

# PRIVATE SCHOOL ENROLLMENT FELL DURING PANDEMIC; HOMESCHOOL, VIRTUAL CHARTERS GREW

*At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, a historic drop in Wisconsin public school enrollment in the 2020-21 school year was accompanied by a smaller but still notable decline in private school enrollment, with both concentrated at the lowest grade levels. Meanwhile, homeschool and virtual charter school enrollment rose substantially. Whether these trends continue is a critical question for school officials and policymakers in the next school year and beyond.*

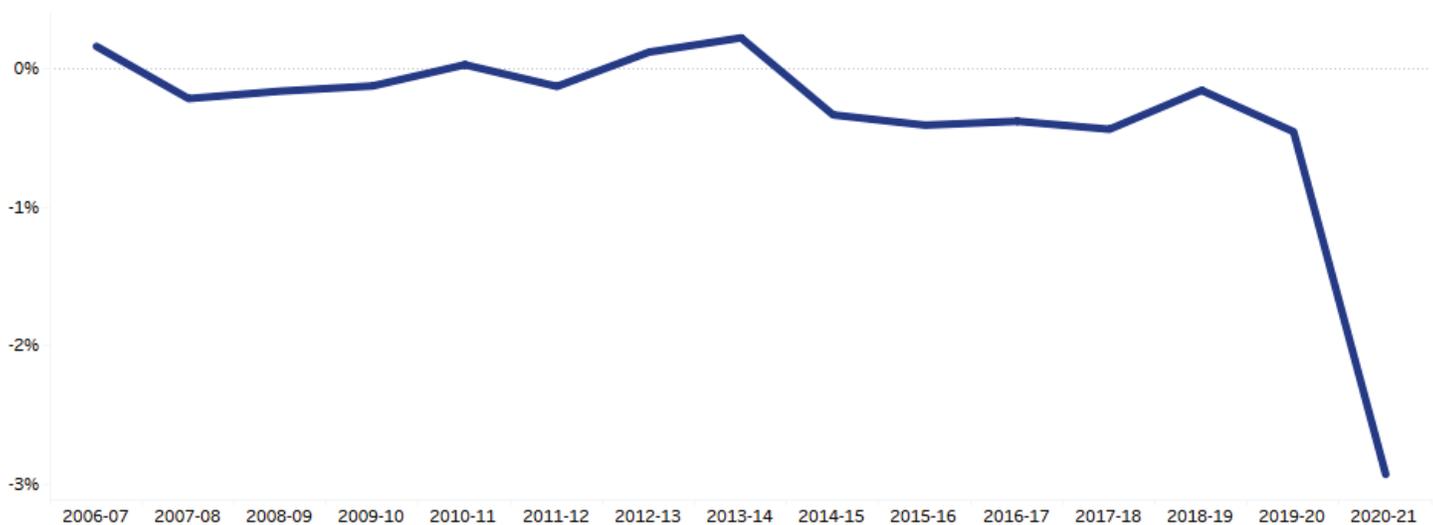
Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) data show private school enrollment declined 1.5% in the 2020-21 school year, which began during the COVID-19 pandemic that had previously triggered school closures and a shift to remote learning in March 2020.

This occurred alongside a larger and more widely publicized decline in public school enrollment of 2.9% in 2020-21 (see Figure 1). However, the figures offer at least a partial counterpoint to speculation about a potential surge in private school enrollment during the pandemic as many public schools continued remote instruction through the fall and winter.

Yet some schooling options did see sizable enrollment increases during the pandemic, DPI data show. Homeschool enrollment increased by 47% in the 2020-21 school year, following several previous years of much more modest increases (see Figure 2 on the following page).

This enrollment increase was the largest since at least 1984, the earliest year for which data are available, and likely the largest single-year increase ever. While homeschool students still account for a small share of all students in Wisconsin, that share increased from about 2.2% in the 2019-20 school year to about 3.25% in 2020-21.

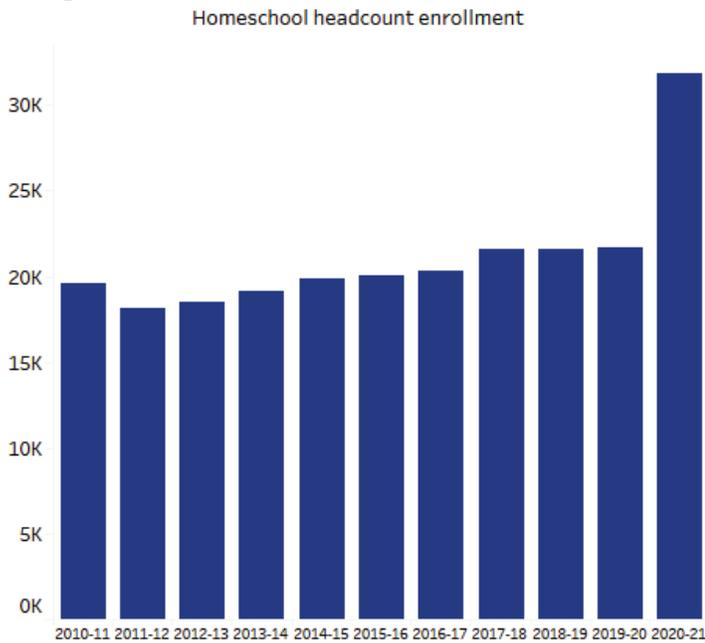
**Figure 1: State public school enrollment saw largest drop in decades**  
 % change in public school headcount enrollment



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

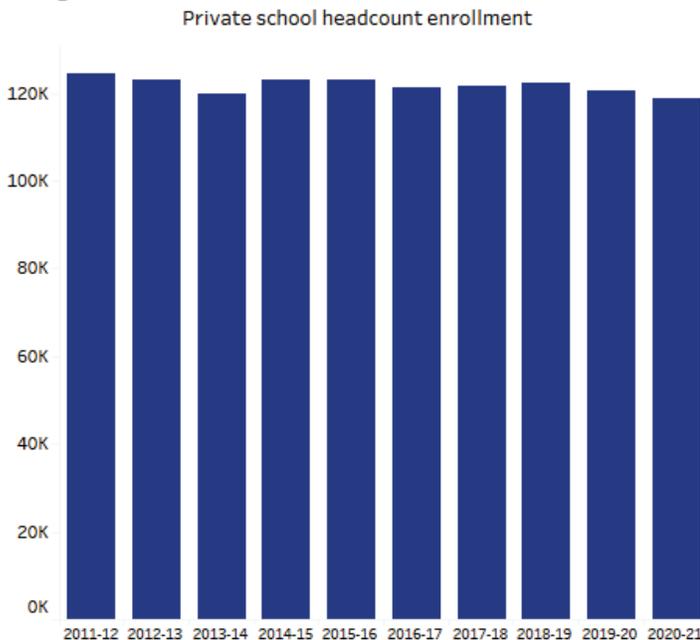


**Figure 2: Statewide Homeschool Enrollment Increases**



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

**Figure 3: Statewide Private School Enrollment Declines**



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Wisconsin charter schools also saw enrollment rise nearly 14% in the 2020-21 school year, after years of remaining roughly flat. This trend appears to have been driven by an explosion of enrollment at virtual charters – not surprising given the widespread shift to remote instruction. Virtual charter enrollment shot up 84% in 2020-21, from 8,696 to 16,020.

These trends appear to have mirrored in large part what took place across the country, according to new data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

### UNPACKING THE TRENDS

While 2020-21 was the seventh consecutive year in which public school enrollment in Wisconsin has declined, it was by far the largest decline in that span in both absolute and percentage terms. It was also by far the largest single-year decline in public school enrollment in at least the last 25 years (the DPI data used for this analysis goes back to 1995) and reached its lowest point during that period.

Private school enrollments have fluctuated more from year to year, as shown in Figure 3, and call for more caution in interpreting the data. In percentage terms, private school enrollments dropped by only half as much as public schools in 2020-21. This suggests private schools may have had fewer families opt out of instruction, received at least some additional public school student transfers, or benefited in some other way.

Still, the benefit was only relative since the last school year represented the largest one-year decline, in both absolute and percentage terms, in private school enrollment since 2013. In fact, private school enrollment total in Wisconsin hit its lowest point in at least a decade.

Last year's changes in school enrollment differed sharply across grade levels. As shown in Figure 4 on the following page, pre-K and kindergarten public school enrollment plunged in 2020-21, while grades 1-8 declined far more modestly and high school enrollment actually increased slightly. The same pattern held in private school enrollment. Private pre-K and K4 enrollment declined by 15.4% in 2020-21, while enrollment in K-12 grades essentially held flat.

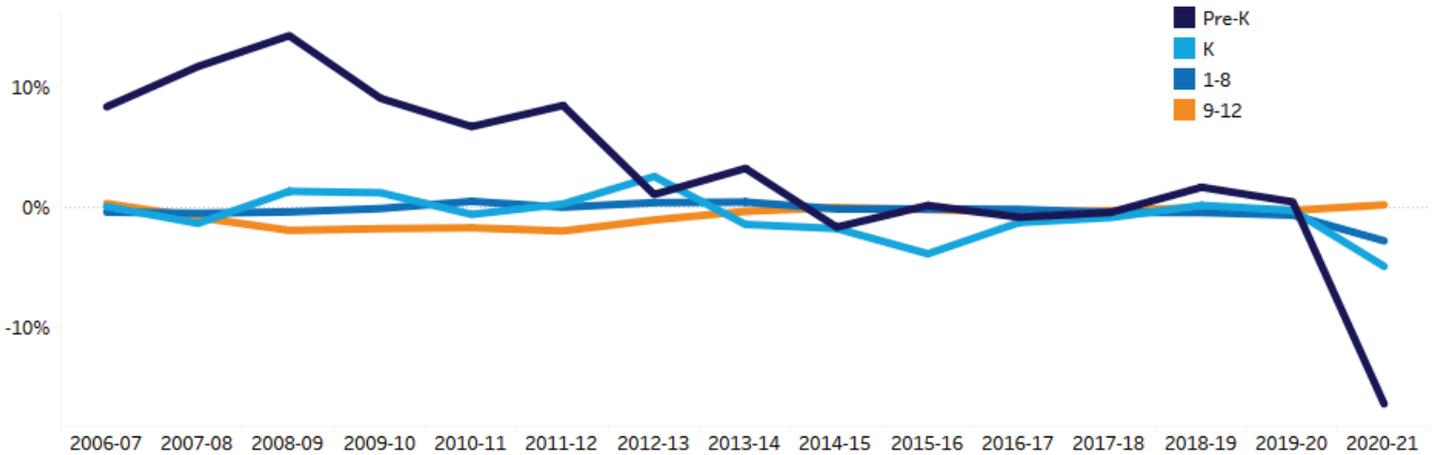
This suggests the enrollment decline may have been driven in part by families who opted to delay starting their youngest learners, especially pre-K students, in school during the pandemic.

Taking a geographic lens to the decline in public school enrollment shows it was not uniform across the state. The 10 largest school districts in Wisconsin, all of which serve large urban centers, account for 25% of total statewide enrollment, but their enrollment drop was



**Figure 4: Public School Pre-K and Kindergarten Enrollment Show Largest Drops**

Percent change in grade level public school enrollment



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

38% of the total decline in the state. Reasons for the difference could range from the [greater use of virtual and hybrid learning](#) by urban schools to higher levels of concern about COVID-19 in those areas.

Wisconsin law requires all virtual charters to be authorized by school districts and as such their enrollment – in addition to being documented separately – also is included as part of the public school enrollment data cited previously. This means that, after accounting for the strong growth in virtual charter enrollment, the decline in enrollment at traditional non-charter public schools was greater than 2.9%.

On a percentage basis, the public school enrollment decline last year was sharpest among American Indian students (-4.6%) and black students (-4.3%), with white students close behind (-3.6%). Asian student enrollment declined 1.7% and Hispanic students showed the least change (-1.1%).

### SIMILAR PICTURE NATIONALLY

National data show a similar pattern played out across the country in 2020-21. Preliminary NCES data show public school enrollment dropped 3%, the largest decline since at least 2000. (The NCES count uses a slightly different approach from that of DPI but yields very similar results for Wisconsin). Nationally, pre-K and kindergarten enrollment in public schools declined 13%, enrollment in grades 1-8 dropped by 3%, and high school enrollment actually ticked up slightly (0.4%).

Available national data also suggest a potential decline in private school enrollment. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), which includes more than

1,600 independent nonprofit schools serving more than 700,000 students, [reported enrollment at its member schools declined](#) by 4% in 2020.

While national trends in homeschooling and virtual charter enrollment are somewhat less clear, there is evidence the former saw increases across the country as well. [The U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey found](#) in its first week during the early period of the pandemic (April 23-May 5 of 2020) that about 5.4% of U.S. households with school-aged children reported homeschooling. By fall 2020, (Sept. 30-Oct. 12), 11.1% of households with school-age children reported homeschooling.

### WHAT'S NEXT IN WISCONSIN'S TWO LARGEST DISTRICTS?

Heading into the 2021-22 school year, the question facing many districts – especially those most acutely affected by enrollment declines in 2020-21 – will be to what extent, if at all, those students who left traditional public schools will return. Predicting this is difficult, in part given the lack of any recent historical precedent to an educational disruption of this magnitude.

This is illustrated in part by the strikingly different predictions made by Wisconsin's two largest districts, as first discussed by the Forum in our May report: [“Opportunity and Uncertainty: An Early Look at the 2022 Budgets of Wisconsin's Two Largest School Districts.”](#)

Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) enrollment fell 4.2% from 74,683 in 2019-20 to 71,510 in 2020-21, including a drop of around 2,500 students from traditional MPS schools. In its 2022 budget, the district



projects traditional MPS enrollment to increase 2.7%, regaining most of what it lost a year earlier.

Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) made less optimistic assumptions – projecting 4K and kindergarten students will enroll at normal rates in 2021-22, but that 1st-12th graders who have left the district largely will not return. The district’s enrollment decline in 2020-21 was nearly 700 students, or about a 2.6% decrease. As part of its 2022 budget proposal, the district projects it will see only a small share of those lost students return in 2021-22.

## CONCLUSION

It is impossible to predict with certainty what will happen next with regard to the severity of the pandemic and how it will impact enrollment during the 2021-22 school year. The optimism that came with vaccination efforts has been tempered by the spread of the more transmissible Delta variant, raising the specter of continued turbulence.

Whatever occurs, the financial implications for public school districts will be considerable. Much of the state’s school finance system – including state limits on school district revenues and various forms of state aid – are based on different enrollment counts including rolling averages that take into account the low 2020-21 counts. In the new state budget, lawmakers chose not to adjust any of those formulas to make allowances for the pandemic.

For now, federal relief aid may carry districts through at least some of these difficulties. Yet if enrollment declines persist in 2021 and beyond, it could impact district budgets and lead to difficult decisions later on.

