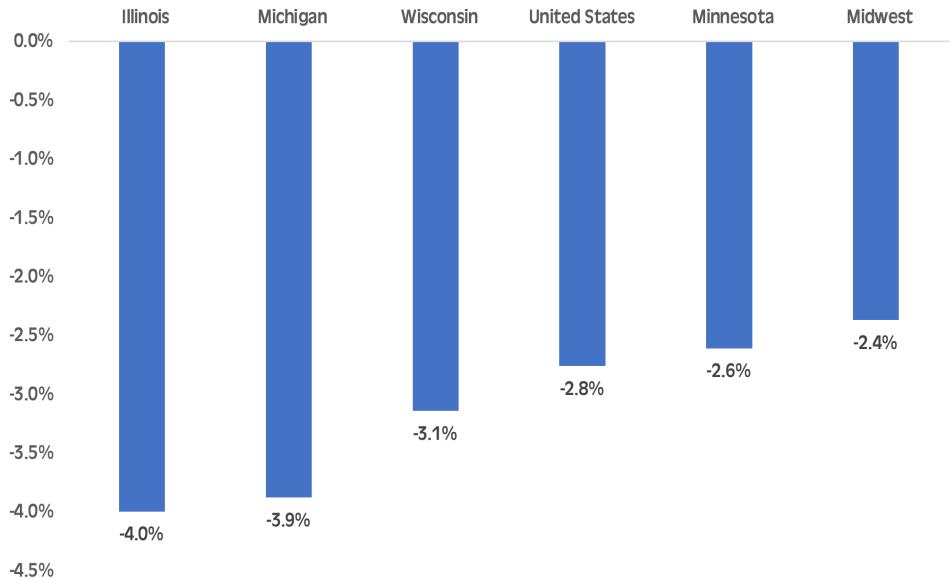
to the pandemic. Between 2013-14, when public school enrollment hit its peak, and 2019-20, enrollment in Wisconsin's public schools was decreasing, on average, by 0.4% or 3,300 students per year. During the pandemic, that decline accelerated to 3% between 2019-20 to 2020-21. But after that large drop, enrollment declines have slowed considerably.

Since the 2019-20 school year, public school enrollment declined by slightly more than 32,000 students, while private schools and home-schooled students have increased by almost 11,000 students. This means that the State of Wisconsin has over 21,000 fewer K-12 students since the 2019-20 school year.

To date, we don't know where those students have gone or where they are being educated – whether they have left the state, are being home-schooled without DPI's knowledge, represent a large cohort that has delayed starting kindergarten, or another reason.

Wisconsin is not alone in seeing major fluctuations in enrollment surrounding the pandemic and in knowing little about where students have gone and in what settings they are learning. Public schools nationwide lost more than [1.2 million students](#) in the first two years of the

Figure 2: Enrollment in public schools: Percent change by location, 2019-20 to 2021-22



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

pandemic. And the [upper midwestern states got hit particularly hard](#). How does the change in Wisconsin's enrollment compare to surrounding states? According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Wisconsin falls in the middle of the pack (Figure 2).

From [2019-20 to 2021-22](#) (the most recent year of data available), enrollment fell by about 2.8% nationwide, slightly less than Wisconsin's 3.1% drop.

The Midwest region as a whole fared somewhat better than both Wisconsin and the nation, with a 2.4%

decline. Illinois and Michigan experienced larger enrollment losses of about 4%. Minnesota's 2.6% loss came in slightly lower than the national average. All of this suggests that if Wisconsin families moved to another state, it is not likely that a large number of them moved to a surrounding state.

Change in enrollment by student group

What have been the enrollment patterns related to the pandemic among Wisconsin's students with higher educational needs, namely students with disabilities, English learners, and those who are economically disadvantaged?

Figure 3 shows that since the 2019-20 school year, the number of students with disabilities climbed, growing by almost 2% or 2,177 students. Meanwhile, the number of economically disadvantaged students declined by 2,779 or 6%, while the number of English learners decreased slightly, by just 86 students.

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Figure 3: Enrollment by student group

Student Group	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	% Change 2019-20 to 2022-23
Economic Disadvantage	361,955	362,345	332,810	339,176	-6.3%
English Learners	51,706	43,796	49,812	51,638	-0.1%
Students w/ Disabilities	120,010	117,969	119,942	122,187	1.8%
TOTAL	533,671	524,110	502,564	513,001	-3.9%

Source: [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#)

Declining enrollment in public schools

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Figure 4 shows how each of these groups changed as a share of the total public school population between 2019-20 and 2022-23. The percent of students with disabilities saw about a one-percentage-point uptick from 14% to 15%. Economically disadvantaged students decreased by about the same amount from 42% to 41%. The share of English learners remained steady at close to 6% of Wisconsin's overall student population.

What might have been some of the impacts of these pandemic-era shifts in school populations? An increase in the number and/or share of students with disabilities means more strain on school budgets, as the increased cost of educating students with disabilities far exceeds the categorical aids intended to support schools with those costs (the cover less than a third of costs).

In addition, for two years during the pandemic, federal COVID relief funds provided universal free meals to students without asking them to apply for them. But parents had to [resume applying](#) for free school meals in 2022-23. A decrease in the number of economically disadvantaged students from 2019-20 to 2022-23 may indicate that the return to requiring applications discouraged eligible families from accessing the program. The number of English Learners rebounded to pre-pandemic levels by 2022-23 after a sharp decline in 2020-21.

However, that one-year drop suggests there might have been a large number of English learners that delayed or paused enrollment in school, which could be creating significant need for investments in academic recovery for that cohort of almost 8,000 students.

Figure 4: Student groups as a share of total public school population

Student Group	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	% Change 2019-20 to 2022-23
Economic Disadvantage	42.3%	43.7%	40.1%	41.2%	-1.1%
English Learners	6.0%	5.3%	6.0%	6.3%	0.3%
Students w/ Disabilities	14.0%	14.2%	14.5%	14.9%	0.9%

Source: [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction](#)

As these data illustrate, the global pandemic was the impetus for major enrollment declines between 2019-20 and 2022-23. But they also show that declining enrollment has been an ongoing consequence of demographic trends since long before the onset of COVID-19. And those trends are likely to continue to pose challenges to school sustainability for many years to come. This comes as students' academic and social-emotional needs are and will continue to be high. Those needs, in turn, drive up ongoing costs that school districts must absorb even as enrollment-based funding shrinks.

Considering the long-term ramifications of the trends we've discussed, what can districts and the state do to mitigate the fiscal and educational impacts of declining enrollment? A few possibilities include:

Districts

- **Identify the specific sources of enrollment pressures:** What is driving enrollment in their particular community? Is it stemming mostly from demographics over which districts have little influence such as fewer births slowing the pipeline of students entering kindergarten? Is it coming from outmigration because families are moving away from the community

for work or housing? Is it driven by families leaving the district through open enrollment or for alternative educational choices like private or independent charter schools?

- **Identify contributing factors and strategies to mitigate them:** Districts could engage with families through interviews, surveys, listening sessions, or other channels to understand factors driving students to leave the district, how families' educational needs are changing, and whether families understand the value that district schools provide. Based on this outreach, districts could ascertain how to better communicate their offerings and outcomes and identify strategies and educational offerings or formats for improving the educational experience to retain as many students as possible.
- **Develop and communicate contingency plans:** In addition to the work districts already do every year to identify efficiencies and trim costs, districts will want to communicate proactively with the community to involve and prepare them for any difficult decisions about what is needed to right-size the district on a longer time horizon. To the degree that enrollment projections suggest the need to consider shared services, school or district

consolidations, and/or closures, districts will fare better if they have been fostering open and transparent communication all along.

State

- The state has a constitutional obligation to provide “for the establishment of district schools,” and its school finance system passes constitutional muster so long as it delivers on students’ “fundamental right to an equal opportunity for a sound basic education.” As state and districts work together to identify structures and strategies to mitigate the harms of declining enrollment at the local level, the state plays a pivotal role to **provide financial, technical, and policy support** to ensure districts have the resources they need to equitably serve all of their students, especially students with disabilities, English learners, and those who are economically disadvantaged.
- Although local schools and districts are where enrollment losses are felt,

demographic trends driving enrollment shifts will be interrelated across all regions of the state. The state can lead efforts to **conduct statewide analyses of the impacts** of demographic and enrollment trends on specific regions, districts, and student groups. It can then make recommendations about how to mitigate the harmful impacts of those trends long-term.

- Such recommendations may include **examining ways to restructure school finance policies, formulas, and systems** to ensure district schools are adequately and equitably resourced despite inevitable future enrollment declines.
- Just as long-term trends in declining enrollment will ask districts and school boards to confront difficult questions like how many school buildings can be sustained long-term, policymakers will face similar questions at the state level. As enrollment declines persist, there will be fewer and fewer students attending schools across the state, be they constitutionally-required district

schools or other schooling options. In combination with the previously mentioned strategies, the **state will need to determine how to distribute investments across school options** in a way that ensures district schools are funded sustainably and their students’ needs are met.

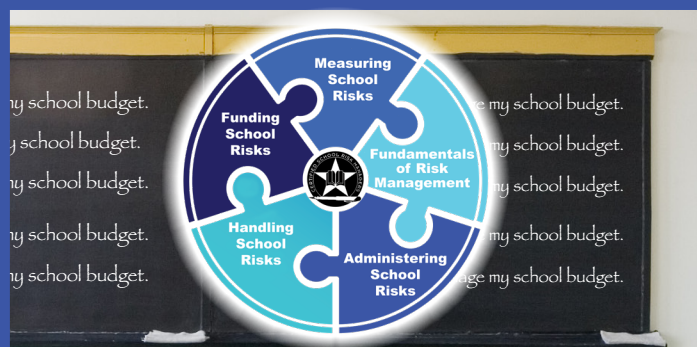
As the consequences of the pandemic continue to play out for public schools, it will take local families, schools, districts, and the state working in concert – not only to confront the demographic realities on the horizon head-on, but to use them as opportunities to explore new and creative ways to build a public education system that launches every child into a bright future, no matter how enrollment is trending in their home district.

As researchers, we’ll be watching these trends in Wisconsin and nationwide, identifying promising strategies to address them, and exploring policy and practice options for Wisconsin. Stay tuned!

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