Wisconsin School Enrollment Stabilizes but Fails to Recover Prior Year’s Losses

Graduation, attendance, test participation rates declined sharply last year, updated DataTool shows

Enrollment in Wisconsin public and charter schools stabilized in 2021 but failed to recoup any of the decrease of more than 25,000 students that occurred the previous year, according to the findings of a newly updated data tool from the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

Meanwhile, graduation and attendance rates declined statewide amid a slew of pandemic-related disruptions. There was also a decline in the share of students scoring proficient or advanced on the Forward Exam, though this metric is not easy to interpret due to a huge increase in the share of students who opted out of the statewide standardized tests.

These are among the key findings of the Forum’s updated School DataTool. This online interactive tool allows for comparison of each of Wisconsin’s public school districts on metrics relating to student participation, school district spending, graduation rates, test scores, and other measures of student performance.

This latest edition of the tool is the fourth since its 2019 debut. It includes the most recent available data, which goes through the 2020-21 school year for some indicators and 2021-22 for others.

COVID-19 Takes Toll Though Full Impact on Learning Hard to Assess

Enrollment in all Wisconsin public and charter schools effectively held flat in the 2021-22 school year, dropping by 729 students to a total of 829,943 students, according to state Department of Public Instruction data used for the tool. This was consistent with annual enrollment changes seen in pre-pandemic years.

However, it is notable that public and charter schools did not recoup even a small share of the large overall enrollment decrease seen in the first year of the pandemic in 2020-21. The largest enrollment declines that year occurred among pre-K students – which suggested they may have been driven in part by families who opted to delay starting their youngest learners in school during the pandemic. Though enrollment in those specific grades has rebounded partially, it has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Meanwhile, though the impact of the pandemic on student learning remains challenging to assess, concerning signs are apparent. The share of Wisconsin elementary and middle school students who scored proficient or advanced on state Forward Exams declined markedly in 2020-21. (The tests were not administered in 2019-20 due to the pandemic.) For example, the share of students scoring proficient or advanced dropped to 31.3% on the 3rd grade English Language Arts exam compared to 39% in 2018-19.
However, this comes with an important caveat: the share of students who did not take those exams increased sharply as well. That share went up from 1.2% in 2018-19 to 11.7% in 2020-21, a nearly seven-fold increase. The inclusion of this metric was a new and relevant addition to this year’s DataTool update.

**Additional key findings include:**

- Following a 16.4% decline in 2020-21, pre-K enrollment increased 8.7% in 2021-22. Enrollment in grades 1 to 8 declined slightly in 2021-22 while high school enrollment increased slightly.
- The share of Advanced Placement (AP) tests administered that scored a 3 or higher dropped by almost five percentage points in 2020-21, with students earning a 3 or higher in 61.6% of exams taken (compared to 66.5% in 2019-20). A score of at least 3 out of 5 is needed to earn potential college credits. The number of AP exams taken also declined by 7% in 2020-21 to the lowest number of exams taken in more than six years.
- Statewide graduation rates declined by 0.9 percentage points to 89.5% in 2020-21. The 2020-21 rate was the lowest since 2016-17. All student groups saw a decrease over the previous year, including students of all racial groups. Notably, economically disadvantaged students decreased from a graduation rate of 81.5% in the previous year to 78.4%.
- Attendance rates statewide dropped by one percentage point to 93.1% in 2020-21, reaching the lowest level in over a decade. Students in each racial group saw a drop in their overall attendance rate from 2019-20 to 2020-21 with the rate for Black students statewide seeing the largest decline – dropping more than five percentage points to 82.5% in 2020-21.

While the figures cited above are statewide, the interactive DataTool allows users to assess and compare how individual school districts are faring on each of these metrics.

This edition of the School DataTool bolsters the Forum’s role as the go-to source for interactive data that helps Wisconsinites better understand local and state policy issues.

Later this year the Forum plans to release the latest edition of the Municipal DataTool, including data on all 601 cities and villages in the state; and the Property Values and Taxes DataTool, which features data for Wisconsin’s 72 counties and 1,852 cities, villages, and towns.

Click here to access the Forum’s 2022 School DataTool.

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