

School Enrollment Shifts Five Years After the Pandemic

*Public education sees shrinking middle schools and
an exodus of wealthy, white, and Asian students*

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Five years after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a substantial shift in enrollment away from public schools and toward non-public options, particularly in the middle grades.

IN SPRING 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic caused school closures throughout the United States—a seismic disruption with immediate effects on enrollment. By fall 2020, early research found that K–12 public school enrollment had dropped by 3 percent nationwide, as growing numbers of families opted to homeschool or transfer their children to private schools. This was the largest annual decline since 1943, when World War II led large numbers of teenagers to leave high school.

What happened in the years since? Did those trends hold? Or did students return to public schools in the same numbers as before, once the widescale pandemic-related disruptions were behind them?

We conduct the first analysis of the pandemic's longer-term impact on school enrollment patterns and find a substantial shift away from public schools. Our study focuses on the state of Massachusetts, where fall 2024 enrollment counts are readily available, but we show that trends similar to those we document for the Bay State are evident in national data through fall 2023.

To estimate the pandemic's effects on school enrollment patterns five years later, we compare actual enrollments to predictions based on trends in the four years leading up to Covid's onset, or 2015 to 2019. This is a critical step, as looking only at raw differences between fall 2024 and fall 2019 will misstate the pandemic's impact when enrollments were already trending in a given direction. We make these comparisons against prior trends for all students and separately by student race, school district income, and grade level.

Five years after the pandemic's onset, there has been a substantial shift away from public schools and toward non-public options. In fall 2024, we find that local public school enrollment in Massachusetts is 4.2 percent lower than it was in fall 2019, which is 1.9 percent lower than predicted based on pre-pandemic trends (see Figure 1). By contrast, enrollment in private schools is 2.6 percent below fall 2019 but 13.8 percent above the predicted decline based on pre-pandemic trends. We also find that homeschooling, which more than doubled from fall 2019 to fall 2020, has had some staying power. In fall 2024, it is 51 percent higher than in fall 2019, which is 44.5 percent higher than predicted.

Charter school enrollment had been rising rapidly pre-pandemic but then leveled off starting in fall 2020. While fall 2024 enrollment is nearly unchanged relative to 2019, it is 18.9 percent lower than those steep pre-trends had predicted. Some of this may have to do with charter expansion being restricted by Massachusetts law, which caps both the number of charter schools statewide and the share of each district's funds that can flow to charters.

Overall, our results suggest that the enrollment shifts due to the pandemic have had lasting impacts, especially on the appeal of private and home schools relative to public schools.

Enrollment Differences by Income and Race

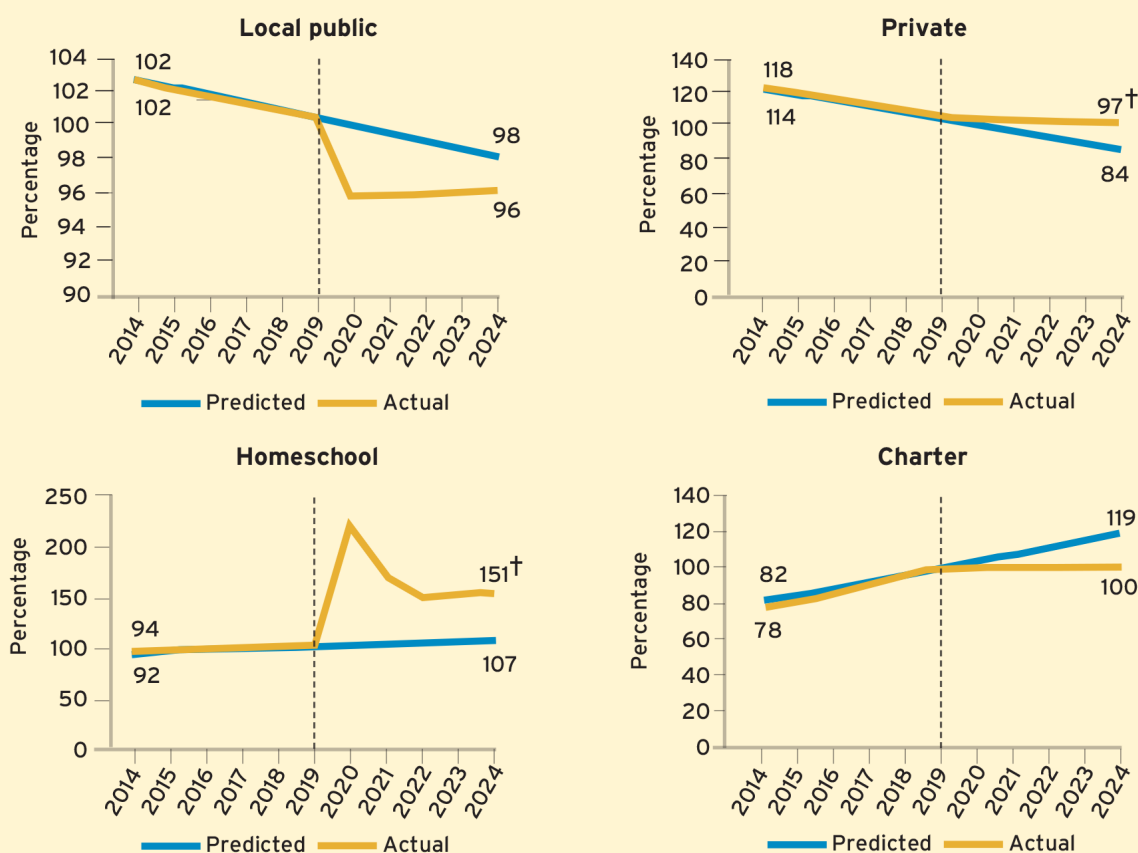
Beyond these overall numbers, the demographics of families opting to homeschool or enroll their children in private schools have shifted.

To study differences by income, we categorize local school districts based on their fall 2019 share of economically disadvantaged students and investigate differences between districts in the top 20 percent of income and the rest. Public school enrollment losses are substantially larger in high-income school districts, with fall 2024 enrollment 5.7 percent below predicted levels compared to 1 percent lower in the other 80 percent of school districts (see Figure 2). These top-income districts lost nearly 50 percent more students than the lower-income four-fifths combined.

These enrollment losses are substantially concentrated among white and Asian students: Fall 2024 enrollment is 3.1 percent lower than predicted for white students and 8.1 percent lower for Asian students. In contrast, Black and Hispanic enrollment has recovered and even exceeded pre-pandemic trends. Relative to predicted levels, fall 2024 Black enrollment is 7.7 percent higher and Hispanic enrollment is 0.8 percent higher than expected. In short, the pandemic has substantially shifted the racial and ethnic composition of public schools.

The Staying Power of Pandemic-Induced Enrollment Shifts (Figure 1)

Public-school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic shifted student enrollment toward private and homeschools, and a comparison of five-year trends before and after the pandemic shows the durability of those changes. In Massachusetts, relative to fall 2019, enrollment at local public schools is down about 4 percent—twice as large as predicted. Enrollment at private schools had been predicted to fall by about 16 percent relative to 2019 levels but declines just 3 percent. Homeschooling is 51 percent above fall 2019 levels compared to the predicted growth of 7 percent. Actual charter school enrollment is flat, due in part to regulatory limitations in Massachusetts.



NOTE: Enrollments by school sector relative to fall 2019. †In the private and homeschool sectors, the 2024 enrollment numbers are assumed based on 2023 totals.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations, based on data from the Massachusetts Education-to-Career (E2C) Research and Data Hub.

Income and racial differences in the persistence of changing enrollment patterns are likely related to differences in education concerns throughout the pandemic. In many areas, white and Asian families and families in high-income communities were more likely in the early days of the pandemic to switch to private schools, which were far more likely to offer in-person instruction than traditional K–12 public schools (see “Pandemic Parent Survey Finds Perverse Pattern: Students Are More Likely to Be Attending School in Person Where Covid Is Spreading More Rapidly,” *survey*, Spring 2021). Those dis-enrollments appear to have persisted. Meanwhile, enrollment has

largely recovered in middle- and low-income communities and among Black and Hispanic families. These families were more likely to support remote schooling or switch to homeschooling, which for many was a temporary shift.

Differences by Grade Level

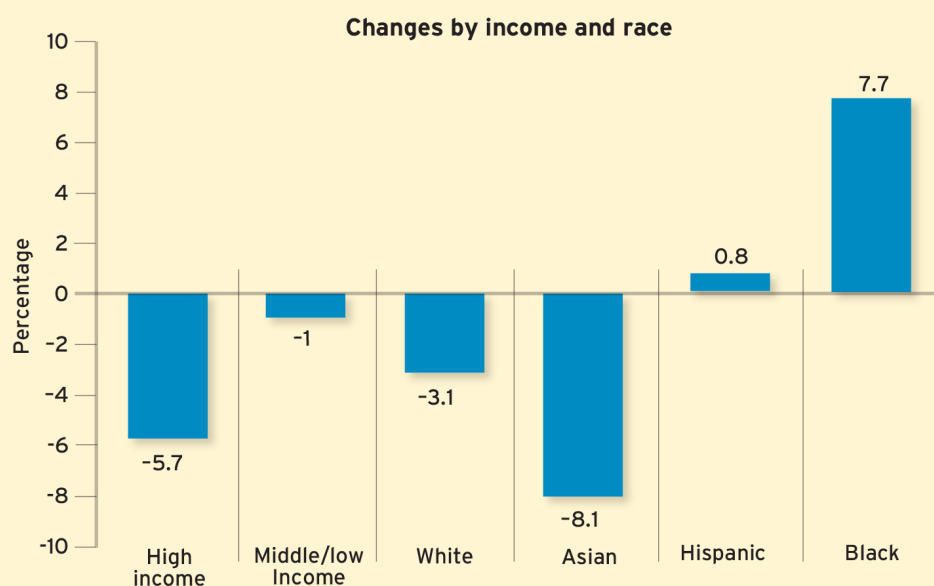
Post-pandemic changes in local public school enrollment vary substantially by grade level as well (see Figure 3). Elementary grades have largely recovered to predicted levels. While prekindergarten and kindergarten enrollment in fall 2024 is 3.4 percent below predicted levels, enrollment in grades 1–4 is 2.7 percent higher than predicted.

However, enrollment in middle school, or grades 5–8, has not recovered. Middle school enrollment is 7.7 percent below predicted levels—a decline that far exceeds the total public school enrollment losses across all grades. Census population estimates for Massachusetts do show larger declines in the number of children of middle grade ages than other ages, suggesting that changing migration patterns may be part of the story. The enrollment decline is, however, substantially larger than the estimated 5.9 percent population decline, implying that some portion of this change must be driven by enduring shifts to homeschooling or private schools. Meanwhile, high school enrollment has barely budged since the pandemic’s onset, with enrollment now up 0.1 percent relative to predicted levels.

Though the enrollment patterns documented here cannot explain why public middle grades have seen a particular exodus of students, our results suggest public schools may need to pay close attention to the mismatch between parental demand and the middle grades experience currently provided. These are students whose formative elementary school experiences were disrupted. Also, post-pandemic increases in challenging student behavior may be particularly prevalent or salient in middle grades, a sensitive developmental time. Some parents may begin to take academic rigor more seriously in middle grades relative to earlier ones, with remote schooling and

Largest Declines Among High-Income and Asian Students (Figure 2)

Compared to 2019 levels, enrollment at schools serving predominately wealthy students is 5.7 percent lower than predicted based on pre-pandemic trends. Enrollment among Asian and white students has declined, while Hispanic and Black student enrollment has grown.



NOTE: Differences between pre-pandemic projections and actual enrollment figures for local school districts in Massachusetts. “High income” refers to households in the top 20 percent based on having the smallest shares of students who qualifying for free or reduced-price school lunch.

SOURCE: See Figure 1.

other disruptions revealing or generating concerns about a lack of such rigor. Private school and homeschool options are likely better substitutes for public middle schools than they are for public high schools, whose economies of scale allow a variety of course and extracurricular offerings that are hard to replicate in smaller settings.

A National Story

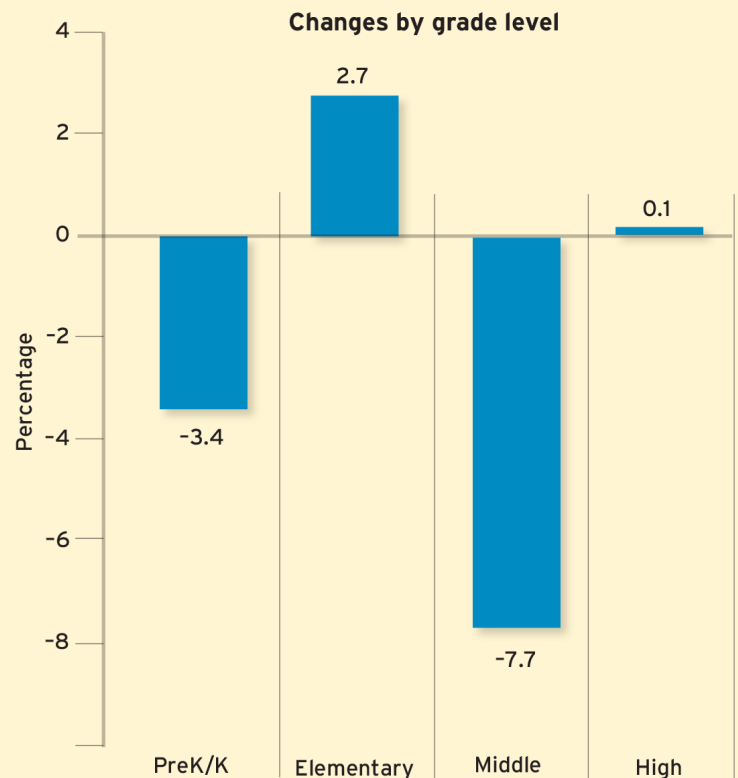
To explore whether the enrollment patterns observed in Massachusetts by fall 2024 are representative of the nation more broadly, we compare our data from the Bay State to the most recent data available at the national level from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data for fall 2023. We find remarkable similarities (see Figure 4).

Fall 2023 public school enrollment nationwide was 2.8 percent below predicted levels compared to a 2.6 percent drop for Massachusetts by fall 2024. Both in Massachusetts and across the U.S., enrollment drops were substantially larger for white and Asian students than for Hispanic and Black students. High school enrollment experienced little change, and the elementary grades recovered, while preschool/kindergarten and middle school grades experienced major drops. These patterns suggest that Massachusetts's experience is typical of the nation more broadly.

The sustained decline in public school enrollment observed here is consistent with evidence that Americans, including K–12 parents, remain less satisfied with public schools even years after school closures ended. Between 2019 and 2025, the fraction of Americans reporting satisfaction with public education dropped by 12 percentage points, as did the fraction of K–12 parents reporting satisfaction with their oldest child's school. The fraction of parents saying K–12 education is heading in the wrong direction was fairly stable from 2019 to 2022 but rose in 2023 and then again in 2024 to its highest level in a decade, suggesting continuing or even growing frustration with schools.

Steep Drop in Middle-School Enrollment (Figure 3)

Compared to 2019 levels, middle-school enrollment is 7.7 percent lower than predicted based on pre-pandemic trends. High-school enrollment has recovered to predicted levels, and elementary enrollment has grown by 2.7 percent, although preschool enrollment remains 3.4 percent lower than it was in 2019.

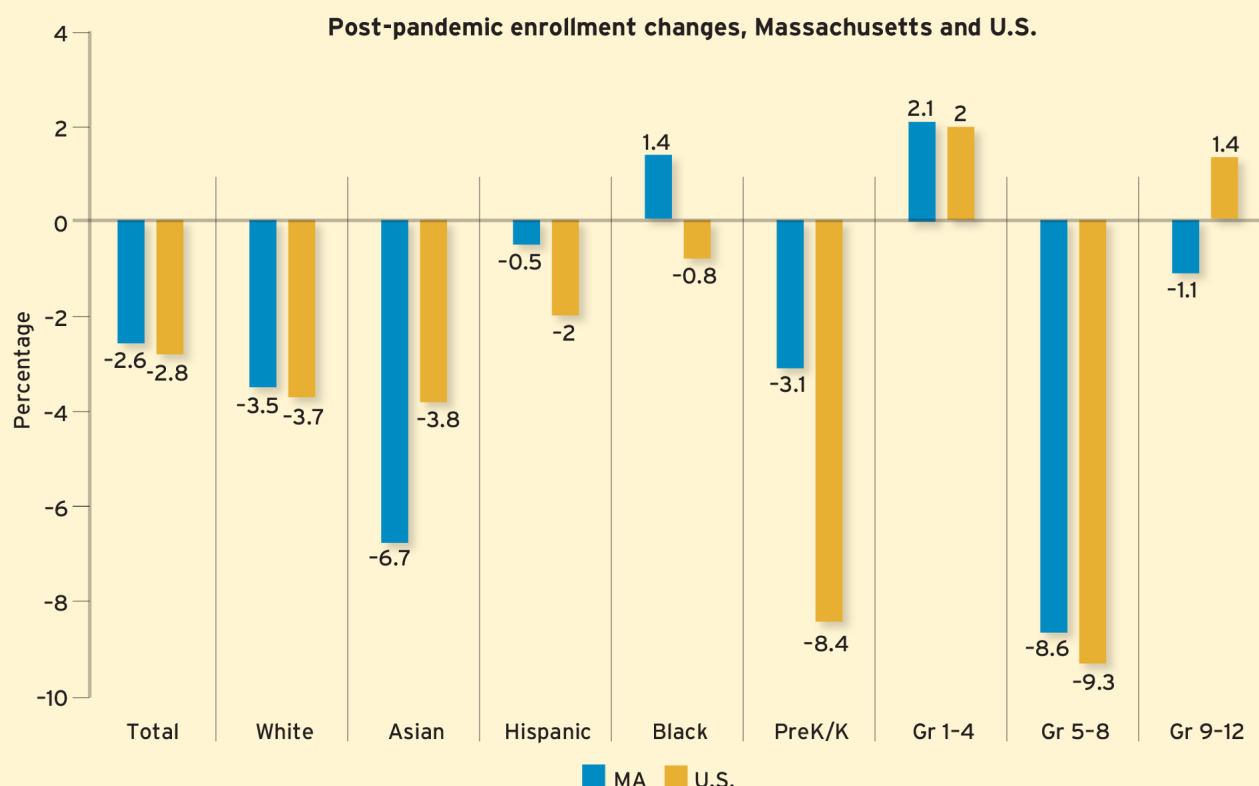


NOTE: Differences between pre-pandemic projections and actual enrollment figures for local school districts in Massachusetts. "Elementary" is grades 1-4, "Middle" is grades 5-8, and "High" is grades 9-12.

SOURCE: See Figure 1.

Massachusetts Mirrors National Trends (Figure 4)

Overall school enrollment is lower than projected based on pre-pandemic trends, with especially steep declines among Asian students and at middle schools. A comparison of Massachusetts and national data shows similar trends across the United States.



NOTE: Differences between projected enrollment based on the pre-pandemic period of 2015-2019 and actual statewide enrollment in fall 2024 (Massachusetts) and U.S. enrollment in fall 2023 (the most recent data available).

SOURCE: Authors' calculations, based on Massachusetts Education-to-Career (E2C) Research and Data Hub and National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data.

Concerns about the learning environment and behavior of their children's peers may partly explain increasing parental concerns. For example, chronic absenteeism among public school students is a stubborn problem. In 2024, 20 percent of Massachusetts students were chronically absent compared to 13 percent in 2019, an increase that is again mirrored in national data.

Negative student behaviors within schools are also a growing worry. In 2022, a national sample of school leaders attributed a host of challenges to the pandemic and its lingering effects, including acts of disrespect toward teachers and rule-breaking use of electronic devices. Though leaders of all school levels experienced such increases, those in middle schools reported the steepest growth in post-pandemic behavioral problems, particularly physical fights between students, hate crimes, bullying, rowdiness in hallways, and classroom disruptions due to misconduct and unsanctioned cell phone use.

Survey evidence suggests that, if anything, parents' and school leaders' perceptions of public school learning environments may be worse now than in the first year or two after the pandemic's onset. The fraction of K–12 parents who said they fear for their child's physical safety at school rose by 10 percentage points between 2019 and 2024. And in late 2024, 72 percent of surveyed teachers, principals, and district leaders reported that student behavior was worse than it had been in 2019, a higher percentage than in 2021 and 2023. The share of educators reporting that students were misbehaving “a lot more” than before the pandemic jumped sharply, to 48 percent in late 2024 from 33 percent in early 2023.

Changes in traditional K–12 public school enrollment have been, and will continue to be, influenced by many factors, such as the growth of charter schools and expansion of publicly supported school choice programs. But the disruption of the pandemic and persistent concerns about student behavior are particularly acute in middle schools, consistent with enrollment declines concentrated in such grade levels. The subset of parents turning to private schools and homeschooling may be doing so in hopes of finding their children a safer and less disrupted learning environment.

Our analysis of Massachusetts data through fall 2024 provides the first systematic examination of how these concerns have translated into sustained enrollment shifts, offering insights into whether the initial disruptions to school choice patterns represent temporary adjustments or more fundamental changes in parental preferences for schooling options. Our findings also raise important questions about the long-term implications for public education, given a sustained exodus of higher-income, white, and Asian families. **E**

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