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How the Pandemic Compounds Education Pipeline Challenges

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Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

7 0 Y E A R S

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

Higher education planners and policymakers are grappling with the lingering impacts of COVID-19 on college enrollment. They should also watch for COVID-19's ravages on the K-12 student pipeline, as these young students may carry the effects of pandemic learning well into their college-going years. This presents postsecondary leaders and their institutions with additional long-term enrollment challenges.

Nationwide, public schools began to experience a youth population decline prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. After 14 years of successively smaller U.S. birth cohorts, elementary public schools now face gradually declining student counts. Public schools already reported a 3% decrease in student enrollment in first through fifth grades by fall 2019 with only 18.17 million students attending those grades compared to a peak 18.75 million students registered in fall 2015.

The complex convergence of shifting age demographics, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing educational inequities make it increasingly difficult to determine the primary driving force behind changes in public school populations. The specific effect of COVID-19 on the K-12 education pipeline remains unclear due to lags in data. However, available public school statistics — from the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years that show shifts in public school student numbers and growing evidence of learning and proficiency decline — could further compound the education pipeline's already-challenging future.

No single factor accounts for the downturn of students enrolled in U.S. public schools in the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years than previously projected. Additionally, growing research suggests a significant number of enrolled students who may be falling behind or disengaging from schooling altogether, which would have an additional negative impact on high school graduate numbers. WICHE advises education and policy leaders to access real-time state and local data, to determine the best course of action for strategies and investments that focus on recovery.

Further analysis and detailed data will be needed to unpack the multiple potential impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on the K-12 education pipeline. WICHE will continue to provide updated analyses in advance of the publication of the 11th edition of WICHE's *Knocking at the College Door*.

Key Takeaways

In this brief, WICHE analyzed state-level public school enrollment data from fall 2020 and fall 2021¹ and compared it to the pre-pandemic projections in WICHE's 10th edition *Knocking at the College Door* published in 2020.²

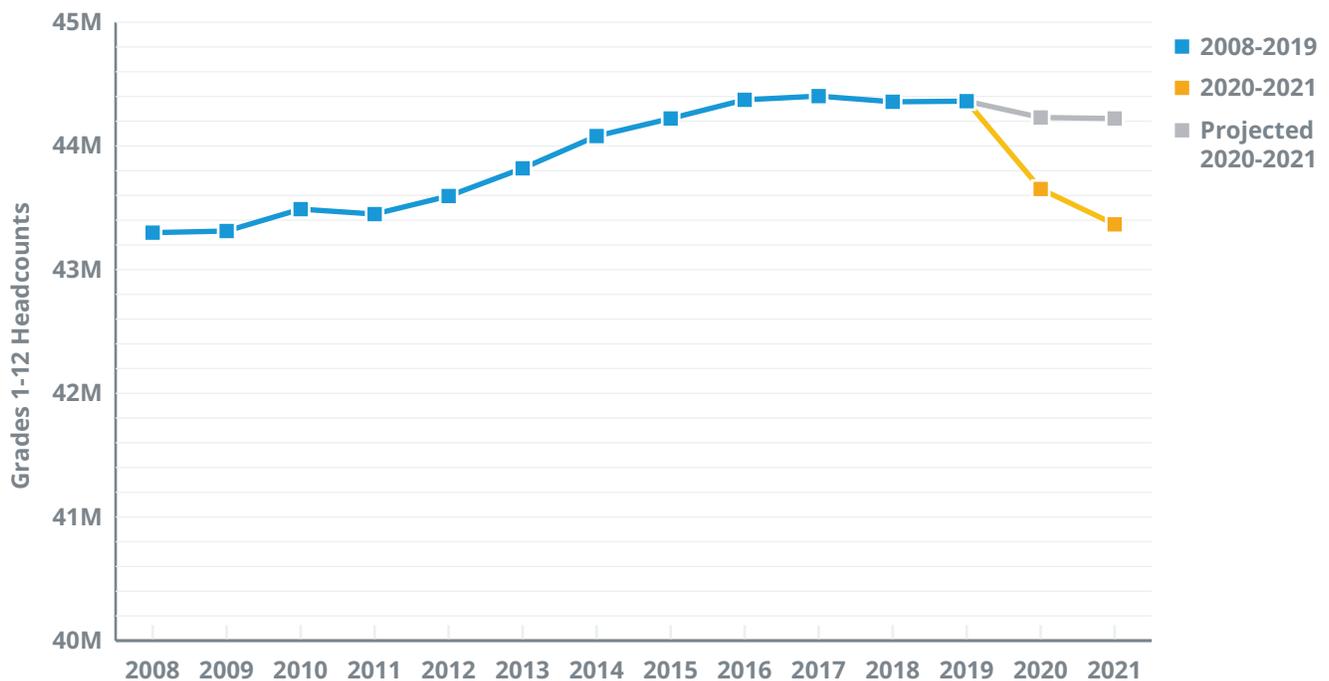
- ▶ Approximately 833,000 fewer students enrolled in public schools in fall 2021 than had been predicted, which was an unexpected 2% decline.
- ▶ Elementary school student enrollment was close to predicted levels, which anticipated a decline.
- ▶ Public middle schools enrolled fewer school middle school students in fall 2021 than predicted by pre-pandemic trends, and notable impacts on learning proficiency could suggest a greater decrease in public high school graduates after 2025 than previous negative projections anticipated.
- ▶ Available data suggest relative stability of high school graduation for the 11th or 12th graders who comprised the first two graduating classes impacted by the pandemic. But data about the third impacted graduating class are only beginning to emerge.
- ▶ A bulge in the number of 9th graders and reports of high school students struggling could indicate a reduction in high school graduates over the next four years, which would dampen the already modest graduate increase forecast around 2025.
- ▶ Enrollment variations indicate greater pandemic impacts for student populations historically underserved in education, which could further exacerbate the projected contraction in high school graduate numbers.
- ▶ To some extent, enrollment changes reflect student shifts to homeschooling and private school options.

FALL 2021 U.S. PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL POPULATIONS

The number of students enrolled in Grades 1-12 in U.S. public schools decreased 1.6% from 44.36 million in fall 2019 to 43.65 million in fall 2020 and then decreased another 0.7% to 43.37 million in fall 2021 (Figure 1). Pre-COVID projections showed that U.S. public schools expected to enroll potentially 2% more students than reported in fall 2021, approximately 833,000.³

Figure 1.

Public School Enrollments Were Leveling-Out Pre-Pandemic

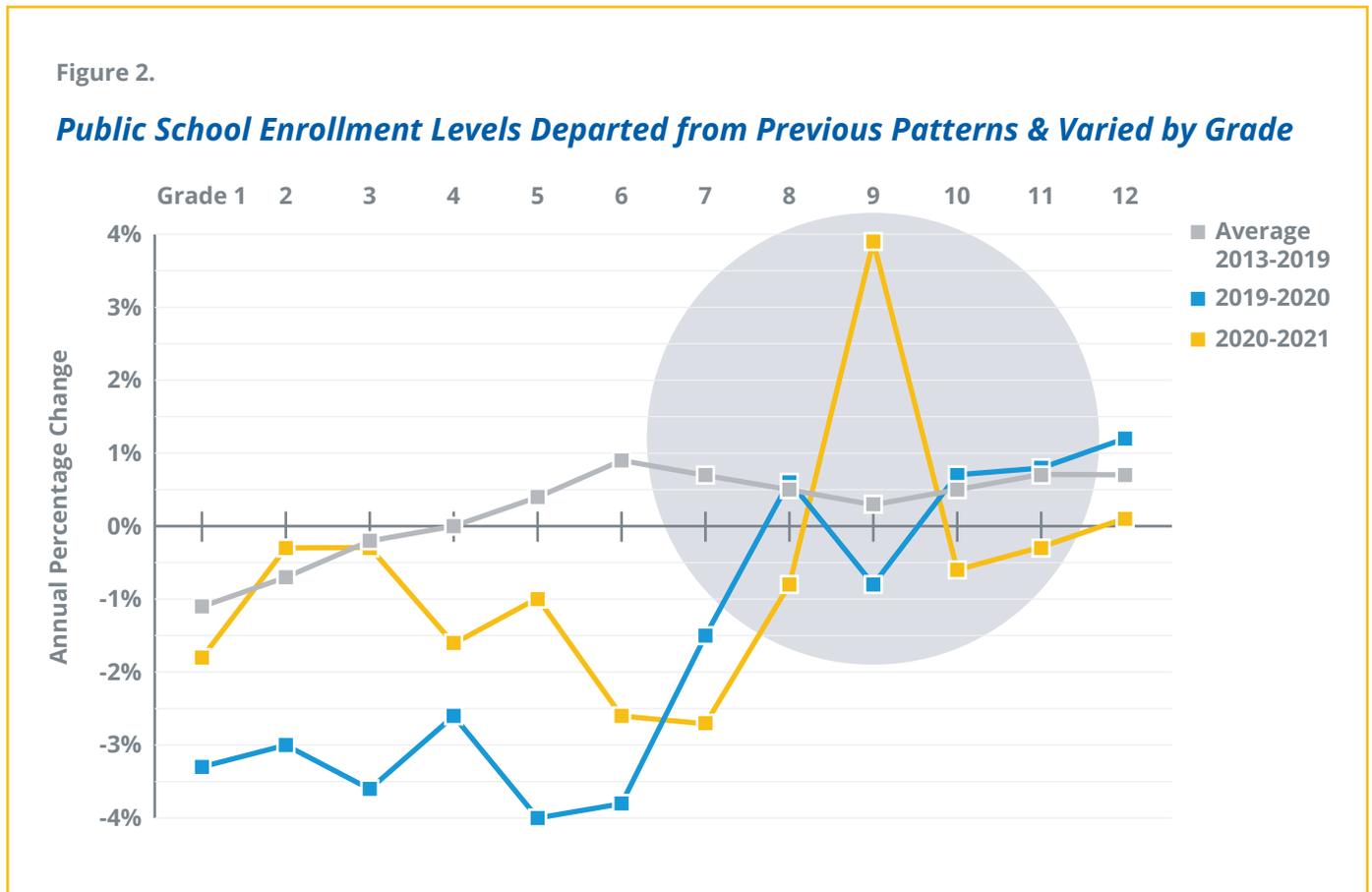


Note. U.S. public school grades 1-12 headcounts, fall 2008 to fall 2021. Includes the District of Columbia and 49 states not including Washington, which had not reported data for school year 2021-22 by the deadline for these data. Source: WICHE analysis of NCES [Common Core of Data](#).

In fall 2021, 30 states experienced annual enrollment declines, and 20 states saw annual increases when only 24 states had projected decreasing student bodies per pre-pandemic data. The average rate of decrease in fall 2021 public school enrollments was 0.4%, due to a range in data from a 2.7% decrease in New York to 2.1% increase in Montana. On average, data indicated either greater decline or more muted annual change than projected pre-COVID, and other recent research [estimates](#) that public schools experienced more substantial enrollment shifts by spring 2022.⁴

Rebounded Public Elementary School Numbers, but Academic Impacts

Figure 2 depicts the average annual percentage change in U.S. public school fall headcounts from fall 2013 to 2018, by grade, and notably different annual changes for fall 2019 to fall 2020 and fall 2020 to 2021.



Note. U.S. public school grades 1-12 headcounts by grade, fall 2013 to fall 2021. Includes the District of Columbia and 49 states not including Washington, which had not reported data for school year 2021-22 by the deadline for these data. Source: WICHE analysis of NCES [Common Core of Data](#).

Overall, U.S. elementary Grades 1-5 rebounded between fall 2020 and fall 2021, resuming patterns more consistent with the expected overall reduction in student numbers due to ongoing demographic change.⁵ At the same time, evidence shows decreased student learning proficiency during the pandemic. If these factors were to remain unchanged, over time, this could compound future higher education enrollment challenges.

The [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) provided the first nationally-representative estimates that compare student achievement in early 2020, before the widespread pandemic interruptions, to metrics from early 2022, when most students returned to in-person learning.⁶ As shown in Table 1 below, the average math score for 9-year-old students in the fourth grade fell seven points during that time (50th percentile scores). The average reading score for the same age group declined five points (see the NAEP source data). The percentage of 9-year-old test takers scoring at the highest benchmark Level 250 of “numerical operations and basic problem solving” fell from 44% to 37% in those two years, and the portion of students at the midway Level 250 “beginning skills and understanding” decreased 86% to 80%. Nine-year-olds tested at the most basic threshold Level 150, “simple arithmetic facts” reduced slightly, from 98% to 97%.

Table 1.

Score Changes in NAEP Long-term Mathematics, Percentile Scores, 9-Year-Old Students

PERCENTILE	2020 SCORE	CHANGE	2022 SCORE
90th	286*	↓ 3	283
75th	267*	↓ 5	262
50th	245*	↓ 8	238
25th	219*	↓ 11	208
10th	191*	↓ 12	178

*Significantly different (p < .05) from 2022. Source: Downloaded from “NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics”, at <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltr/2022/#section-recent-student-performance-trends>

Performance levels across both reading and mathematics saw statistically-significant declines in scores, but disparities existed in the rates of decline for students of color and students at lower proficiency levels, which widened existing large disparities.⁷

Of course, test scores and COVID learning impacts vary by [location](#) and other factors, and many students stayed on pace during the pandemic.⁸ A [return to pre-pandemic proficiency](#) in grade-level standards is still possible before high school graduation for struggling younger students.⁹ But, urgency to catch up remains, because even before the pandemic the overall trend for high school graduates was increasingly influenced by the growing population of students from racial/ethnic backgrounds that have been historically underserved in education, and the pandemic compounded educational disparities. Education and policy leaders will need to dig deep to understand where to best focus recovery strategies and investments to aid the unique needs of their student populations.

Fewer U.S. Public Middle Schoolers, Substantial Learning Impacts

Fewer middle school students in fall 2021 than predicted by pre-pandemic trends, and notable impacts on learning proficiency, could lead to even fewer public high school graduates after 2025 than previously expected.

Compared to the slight rebound in U.S. public elementary school enrollments between fall 2020 and fall 2021, the number of public school sixth to eighth graders decreased 2% in fall 2021, as shown by grade in Figure 2. The reported number of U.S. middle schoolers was lower even than the 1.4% fewer middle schoolers projected by pre-pandemic data and this amplified the declines in fall 2020. According to WICHE's analysis, decreases in the reported number of public middle schoolers exceeded the already predicted decreases in 46 states, on average by about 2%.

Some of the decline in public middle school enrollments from fall 2020 to fall 2021 might reflect movement to [homeschooling](#) or to private schools.¹⁰ However, that best-case scenario presents its own problem, as it stymies the ability to monitor progress among all U.S. middle schoolers. The lack of comprehensive data is of concern, because current post-COVID [assessment results demonstrate](#) the extent of pandemic learning impacts on these grade levels.

Analyses from other [assessment tests](#) used throughout the nation support NAEP's findings with similar outcomes, as do many state assessment results.¹¹

Education and policy leaders will need to dig deep to understand where to best focus recovery strategies and investments to aid the unique needs of their student populations.

Elementary Student Learning During the Pandemic

- ▶ In 2021-22, [younger students](#) regained some (but not all) of the learning achievement lost in the first year of COVID.
- ▶ A greater share of students' test performance remains below grade-level than before the pandemic.
- ▶ Math levels were more negatively impacted than reading levels.
- ▶ On average, students who struggled before the pandemic fell further behind and have the greatest challenges to catching up.¹²

Middle School Student Learning During the Pandemic

- ▶ [Spring 2022 assessments](#) indicated that middle schoolers lost more ground than younger students over the past two years or did not recoup as much lost learning.
- ▶ Middle schoolers' [math skill](#) levels were particularly impacted, with [some evidence](#) that math learning impacts may be up to four times greater than impacts with English skills.
- ▶ Middle school students who [lost ground](#) might need up to five years to return to pre-pandemic performance, which is less than the typical four years of high school, and does not account for the high school math they need to master simultaneously.¹³

FALL 2021 U.S. PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL POPULATIONS

WICHE analyzed students counts in the 9th to 12th grades from fall 2021 in an attempt to discern whether there might be changes from what was previously predicted about public high school graduates for the next few years. In combination with the growing evidence of [proficiency declines](#) among high school students, otherwise modest changes in student numbers could be leading indicators of potentially smaller public high school graduating classes than previously projected through 2025-26 – just before the almost certain demographically-driven decline.¹⁴

A Bulge in the Number of 9th Grade Students

[Analysis](#) that predated the release of these fall 2021 headcount data raised an alert about a “bulge” or increase in public school 9th grade enrollment levels last year.¹⁵ These newly-issued data confirm 152,200 more U.S. 9th graders, a 4% increase, between fall 2020 and fall 2021 (Figure 2).

Some portion of this large annual increase in U.S. public school 9th grade enrollments in fall 2021 could relate to students entering high school, who were born in the last of the larger birth cohorts through 2007. But the reported 4% increase is about twice the anticipated increase. WICHE projected a 2% increase in the number of U.S. public school 9th graders in fall 2020 (78,200 more) and fall 2021 (72,200 more), however enrollment in that grade level from fall 2020 to 2021 exceeded the projected annual increase by 50% or more in 36 states. Conversely, more than half of the states nonetheless had fewer 9th graders in fall 2021 than were projected by pre-pandemic conditions, reflecting pandemic-related population shifts.

Some portion of this year-over-year bulge might relate to the number of births around the 2007 peak, and it is possible that some students returned to public schools for 9th grade in fall 2021 after opting for private or homeschooling in 2020-21. However, emerging [evidence](#) points to increased rates of 9th grade “[grade repeating](#)” as contributing to this anomalous bulge. That is, 9th graders in fall 2020 who may not have proceeded to 10th grade in 2021 due to [chronic absenteeism](#), lack of earned [credits](#) or [proficiency losses](#).¹⁶ The grade repeating trend at this point in the pipeline is also consistent with the aforementioned COVID-related academic progress impacts among middle schoolers. Concerningly, research indicates that students who get off the educational track in 9th grade are less likely to eventually graduate.¹⁷

See Figure 2 on page 3



More than half of the states, nonetheless, had fewer 9th graders in fall 2021 than were projected by pre-pandemic conditions, reflecting pandemic-related population shifts.

Numbers for Grades 10-12 Reflect Predicted Levels of Enrollment

Pre-pandemic projections suggested a 1% annual increase of U.S. public school 10th to 12th graders in fall 2021, but instead a 0.3% annual decrease was reported. U.S. public schools reported 2% fewer 10th graders than previously anticipated, which is roughly equivalent to the unexpected increase of 9th graders and supports the theory of a higher rate of 9th grade repeating. The number of U.S. public school 11th graders remained flat, per earlier projections of an enrollment drop of only 0.1%, but 1.2% more 12th graders were enrolled than predicted by pre-pandemic data.

2020 AND 2021 U.S. PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

High school graduates are the focus of WICHE's projections, but information about [graduation rates](#) or numbers of students graduating in 2020 to 2022 is not widely available, similar as with previous years.¹⁸ Therefore, WICHE collected data through Class of 2019 for the 10th edition of projections and has since gathered as much available data that could be obtained on public high school graduates for class of 2020 and 2021 from state departments of education.¹⁹ Table 2 summarizes the public high school graduate counts that WICHE has obtained since the 10th edition.

Table 2.

Class of 2020 and 2021 High School Graduates

		NUMBER OF STATES	NUMBER AND % OF ANNUAL NATIONAL NUMBER	HIGHLIGHTS COMPARED TO WHAT WAS PROJECTED
TOTAL	Class of 2020	36 states	2.94 million, 86%	⬆️ 39,700 more than projected (1%)
	Class of 2021	29 states	2.57 million, 81%	⬇️ 3,500 fewer than projected
BY RACE OR ETHNICITY	Class of 2020	34 states	White: 1.33 million, 79%	⬆️ 11,800 more than projected (1%)
			Hispanic: 765,000, 79%	⬆️ 16,000 more than projected (2%)
			Black: 370,000, 77%	⬆️ 10,100 more than projected (3%)
			Asian: 165,000, 84%	⬆️ 300 more than projected
			Other: 104,000, 71%	⬇️ 2,000 fewer than projected (-2%)
	Class of 2021	26 states	White: 1.93 million, 71%	⬆️ <100 different than projected
			Hispanic: 740,000, 85%	⬇️ 1,400 fewer than projected
			Black: 348,000, 74%	⬇️ 300 fewer than projected
			Asian: 170,000, 84%	⬇️ 300 fewer than projected
			Other: 102,000, 65%	⬇️ 4,000 fewer than projected (-4%)

Note. Less than 0.5% difference unless indicated. Data only available from 10 states for class of 2022. States for which data were obtained are listed with the downloadable dataset at <https://knocking.wiche.edu/data/other-data/>. Source: Data collected and analyzed by Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

The states for which WICHE obtained graduate counts encompass approximately 80% of the national annual number of public high school graduates. What can be concluded about high school graduation over the past several years is limited because these data are not comprehensive. Without data that include public school, private school, and full race/ethnicity demographic statistics for all states, it is not possible to determine how previous data and predictions relate to graduation improvements or decreases or the impacts of family interstate movements, switching learning environments between public, private or homeschooling, or any other change factors.

The data summarized in Table 2 suggest overall relative stability in the numbers of high school graduates and not a stark reduction of graduating 11th or 12th graders at the national level for the first two graduating classes impacted by the pandemic. But data for the third affected graduating class are only beginning to emerge. More data are needed to understand the full scope of the pandemic's impact on high schoolers. Initial data such as these do, however, reinforce the findings of [other reports](#) that the 2020 to 2022 postsecondary enrollment declines were likely due to changed enrollment behavior rather than significantly fewer high school graduates during the first two years of the pandemic.²⁰

TRENDS BY PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT RACE AND ETHNICITY

Pandemic impacts on historically underserved student populations could be a leading cause of potential disruption to the predicted number of U.S. high school graduates. While it is not possible to pinpoint causes of change in these high-level enrollments, there is evidence of variation by student race and ethnicity in fall 2020 and fall 2021 enrollment trends (Figure 3).

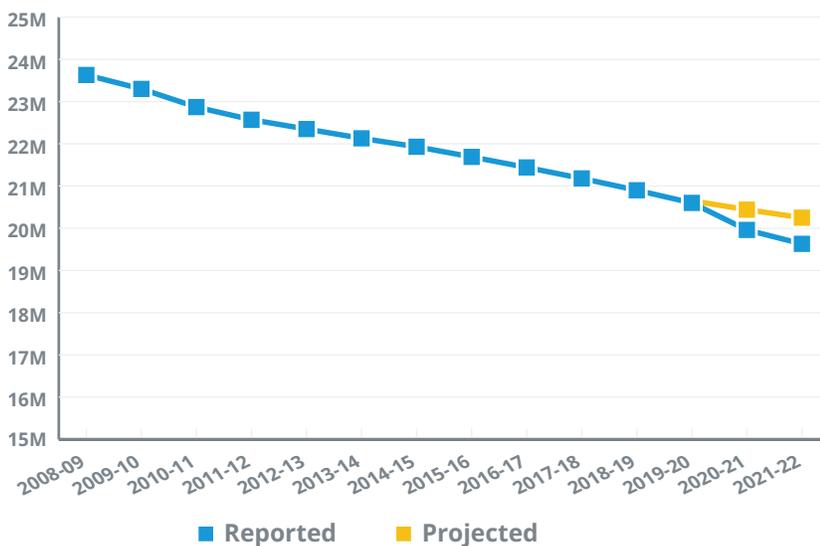
White Non-Hispanic Public School Students

The number of White non-Hispanic U.S. public school students decreased 3.1% in fall 2020 and 1.6% in fall 2021, amounting to possibly 2% to 3% fewer students than would have been predicted by pre-COVID data. The unexpectedly steep decline in White public school enrollment accounted for at least 75% of the overall national public school enrollment decline in these two years. This decrease was a disproportionate change considering White students comprised 47% of public school enrollment in fall 2019).²¹ The declines for this racial demographic were concentrated in elementary grades, but high school numbers were also slightly lower than projected, by less than 1%. Nationally, 9th grade White student enrollments were also slightly lower than projected in fall 2021 and do not evidence the unusually large annual 9th grade increase seen overall or among students of other ethnicities or races.

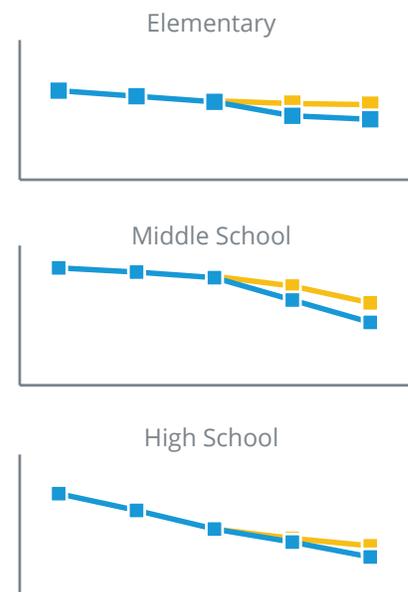
Figure 3

Public School Enrollment Changes Varied by Race/Ethnicity

White Non-Hispanic Students: Total Grades 1 to 12, Fall 2008 to Fall 2021



By School Level, Fall 2017 to Fall 2021

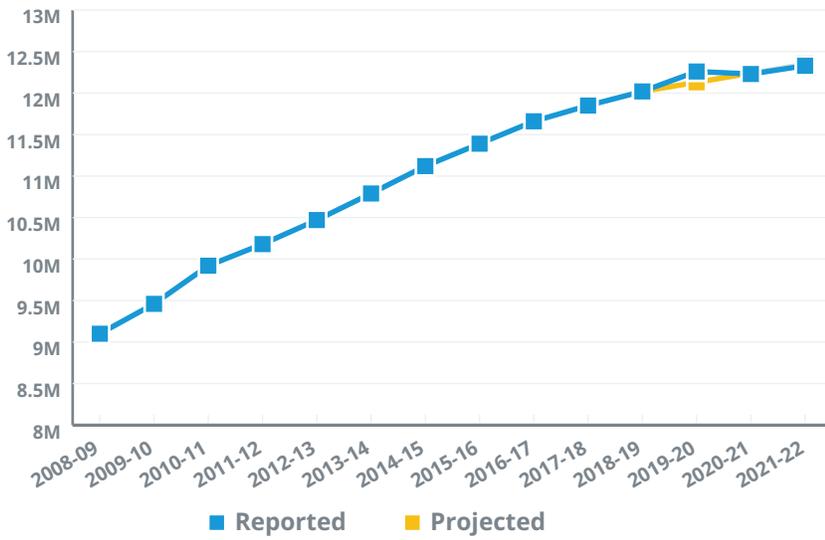


Note. U.S. public school headcounts, fall 2008 to fall 2021, total Grades 1-12 and by school level and race or ethnicity. Includes the District of Columbia and 49 states not including Washington, which had not reported data for school year 2021-22 by the deadline for these data. Native American and Alaska Native enrollments do not include BIE or tribally-run schools. Source: WICHE analysis of NCES [Common Core of Data](#) compared to WICHE [projections](#).

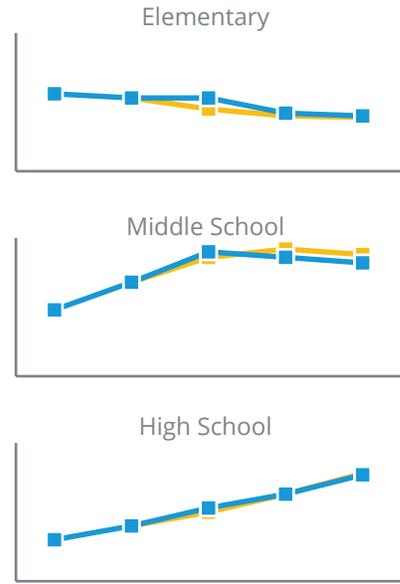
Figure 3

Public School Enrollment Changes Varied by Race/Ethnicity (continued)

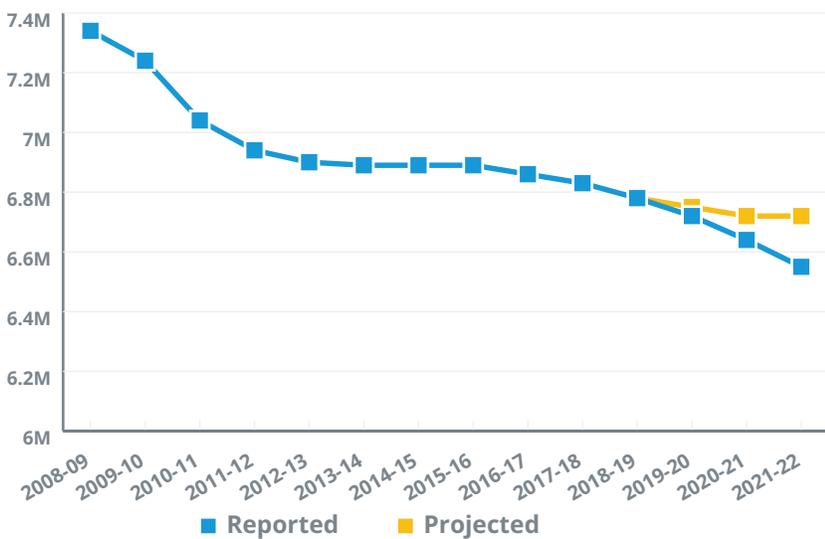
Hispanic (Any Race) Students: Total Grades 1 to 12, Fall 2008 to Fall 2021



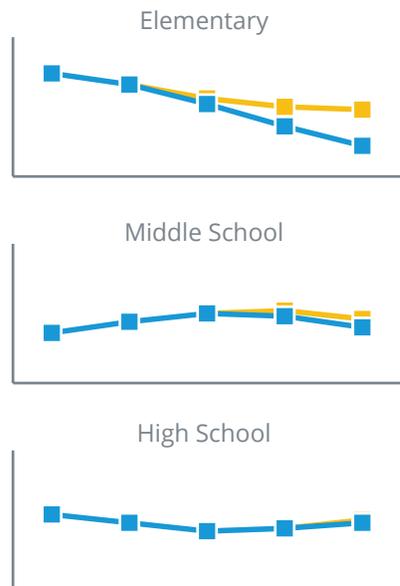
By School Level, Fall 2017 to 2021



Black Non-Hispanic Students: Total Grades 1 to 12, Fall 2008 to Fall 2021



By School Level, Fall 2017 to Fall 2021

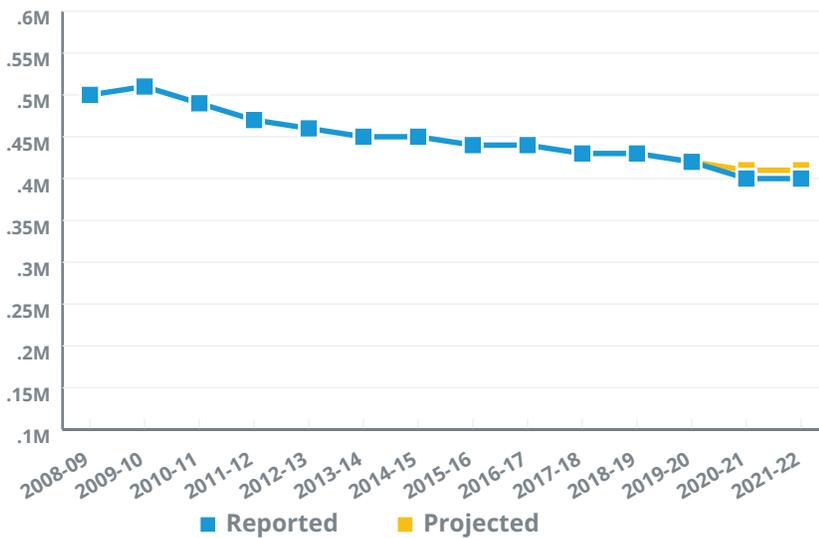


Note. See Figure 3 notes on page 9.

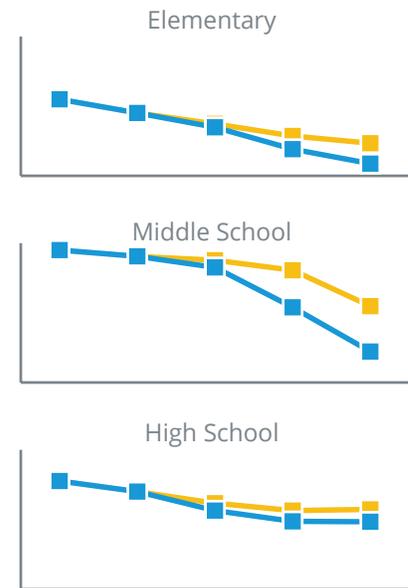
Figure 3

Public School Enrollment Changes Varied by Race/Ethnicity (continued)

Native American or Alaska Native Students: Total Grades 1 to 12, Fall 2008 to Fall 2021



By School Level, Fall 2017 to Fall 2021



Note. See Figure 3 notes on page 9.

Hispanic (Any Race) Public School Students

Total Hispanic U.S. public school enrollments were virtually the same in fall 2020 and fall 2021 as had been projected by pre-pandemic data, within 0.1% difference each year. Hispanic middle school enrollment levels varied, with 30 states posting an annual increase in fall 2021, significantly more than the 23 states predicted. Thirty-one states nonetheless had, on average, about 1% fewer total Hispanic middle school students in fall 2021 than the slightly greater numbers projected by pre-pandemic data.

On the other hand, the number of Hispanic 9th graders steeply increased, more than 7%, from fall 2020 to fall 2021, which could reflect some of the strong ongoing increases of the Hispanic youth population and students returning to public schools. But annual increases averaging 12-13% at the state level during this time are far above the projected 7-8% increase, which could be evidence of increased retention of Hispanic 9th graders. Fall 2021 U.S. public school enrollment patterns for Hispanic 10th to 12th graders were similar to the overall high school enrollment patterns described above.²²

Black Non-Hispanic Public School Students

Black non-Hispanic U.S. public school enrollments declined 1.2% and 1.3% in fall 2020 and fall 2021, respectively, whereas pre-COVID data projected only a 0.4% decrease. Black, non-Hispanic students accounted for 15% of U.S. public school students in fall 2019, and their decreased enrollment in fall 2020 and fall 2021 accounted for 14% and 19% of the total student declines in fall 2020 and fall 2021, respectively. Thirty-nine states experienced declines in enrollment of Black students in fall 2021 rather than the pre-COVID projection for decline in only 23 states. This change resulted in an overall average national enrollment decline of 1.3% compared to the projected slight increase of 0.6%.

Enrollment levels for Black middle school students in fall 2021 were substantially lower than previously projected. The 2.7% average state annual rate of decrease in Black middle school students was almost twice the projected rate of decrease of 1.3% for fall 2021. Forty-three states had an average of 3.6% fewer Black middle school students in fall 2021 than projected by pre-pandemic data.

Analysis shows a sharp increase of 6.7% Black non-Hispanic students enrolled in the 9th grade, which is more than double the earlier projected annual increase of 2.6% for fall 2021. Meanwhile, fall 2021 U.S. public school 10th to 12th grade enrollment patterns for Black non-Hispanic students were similar to the overall high school enrollment patterns described above. However, there were about 1% more Black non-Hispanic 11th graders and 2.5% more 12th graders in that demographic enrolled than projected. It is unclear whether this slight deviation might signal improved progress through high school for this student population, increased 12th grade repeating, or a combination or another factor, including projection imprecision.

Native American and Alaska Native Non-Hispanic Students

Fall 2021 U.S. public school enrollment of non-Hispanic Native American and Alaska Native students met pre-pandemic projections, with 37 states seeing an average annual decline of 1.4% fewer students since fall 2020.²³ Similar to patterns seen with Hispanic and Black non-Hispanic students, there was a steep 6.9% state average annual increase of Native American and Alaska Native 9th graders from fall 2020 to fall 2021. This enrollment bulge was significantly larger than the projected average annual increase of 1.6%. Meanwhile, the number of Native American and Alaska Native 10th graders was 3.5% fewer than projected. The 11th and 12th grade enrollment of these demographics was about the same as projected.

In recent years, 35,000 to 40,000 students also attended Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)-run and tribally-controlled schools, which accounts for approximately 7% of the combined total of Native American and Alaska Native students in U.S. public schools, BIE and tribally-controlled schools. The number of students reported by BIE began a trend of decline in 2017-18 that continued into 2021-22.²⁴ While current incomplete data do not allow WICHE to pinpoint precise causes for changes in enrollment, this student demographic is known to have faced particularly [unique challenges](#) and disruptions to their learning during the pandemic.²⁵

Note: For the following student race and ethnicity categories, data did not support making projections of younger student populations in the 10th edition of projections, so we can only compare to what was projected for middle and high school enrollments, and not elementary level or Grade 1-12 totals.

Asian or Native Hawai'ian/Other Pacific Islander Non-Hispanic Public School Students

Asian non-Hispanic U.S. public school student populations saw substantial declines between fall 2020 and fall 2021. There was a 2% annual decline among elementary grade students, a 4.8% annual decline in middle school enrollment, and a 2.5% loss of high school students during that year. This decrease is especially significant when compared to the slight overall annual increases of 1% in 2020 and 1.7% in 2021 previously projected for this growing racial youth demographic.²⁶ In total, U.S. middle schools reported 7% fewer Asian students in fall 2021 than projected by pre-pandemic data, and U.S. high schools' enrollment reflected a 6% loss.

The Native Hawai'ian/Other Pacific Islander non-Hispanic U.S. public school student population also saw substantial declines between fall 2020 and fall 2021. There was a 13% decline in elementary grade students, and 13% and 18% annual decreases among middle and high school students of this demographic, respectively. These data are a significant deviation from the small projected annual declines of only 1% to 2%.²⁷ In total, U.S. public middle schools reported 9% fewer Native Hawai'ian/Other Pacific Islander students enrolled in fall 2021 than projected by pre-pandemic data; U.S. public high schools saw nearly 6% fewer of these students.

These unexpectedly high enrollment declines for the growing Asian and Native Hawai'ian/Other Pacific Islander youth population could reflect the fear and stress on [students](#) and families from bullying, discrimination, and other health and economic impacts that Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander [communities](#) in the U.S. experienced during the pandemic.²⁸ There were reports early in the first year of the pandemic that Asian and Pacific Islander students transitioned to [homeschooling](#) at similar rates as other student populations, and continued online learning at greater rates than overall during the 2020-21 school year. But WICHE did not find more recent information to explain public school enrollment declines with this demographic.²⁹

Multiracial Public School Students

The only racial or ethnic category that saw an overall increase in fall 2021 were multiracial public school students. Between fall 2020 and fall 2021, U.S. public schools saw a 3% increase in multiracial elementary school students, 2% decline in multiracial middle school students, and 5% increase in multiracial high school students. However, these increases deviated from pre-pandemic growth patterns for this youth population. When variance from early projections is considered, statistics show that 6% fewer multiracial U.S. public middle school students enrolled in fall 2021 than expected, and 7% fewer of their high school counterparts.

OTHER SOURCES OF STUDENTS

The foregoing analysis only describes the enrollment changes with U.S. public schools through the 2021-22 school year. As of February 2023, available data remain insufficient to describe the full potential impact of COVID-related school disruptions on the total education pipeline. In 2021-22, approximately 833,000 fewer children attended public schools than might have been predicted, a gap of 2%. So, where and how are those children learning, and what portion may have disengaged from school entirely?

Homeschooling

The most recent available national enrollment estimates currently have a one-year lag, but, according to the [Condition of Education](#), 87.1% of U.S. children attended public schools, 7.6% attended private schools and 5.4% received homeschool instruction during the 2020-21 school year.³⁰ Other estimates based on U.S. Census Bureau data derive that in 2020-21, 85.8% of school-aged children attended public schools, 8.2% were private schooled, and 6.0% were homeschooled.³¹ According to the various estimates, as many as 2.8 million to 3.7 million U.S. school-age children in grades K-12 might have been homeschooled during the 2020-21 school year, which derives to an increase that could range from 311,000 to 1.2 million children receiving homeschooling in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. Recent [analysis](#) covering 18 states through fall 2022 suggests possible a stabilizing trend in homeschooling, but still indicates higher levels for that education choice than pre-pandemic.³² Data also indicate increases in [online public school enrollment](#), for which there is less information available about learning environment or quality.³³

Private Schools

Data from private schools are difficult to gather and analyze even in the best of times. Key data for the private school sector comes from pre-pandemic federal survey results, so other information must be used to analyze this sector post-pandemic. The most recent national estimate shows 4.2 million students in Grades 1-12 in U.S. private school in the 2019-20 school year.³⁴ This number accounted for 8.4% of the 49.6 million school-aged children nationwide.

According to the data by sector, students at Catholic schools comprised an estimated 38.5% of private school students in 2019-20, nominally surpassed by the 38.9% of students attending other private religious schools. An additional 22.6% attended private nonsectarian schools. According to the [National Catholic Educational Association](#), Catholic school enrollment declined nearly 3% between 2019-20 and 2021-22.³⁵ According to the [National Association of Independent Schools](#), student enrollment at member independent non-sectarian and sectarian member schools dropped 4% between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, and information about 2021-22 enrollments is currently unavailable.³⁶ Other recent research suggests an almost 75% increase of students now attending U.S. private schools, which would indicate an enrolment surge from 4.2 million students in fall 2020 to 7.3 million students in spring 2022; but this higher estimate is based on parent survey responses.³⁷

Immigration

Recent increases in immigration rates could contribute to future growth in high school graduates. By some [estimates](#), a [quarter](#) of school-age youth may be foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents.³⁸ [Immigration into the U.S. was down](#) in the years that relate to WICHE's published projections, and may have remained [relatively low](#) through early 2022 before [recently](#) picking up.³⁹ Some [estimates](#) suggest the number of children migrating to the U.S. unaccompanied or as part of a family unit has substantially increased in recent years.⁴⁰

Immigration trends are developing rapidly, but the majority of foreign-born children or those born to foreign-born parents should be captured by recent school enrollment counts, primarily in U.S. [public schools](#).⁴¹ These youth are therefore largely reflected in the existing projections, which are based on student enrollment counts, and potential addition from recent immigration would relate to projections 10-15 years in the future. However, "newcomer" students' ability to graduate is an important factor for graduate numbers during this period of youth population decline, and migration influxes will definitely impact schools in key resettlement states and local [areas](#).⁴²

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data and information in this brief, WICHE has the following recommendations for educational leaders and policy makers:

Close data gaps about nonpublic school populations.

A substantial portion of the public school enrollment declines may be students who shifted to other learning environments and not who have disengaged from school. It is unknown whether the level of homeschooling and possible shifts to private schools will be sustained. There are much less data about these students and the quality of their learning than is available for public school students. Governmental and nongovernmental entities like private school and homeschooling associations might help fill this gap.

Re-assess and refresh COVID-19 relief strategies.

Most plans for spending of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) learning recovery funds were formulated before there was a solid picture of the impacts of the pandemic on student learning, well-being and progress. States and other agencies that manage the COVID-19 relief funding and other response strategies should consider the newest possible information and adjust to current and ongoing targeted needs.

Implement targeted recovery strategies.

Detailed, emerging, and real-time data should be used to identify needs for specific, targeted responses. These data include the latest information regarding attendance, term assessment results, high school graduation, and teacher and school staff needs at state and local levels. Where “perfect” data are not available in a time of urgency, it is reasonable to act on trends corroborated by other information. States could assist with use and application of data in real time, if local leaders and educators do not have capacity, leverage and publicize information to inform communities about needs, and broker input and support from parents, businesses and other stakeholders towards targeted solutions.

What’s Next?

Current available information does not directly answer the question “Where are the missing U.S. public school students?” However, the preponderance of evidence suggests that much of the unexpected decrease in public school enrollments through the 2021-22 school year is likely due to families choosing to homeschool or use private schools during the pandemic. But it is neither clear whether COVID-era enrollment shifts will persist, nor what portion of the current public school enrollment decrease might reflect students who have [entirely disengaged](#) or dropped out of learning.⁴³

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Specifically, fall 2020 and fall 2021 state-level membership counts from the Common Core of Data, available at: National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Common core of data: America's public schools*. U.S. Department of Education Institute of Educational Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>. Fall 2021 data are considered “preliminary” and do not include Washington, which had not reported data for school year 2021-22 by the deadline for these data. Therefore, throughout this report, “U.S.” and “national” data points encompass the District of Columbia and 49 states. The analysis is only state level, because fall 2021 district- and school-level membership counts have not been released under the Common Core of Data yet.
- ² Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. (2020, December). *Knocking at the college door: Projections of high school graduates*. <https://knocking.wiche.edu>.
- ³ Not including the state of Washington (see also endnote 1). This analysis may not align with news reports about public school enrollment losses, which typically included potential pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students. WICHE does not cover prekindergarten and kindergarten in this analysis because they are neither universally compulsory nor available across the U.S.
- ⁴ Java, N., Bharadwaj, R., & Newman, A. (2022, September). *School disrupted part 1: Pandemic-driven decline in K-12 public school enrollment continues*. Tyton Partners. <https://tytonpartners.com/school-disrupted-part-1-pandemic-driven-decline-in-k-12-public-school-enrollment-continues/>.
- ⁵ The small rebound in elementary grade enrollment numbers could include some children whose families delayed entry into elementary school.
- ⁶ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *The nation's report card*. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>. Note: Other assessment results—some referred to in this report—are based on samples that are less fully representative but have indicated similar trends.
- ⁷ Math scores dropped by 5 percentage points for White, 13 points for Black, and eight points for Hispanic students. The divide between Black and White students widened by 8 percentage points during the pandemic. In reading, scores uniformly dropped six points for White, Black, and Hispanic students. There was little change in reading or math between 2020 and 2022 for Asian, Native American and multiracial students. See also: Reading and math scores fell sharply during pandemic, data show. (2022, September 1). *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/01/1120510251/reading-math-test-scores-pandemic>. Mahnken, K. (2022, September 1). ‘Nation’s report card’: Two decades of growth wiped out by two years of pandemic. *The74*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/nations-report-card-two-decades-of-growth-wiped-out-by-two-years-of-pandemic/>. Barshay, J. (2022, September 12). Proof points: Six puzzling questions from the disastrous NAEP results. *The Hechinger Report*. <https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-six-puzzling-questions-from-the-disastrous-naep-results>.
- ⁸ DiMarco, B. (2022, December 8). What the pandemic did to NAEP, state standardized test scores. *FutureEd*. <https://www.future-ed.org/state-standardized-test-scores/>.
- ⁹ Kuhfeld, M. & Lewis, K. (2022, July). Student achievement in 2021-22: Cause for hope and continued urgency. *NWEA*. <https://www.nwea.org/research/publication/student-achievement-in-2021-22-cause-for-hope-and-continued-urgency/>.
- ¹⁰ Data are not available about the rate or number of homeschooled children in fall 2021. But available data suggest it might have potentially doubled between 2019 and 2020 from 2.9% of school-aged children in 2019 to anywhere from 5.4% to 6.8% in 2020. See: National Center for Education Statistics. (2022, May). *Homeschooled children and reasons for homeschooling*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/tgk>.
- ¹¹ Kuhfeld, M. & Lewis, K. (2022, July). Student achievement in 2021-22: Cause for hope and continued urgency. *NWEA*. <https://www.nwea.org/research/publication/student-achievement-in-2021-22-cause-for-hope-and-continued-urgency/>. Curriculum Associates. (2022, September). The state of student learning in 2020. <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/-/media/mainsite/files/corporate/state-of-student-learning-2022.pdf>. ACT. (2022, October 12). Average ACT score for the high school class of 2022 declines to lowest level in more than 30 years. <https://leadershipblog.act.org/2022/10/GradClassRelease2022.html>. O’Donnell, P. (2022, October 6). *Pandemic widened Ohio achievement gaps, leaving ‘vulnerable’ students further behind*. *The74*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/pandemic-widened-ohio-achievement-gaps-leaving-vulnerable-students-further-behind/>.
- ¹² For discussion of the limitations of high-level assessment scores, see: Schweig, J., Kuhfeld, M., Diliberti, M. K., McEachin, A. & Mariano, L. T. (2022). *Changes in school composition during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for school-average interim test score use*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1037-2.html. Mahnken, K. (2022, July 14). Harvard economist offers gloomy forecast on reversing pandemic learning loss. *The74*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/harvard-economist-offers-gloomy-forecast-on-reversing-pandemic-learning-loss/>.
- ¹³ Kuhfeld, M. & Lewis, K. (2022, July). Student achievement in 2021-22: Cause for hope and continued urgency. *NWEA*. <https://www.nwea.org/research/publication/student-achievement-in-2021-22-cause-for-hope-and-continued-urgency/>. Curriculum Associates. (2022, September). The state of student learning in 2020. <https://www.curriculumassociates.com/-/media/mainsite/files/corporate/state-of-student-learning-2022.pdf>. Wakelyn, D. (2022, December 14). Learning loss is worse than NAEP showed. Middle school math must be the priority. *The74*. <https://www.the74million.org/article/learning-loss-is-worse-than-naep-showed-middle-school-math-must-be-the-priority/>. Yoder, S. (2022, December 30). Inside the new middle school math crisis. *The Hechinger Report*. <https://hechingerreport.org/inside-the-new-middle-school-math-crisis/>. Note: Pre- and post-pandemic NAEP scores were not released for eighth graders such as they were for fourth graders. But based on 2019 regular NAEP administrations, national average mathematics scores for eighth graders were one point lower than in 2017, and three points lower in reading in 2019 than in 2017. In other words, eighth-grade mathematics and reading performance appear to have plateaued an nominally declined prior to the pandemic. See highlights from the 2019 assessments in: U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *The nation's report card*. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>.
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