

# Public School Enrollment Is Down by More Than a Million. Why?

For many leaders, learning recovery should also mean adapting to enrollment changes

By Thomas S. Dee — November 02, 2022 ⌚ 5 min read



— DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

## Thomas S. Dee

Thomas S. Dee is the Barnett Family Professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, a senior fellow at the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research, and the faculty director of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities.

Recent federal testing results documenting two decades of lost progress have brought unusually broad and intense public attention to the developmental harm the COVID-19 pandemic has had on U.S. schoolchildren. That has led to a sense of urgency, an important asset as a growing body of evidence indicates the unprecedented educational challenges created by the pandemic demand an exceptional public response.

However, an accurate understanding of these challenges cannot rely on test scores alone. For example, the test-score changes that occurred between 2019 and 2022 cannot be properly understood, particularly at the district and state levels, without understanding how the distribution of students who took those tests also changed during the pandemic. Furthermore, those same enrollment and population data also provide distinct evidence that many public school districts will soon face financial threats likely to vex their academic-recovery efforts.

Consider, for example, Los Angeles Unified, one of the nation's largest school districts, which showed surprising gains on the recent federal tests relative to other large cities. The district was quick to credit the positive impact of their COVID-19 intervention strategies. Over the same three-year period, however, district enrollment fell nearly 10 percent. That dramatic enrollment decline, which varied by multiple student traits, confounds in an uncertain way any effort to view overall test-score changes as a reliable measure of the true changes in student learning.

That same enrollment-related caveat is relevant to how we understand the test-score changes observed in other districts and even those at the state and national levels. In just the first full school year after the onset of the pandemic, national K-12 public school enrollment fell by 1.1 million students, an unprecedented decline of over 2 percent. Roughly a third was in kindergarten alone, where enrollment fell by over 400,000 students. This historic exodus varied considerably across states as well as by grade.

We might have expected last fall's enrollment data to show a return to public schools. Most school districts returned to in-person classes, abandoning the "remote only" learning modes that contributed substantially to enrollment loss in the prior year. Families with children of kindergarten age had particular flexibility because they could simply delay their enrollment by one year, known as "redshirting," or, in some states, skip ahead to 1st grade.

Current enrollment data indicate that a broad return to public schools simply did not happen. Fall 2021 enrollment in K-12 grades actually fell nationally for a second year in a row, though by a more modest amount, roughly 130,000 students. A second year of declines in 1st grade enrollment indicates the children who avoided public kindergarten in the pandemic's first year did not merely skip ahead to 1st grade. Additionally, though kindergarten enrollment bounced

back somewhat, it was still far below its pre-pandemic levels, indicating substantial numbers of families didn't redshirt their children.



A broad return to public schools simply did not happen.

---

These results imply many families found accommodations for their children outside the public school system (e.g., private schools, home schooling). While the information available for a few states documents increased private school enrollment, these data are not yet comprehensive nor consistent . However, U.S. Census survey data indicate home schooling grew dramatically over this period.

Regardless, the failure of students to reappear in last year's kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms implies these students will not return to public schools anytime soon. Families are likely to maintain their status quo, both to avoid disruptive school switching and as a kind of insurance against the possibility public schools will again revert to remote-only schooling as the pandemic evolves. At best, public schools can hope these students might return as they age into higher grades that eventually compel a school transition (i.e., middle and high school).

#### SEE ALSO

[SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT](#) WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

### **Public School Enrollment Continues to Stagnate**

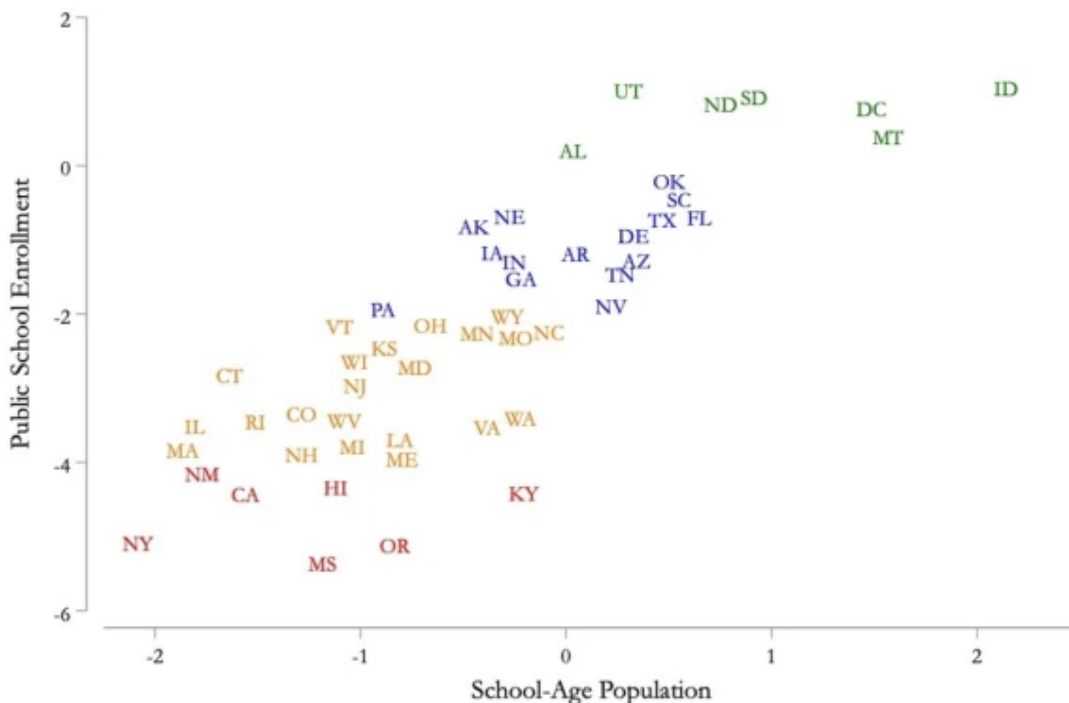
Sarah D. Sparks, August 16, 2022 • 3 min read

Recent federal population estimates provide more definitive evidence the enrollment declines experienced by many public schools will endure. During the pandemic, overall population growth was the lowest ever recorded in U.S. history. And the population of *school-age* children in the United States, those 5- to 17-years-old, actually fell by over a quarter million. This overall decline means some of the enrollment loss during the pandemic simply reflects declining birth and immigration rates rather than an active choice not to attend public schools.

Still, the changing location of school-age children during the pandemic was also striking and consequential for public school enrollment. New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, and California saw their populations of school-age children decline by roughly 2 percent each after the onset of the pandemic, while a few states (e.g., Idaho, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Montana) each experienced increases of 1 percent to 2 percent.

The state-level losses in public school enrollment relate strongly to these underlying losses of their school-age population, as can be seen in the chart below. These data imply the pandemic flight from public schools was not only switching schools within communities but also reflect changes in where families with school-age children lived.

**Percent Changes in Public School Enrollment and School-Age Population by State, 2019-20 to 2021-22**



SOURCE: Author's calculations based on federal and state K-12 enrollment data for fall 2019 and fall 2021 and federal population estimates for April 2020 and July 2021

These enrollment and population shifts are consistent with what we are learning about how the pandemic is fundamentally reshaping the broader economy. For example, prior to the pandemic, fewer than 5 percent of workdays occurred under “work from home” arrangements. However, [surveys](#) by my Stanford colleague Nicholas Bloom and his collaborators show a dramatic pandemic increase in work-from-home employment has endured up to the present,

accounting for a persistent 30 percent of workdays, despite the efforts of corporate leaders to encourage a broader return to offices. These flexible work arrangements, coupled with the push of high housing costs in many cities, likely contributed to the demographic realignment reshaping school enrollment.

Taken together, these patterns imply state and local education leaders should plan immediately for the serious challenges (and potential opportunities) enduring enrollment losses imply for their COVID recovery efforts. The financial implications of enrollment loss have already begun to pressure districts to discuss school closures as well as teacher layoffs. Adapting to this new normal in a way that preserves community engagement and limits further learning disruptions to students will compound the already difficult task of addressing the pandemic's direct impact on student learning and engagement.

### Reprints, Photocopies and Licensing of Content

All content on Education Week's websites is protected by copyright. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source. For additional print copies, or for permission for other uses of the content, visit [www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content](http://www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content) or email [reprints@educationweek.org](mailto:reprints@educationweek.org) and include information on how you would like to use the content. Want to seamlessly share more EdWeek content with your colleagues? Contact us today at [pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html](http://pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html) to learn about how group online subscriptions can complement professional learning in your district or organization.



Copyright © 2022 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved.