



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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Amid Pandemic's Upheaval, School Enrollment Down Markedly, Graduation Rates Up
Newest update to Forum data tool shows impacts though accuracy of some metrics unclear

Wisconsin K-12 school enrollment is down by more than 25,000 students for the 2020-21 school year, one of many far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that may warrant a response from state and local policymakers, according to the findings of a new interactive data tool from the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

In welcome news, high school graduation rates continued to rise and the reported student dropout rate continued to decline during the 2019-20 school year. Meanwhile data for other metrics, such as student attendance, are more difficult to interpret in light of changes brought about by the pandemic.

These are among the key findings of the Forum's updated School DataTool. It enables users to quickly compare each of the 421 school districts in Wisconsin on metrics relating to student enrollment, school district spending, graduation rates, and other measures of student performance.

This latest edition of the tool is the third since its 2019 debut. It is updated with the most recent available data, which goes through the 2019-20 school year in some categories and through 2020-21 in others.

While 2020-21 was not the first year statewide school enrollment has declined in Wisconsin, the steep decline came after previous years of steady but small decreases of less than 4,000 students per year in each of the previous five years.

"The largest declines can be seen in the 4-year-old and kindergarten age groups, as those students may have delayed school for another year. There also may have been higher numbers of transfers of other students to private schools," according to the "Key Findings" section of the tool.

The pandemic's fallout cast uncertainty on the reliability of some data metrics that have traditionally been included in the tool. For example, attendance rates remained largely flat in the 2019-20 school year, the most recent for which there is data, but the latter part of that year was upended by the statewide school closure linked to the pandemic. It is unclear how different schools and districts may have reported or recorded attendance during the period of widespread remote learning that concluded that school year.

The impacts of the pandemic also meant that other metrics included in previous editions of the tool were unavailable in this edition, such as statewide ACT and Forward exams.

Additional findings include:

- The share of advanced placement (AP) tests administered that scored three or higher stayed almost exactly the same in 2019-20, at 66.5%. This is notable as AP exams in 2019-20 were conducted virtually due to the pandemic, and fewer tests were administered overall.
- Dropout rates in Wisconsin decreased slightly in 2019-20 to their lowest point in a decade. The dropout rate for Black students dropped from 4.3% in 2018-19 to 3.6% in 2019-20, marking the fourth consecutive year of declines for these students. Other groups saw declines as well. Like other metrics, dropout rates may have been affected by the pandemic.
- Statewide graduation rates continued their ascent, rising from 90.0% in 2018-19 to 90.4% in 2019-20. Students of nearly all races saw increases over the previous year with the exception of Black students, whose graduation rate dropped slightly from 71.3% to 70.8%.

This edition of the School DataTool bolsters the Forum's role as a go-to source for interactive data that helps Wisconsinites better understand local and state government policy issues.

Later this year the Forum plans to release the latest edition of the Municipal DataTool, including data on all 601 cities and villages in the state; and the Property Values and Taxes DataTool, which features data for all of Wisconsin's 72 counties and 1,852 cities, villages, and towns.

[Click here to access the latest School DataTool.](#)

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