

WILL SUMMER BE THE SEASON FOR STUDENT RECOVERY?

At a time when many Wisconsin students need additional support, statewide summer school enrollment plunged in the early months of the pandemic and did not fully recover last summer. While the decline in 2020 hit nearly every district, some fully regained their enrollment in 2021 while others lagged. Federal relief funds as well as state K-12 aids and local resources can support summer school programs and other COVID recovery efforts.

As the state’s schools navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, summer school enrollment counts reflect the turbulence of the time. The number of Wisconsin public school students enrolled in summer school plummeted in 2020 and showed a partial rebound in 2021. Enrollment patterns for individual districts varied greatly. Some districts, such as Green Bay, reached their highest levels in a decade, while others, like Milwaukee, remained at 2020 levels.

The reduction in summer school enrollments marks not only another case of student services that have yet to return to pre-pandemic norms, but also a potential financial loss for districts. Perhaps most compellingly, it is a missed opportunity to use existing infrastructure to support students’ recovery from COVID-19.

STATEWIDE SUMMER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Summer school enrollment in Wisconsin trended upward from 2009 to 2019. In 2020, the first year in

Terminology

Districts report summer school enrollment to the state’s Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in terms of full-time equivalent (FTE) students, accounting for the amount of instructional time. For example, a student attending a half-day program would be counted as 0.5 FTE.

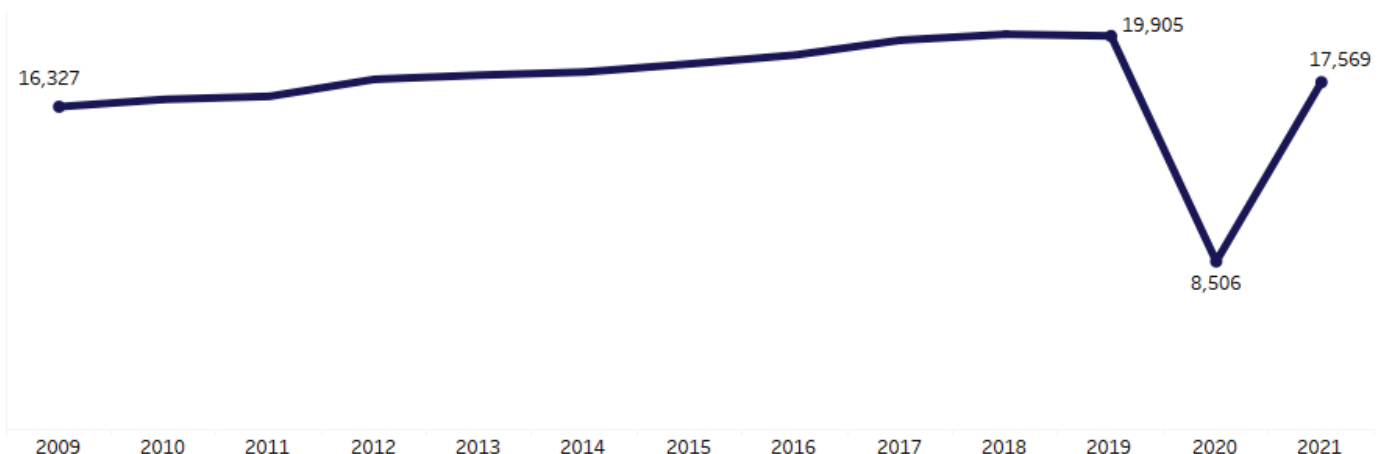
Summer school years listed refer to the calendar year in which programs took place. For example, summer school 2020 occurred in the summer of 2020, between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years.

which the COVID-19 pandemic affected summer school, enrollment plunged by 11,399 full-time equivalent (FTE) students, or 57.3% (see Figure 1).

Explanations submitted to Wisconsin’s Department of Public Instruction (DPI) for [2020](#) and [2021](#) nearly unanimously point to state and local COVID-19 restrictions and related community concerns as the cause for the precipitous enrollment decline. Districts

Figure 1: Summer School Enrollment Drops During COVID-19

Wisconsin summer school FTE enrollment, summer 2009-2021



Source: Department of Public Instruction. *Does not include private schools



reported canceling or offering fewer summer 2020 classes, limiting enrollment, or shifting to a virtual environment. Multiple districts only offered credit recovery classes, which serve students who have previously failed a class, rather than their usual mix of remedial and enrichment activities, which attract more students. Some districts mentioned parents concerned about in-person learning, while others alluded to online learning fatigue among both students and parents.

The 2020 decline will have a negative effect on school revenues, as the enrollment count used to calculate districts' state equalization aid and revenue limits includes 40% of summer school FTEs. Revenue limits cap the amount of state and local funding that districts can spend on education per year. When the three-year average enrollment decreases, so do revenue limits. When enrollment increases, costs can rise but so can access to additional ongoing state and local funding.

Summer 2021 saw a considerable rebound in summer school students, with enrollment returning to 88.3% of summer 2019 levels. Districts widely reported returning to in-person summer school and restoring many offerings.

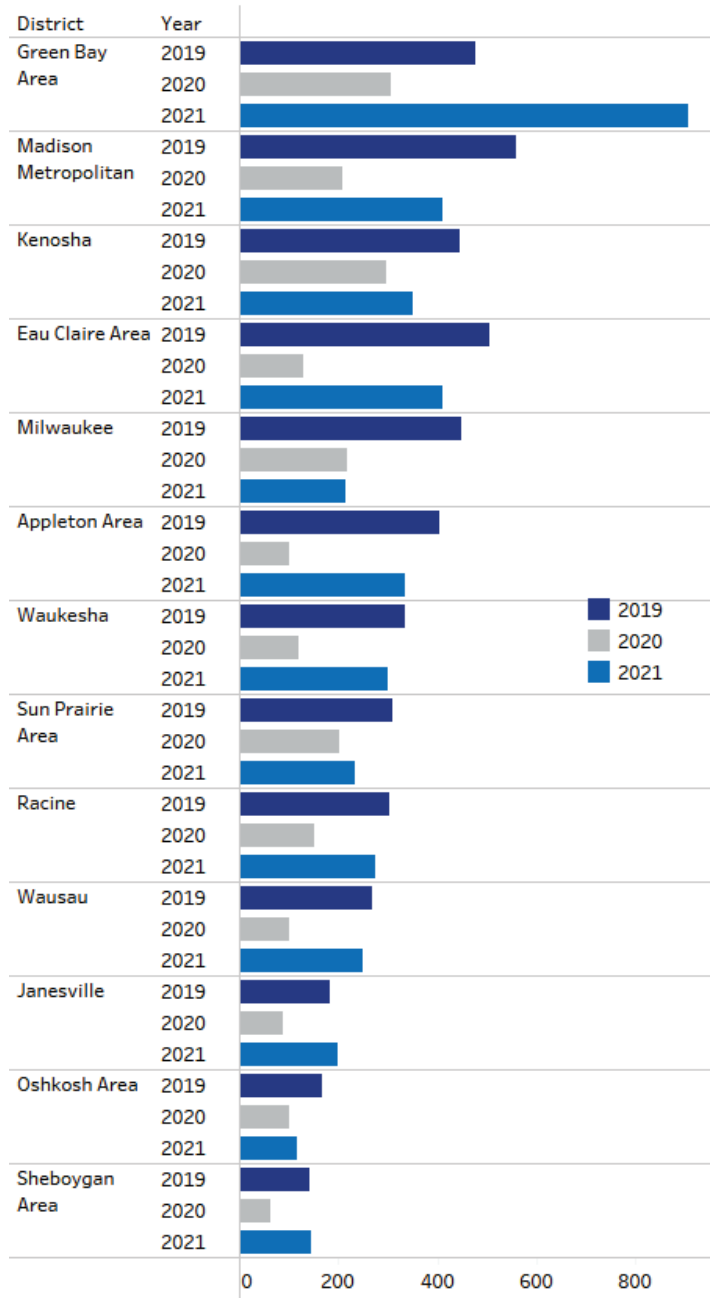
Yet few explanations directly addressed why enrollment did not fully rebound for 2021. One district official said in an interview that families and students were eager to come back, but a shortage of available staff left supply unable to meet demand. He cited staff burnout as a primary driver of the shortage. Other reasons for the incomplete recovery may have included continued public health concerns or decisions to gradually restore programming.

While the increase from the low in summer 2020 is encouraging, the continued enrollment shortfall raises concerns, especially given [evidence](#) that student need and academic gaps grew during the pandemic, boosting the potential value of summer school as an intervention.

ENROLLMENT VARIED ACROSS DISTRICTS

The 13 largest school districts in Wisconsin, representing 29.8% of the state's overall student FTE enrollment and 23.6% of the state's summer school FTE enrollment, illustrate the range of summer school enrollment fluctuations over the past three years (see Figure 2). While all 13 districts saw a sizeable decline in summer school enrollment from 2019 to 2020, the degree of change varied widely, from a 32.9% drop in

Figure 2: Largest Districts Saw Varied Summer Recovery
Wisconsin summer school FTE enrollment, summer 2019-2021



Source: Department of Public Instruction. *Does not include private schools. MPS data reflects numbers reported in DPI All-District Reports.

Kenosha Unified School District to a 75.1% decrease in the Appleton Area School District.

These enrollment declines slowed or reversed in 2021. The 2020-21 change ranged from an additional 1.4% decrease in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) to a 232.7% increase in Appleton.

Comparing summer 2021 to summer 2019 enrollment, seven of the 13 districts failed to match the statewide



rebound to 88.3% of pre-pandemic enrollment. Oshkosh Area School District and MPS saw the smallest rebounds, returning to 70.7% and 48.2% of pre-COVID levels, respectively. Oshkosh gained only 16 additional student FTEs in 2021 after its 2020 decrease, and MPS lost three.

The other six districts matched or exceeded the state's 88.3% rebound. Three of the six – the School District of Janesville, Sheboygan Area School District, and Green Bay Area Public Schools (GBAPS) – achieved a full recovery in summer 2021, with enrollment meeting or exceeding summer 2019 levels. Green Bay, in fact, far outstripped its summer 2019 numbers, almost doubling from 476 FTEs in 2019 to 908 FTEs in 2021.

SPOTLIGHT: GREEN BAY AREA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In interviews, Green Bay officials described their success as the result of concerted efforts and an intentional investment in summer school to meet COVID recovery needs. Green Bay served students virtually from March 2020 through March 2021. Concerns about student learning and socioemotional health during this time led the district to leverage summer school in two novel ways.

First, GBAPS took the opportunity to use summer 2020, immediately after the pandemic's onset, as a training ground for teachers in online learning best practices.

Second, the superintendent prioritized in-person, robust programming for summer 2021. Armed with federal relief funds, pre-existing relationships with community partners, and internal leadership and coordination, the district expanded its usual half-day programming to a full-day schedule with both remedial and enrichment offerings. The extended time allowed for more course offerings that attracted more students and also met parent and guardian demand for full-time programming as families struggled with childcare coverage.

The federal relief dollars, provided through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, also paid for additional resources like literacy coaches, English Learner supports, and special education supports. To combat staff shortages, teachers received higher summer pay than usual, and the district hired new college graduates to start during summer school rather than in the fall.

Even with these strategies in place, student sign-ups initially lagged. District leaders analyzed who was missing and conducted principal focus groups to brainstorm additional outreach and recruitment. As one leader noted, "We looked at all of our practices. How do we connect as much as we can?"

The federal relief funds will expire in 2024, which will threaten the district's ability to sustain this level of investment in summer school. In preparation, Green Bay will gradually remove some of the summer 2021 supplemental components and will leverage community partners and a sliding parent fee scale. The district still hopes to sustain full-day summer school programming in future years, although officials acknowledge that may only be possible with different funding structures.

SPOTLIGHT: MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

On the other side of the summer school enrollment spectrum, MPS saw no rise in summer 2021 FTEs after its 2020 drop.

Even before the pandemic, reported MPS summer school enrollment was low relative to its size. The district only reports high school FTEs and selected middle school FTEs in its summer school enrollment count for state funding purposes, with more expansive elementary programming funded through the district's extension fund instead. In addition, the district strategically focuses its summer school offerings on credit recovery to keep students on track for graduation. Milwaukee students access enrichment opportunities like science exploration, physical education, and arts programming – which might be offered through a smaller district's summer school – instead through MPS' Milwaukee Recreation Department. Recent MPS leadership has started adding more enrichment and accelerated learning summer school programming to attract more students.

When the pandemic hit, MPS experienced many of the same 2020 summer school enrollment challenges as other districts: decreased contact with students and families, COVID fears, staffing vacancies, virtual learning barriers, and confusion in response to changing state and federal guidance.

On top of these factors, the district switched to a pass/fail grading system for the second semester of 2020 and obtained a waiver from DPI that temporarily replaced the more stringent MPS-specific graduation requirements in favor of the state's requirements. Under



these policies, fewer students failed to meet the course requirements for graduation, and therefore fewer students needed credit recovery via summer school in 2020.

MPS took steps to increase summer 2021 enrollment by offering both in-person and virtual classes, promoting them to families, and implementing a fully online registration system. COVID uncertainty remained high for families and staff, however, and a second DPI graduation requirements waiver again decreased the number of students who sought out summer school. These factors combined to leave MPS with slightly fewer students attending summer school in 2021 than in 2020, even as [available data](#) indicate that the pandemic has worsened student learning outcomes.

MPS officials expressed hopes that summer 2022 will bring more students back to summer school, thanks to newly expanded offerings funded by ESSER. The district will open 18 summer school sites, four more than usual, and include acceleration opportunities, tutoring, dual enrollment, and other specialty programs alongside its traditional programming. MPS leadership does not currently intend to seek another graduation requirements waiver for this year.

SUMMER SCHOOL AS COVID INTERVENTION

Summer school 2022 registration and 2022-23 school year budgeting seasons are upon us. At a minimum, restoring pre-pandemic summer school enrollment levels throughout Wisconsin would ensure that students are no longer missing out on offerings previously available to them and would forestall state equalization aid and revenue limit decreases for districts. Optimally, school officials would also leverage the additional teaching time and revenue afforded by summer school to accelerate student learning and support students' socioemotional health.

Some form of student recovery intervention is all but required under the American Rescue Plan Act, which [stipulates](#) that districts must use at least 20% of their ESSER III funding to address learning loss. Institutions like [DPI](#), the [Education Trust](#), and the [EduRecoveryHub](#) highlight summer school as one of many options in which districts might invest, based on their local needs.

Summer school may not be the best intervention in every district or situation. Notably, the additional time it provides is not itself a silver bullet. [Research](#) indicates that the most effective voluntary summer programs offer

high-quality instruction in a positive climate and emphasize consistent attendance.

Yet it remains an attractive option for consideration. Districts with existing summer school programs can use ESSER dollars to leverage current infrastructure rather than designing an entirely new program. Districts without existing programs can use ESSER dollars in the short term as seed money to launch summer school and potentially use revenue limit increases as a long-term funding source.

Ultimately, the specific interventions that districts employ will matter less than their impact. Early evidence has shown that students need additional support to regain their pre-pandemic learning. Programs like summer school that previously played a role in helping students succeed are now more important than ever to help students recover and reach their full potential.

