

Policy Brief 2021 – 1: Student Enrollment in Pennsylvania during the Covid Pandemic

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Introduction

Starting in March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic completely altered the ways in which Pre-Kindergarten (PK)-12 education was offered throughout the US. Indeed, many districts rapidly changed from providing in-person instruction to offering virtual instruction in which students and teachers connected through the internet.

Concerns over safety and the ability of districts to offer high-quality virtual instruction resulted in a substantial increase in student enrollment in cyber charter schools. There have also been reports that families transferred their children from public schools to private schools, including in Pennsylvania.

However, prior reports relied on only early data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), did not include enrollment by grade level, and did not include enrollment in private schools. This analysis includes such data.

I find that changes in public school enrollment were not distributed equally across grade levels. Specifically, most of the declines in enrollment occurred at the kindergarten level and at the 5th- and 6th-grade levels. I found only slight declines or even increases in enrollment in grades 8 through 12.

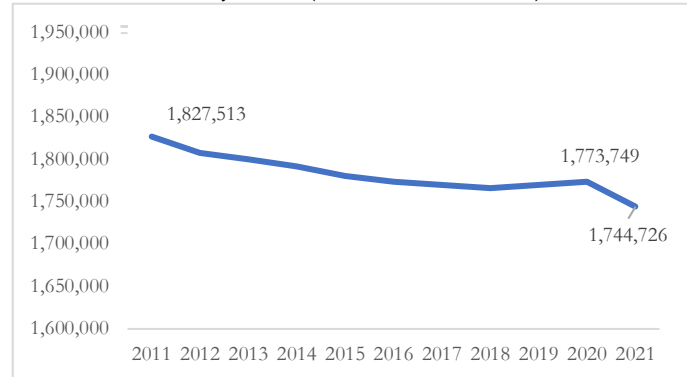
I also found declines for private school enrollment across all but one grade level and the percentage decline in private schools was greater than or equal to the percentage decline in public schools, depending on which schools were included in the analysis. There was no evidence that students transitioned from public schools to private schools.

There was a relatively large increase in cyber charter school enrollment. There was approximately a 2,000 student increase in cyber charter enrollment in kindergarten as well as in grades 1 through 6, an increase of approximately 1,700 students in grades 7 through 9, and between a 200 and 1,000 student increase in grades 10 through 12.

Overall Change in Enrollment

In Fall 2020, a number of reports documented a decline in overall PK-12 enrollment in public school districts in Pennsylvania. These analyses, based on estimates provided by PDE, were fairly accurate. In fact, overall student enrollment in public schools declined by nearly 50,000 students—a 1.6% decline from the 2019-20 school year. As shown in **Figure 1**, this was the largest decline in student enrollment in the last decade.

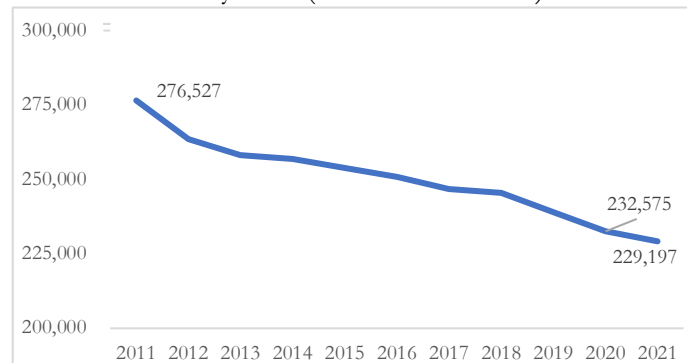
Figure 1: Change in Public School Enrollment in Pennsylvania (2010-11 to 2020-21)



Data Source: PDE public school enrollment

As shown in **Figure 2**, there has been a steady decline in private school enrollment in Pennsylvania over the last decade. However, unlike with public schools, the decline in enrollment in private schools (-1.5%) was lower than in the two prior years and lower than the average decline since 2010-11. Note, however, the decline would have been even greater without the introduction of an online private dropout recovery high school that enrolled more than 13,000 students in 2020-21. Without the introduction of that school, the decline in private school enrollment from 2019-20 to 2020-21 would have been -7.1% rather than -1.5%.

Figure 2: Change in Private School Enrollment in Pennsylvania (2010-11 to 2020-21)



Data Source: PDE private school enrollment

District Type

The overall decline in enrollment, however, masks differences by district type. **Table 1** below displays the overall enrollment by district type in 2019-20 and 2020-21 for five district types: Special Districts, School Districts, Brick and Mortar Charter Schools, Cyber Charter Schools, and Private Schools.

While there were declines in student enrollment for special districts (-1.9%), school districts (-3.2%), and private schools (-1.5%), there was a slight increase for brick and mortar charter schools (+0.1%) and a dramatic increase for cyber charter schools (+59.1%).

Table 1: Change in School Enrollment by District Type (2020-21 to 2020-21)

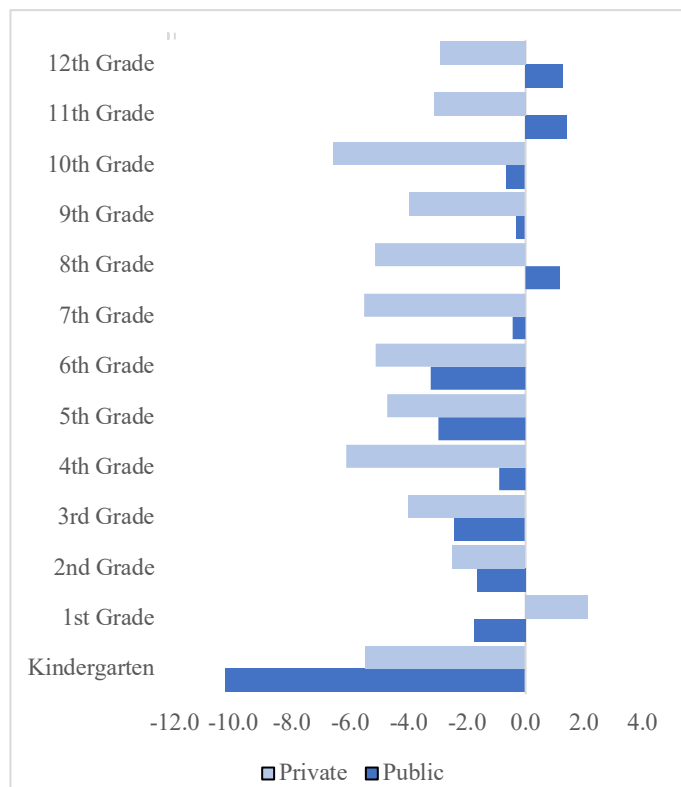
District Type	All PK 12			
	2020	2021	# Chg	% Chg
Special Districts	60,338	59,202	-1,136	-1.9
School District	1,566,855	1,516,271	-50,584	-3.2
B&M Charter Sch	108,290	108,369	79	0.1
Cyber Charter	38,266	60,884	22,618	59.1
Private	232,575	229,197	-3,378	-1.5
All Students	1,773,749	1,744,726	-29,023	-1.6

Data Source: PDE public and private school enrollment

Overall Change in Enrollment by Grade Level

Figure 3 presents the percentage change in enrollment from 2019-20 to 2020-21 for both public and private schools. There were declines in enrollment for both public and private schools for almost all grade levels.

Figure 3: Percent Change in Student Enrollment by Grade Level for Public and Private Schools (2019-20 to 2020-21)



Data Source: PDE public and private school enrollment

For public schools, the declines in enrollment occurred primarily in Kindergarten through 6th grade. In the 7th-through the 12th-grades, there were only minimal declines or even increases in enrollment.

For private schools, there was a decline in enrollment across all grade levels except for 1st grade where there was an increase in enrollment of about 2%.

Table 2 includes the changes in the number of students enrolled from 2019-20 to 2020-21 by sector. There was a 26,492 student decline in public schools and an 8,535 decline for private schools. Note that about one-half of the enrollment decline for public schools occurred in Kindergarten while the decline for private schools was distributed across grade levels.

Table 2: Change in the Number of Students Enrolled by Grade Level for Public and Private Schools (2019-20 to 2020-21)

School Sector	Grade Level						
	K	1	2	3	4	5	6
Public	-12,857	-2,206	-2,103	-3,142	-1,176	-3,957	-4,437
Private	-982	330	-396	-638	-985	-766	-837
Total	-13,839	-1,876	-2,499	-3,780	-2,161	-4,723	-5,274

School Sector	Grade Level						Total
	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Public	-623	1,619	-476	-1,031	2,057	1,840	-26,492
Private	-892	-835	-597	-1,017	-473	-447	-8,535
Total	-1,515	784	-1,073	-2,048	1,584	1,393	-35,027

Data Source: PDE public and private school enrollment

Conclusions

Despite claims that students migrated from public to private schools to take advantage of in-person schooling, data collected by PDE suggests this did not occur on a statewide basis. Indeed, there was a decline in private school enrollment that was largely consistent with the slow and steady decline in enrollment of private schools across the last decade.

The majority of student enrollment loss was concentrated in the earlier grades—including pre-kindergarten which is not shown in some of these analyses because PDE does not report pre-kindergarten enrollment for private schools. This suggests many families simply kept younger children at home during the pandemic. Whether families will re-enroll these students remains to be seen as well as the grade levels in which such students will enroll. Districts may be faced with very large pre-kindergarten and kindergarten enrollments and smaller than typical 1st grade enrollments as families choose to enroll removed students in kindergarten even though they are eligible to enroll in the 1st grade.

Suggested Citation

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Penn State Center for Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis

This brief is part of the CEEPA Policy Briefs Series that provides evidenced-based, peer-reviewed analysis of important educational issues in Pennsylvania and across the US. Dr. Ed Fuller is the Executive Director and Drs. Matt Kelly and Kai Schafft are Associate Directors.