

Milwaukee Enrollment Landscape Analysis

Key findings

- Publicly funded student enrollment in Milwaukee has been falling since 2014, has accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic, and has disproportionately impacted Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) schools.
- Enrollment declines in the past 10 years have been driven by:
 - An overall decrease in the number of children under-18 residing in Milwaukee
 - A decline in the number of births by city of Milwaukee residents
 - A shrinking share of babies born in the city enrolling in Milwaukee schools

Purpose

Over the past 10 years, student enrollment in publicly funded schools in Milwaukee has undergone numerous shifts. Last year, enrollment numbers reached a historic low and are estimated to continue falling the next few years, disproportionately impacting traditional public schools operated by Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) more than other sectors. These changes impact the resources available to students, facility utilization, and

school program sustainability, and have the potential to affect the options available to families. This publication examines trends in Milwaukee student enrollment and includes an analysis of citywide student population, birth rates, and grade-level changes. Our hope is that this information will equip school leaders and other education stakeholders with data to inform decision-making in the future.

Student Enrollment in Milwaukee

Student enrollment¹ in publicly funded schools in Milwaukee² has been dwindling since 2014, and Milwaukee has experienced a loss of 6.6% students since that year.³ Declines that were already in motion—and are likely due to population and birth rate shifts—were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, since the 2018–2019 school year, MPS has seen a decline of 6,048 (or 9.1%) of their students and now serves just a bare majority (54%) of the city's total K3-12 enrollment. Consistent with national trends,⁴ 22% of student loss in Milwaukee schools since 2018–2019 has occurred in early childhood grades (e.g. K3 and K4), which students are not necessarily required to attend.⁵

In 2021–2022, early childhood enrollment had begun to recover from COVID-19 lows but remained at just 84% of 2018–2019 enrollment, and it is difficult to estimate whether early childhood enrollment will ever fully recover. While enrollment in kindergarten did not see such precipitous drops over the pandemic years, it has continued a multi-year trend of enrollment decline. Additionally, enrollment in fourth and fifth grades has accounted for 30% of declines since the 2018–2019 school year and are expected to appear in subsequent grades in the future.

¹ Throughout the report, we use a headcount of all students, K3-12.

² A "school" as defined by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) may have more than one campus. We also include 5 Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) schools that serve 75% or more MPCP students but are technically located outside of city limits.

³ This includes Partnership school students. 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. Partnership students are also included in student population analyses.

⁴ <https://www.ffyf.org/national-report-examines-state-preschool-policies-in-2020-2021/>

⁵ While K5 completion is required to enroll in first grade in Wisconsin public schools, children under the age of 6 are not otherwise subject to compulsory attendance per Wis Rev. Statutes Sect. 118.15-16.

Samantha Bronson

Senior Manager of Policy Research
samantha.bronson@cityforwardcollective.org

Spencer Schien

Senior Manager of Data & Analytics
spencer.schien@cityforwardcollective.org

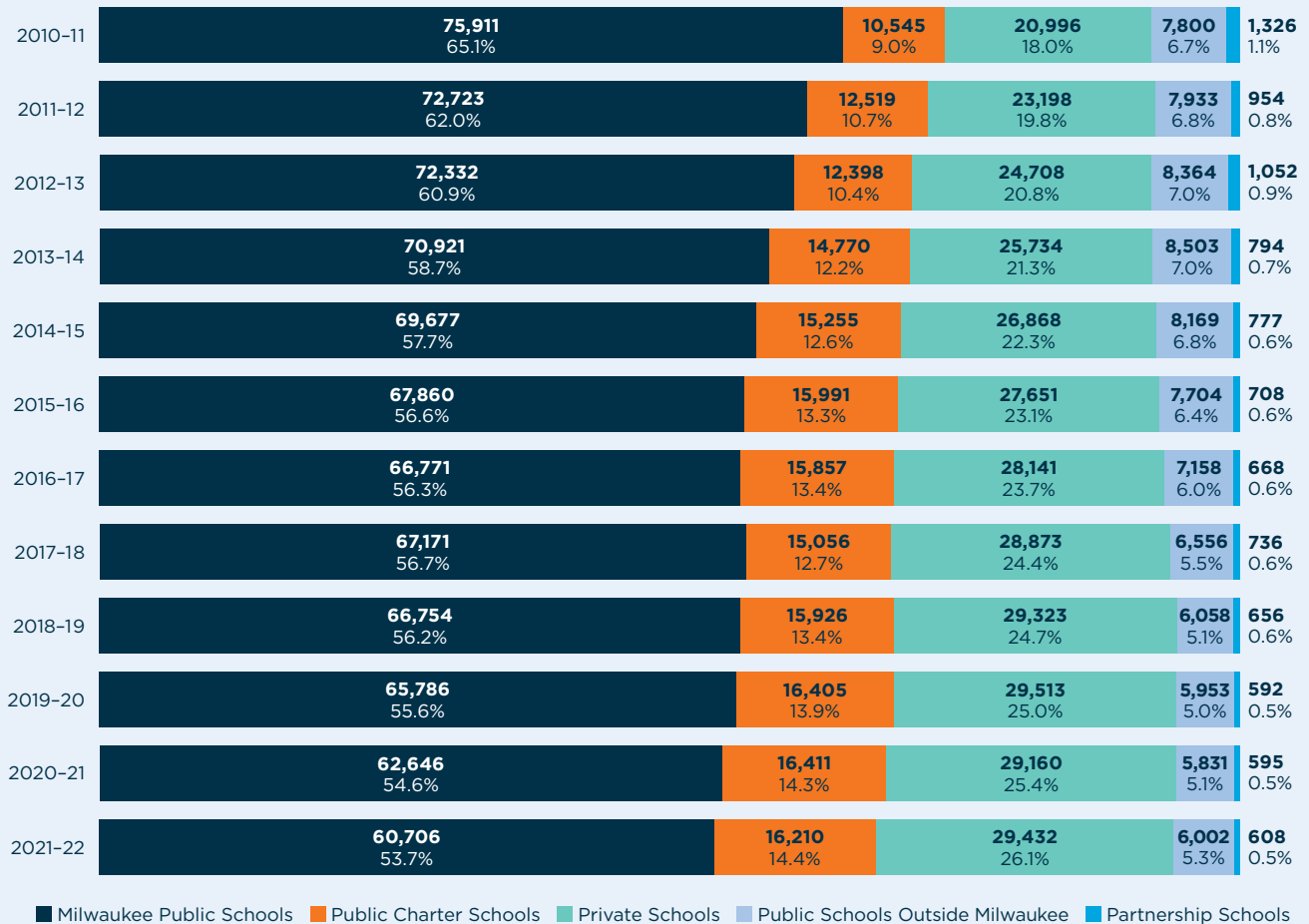
Enrollment changes have also impacted each school sector differently. Specifically, declines have been concentrated in schools directly operated by MPS, and while MPS remains the largest single operator of schools in Milwaukee, the proportion of publicly funded students in public charter schools and private schools accepting vouchers has been increasing since 2010 (Figure 1). Shifts in school sector enrollment have been partially driven by policy changes, which have impacted the

choices available to families. For instance, expansion of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program has led to an increase in the number of publicly funded students attending private schools, while the sunseting of the Chapter 220 program⁶—which provided transportation for students to attend suburban districts—has restricted families from selecting schools outside of Milwaukee.

Figure 1

Change in Publicly Funded Enrollment by Sector, 2010–2022

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



⁶ As of the 2021-2022 school year, 312 students remained in the Chapter 220 voluntary desegregation program, which was closed to new enrollees in 2014. Preliminary 2022-2023 numbers indicate that as few as 217 students remain.

Milwaukee Population Shifts

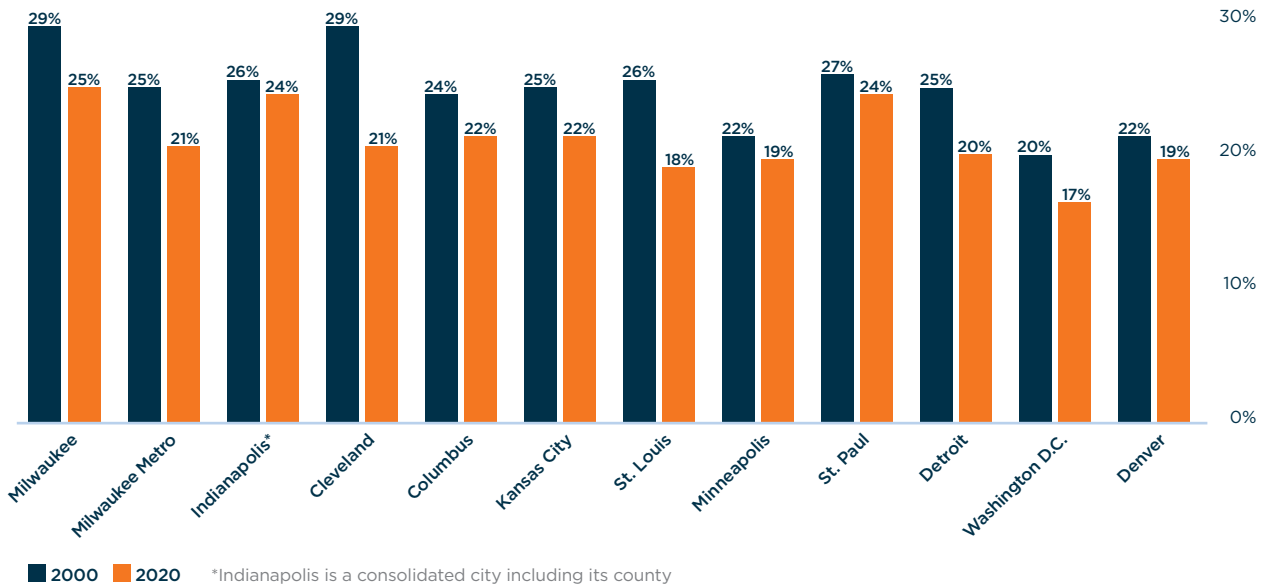
One factor that has been impacting student enrollment numbers is the decrease in children under-18 residing in the city. Like other large cities across the nation, the population of school age children has been declining since 2000, and children make up a smaller share of most city populations than they have in the past (*Figure 2*).

The reduction in the number of children under-18 is slightly due to decreasing birth rates nationwide. In Milwaukee, birth rates for residents have dropped by 1,666, or 16%, since 2010, largely driven by a decrease in teenage pregnancies.

Figure 2

Under-18 Population, 2000-2020

Nationwide, the percentage of residents in each city who are children under 18 years old has been declining since 2000.



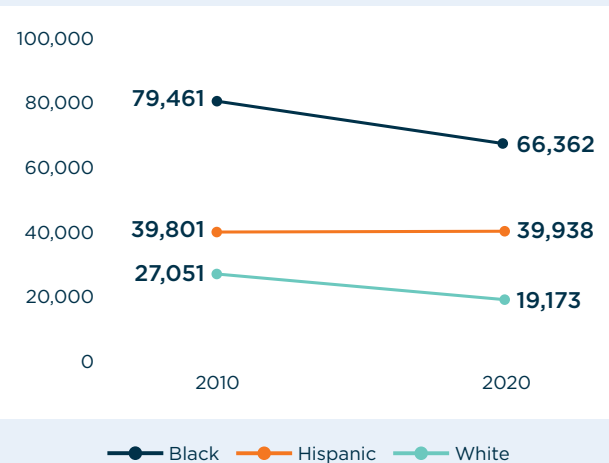
The 2020 Decennial Census indicated that Milwaukee has a total of 144,462 residents under 18 years old, and has experienced a decline of 16,885 children, or 96% of the city's overall population decline of 17,611 residents, since 2010. Meanwhile, the city's adult population has remained relatively stable.

Population losses have been most significant in Black and white communities, which are experiencing far greater declines than Latino⁷ populations. In fact, the latter has seen a slight gain in their youth population (*Figure 3*).

Figure 3

Change in number of children, 2010-2020

The decline in the child population since 2010 was largely driven by a decline in Black and white children



⁷ 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").

Overall, since the 2010 Decennial Census (Figure 4):

- The city's 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/Latino are the city's fastest growing subgroup and are also a larger proportion than that of the adult population (18%).
- Even though white adults comprise 39% of the adult population and are the largest adult group, white children make up only 13% of the under-18 population. The high ratio of white adults as compared to children indicates that white residents have fewer children than Black and Latino residents.

These demographic shifts in the city's under-18 population are reflected in K3-12 school enrollment. Since 2015-16⁸, the proportion of Latino students has increased by 3 percentage points, while the proportion of white students has decreased by 2 percentage points and the proportion of Black students has decreased by 4 percentage points (Figure 5).

Most Milwaukee students are from economically disadvantaged households. These students make up 80% of the total student population, a decrease of 3 percentage points since 2015. In addition, the percentage of students who are English language learners has increased from 9% to 13% since 2015, while the percentage of students with disabilities has decreased from 16% to 14% during the same period.

Milwaukee Comparison to Suburbs

One theory to explain the shrinking Milwaukee enrollment has been that families are relocating from the city to nearby suburbs, such as those in Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Washington and Waukesha counties. If that was the case, we would expect to see growth or stabilization of enrollment numbers in surrounding areas. However, like Milwaukee, these communities are witnessing nearly identical drops in the number of children enrolled in publicly funded schools (Figure 6). While the loss of 10% of the city's children since 2010 is more extreme in Milwaukee than surrounding metropolitan areas, these children are not necessarily showing up in nearby districts. The fact that the number of adults in Milwaukee has stayed stable suggests that families are either leaving the city or having fewer children.

Figure 4

2020 Race/ethnicity by age

The largest adult racial group in Milwaukee is white, while children are predominantly Black or Hispanic/Latino.

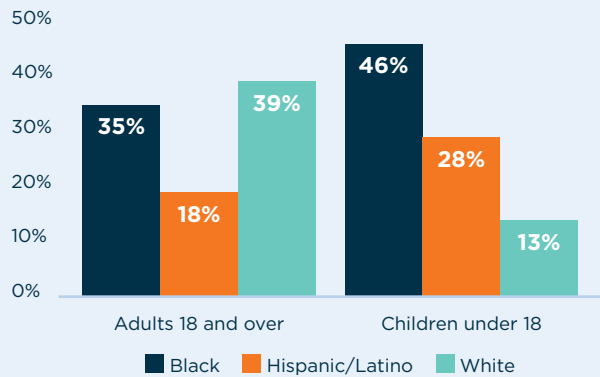


Figure 5

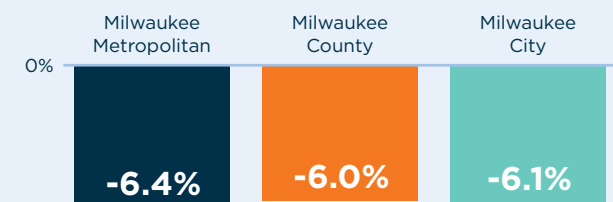
Change in Milwaukee student demographics, 2015-2021

Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Citywide Enrollment	
	2015-2016	2021-2022
Black/African-American	54.2%	49.9%
Hispanic/Latino	27.8%	30.7%
White	11.0%	9.0%
Other Race	2.0%	3.9%
Other Subgroup		
Economically Disadvantaged	54.2%	79.8%
Students with Disabilities	54.2%	14.1%
Limited English Proficiency	54.2%	12.7%

Figure 6

Enrollment decline for the region

Milwaukee's change in enrollment from 2010 to 2020 is nearly identical to the enrollment declines happening in the surrounding school districts.



Milwaukee Metropolitan includes schools located in Ozaukee, Washington, and Waukesha counties. The Milwaukee County designation excludes schools in the city of Milwaukee.

⁸ We use 2015-2016 as a starting point here because race/ethnicity and special populations data is not available for MCPD students prior to the mandate implemented that year for all schools to be issued a School Report Card.

Milwaukee Birth and Enrollment Cohorts

A comprehensive report on a city's enrollment is not complete without accounting for changes that occur as students progress from birth to graduation. Birth rates are one measure that help predict future enrollment trends, but the correlation between birth counts and enrollment six years later in first grade is not perfect.⁹

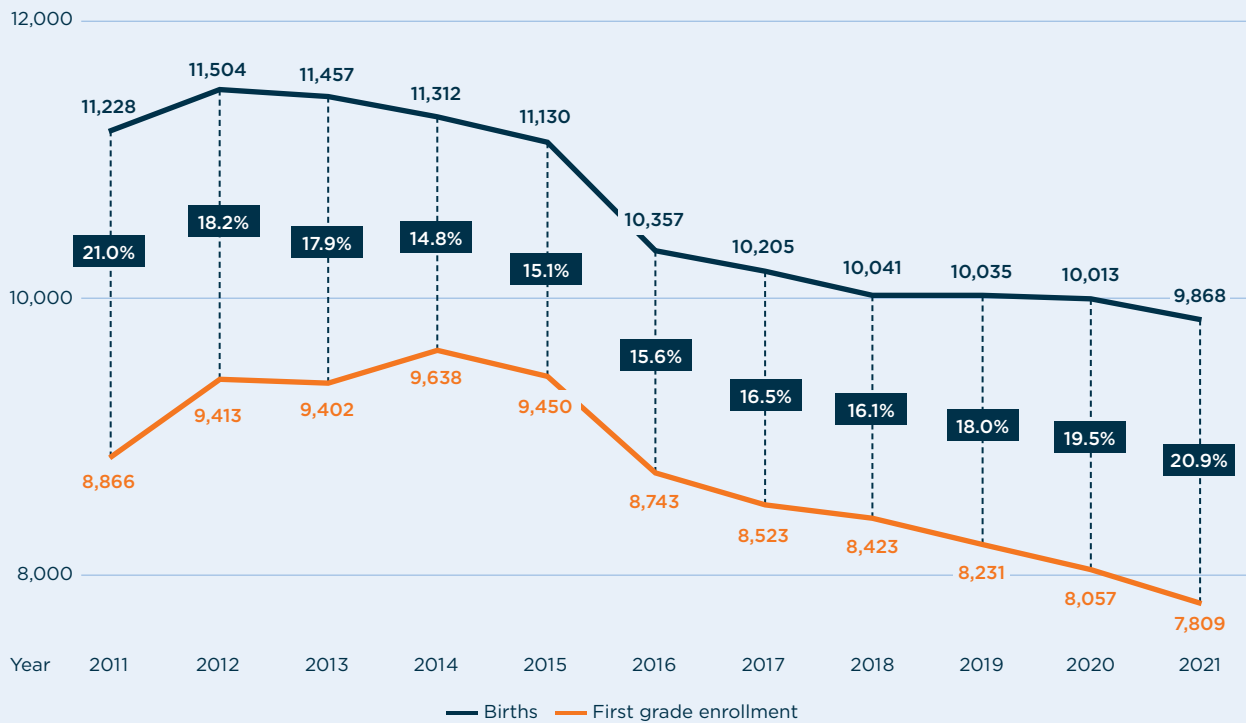
In Milwaukee over the past decade, we have observed a decrease in the number of babies born in the city. In 2021, the number dipped below 10,000 for the first

time over this period. This trend tracks with the overall decline in Milwaukee's population in general, but additionally, a smaller proportion of these babies are showing up in Milwaukee schools six years later in first grade enrollment. About one in five kids do not show up in the city's schools (*Figure 7*). In other words, families are having fewer kids in Milwaukee, and of those that do have kids, a smaller share of them are enrolling their kids in Milwaukee schools when they are old enough.

Figure 7

Cohort Retention, Birth to First

Since a peak in 2014, the share of births in the city of Milwaukee retained six years later in Milwaukee schools first grade enrollment has decreased by 6%.



Percentages represent proportion of births in Milwaukee that are not retained six years later in first grade enrollment.

One might assume that once a cohort is established through first grade enrollment, the size of that cohort will remain stable as those kids progress from one grade level to the next. What we see, however, is that the school system consistently loses kids at each grade level, with the greatest losses coming in high school grades. The notable exception is ninth grade, for which we see a large increase in enrollment (*Figure 8*). Enrollment increases in ninth grade are most likely

due to students getting held back their first year of high school; research indicates that in most large cities, retention rates are as high as 10–20% of the freshman class, or higher, resulting in a ninth grade enrollment bump.¹⁰ While retention rates reported to the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) are much lower, the increases we see in Milwaukee are consistent with this nationwide research.¹¹

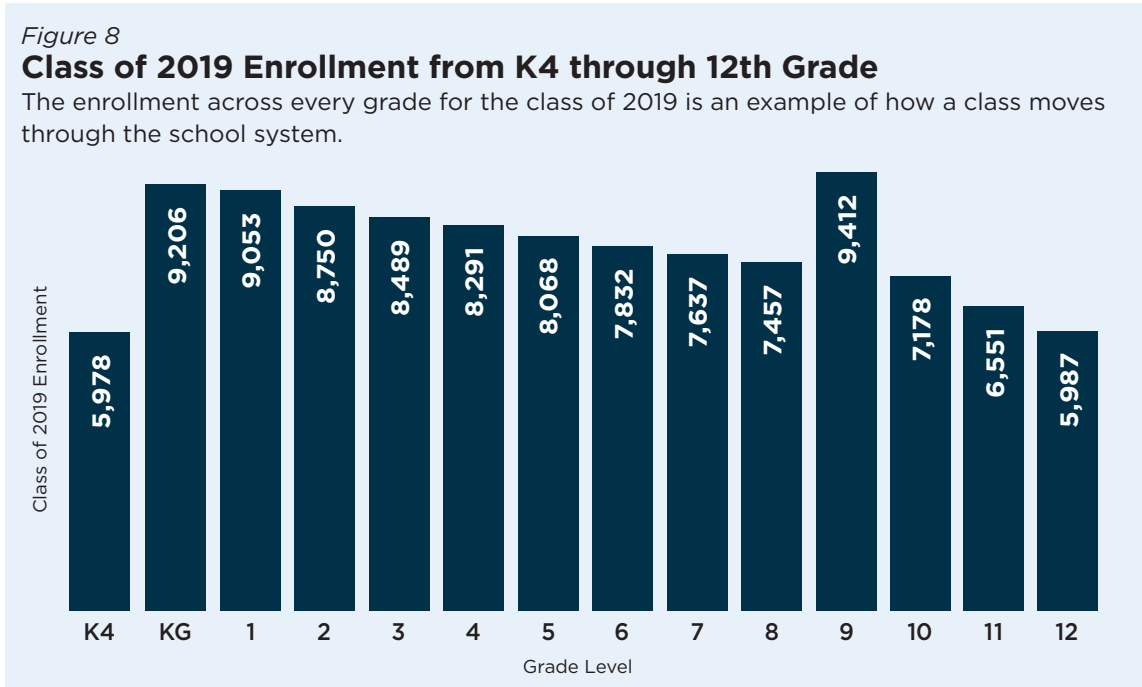
⁹ We are choosing to track birth to first grade retention because kindergarten enrollment is not necessarily required in Wisconsin, dependent upon which school sector a student attends, and when the student turns 6 years old, at which point attendance in school is compulsory.

¹⁰ <https://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=8728>

¹¹ Official numbers from DPI report ninth grade retention rates as low as 1–2% of total ninth grade enrollment for public schools, and data isn't available for private schools. However, these numbers are unlikely to be an accurate picture of retention in our city, especially given national averages and student proficiency rates in Milwaukee.

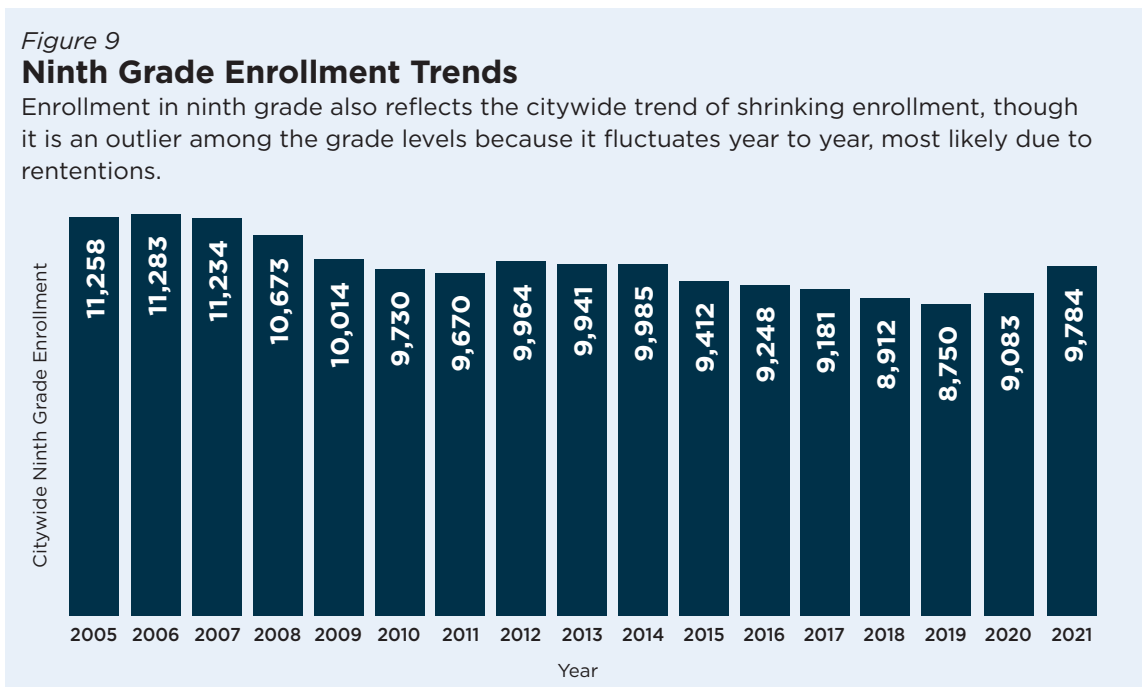
We can get a clearer picture if we take the class of 2019 as an example. This cohort is made of the students who graduated in 2019, and Figure 8 below shows what the citywide enrollment was for this cohort at each grade level. We clearly see through this example how the cohort starts out at a relatively high level, and it then proceeds to shrink at every grade

level except ninth grade. The shrinking enrollment is indicative of students leaving the Milwaukee school ecosystem, possibly through families choosing to move out of the city or through students dropping out of school altogether.



While ninth grade has typically been the largest grade level in terms of student enrollment in any given year, the long-term trend is still one of falling enrollment (Figure 9). That said, the picture offered by ninth

grade enrollment is muddled a bit by the prevalence of retentions and its position towards the end of the education cycle.



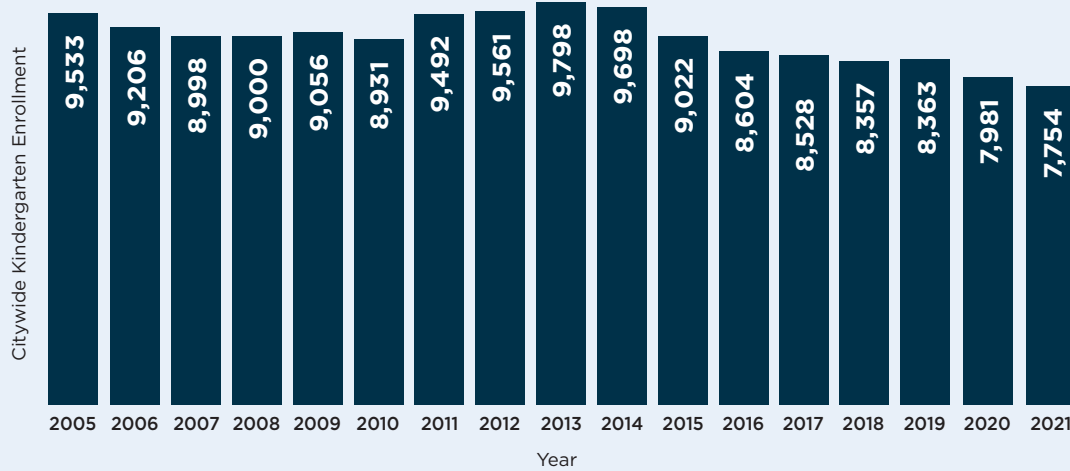
We can see more of a leading indicator at the front end of the cohort cycle by looking at kindergarten enrollment trends (Figure 10). In this case, we see an even clearer trend of shrinking enrollment, especially since 2014. As these cohorts age through the schooling system, we can expect to see similar enrollment declines at higher

grade levels year over year. If citywide birth rates continue to fall, this decline will be accelerated without an influx of families with school aged children moving to the city, which is the opposite of the trend we've seen in Milwaukee's recent history.

Figure 10

Kindergarten Enrollment Trends

Annual enrollment in kindergarten reflects the citywide trend of falling birth rates and fewer babies showing up in Milwaukee school enrollment.



Appendix: Glossary of Terms

STUDENT DEFINITIONS (WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION)

Students with Disabilities	Have a qualifying impairment requiring an individualized education program (IEP) entitling them to additional learning supports and resources. ¹²
Economically Disadvantaged	From a household with an income no greater than 185% of Federal Poverty Guidelines or other designation. ¹³
Limited English Proficiency	Learning English as a second language, identified through a federally mandated annual assessment. ¹⁴

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).

¹² <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/disability>

¹³ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/econ-status>

¹⁴ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/elp>

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.