**Fiscal Facts: School Enrollment Numbers Raise Question of Missing Students**

Total enrollment at Wisconsin’s public and charter schools sharply declined amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and has continued to fall since.

Declining birth rates and apparent movement of some students to private or home schools likely account for at least two-thirds of the decline. However, somewhere between 0.5% and 1.2% of the state’s school-age population may be unaccounted for, raising questions about their whereabouts and well-being, the state’s workforce, school finances, and more.

K-12 enrollment in Wisconsin’s public schools plummeted in the 2020-21 school year by over 25,000 students, or 2.9%, the largest single-year decline in at least 35 years. It kept falling after that, by an additional 792 students in 2021-22 and another 6,339 students in 2022-23. The total three-year decline was 32,155 students.

We estimate that the movement of students to private schools and homeschooling, in addition to the declining birth rate, accounts for roughly 20,600 to 27,700 students out of the total three-year decline of more than 32,000 students.

That leaves approximately 4,500 to 11,600 students not captured in current data sets, according to a Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis. (It does not include still-unreleased data from the newly begun 2023-24 school year.) These students would be missing either because the data on them was not collected or, worse, because they disconnected from the education system in Wisconsin entirely.

From fall 2019 to fall 2022, the largest grade-level enrollment declines occurred across two broad groups: The PreK and kindergarten students. National data suggest the pandemic may have caused parents to delay or avoid enrolling students in pre-kindergarten. The second was fifth-, sixth- and seventh-graders. This has a different explanation: around the time of the Great Recession, there appears to have been a “demographic cliff” in the amount of children born in the state.

A myriad of possible factors may explain any additional drops in student enrollment not tied to movement between school sectors or pre-existing declining enrollment trends. The pandemic may have prompted or forced families with children in Wisconsin to move to other states or countries.

National studies have documented a rise in student anxiety, disconnection, and other mental health concerns that could lead youth to disengage with school and perhaps drop out entirely. School closures also may have unintentionally communicated to students that school was optional. Sharp increases in both statewide and national chronic absenteeism rates further highlight the degree to which the pandemic upended students’ relationship to school.

Older students in theory could have left school to join the workforce or care for younger siblings. Or

possible inaccuracies in the dataset itself might account for some of the missing students.

Ultimately, whatever the true number of missing students, every child disconnected from school – whether they left or failed to enter the state’s formal education system – should be cause for concern and action on the part of educators and policymakers.

*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/)*.*