

The State of Milwaukee Education in 2022: An overview

Key facts and figures representing the latest information available from official sources

Every Wisconsin resident has a stake in the success of Milwaukee’s children and youth. To ensure that success, all stakeholders need ready access to key information about the city’s K-12 schools.

Over the past three decades, publicly funded school options in Milwaukee have evolved to offer a wide variety of choices for the city’s families. The resulting education ecosystem is complex, with multiple entities responsible for administering schools, collecting data, and analyzing performance.

This report provides an overview of the state of education in Milwaukee schools, and provides key facts and figures compiled

from the latest information available from official sources. It includes data about both current status and historical trends in school governance, enrollment, student performance, finances, and public perceptions.

This overview will be followed by a series of companion briefs that offer a deeper dive on specific topics, like student enrollment and school funding.

It is our hope that this State of Milwaukee Education report will be used by parents, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to better understand Milwaukee’s school landscape and to make informed decisions about its future.

School Sectors and Governance

Milwaukee has a diverse and often misunderstood ecosystem of publicly funded K-12 educational options for students and families. Milwaukee’s schools are organized in a complex and fragmented manner, with different school governance and funding structures.

Publicly funded schools in Milwaukee are most often broadly categorized into 3 sectors:

- **District-run (or traditional) public schools**, including instrumentality charter schools, are directly operated by staff employed by Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and governed by the Milwaukee Board of School Directors. They are secular and free for all students.
- **Public charter schools** are operated as independent entities governed by independent governing boards (in all but one case as not-for-profit corporations), and authorized and regulated by one of

three public entities – MPS, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the City of Milwaukee’s Common Council. This includes independent charter schools, as well as non-instrumentality charter schools authorized by MPS. They are secular and free for all students.

- **Private schools** are operated by independent entities and accept state-funded tuition vouchers through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) or other state scholarship programs such as the Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP)¹ or the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP). Most of these schools are religiously affiliated.

In 2020-21, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) identified a total of 268 publicly funded schools² serving Milwaukee students between grades K3 and 12³. Together, these

¹Some Milwaukee schools accept vouchers from both MPCP and WPCP. While WPCP students are not included in our enrollment counts, WPCP students are included in student performance and report card data.

²A “school” as defined by DPI may have more than one campus.

³We include in this total 5 Milwaukee Parental Choice Program schools that serve 75% or more MPCP students, but are technically located outside of city limits.

schools served 108,812⁴ Milwaukee students⁵. The number of schools available to students in Milwaukee has not significantly changed since 2015, despite population and enrollment declines.

Across this fragmented ecosystem (*Figure 1*), there are few clear lines of communication, coordination, or accountability for overall outcomes:

- **The Milwaukee Board of School Directors** exercises direct operational authority over about half of the city’s publicly funded schools and provides a limited scope of services to private schools.
- **City government** has limited authority, primarily related to the health and safety of students and the facilities used as school buildings.

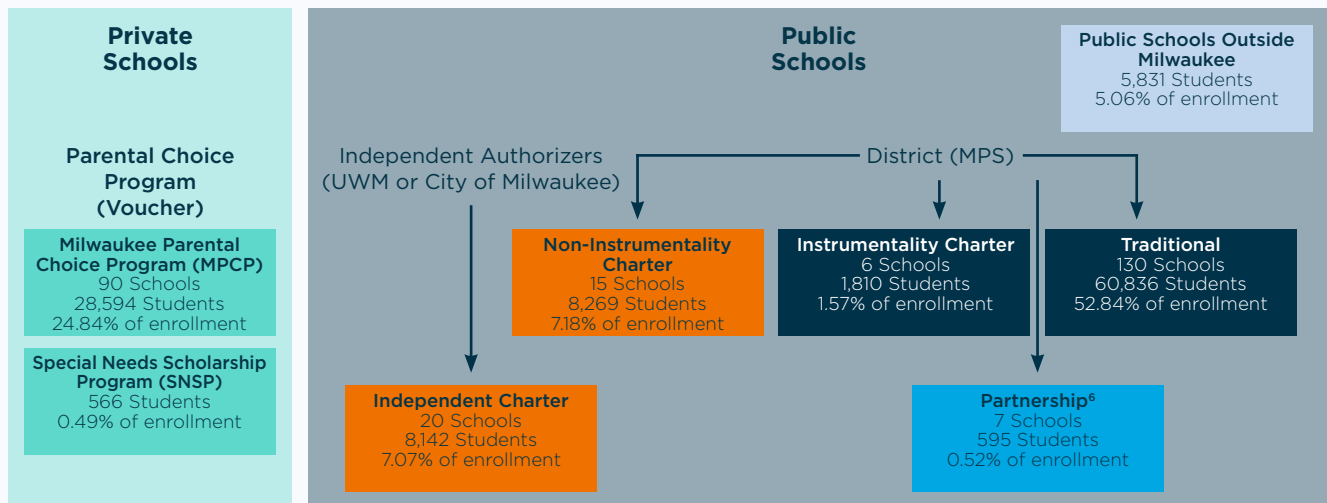
- **The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI)** is the state agency responsible for advancing public education and libraries in Wisconsin. It oversees allocation and disbursement of state funding as well as teacher, principal, and other types of educational licensure. DPI also maintains a data system – Wisconsin Information System for Education (WISE) – which is a primary source of information on students and schools.

This fragmentation, in turn, directly impacts the quality of educational experiences received by our city’s students and families, and the ability of our schools to provide the necessary resources and supports to meet every child’s unique needs.

Figure 1

How Milwaukee’s Publicly Funded Education Options Are Organized

Milwaukee education has a complex school governance structure that determines how schools operate



Student enrollment

In 2020-21, Milwaukee schools served 108,812 students, while an additional 5,831 Milwaukee students received public funding to enroll in suburban districts through the Open Enrollment or Chapter 220 programs, totaling 114,643 publicly funded Milwaukee students all together.

According to the 2020 Decennial Census, Milwaukee has a total of 144,462 residents under 18 years old. Milwaukee’s K3-12 school enrollment is demographically similar to the city’s under-18

population. Since the 2010 Decennial Census, Milwaukee’s population of children under-18 has declined by 10%, while enrollment in publicly funded schools has declined by 2%. However, enrollment declines have accelerated since 2015 and were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2020-21 enrollment decreased by 2.4% alone, with two-thirds of student loss occurring in early childhood grades (K3, K4 and K5). These

⁴ This number does not include 482 “mobile” MPS students who did not spend a full academic year at any one school. We opted to exclude these students from aggregate counts because mobile student data are not available prior to 2015, and current data exclude students who move among the other school sectors.

⁵ Throughout the report, we use a headcount of all students, K3-12.

⁶ Partnership schools are contracted by the district and operated by community organizations. Because they work with special student populations, we include their enrollment counts as a separate category and don’t consider them part of any one sector.

recent shifts create difficulty in estimating student enrollment in future years, since Wisconsin does not require students to enroll in school until age 6⁷.

Population and enrollment declines have disproportionately impacted enrollment in MPS, which in 2020-21 serves just a bare majority (55%) of the city's total K-12 enrollment (*Figure 2*). If current trends continue, within the next few years the majority of Milwaukee students will attend a K-12 school that is not operated by MPS.

Over the last 10 years, there have been significant demographic shifts in the city's under-18 population, which differ from trends for adults over 18:

- The city's adult population remained stable, but the under-18 population declined by 10%, driven by a loss of 7,878 white children and 13,099 Black children.
- At nearly 50%, Black children comprise the largest racial/ethnic demographic subgroup of the city's under-18 population. In comparison, the over-18 Black population is about 35%.
- At nearly 30%, children identifying as Hispanic/Latino⁸ are the city's fastest growing subgroup and represent a similar proportion as that of the adult population (28%).

Since the 2006-07 school year, citywide enrollment of publicly funded students has declined by 3,979. However, the decline has not been evenly distributed (*Figure 3*):

- The proportion of students enrolled in MPS-operated schools declined from 69% to 55%.
- Public charter schools increased from 8% to 14% of citywide enrollment.
- The share of students using MPCP vouchers to attend private schools grew from 15% to 25% of citywide enrollment.

Figure 2

Publicly Funded Enrollment By Sector

In 2020-21, MPS served a slight majority of all 114,643 publicly funded students

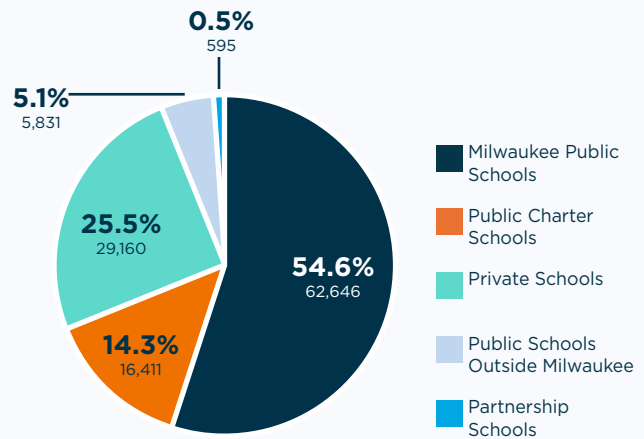
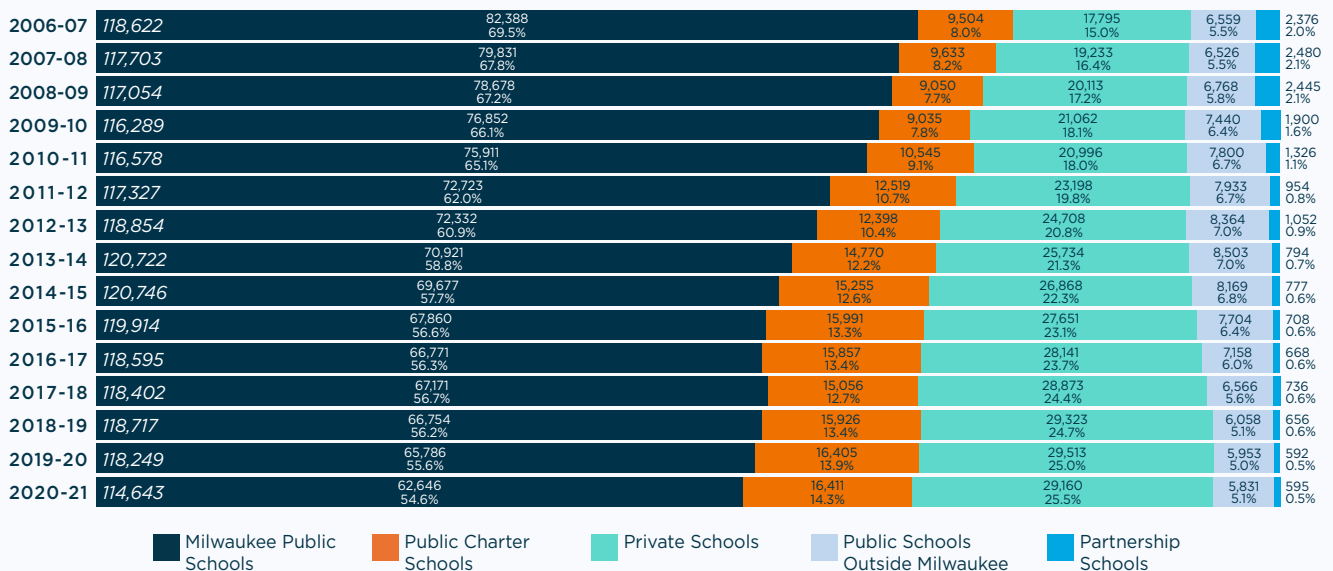


Figure 3

Changes In Publicly Funded Enrollment Proportion By Sector, 2006-2021

Enrollment in MPS-operated schools has declined as enrollment in charter and private schools has risen



⁷ In Wisconsin, kindergarten grades (K3, K4, and K5) are not subject to compulsory attendance per Wis Rev. Statutes Sect. 118.15-16.

⁸ The terms Hispanic, Latino, and Hispanic/Latino are used interchangeably throughout this report, reflective of usage by different data sources (e.g. federal sources use "Hispanic or Latino", while the state uses "Hispanic/Latino").

Student and School Performance

Student proficiency in math and reading has declined since 2016, and Milwaukee students continue to underperform in these subjects compared to both their state and national peers. Overall, fewer than one in five Milwaukee students are meeting state-established proficiency standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math, and Milwaukee has remained at or near the bottom of national measures of student academic outcomes for more than a decade.

Proficiency rates on annual state tests were markedly lower in 2021 (*Figure 4*), though it is important to keep in mind that test participation was well below its usual rate due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is relevant because Wisconsin uses a methodology to calculate proficiency rates that counts untested students as not proficient. The bottom line: this year's test results and Report Cards should be interpreted carefully.

Student Proficiency in Grades K-8

Overall, 10% of Milwaukee students demonstrated grade-level proficiency in ELA on the most recent state Forward Exam, and 6% demonstrated grade-level proficiency in Math. This compares to 20% in ELA and 18% in Math in Spring 2019, the last pre-pandemic round of state assessments. By school sector:

- 6% of students in MPS-operated schools were proficient in ELA, 3% in Math.
- 16% of students attending public charter schools were proficient in ELA, 11% in Math.
- 16% of students attending private schools using MPCP vouchers were proficient in ELA, 11% in Math.

Student Proficiency in Grades 9-12

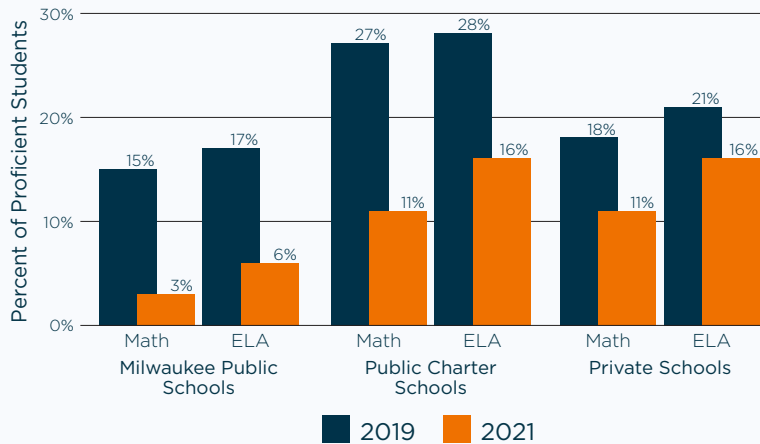
Overall, 8% of Milwaukee students demonstrated proficiency in ELA on the most recent ACT and ACT Aspire exams, and 4% demonstrated proficiency in Math. This compares to 16% in ELA and 10% in Math in Spring 2019. By school sector:

- 5% of students in MPS-operated schools were proficient in ELA, 2% in Math.
- 11% of students in public charter schools were proficient in ELA, 6% in Math.
- 14% of students attending private schools using MPCP vouchers were proficient in ELA, 9% in Math.

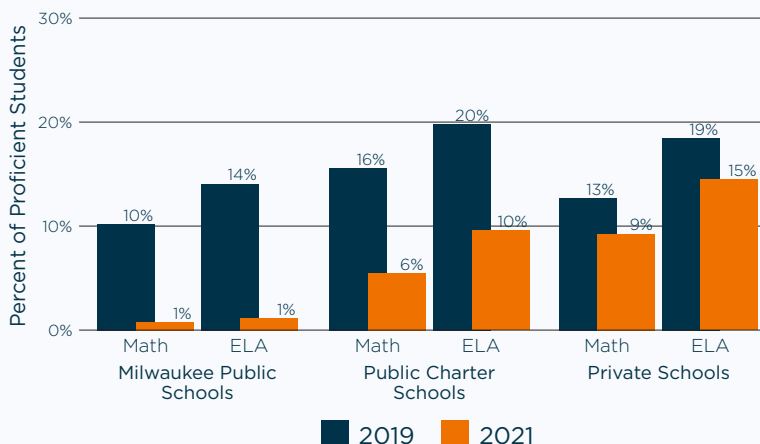
Figure 4

Student Proficiency Among All Students By School Sector

Forward Exam proficiency of students in grades K-8



ACT Aspire proficiency of students in grades 9-10



ACT proficiency of students in grades 11

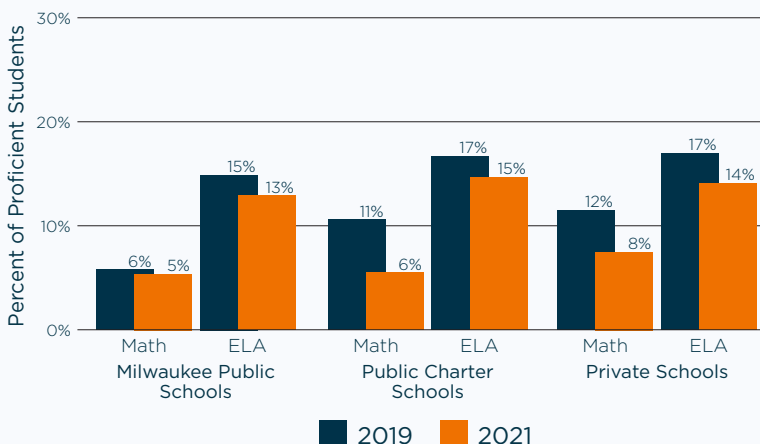
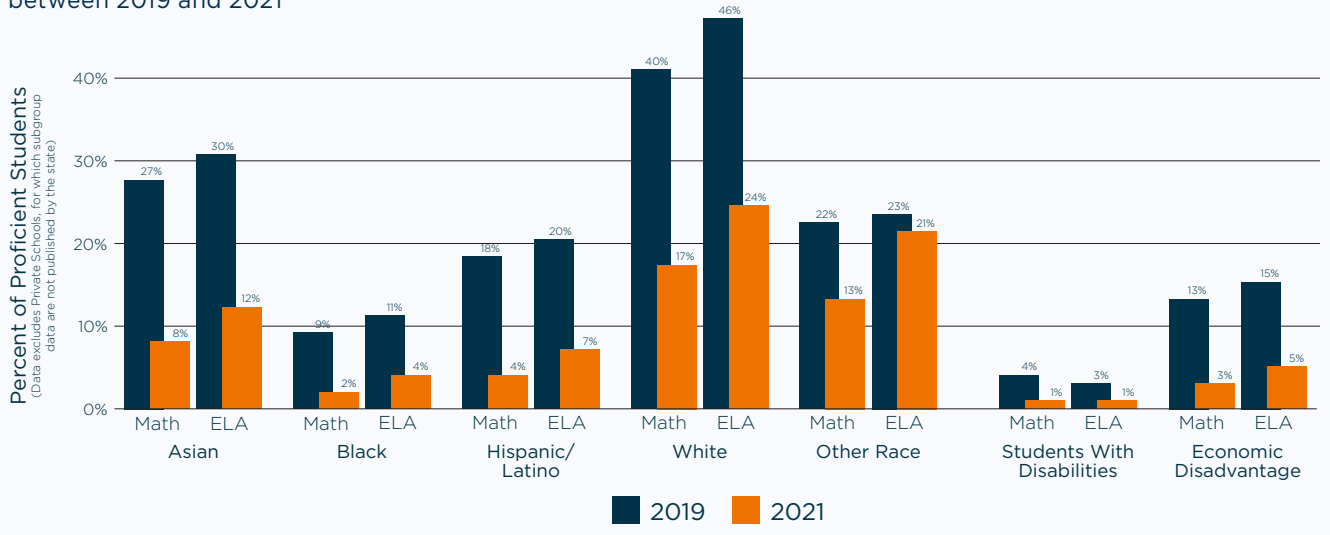


Figure 5

Forward Exam Proficiency Rates Among All Students By Subgroup

Gaps in K-8 student proficiency by race, income, and disability remain large, and in some cases widened between 2019 and 2021



Student Subgroup Performance

Student outcomes continue to vary widely among various student subgroups (Figure 5). When considered by race/ethnicity (across all sectors except private schools, for which data aren't made available by the state):

- 24% of White students met grade level expectations in ELA, 17% in Math.
- 4% of Black students met grade-level expectations in ELA, 2% in Math.
- 7% of Hispanic/Latino students met grade-level expectations in ELA, 4% in Math.
- 12% of Asian students met grade-level expectations in ELA, 8% in Math.

For other demographic subgroups:

- 5% of economically disadvantaged students met grade-level expectations in ELA, 3% in Math.
- 1% of students with identified disabilities met grade-level expectations in ELA, 1% in Math.

Student Growth

Overall, 47% of schools (126 schools) met or exceeded state-established benchmarks for student growth, meaning students in these schools demonstrated more learning during a full school year than statistically projected. By school sector:

- 43% of MPS district-operated schools (49 schools) met or exceeded student growth expectations.

- 53% of public charter schools (17 schools) met or exceeded student growth expectations.
- 80% of private schools participating in the Parental Choice voucher programs (60 schools) met or exceeded student growth expectations.

School Performance

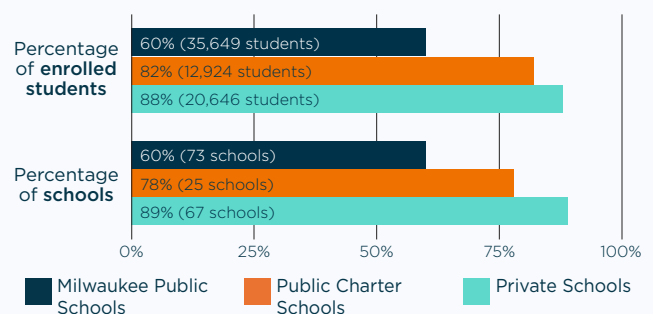
Though Wisconsin's School Report Card system shows overall rating scores rising for Milwaukee schools, these improvements do not reflect gains in student achievement on the state's annual assessments⁹. In fact, student achievement scores have shown a slight decline over the past few years.

As seen in Figure 6, many schools receive ratings of "Meets Expectations" or higher

Figure 6

Schools Earning 'Meets Expectations' Or Higher By School Sector

Private and Public Charter schools were more likely to at least 'Meet Expectations'



⁹ For more on this, see our winter 2021 Issue Brief on the state School Report Cards at www.cityforwardcollective.org/publications

despite declining student proficiency. A total of 165 schools, representing 65% of the city’s enrollment, earned ratings of “Meets Expectations” or higher on the most recent state Report Card. This compares with 157 schools, or 63% of the city’s enrollment, when the 2019 state Report Cards were published in the last year prior to the pandemic¹⁰.

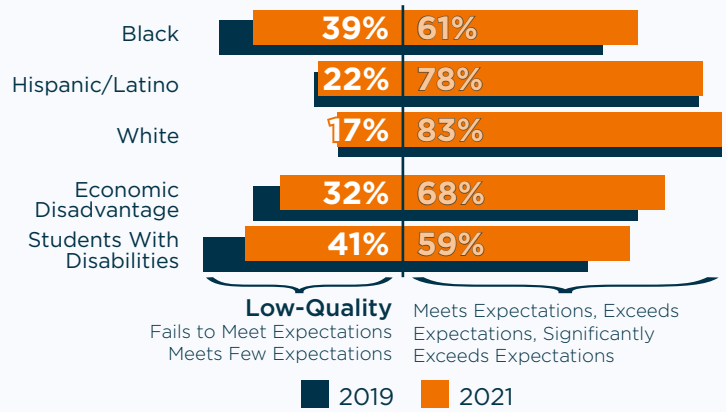
Disparities in Access to High-Quality Schools

As seen in *Figure 7*, Black students are the racial group least likely to attend a high-quality school, and the most likely to attend a school that rates below “Meets Expectations” according to the state School Report Card. Students with identified disabilities, Black students, and students from economically disadvantaged households disproportionately represent enrollment at schools rated below “Meets Expectations”.

Figure 7

Access To High-Quality Schools by Student Subgroup

Students with disabilities, Black students, and those from low-income households remain most likely to attend low-quality schools



Resources

The difference in funding and resources available to Milwaukee schools directly impacts the opportunities afforded to students throughout the city – from school transportation, to extracurricular offerings, to the quality of school facilities.

Schools in Wisconsin receive a combination of funding from local sources (primarily property taxes), funding provided by the state (both unrestricted or “general” aids, and “categorical” aids that are restricted for specific purposes like transportation), and funding provided by the federal government. In Milwaukee, a total of seven different funding formulas are used to determine levels of funding for Milwaukee students, based on where the school operates within Milwaukee’s overall education structure.

The exact blend of funding sources differs by sector and by individual school (*Figure 8*). On average, Milwaukee schools receive about 60% of their funding from the state, about 20-25% from federal sources, and the remaining 15-20% from local property taxes. These averages, however, mask wide variations across sectors. Most notably, private schools are prohibited by the state Constitution from directly receiving local property tax revenues, and are also restricted by federal law from directly receiving federal funding (though eligible Choice program students may receive some services purchased

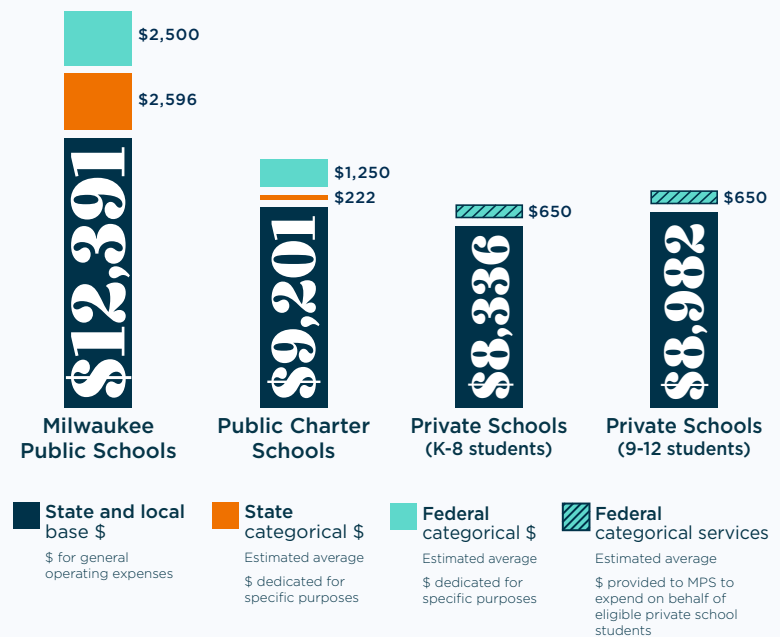
by MPS on their behalf using federal funds, after the district deducts administrative overhead).

Students attending schools directly operated by MPS receive a higher amount (\$12,391) of base state and local funding, often referred to as “revenue limit” funding, than schools in other sectors (\$9,201 for public charters, and

Figure 8

Per-Pupil Funding By Sector

The amount of public funding for each student differs by school sector



¹⁰ DPI lowered the Report Card rating category thresholds in 2021, making it difficult to compare this year’s performance with that of prior years.

\$8,336-\$8,982 for private schools participating in the MPCP or students receiving partial SNSP scholarships¹¹). MPS district-operated schools are also able to access more state and federal categorical aids for their students than schools in the other two sectors. Across all funding sources and methodologies, there is a total per-pupil funding disparity of \$4,500-\$7,000 between Milwaukee students attending traditional public schools operated by MPS, and those attending non-MPS schools.

Passage of the MPS referendum in 2020 decreased the funding disparity between students in MPS and those in surrounding suburban school districts, moving MPS just above both the state and Milwaukee metro area averages. However, because referendum proceeds are only being spent on behalf of MPS' traditionally operated schools, the referendum actually worsened disparities within the city between students in traditional MPS schools and those attending schools operated independently of the district, including non-instrumentality charter schools authorized by MPS.

MPS still faces a significant structural budget deficit despite the district's higher per-pupil funding levels, the 2020 passage of the permanent operating referendum, and the more than \$700M in federal pandemic relief funding the district received. According to the MPS FY 2023 budget, the district currently operates with

a structural budget gap (projected expenses in excess of projected revenues) of \$45M-\$60M. In future years, the budget projects annual deficits will continue to rise, climbing above \$100M beginning in 2024-25. In total, the district projects a cumulative budget deficit of nearly \$350M over the next five years.

On the other hand, both public charter and private schools face a differing set of financial pressures, tied to the significantly lower levels of funding they receive. The 45% of Milwaukee students who attend public charter schools or who use a state-funded tuition voucher to attend private schools are the lowest-funded students in the metro Milwaukee region, and among the lowest-funded students in the state. On average, these schools receive 20-25% less in funding on a per-pupil basis - hindering their ability to provide competitive pay and benefits to their educators, to provide services like bus transportation to their students, and to make investments to sustain current operations and expand to meet the level of demand from families.

As a city, the persistence of these sector-based funding disparities means that students in Milwaukee's K-12 education system are being collectively underfunded by a combined \$100M+ each year - critical resources that would support student learning and indirectly benefit the city's larger economy.

Public Opinion

City Forward Collective commissioned a citywide poll from an independent research firm in summer 2020 and again in fall 2021. The data from these polls indicate Milwaukee residents would like to see changes in the city's education infrastructure.

From 2020 to 2021, most respondents remained broadly dissatisfied with the state of K-12 education in Milwaukee (Figure 9), with only about one in three parents believing the system is working for students or providing a good education. However, we found significant improvements in the perception of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program between 2020 to 2021.

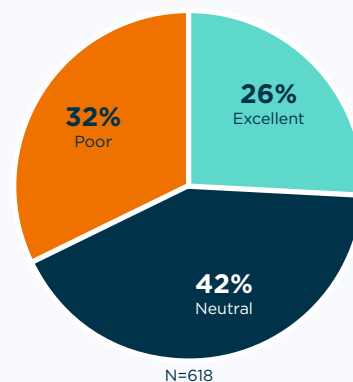
Among Milwaukee parents, we found greater levels of satisfaction with their child(ren)'s school(s) and some shifts in where they get

Figure 9

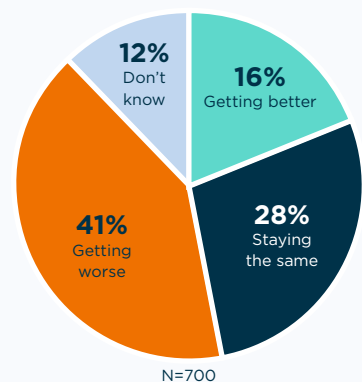
Perceptions Of School Quality

Nearly one in three Milwaukee residents rate the city's K-12 schools as poor, and 41% say they're getting worse

"How would you rate the quality of K-12 schools in the City of Milwaukee?"



"Would you say the quality of K-12 schools in the City of Milwaukee is...?"



¹¹ A small number of SNSP students granted a full scholarship received \$13,013 per pupil in 2021-22.

information about schools, even as parents are similarly dissatisfied with the overall state of K12 education in the city.

Respondents demonstrated a low level of awareness of key aspects of the governance of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and indicate significant openness to changes in the current MPS governance model.

There is broad agreement that the COVID-19 pandemic has been harmful to many students'

learning, and respondents demonstrated substantial support for pandemic-related policy mandates.

Roughly half of Milwaukee parents responding to our poll said their child fell behind during remote learning, while 11% of parents felt their students got ahead. Meanwhile, one-third of parents believed their students stayed on track. This perception is in alignment with national studies conducted to assess learning loss, especially at the elementary level.

The Impact of COVID-19

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic has had profound negative impacts on students and schools, including uncertainty in measures of student performance, learning loss, and future educational experiences.

Enrollment for the 2020-21 school year declined by more than 3,600 students (2.4%) overall, especially in kindergarten and early elementary grades, and mostly in district-operated schools.

Standardized testing was not conducted for the 2019-20 school year, further reducing the availability of data when consistent data across all school sectors was already a concern. Variable and low test participation rates (less than 50% in many schools) in 2020-21 create an added level of uncertainty about the validity of this year's data.

Practices for reopening schools for in-person learning varied widely across sectors. MPS

district-run schools remained remote-only for more than a year, from March 2020 through late April 2021 – or even later for some students at traditional MPS high schools who did not return to in-person learning until the start of the 2021-22 school year. Conversely, some public charter schools and many private schools offered in-person learning much earlier. There is some early evidence that these differences may have implications for learning loss and student achievement, though more data will be needed.

Federal funding intended to address the impact of the pandemic on students and schools will significantly exacerbate pre-existing inequities in per-pupil funding. While all schools face the same challenges in operating safely, the traditional MPS district received upwards of \$505M in funding (nearly \$12,000 per pupil), while significantly fewer resources were provided to public charter schools (\$6,000 per pupil on average), and private schools (\$2,500-\$3,000 on average).

Conclusion

Milwaukee's students and families must navigate one of the most complex K-12 school landscapes in the country. Our city's educational ecosystem is robust with school options – but along with those opportunities comes a uniquely intricate set of challenges. Across all school sectors, far too many students are not demonstrating proficiency in core academic subjects – leaving them underprepared for college, careers, and a thriving life. Long-term declines in the city's population of school-aged children, and shifts in where families access publicly-funded education, have combined to create

new strains on a fractured school funding structure. Further, the acute challenges of the last two years during the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted our city's students and schools, along with all of us.

We offer this State of Milwaukee Education Report to our city's many education stakeholders in the hope that a clear analysis of the data will inform a community-wide conversation about how we as a city will address these challenges and secure our city's future by realizing the inherent and infinite potential present in each of our city's students.

Appendix: Glossary of Terms

DATA GROUPS

Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS)	Refers to schools operated by MPS staff. This includes Traditional Public Schools and Instrumentality Charter Schools. It does not include 2r/2x or Independent charters, Non-Instrumentality Charter Schools, or Partnership schools.
Public Charter Schools	Includes autonomous charter schools (Independent and Non-Instrumentality). Does not include instrumentality charter schools, which are operated directly by MPS staff.
Public Schools Outside Milwaukee	Includes only Open Enrollment and Chapter 220 students enrolled in suburban school districts.
Private Schools	Includes students attending private schools using a state-funded tuition voucher through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP), or Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP).
Public Schools	Refers to all schools that are free for all children to attend and overseen by a governmental body (Traditional Public and all charter schools, including Independent Charters).

SCHOOL TYPES

2r/2x or Independent Charter Schools	The terms “2r/2x” and “Independent Charter” are used interchangeably to indicate charter schools fully independent from a school district. In Milwaukee, these schools are authorized by either the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee or the City of Milwaukee Common Council.
Instrumentality Charter Schools	A charter school authorized by the Milwaukee Board of School Directors, operated by MPS, and staffed by MPS employees.
Non-Instrumentality Charter Schools	A charter school authorized by the Milwaukee Board of School Directors but operated by an independent 501c3 nonprofit and staffed by employees of that nonprofit.
Partnership Schools	Refers to independent schools contracted by MPS to work with specific student populations, such as those identified by the district as at-risk of dropping out. These schools are operated by community organizations based on parameters of the contract with MPS.
Private Schools	Refers to independent schools that charge tuition, which may be paid by a tuition voucher through the state’s Choice programs.
Traditional Public Schools	Schools operated directly by MPS without a charter contract, e.g. excluding Instrumentality and other types of charter schools.

PROGRAMS

Chapter 220	State-funded voluntary racial desegregation program that funded transportation for Milwaukee-area students to attend schools in neighboring districts.
Open Enrollment	State program which allows any Wisconsin student to apply to attend a traditional public school in a nonresident school district.
Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP)	State-funded program which allows students in households below a certain economic threshold (300% of the federal poverty limit) to obtain a tuition voucher to attend a participating private school. Students must live within the Milwaukee city limits to qualify for this program.
Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP)	Allows a student with an identified disability to obtain a tuition voucher from the state to attend a participating private school.
Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP)	State-funded program which allows students in households below a certain economic threshold (220% of federal poverty limit) to obtain a tuition voucher to attend a participating private school. Students must live in Wisconsin, but cannot live within the city limits of either Milwaukee or Racine to qualify for this program.