*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**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.

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction data shows private school enrollment declined 1.5% in the 2020-21 school year, which began during the COVID-19 pandemic that 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. 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: homeschool enrollment increased by 47% in the 2020-21 school year. This increase was the largest since at least 1984, the earliest year for which data is available, and likely the largest single-year increase ever.

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 data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Last year’s changes in school enrollment differed across grade levels. 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 4K 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 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.

It is impossible to predict how the pandemic will impact enrollment during the 2021-22 school year, except to say the financial implications for public school districts will be considerable. 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.

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