



The Stickiness of Pandemic-Driven Disenrollment from Public Schools

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POLICY ISSUE

Many of the decisions schools make around day-to-day operations—staffing, funding, scheduling—are predicated on how many and what types of students are in the building. That’s why, for schools that lost students during the Covid-19 pandemic, it matters whether those students are gone for good or coming back. The large and unprecedented decline in U.S. public school enrollment we saw during the first year of the pandemic (about 1.5 million elementary and secondary students) could recover as families’ health risk concerns subside and schools return to typical pre-pandemic functioning. On the other hand, there are reasons to be concerned that we have entered a new era of decreased interest in public education if, as [some evidence](#) suggests, students experienced unanticipated benefits of learning in alternative settings. The extent to which pandemic-era disenrollment from public schools was a temporary blip versus a more permanent change holds significant implications for the future of public education. In this study, the authors build upon their [prior research](#) on enrollment sector shifts in Michigan during the first year of the pandemic to examine whether these patterns persisted into the subsequent school year, perhaps forecasting a sustained movement away from public schools.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

The authors use longitudinal data from Michigan to track the public school enrollment patterns of K-12 students before and during the first two years of the pandemic (2020–21 and 2021–22). Their analyses reveal the following findings:

- **Two years into the pandemic, statewide public school enrollment was 3.6% lower than pre-pandemic levels.** Though enrollment had been declining modestly before the pandemic, this loss was substantially higher than in pre-pandemic years. Enrollment losses were most persistent among White, Asian, and higher-income students. Enrollment for Black, Hispanic, and lower-income students, on the other hand, largely recovered by 2021–22.
- **Public school exit rates rose and remained high for the first two years of the pandemic compared to previous years (Figure 1).** Prior to the pandemic, about 4% of elementary and middle school children exited the public school system each year. This rate nearly doubled for kindergarteners when the pandemic hit,

KEY FINDINGS

Using Michigan data, this study finds:

- Public school exit rates rose and remained high for the first two years of the pandemic compared to prior years.
- Students who left public schools for private schools in 2020–21 were less likely to return in 2021–22 than those who left for homeschooling.
- Black, lower-income, and special education students were more likely to leave public schools in 2020–21 but also more likely to return the next year compared to White, higher-income, and general education students.

AUTHORS’ NOTE

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and there were substantial increases in all other elementary and middle school grades as well, both in 2020 and 2021. High school exit rates, on the other hand, did not increase.

- Re-enrollment decisions depended greatly on whether students had left the public education system for home schools or private schools.** Among students who left public schools for a homeschooling alternative in 2020–21, half had returned by 2021–22. In contrast, only 20% of those who left public schools for private schools returned during the same period.
- Public school exit and return decisions varied based on student characteristics.** Black, lower-income, and special education students were more likely to exit the public education system in 2020–21 but were also more likely to return in 2021–22. In contrast, White, higher-income, and general education students were less likely to exit in 2020–21 but also less likely to return in 2021–22.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

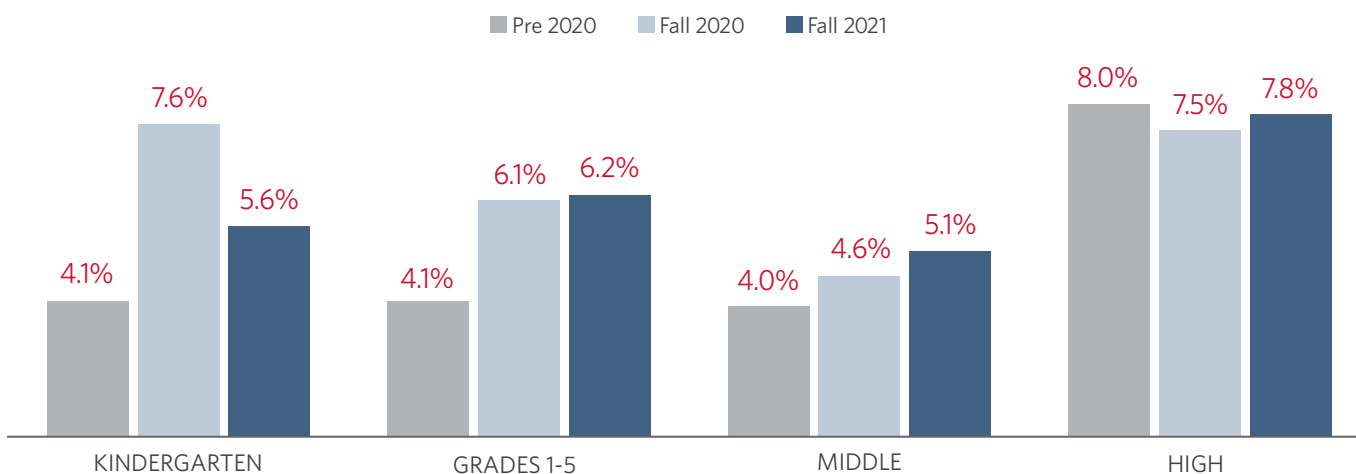
Declining student enrollment has been a consistent challenge for public school systems in recent years, with families increasingly seeking out and engaging in alternative options that serve their needs and preferences. This study shows that the pandemic exacerbated an ongoing wave of movement away from the public education sector, and moreover, that this heightened disenrollment is likely to be a persistent trend moving forward.

These findings highlight several critical implications for policymakers. Perhaps most importantly, if enrollment remains

below pre-pandemic levels, schools and districts will have to brace themselves for budget reductions. Particularly as school emergency relief (ESSER) funds expire in the next couple of years, these cuts may be an exceptionally challenging setback for school systems struggling to maintain consistent student enrollment. If year-to-year declines continue, schools and districts may also face additional operational challenges, such as unpredictable teacher hiring and resource allocation needs. Furthermore, the disproportionate recovery of enrollment across different student groups may complicate attempts to track school- and district-level educational progress over time. Policymakers often rely on cross-cohort comparisons of aggregate test scores, for example, which will now be confounded by underlying differences in the characteristics of students who remain enrolled each year.

This study also shows that the stickiness of public school disenrollment appears to be greater for higher-income families, who were more likely to leave Michigan public schools for private school alternatives. Lower-income, Black, and special education students were more likely to exit but also more likely to return, indicating that their families may have been less satisfied with the non-public alternatives they accessed after exiting, that non-public education was no longer financially or logistically viable, or perhaps that they always intended to come back. Either way, these patterns raise important questions about the growing divide between which families participate in different sectors of the U.S. education system and the changing quality of the public sector as wealthier and more resourced families continue to leave.

Figure 1: Percent of Students Not Returning to Michigan Public Schools



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ADDITIONAL READING

For more research on school enrollment patterns during the pandemic, see:

[Where the kids went: Nonpublic schooling and demographic change during the pandemic exodus from public schools.](#) Dee, T. S. (2023).

[School enrollments during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of New York.](#) Roy, J., Nguyen-Hoang, P. (2022).

[Understanding COVID-19-era enrollment drops among early-grade public school students.](#) Bassok, D., Shapiro, A. (2021).

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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