**Fiscal Facts: Wisconsin School Enrollment Stabilizes but Fails to Recover Prior Year’s Losses**

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. 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. However, 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 Wisconsin Policy Forum’s updated School DataTool, the latest edition of which is the fourth since its 2019 debut. The 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. The public is invited to access the School DataTool by visiting the Wisconsin Policy Forum website at [wispolicyforum.org](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/).

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. Complicating our ability to draw conclusions from this, however, is the fact that the share of students who did not take Forward exams increased sharply as well. It went from 1.2% in 2018-19 to 11.7% in 2020-21, a nearly seven-fold increase.

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. Attendance rates statewide dropped by one percentage point to 93.1% in 2020-21, reaching the lowest level in over a decade.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*