

# ROLL CALL

*A Landscape Review of the Students, Financing,  
and Performance of Milwaukee's K-12 Schools*



WISCONSIN  
**POLICY FORUM**

## ABOUT THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their lengthy histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. WPF is committed to those same activities and that spirit of nonpartisanship.

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to acknowledge and thank the Northwestern Mutual Foundation for its generous support of this research through the funding of a dedicated research fellow, Robert Rauh, who served as one of three members of our primary research team. His participation allowed us to expand the scope of this work and to complement the Forum's research expertise with the experience of a respected Milwaukee education leader. In addition, we would like to thank the Greater Milwaukee Foundation for its ongoing general support of the Forum's education research agenda.

We further offer gratitude to the organizations and individuals who shared their time, talent, and thoughtfulness through many hours of meetings, document reviews, and interviews. Most particularly, our study advisory committee members (listed in Appendix A) provided diverse perspectives and critical feedback throughout the development and execution of this research. The analysis offered in this report, however, should be attributed to the Wisconsin Policy Forum alone.



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# INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, Milwaukee was widely seen as the epicenter of “education reform” in the country, earning both praise from proponents and scorn from detractors. In the face of poor student outcomes and societal trends such as increasing segregation and poverty, multiple interests had converged to establish the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), the country’s first initiative to offer publicly funded tuition vouchers for students to attend private schools. Independently operated public charter schools opened a few years later, further expanding the options available to families.

Democratic State Representative Annette “Polly” Williams advocated for the choice programs as a means of empowerment for low-income city residents, particularly aiming to increase Black families’ control over their children’s education. Republican Governor Tommy Thompson publicly expressed hope of encouraging better quality by increasing competition between schools in Milwaukee, following the arguments of free market economists like Milton Friedman. The views of these and other elected officials – supported by a coalition of parent and community organizers, business interests, and private philanthropy – rested on the belief that students were not sufficiently or equitably served by the current education system, and that families would take more school options if given them.

Opponents, however, characterized the shift of students and funds away from Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) as privatization efforts that undermined the traditional public school system and its obligations under the state constitution. They feared that the resulting dispersion of students would exacerbate inequality, fail to offer public accountability and transparency, and divert resources from MPS, threatening its ability to provide an adequately and equitably resourced system of public schools to its residents. The stakes were high for Milwaukee students, whose levels of poverty stand out on both a statewide and national scale, as well as for the city’s wellbeing and for the state’s workforce and economy.

The Forum took stock of the resulting educational landscape 20 years later in a 2014 series of reports: [“What is the Milwaukee K-12 School System?”](#) and [“The K-12 School System in Milwaukee: How has it changed and how does it measure up to peers?”](#) Our research provided a broad overview of the types of schools operating in Milwaukee, admissions processes, academic quality, student demographics, and education funding. It further analyzed recent changes in the landscape and compared them to the experiences of national peers.

In the fall of 2023, we took up these questions again, equipped with nearly a decade of additional data. We did so in the context of recovery from a global pandemic and a recently passed state budget and related legislation that, among other provisions, provided K-12 funds and – separately – helped stabilize the finances of both the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County. With local government now on firmer ground, the time appeared ripe to return civic attention to the quality of education in the city. Our specific research questions included the following:

- What does the educational ecosystem look like in Milwaukee right now?
- What trends were found in regard to enrollment, demographics, and finances across the different sectors of schools in Milwaukee?
- What trends are identifiable in regard to outcomes for students on the whole in Milwaukee, using both local and national benchmarks?



These questions took on more urgency in early 2024, after our research was already well underway. Alongside other Wisconsin school districts grappling with enrollment losses and state underfunding relative to inflation, the Milwaukee School of Board Directors voted in January to place an operational referendum on the April 4, 2024, ballot for the purposes of authorizing up to \$252 million in additional revenue for MPS, to be raised through a combination of increased local property taxes and state aid. The Forum drew upon our years of following MPS finances, in addition to the specific research in progress for this project, to release an [analysis](#) and accompanying [op-ed](#) on the referendum.

We subsequently published our annual [MPS budget brief](#) in May, analyzing the impact of the narrowly approved referendum on the superintendent's proposed budget and flagging unanswered questions, missing data, and an unaudited 2023 financial statement that undercut our ability and that of the public to analyze the proposal. Less than a week after publication, news broke of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) sanctions placed upon MPS as a result of missing and incorrect financial information. In the weeks since, the district has lost its superintendent, chief financial officer, and comptroller; community organizers have initiated recall efforts against four MPS school board members; and the governor has announced upcoming operational and instructional audits for the district.

This latest report therefore now arrives during a time of heightened scrutiny and civic engagement. While public attention is currently trained primarily on MPS, our research encompasses the whole of the city's education system, marking both commonalities and differences between different types of publicly funded schools. It highlights financial aspects of the system but also expands the discussion to include student enrollment and outcomes.

The report is organized into three major sections: Milwaukee's Students and Schools, covering the basic schooling options available to students along with student enrollment and demographic trends; School Funding in Milwaukee, outlining the core funding mechanisms and their funding levels for schools in the city; and Student Outcomes and School Performance, summarizing broad trends in Milwaukee's academic results. We conclude with key insights for the consideration of both policymakers and the public.

We hope the report's findings ground both current and future policy discussions with important facts and nonpartisan insights. We further intend to inform those discussions with a second report this fall, in which we will highlight promising K-12 practices and innovations occurring both within Milwaukee and nationally. We look forward to sharing our findings as they emerge, responding to the recent calls for our city to better serve its children.



## K-12 Schooling Options in Milwaukee

**Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS)** – The “traditional” public schools that are staffed by district employees, governed by an elected school board, and subject to all state and federal regulations related to public schools. Together, they comprise the local school district for students who live within the city of Milwaukee and by law must serve these students.

**Milwaukee Charter Schools** – Independently operated, secular schools considered public institutions under the law. Charter schools operate with more autonomy than traditional public schools, in exchange for which authorizers regularly review their performance, finances, and compliance with the law. In Milwaukee, charter schools can be authorized by MPS, the Common Council of the city of Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), or Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), although MATC has never exercised this authority. Charter schools authorized by the city or UWM are considered “independent charters.” Charter schools authorized by MPS but run by an outside entity are called “non-instrumentality charters” (NICs) and operate in a similar fashion to the independent charters. (Charter schools that are both authorized and run by MPS are called “instrumentality charters.” Since they function more like traditional public schools, they are grouped with other MPS schools for the purposes of this report.)

**Private Choice Programs** – Taxpayer-funded, state-administered programs that provide tuition vouchers for students to enroll at private schools, either religious or secular. Eligible students must meet residency and income requirements. Private schools participating in the choice programs are subject to more regulation than other private schools but substantially less than traditional public and charter schools. Wisconsin operates three choice programs: the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) for Milwaukee residents, Racine Parental Choice Program (RPCP) for Racine residents, and Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP) for other Wisconsin students. The state also offers the Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP), which works in a similar way, providing state funding for private schooling for students with disabilities.

**Private Pay Students** – Students who attend private school without taxpayer support. Schools that accept only private pay students receive the least government oversight.

**Open Enrollment Program** – This program allows students to attend public schools outside of their resident district, subject to certain restrictions (e.g., available space, ability to provide special needs services).

**Chapter 220 Program** – This integration program gives state aid to school districts for student transfers that increase racial diversity, such as Milwaukee students who attend suburban districts, and vice versa. The program stopped accepting new students in 2015, and it has nearly phased out.

**Home School** – Home schools operate with limited government oversight with teaching from a parent, guardian, or designee.



# MILWAUKEE'S STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

Milwaukee stands out from the rest of the state in many respects, including the size and composition of its student population and the degree to which students are spread across many schooling options. We begin our research with an overview of these options and demographic descriptions of the students they educate.

After three decades, efforts to create alternatives to traditional K-12 public schools in Milwaukee have resulted in an increasingly decentralized system in which the number of students enrolled in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS)<sup>1</sup> and the number paying tuition to attend private schools have each plummeted while enrollment continues to rise in charter schools and private schools receiving state voucher payments. One net effect is the declining share of students educated at traditional public schools, which may soon drop below the 50% mark.

These shifts have occurred as the city's overall youth population has decreased, heightening the competition between the three publicly funded "sectors": traditional public, charter, and private choice (also known as "voucher" – see textbox on previous page for terms). Over the last 20 years, the net population decrease has included the loss of over 20,000 Black children, the loss of even more white children, and a gain of over 10,000 Hispanic children.

The income, race, and ethnicity of students vary only modestly across sectors, with at least 90% students of color served in each type of school. MPS serves a much larger share of students identified with disabilities than the other two sectors, however. Meanwhile, both the number and percentage of English learners have been rising steadily across all sectors. Racial segregation between schools within the city and the county remains high relative to the rest of the state. Compared to other school systems in Wisconsin, Milwaukee schools serve high percentages of students of color and students from low-income households.

Overall, the system of K-12 schools in Milwaukee serves fewer students today than previously, with more who are likely to be from vulnerable backgrounds, particularly within MPS. While the landscape includes many options for families, it is also marked by fierce competition. These trends affect students' experiences, the use of taxpayer funds, and the ways in which the state, city, and community can hold schools accountable for educational quality.

## Milwaukee Families Choose Between Many Schooling Options

Milwaukee's early adoption of alternative K-12 models, including charter schools and private choice programs, has yielded many choices for families both inside and outside of the city: traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling. MPS alone operated 143 schools in 2023, including Montessori, language immersion, International Baccalaureate, selective, and community school programs. In total, MPS educated 59,899 students in 2023, representing 54.9% of all students served in the city (see Figure 1 on the next page).

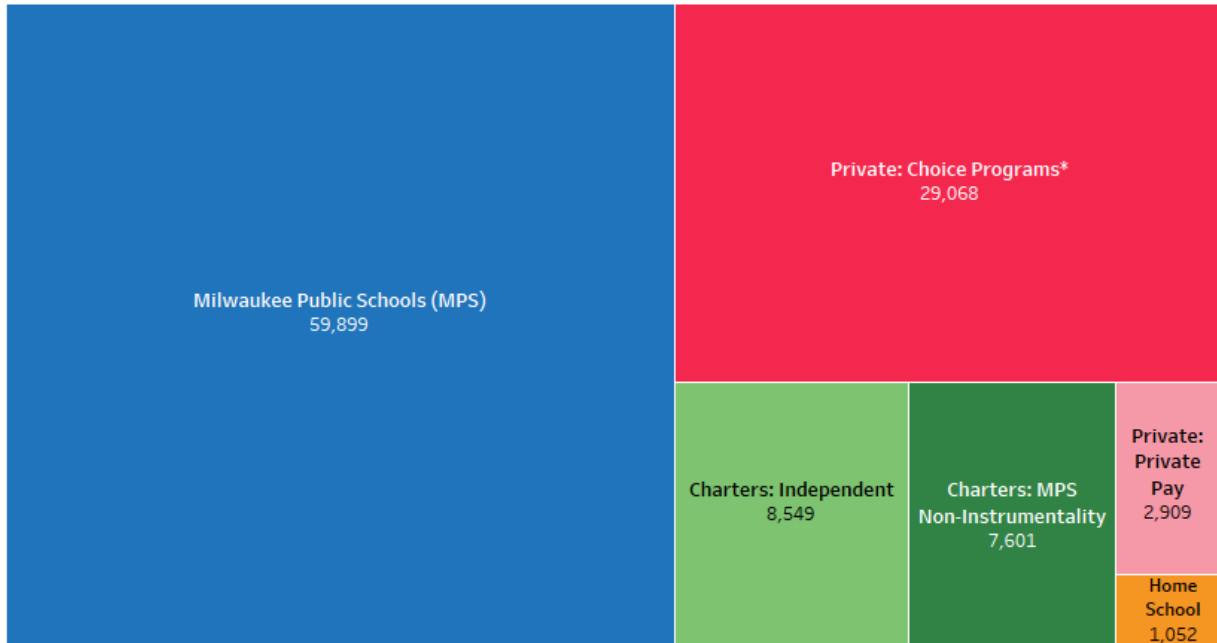
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<sup>1</sup> For the duration of our enrollment and demographics analysis, references to MPS do *not* include the district's non-instrumentality charter schools (NICs), which are operated by outside entities. These schools are instead grouped together with the independent charter schools in the city and collectively referred to as "Milwaukee charter schools." The same categorization is true in our later analysis of student outcomes and school performance. For our middle analysis of school finance, however, the NICs are included as part of MPS as their finances are intertwined with those of the district overall.





**Figure 1: Students in Milwaukee Educated Across a Range of Schools**  
 Enrollment (headcount) of students educated at Milwaukee schools, 2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, MPS Department of Contracted School Services. \*Note: includes students in the MPCP, WPCP, RPCP, and SNSP programs.

Thirty-three charter schools served students in the city, run by 21 separate operators, the vast majority of which are Milwaukee-based (as opposed to part of a national charter network). Those 33 schools included 14 authorized by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) and seven by the city as independent charters, and 12 authorized by MPS as non-instrumentality charters (NICs). Together, the city’s charter schools served 16,150 students in 2023, representing 14.8% of all students educated in Milwaukee.

Private choice programs account for an even larger portion of students educated in Milwaukee. In 2023, 86 private schools in the city served 26,238 Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) students. More than 80% of these schools identified as religious Christian institutions, with the majority affiliated with Catholicism or Lutheranism. Another 43 schools outside of Milwaukee accepted MPCP students in 2023, serving 2,678 program participants. (Participants in the program can attend school outside of the city since their eligibility is determined by the student’s residence, not where the school is located.)

Private schools in Milwaukee may also accept students who reside outside the city through the statewide and Racine choice programs. In 2023, 2,171 WPCP participants<sup>2</sup> and 84 RPCP participants attended private school in Milwaukee. Private schools in Milwaukee also served 575 Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP) students, who may reside inside or outside of the city.

<sup>2</sup> More than half (51.1%) of WPCP students listed as being educated at a Milwaukee school were enrolled at Academy of Excellence, which operates three campuses within Milwaukee city limits and an online campus. According to school administration, all WPCP students at Academy of Excellence attend the latter, meaning that a meaningful proportion of WPCP students listed as being educated within Milwaukee are in fact educated virtually.



In total, MPCP on its own served 28,916 students in 2023. Combining the four private choice programs, 88 private schools in the city of Milwaukee served 29,068 taxpayer-funded students, representing 26.7% of all students educated in the city.

Students in Milwaukee may also enroll in private school without choice program funding. In 2023, 2,909 “private pay” students attended private school in Milwaukee, representing 2.7% of all students educated in the city.

Children in Milwaukee can further enroll in districts outside of the city through Open Enrollment, with 5,766 Milwaukee students transferring out of MPS in 2023 through the program and 2,550 students transferring from non-MPS districts into MPS. (Open Enrollment students coming into MPS are included in the MPS figures cited previously; students leaving MPS are not.) This makes Open Enrollment the fourth most popular schooling option for Milwaukee children after MPS, the private choice programs, and charter schools. In addition, 217 Milwaukee students attended neighboring school districts in 2023 via the nearly fully phased-out Chapter 220 integration aid program.

The final schooling option available to students living in Milwaukee is home schooling. In 2023, 1,052 Milwaukee students were homeschooled, representing 1.0% of students educated in the city.

## Overall Enrollment Decline Borne by MPS

As a result of these enrollment options, some Milwaukee students attend school outside of the city, and some non-Milwaukee students attend school within the city. Regardless of whether we consider the total number of Milwaukee resident students or the total number of students educated within Milwaukee, however, the total number of students is falling.

### City Youth Population Falls

First, we consider the city’s overall youth population. The 2020 Census counted 26.8% fewer youth under the age of 18 in Milwaukee than in 2000: 104,524 compared to 142,811, including 22,320 fewer white youth and 20,466 fewer Black youth. [Falling birthrates and negative net migration](#) – that is, fewer families moving to Milwaukee than leaving the city – drove the overall decline.

The total population of students educated within the city has also declined over time, though to a notably smaller degree: it fell by 12.5%, from 123,989 in 2006 to 108,439 in 2024 (see Figure 2 on the next page).

### Non-MPS Sectors Increase Enrollment

The decline in Milwaukee’s PK-12 students has not occurred evenly across the education sectors. From 2006 to 2024, MPS enrollment plummeted by 29,477 or 33.1%, from 89,189 to 59,712. That was nearly five times greater than the 6.9% drop in enrollment for Wisconsin school districts as a whole from 2006 to 2024, though national data suggests that MPS’ experience is not unique among large urban districts.<sup>3</sup> In addition to birth and migration patterns, this drop likely reflects the growth in charter and private choice program enrollments in the city, with students either leaving MPS to

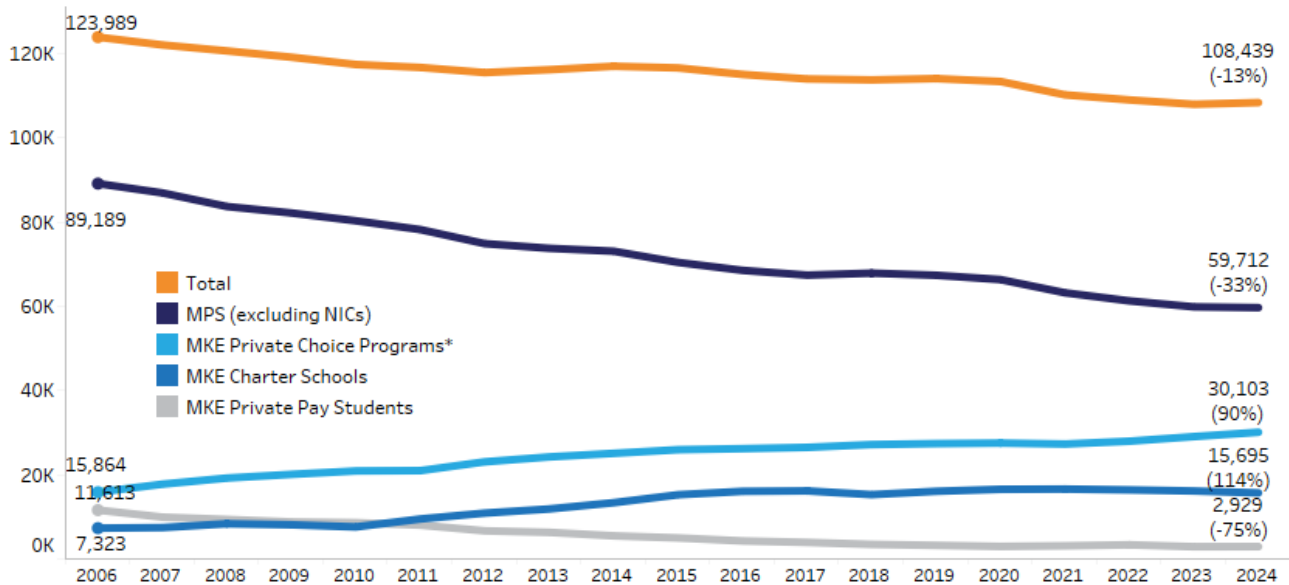
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<sup>3</sup> Data from the [Council of Great City Schools](#) (CGSC), of which MPS is a member, show enrollment changes from 2012 to 2023 across its member districts. MPS – inclusive of its charters – saw a 14.1% drop in enrollment over that time period, close to the 13.5% average drop for CGSC districts.



**Figure 2: Overall Decrease in Milwaukee Students Felt Primarily by MPS**

Enrollment (headcount) of students educated at Milwaukee schools, percent change in parentheses



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, MPS Department of Contracted School Services. \*Note: includes students attending private school in Milwaukee through the MPCP, WPCP, RPCP, or SNSP programs.

enroll in a different sector or never enrolling in MPS at all.<sup>4</sup> MPS and other districts also experienced heightened [enrollment drops](#) in response to the pandemic, largely in the youngest grades.

Over the same period, both private choice program and charter school enrollment expanded. Combined student enrollment in independent charter schools<sup>5</sup> and the NICs increased by 8,372 students, more than doubling from 7,323 in 2006 to 15,695 in 2024 – the biggest percentage increase of any of the sectors. The gains were evenly split between the independent charters and the NICs.

Although we treat the NICs as separate from MPS here, their growth is notable for the district, since they count toward MPS’ total enrollment for funding purposes. When NIC students are included, MPS’ enrollment drop from 2006 to 2024 modestly improved to 27.6% instead of 33.1%.

The number of private choice program participants enrolling in Milwaukee’s private schools increased by 89.8%, from 15,864 in 2006 to 30,103 in 2024. Enrollment in the MPCP program made up the lion’s share of this amount. The increase occurred alongside a 74.8% decline in private pay student enrollment, from 11,613 in 2006 to 2,929 in 2024. Based on other states’ experiences, this trend might be explained in various ways. State-funded tuition vouchers may have been awarded primarily to students already attending private school or those who would have done so, with more students moving from private pay to the private choice programs as eligibility for the latter expanded.<sup>6</sup> Some other states like [Arizona](#), [Florida](#), and [New Hampshire](#) have documented a similar

<sup>4</sup> Enrollment data are based on the average of point-in-time counts. Data are not readily available to describe student mobility – that is, the movement of students between schools or sectors – in relation to these point-in-time count dates.

<sup>5</sup> Enrollment counts for independent charter schools include all students educated at charter schools authorized by the city of Milwaukee and UWM. In all but one case, these schools are located within Milwaukee city boundaries. The lone exception is La Casa de Esperanza, located in Waukesha.

<sup>6</sup> The Legislative Fiscal Bureau [informational paper on private school choice](#) describes these eligibility criteria expansions:

- 2011 Act 32 amended the MPCP to remove its enrollment limit, raise the income limit from 220% of the federal poverty level to 300%, and expand participation to schools outside of the city. It also facilitated the creation of the RPCP.

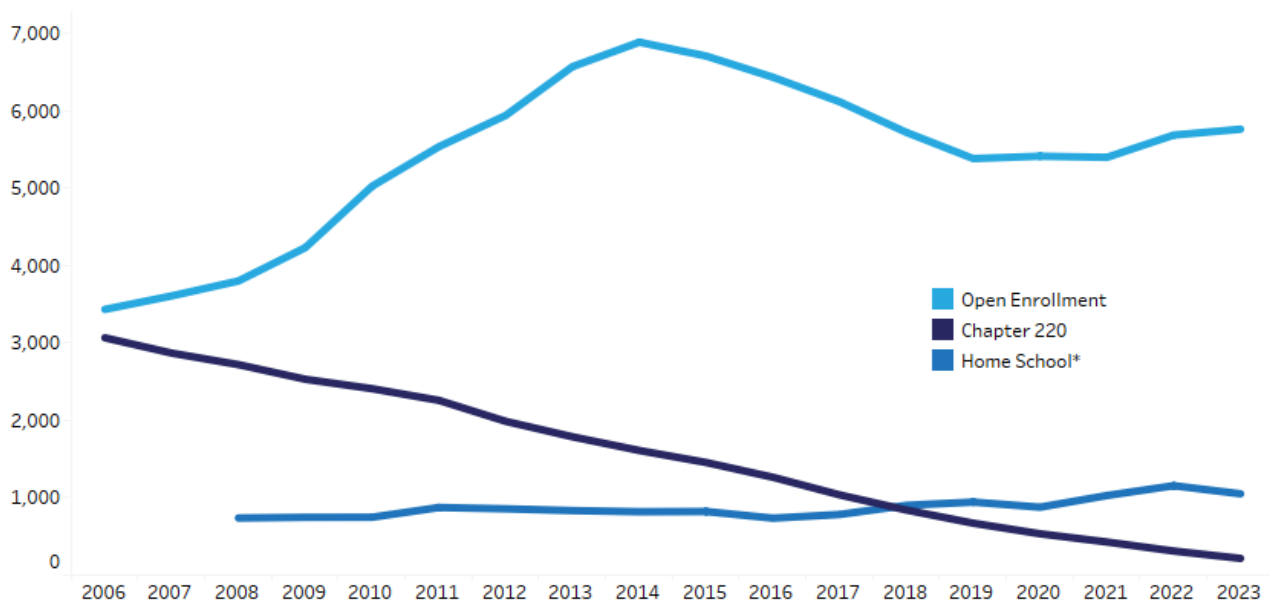


trend of current private school students being most likely to use tuition vouchers when they are made available. Conversely, a [long-term national trend](#) toward fewer high-income or middle-income families enrolling their children in urban private schools could also be a factor in the decline of private pay students. This trend may be exacerbated in a city like Milwaukee, with its large recent population declines and ongoing segregation. Choice program participants now account for almost all (91.1%) of total private school enrollment in Milwaukee.

In all, Milwaukee’s private schools educated more students in 2024 than in any of the last 18 years, increasing by 20.2% from 27,477 combined private pay and choice program students in 2006 to 33,032 students in 2024. That growth ran counter to the state, which saw a 4.5% decline in overall private school enrollment over the same time period, despite increases in the last three years.

The number of Milwaukee resident students receiving an education at a public school district outside of Milwaukee or via home school has also increased modestly over time. Combined enrollment in Open Enrollment, Chapter 220, and home school rose by 530 students or 8.1%, from 6,505 in 2006 to 7,035 in 2023.<sup>7</sup> Large increases in Open Enrollment have driven these gains, offsetting city students’ decreasing participation in Chapter 220 as the latter program phases out (see Figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 3: More Milwaukee Students Use Open Enrollment as Chapter 220 Phases Out**  
Enrollment (headcount) of Milwaukee students educated outside Milwaukee schools



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. \*Note: Home school enrollment data available as of 2008

- 2013 Act 20 established the WPCP.
- In 2014, the RPCP enrollment limit was removed.
- 2015 Act 55 loosened WPCP enrollment limits incrementally until full removal in 2027.
- 2017 Act 59 raised the WPCP’s income limit from 185% of the federal poverty level to 220%.

<sup>7</sup> At the time of publication, enrollment data were available through 2024 for public and private schools, Chapter 220, and home schooling but not for Open Enrollment.

<sup>8</sup> State demographic data are not available to confirm the degree to which Chapter 220 participants may have transitioned to the Open Enrollment program, but the programs’ different policy provisions (particularly the lack of transportation provided and lack of focus on race in Open Enrollment) suggest they may not overlap much. The numbers cited here refer to Milwaukee resident students educated in non-MPS districts. The number of Open Enrollment students coming into Milwaukee has also been on the rise (in 2006, MPS gained 242 students from Open Enrollment; in 2023, MPS gained 2,550), but the district still lost more resident students to other districts each year through Open Enrollment than it gained non-resident students. The MPS figures shown in this analysis include non-Milwaukee students enrolled in the districts.

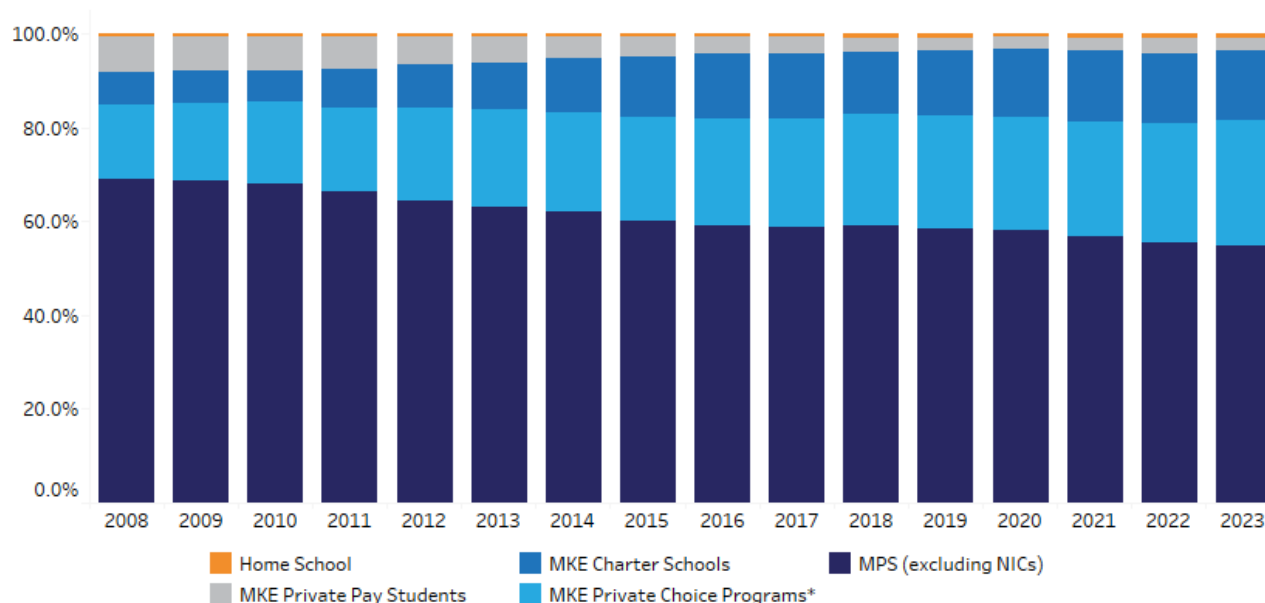


Earlier in the programs' histories, however, Chapter 220 participation eclipsed Open Enrollment participation among Milwaukee resident students. For example, in 2002, 4,269 students transferred out of MPS to attend a suburban school district through Chapter 220, while 1,361 students transferred out via Open Enrollment.

Participation in home school held steady until 2021, when it shot up due to COVID-19. Still, the 17.2% citywide increase from 2020 to 2021 was well below the statewide increase of 47.3%, and the total percentage of Milwaukee children engaged in home school in 2023 (1.0%) remained below the 3.0% statewide average.

As a net result of these enrollment trends, MPS dropped from serving over two-thirds of students educated in Milwaukee in 2008 (68.9%) to a little over half in 2023 (54.9%). (We use 2008 as the starting point for this comparison since it is the first year for which homeschool data are available.) As Figure 4 shows, private choice programs in Milwaukee nearly doubled their "market share," serving 26.7% of students in Milwaukee in 2023 compared to 15.8% in 2008. Charter schools increased their share of Milwaukee students from 6.9% in 2008 to 14.8% in 2023. If these trends continue, MPS may no longer serve the majority of students in Milwaukee within a matter of years, though it would retain its status as the largest provider of K-12 education in the state for years to come.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 4: By 2023, Nearly Half of Milwaukee Students Served Outside of MPS**  
Enrollment (headcount) distribution of students educated within Milwaukee



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, MPS Department of Contracted School Services. \*Note: includes students attending private school in Milwaukee through the MPCP, WPCP, RPCP, or SNSP programs.

### Enrollment Choices and Competition Increase

Over time, Milwaukee's total PK-12 enrollment has decreased, increasing competition for the remaining students. Compared to a generation ago, the city is marked by a more decentralized education system and a larger number of schools, despite the reduced student population.

<sup>9</sup> This statement applies to MPS' traditional public schools. When the NICs are included, the district's share of Milwaukee enrollment rests more comfortably above 50% (62.5% in 2023).



These key points echo findings from our [2014 report](#) and appear unlikely to change in the near future. [Total births within Milwaukee](#) between 2019 and 2022 fell each year, suggesting the city will keep losing students<sup>10</sup> unless some fundamental shift like a significant rise in net migration occurs.

## Student Needs Remain High as Demographics Shift

Even with its population loss, school enrollment in Milwaukee still far exceeds that of any other school system in Wisconsin. Its student composition is also unique, as MPS is one of fewer than 20 districts in the state in 2023 serving both a majority of students from low-income households and a majority of students identifying as non-white. Student demographics are similar across sectors, with the notable exception of identified students with disabilities.

### Milwaukee Schools Serve Majority Students of Color, With Increased Diversity Over Time

As the city has lost students, its overall youth population has become less white and more diverse. Again, we first turn to Census data, which show Asian youth increased from 4.8% of the city's youth population in 2000 to 9.1% in 2020, youth of two or more races from 3.9% to 7.8%, and Hispanic or Latino youth from 19.7% to 38.2%, an increase of 11,765 children.<sup>11</sup> White youth, on the other hand, made up 29.1% of the city's under-18 population in 2000 but only 18.3% in 2020, a decline of 22,320 children. Milwaukee lost nearly as many Black youth (20,466), but the share of Black youth actually increased slightly, from 60.8% in 2000 to 63.5% in 2020.

These trends are somewhat reflected in the available DPI school enrollment data as well.<sup>12</sup> The overall 29,290-student enrollment decrease in MPS from 2006 to 2023 included losses in every racial and ethnic demographic group except Asian, Pacific Isle, and "two or more races," the latter of which was not an option available for selection until 2011. MPS lost 22,524 Black students and 8,813 white students and did not gain any Hispanic students despite their growth in the city.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, MPS' demographic breakdown shifted. In 2006, MPS served 59.1% Black students, 19.2% Hispanic students, 16.6% white students, 4.3% Asian students, and 0.8% American Indian students. By 2023, Black youth made up 50.3%, white youth had dropped to 10.0%, and the share of American Indian students had halved to 0.4% (see Figure 5 on the following page). Hispanic students rose to 28.5% of enrollment, and Asian students, students identifying as two or more races, and Pacific Islander students increased to 6.4%, 4.2%, and 0.1%, respectively.

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<sup>10</sup> Researcher John D. Johnson at Marquette Law School's Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education applied a simple linear model to [predict first grade enrollment](#) based off of these birth data. He found that the total number of first graders in the city of Milwaukee is likely to be between 16% and 22% lower in 2029 than in 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout this report, we use the race and ethnicity labels in the dataset cited. For example, the Census uses "Hispanic or Latino," whereas DPI uses solely "Hispanic." The Census considers race and ethnicity separately, so a youth identifying as Hispanic or Latino may also have identified as any racial category. The vast majority of the city's Hispanic or Latino youth population growth occurred between 2000 and 2010, from 28,173 children under the age of 18 to 39,801. Separately, the sharp increase in individuals selecting "two or more races" may reflect shifts in self-identification over time as much as actual population change.

<sup>12</sup> The historical composition of Milwaukee's traditional public and charter schools are available through DPI's public [WISEdash data files](#). Demographic data are not available for private choice programs, Open Enrollment, Chapter 220, or home school, but we derived the demographics of private choice program participants through DPI's [Choice Report Card data](#), which are available as of 2016 through 2023 at the time of this report's publication. The Choice Report Cards do not, however, include SNSP participants, nor do they reflect any private pay students. All demographic analyses are based on the students attending Milwaukee schools, the majority but not all of whom are Milwaukee residents.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike the Census data, DPI considers race and ethnicity together rather than separately, so a youth identified as Hispanic here could not also identify as white, Black, or any other racial category.



Over the same timeframe, Milwaukee charter schools saw increases in raw numbers across all racial and ethnic categories, including 4,037 additional Hispanic students, 2,501 additional Black students, and 1,547 additional Asian students. One net effect was that Black youth dropped from making up over two-thirds (67.5%) of the sector’s student population in 2006 to under 50% (46.1%) by 2023. This drop was accompanied

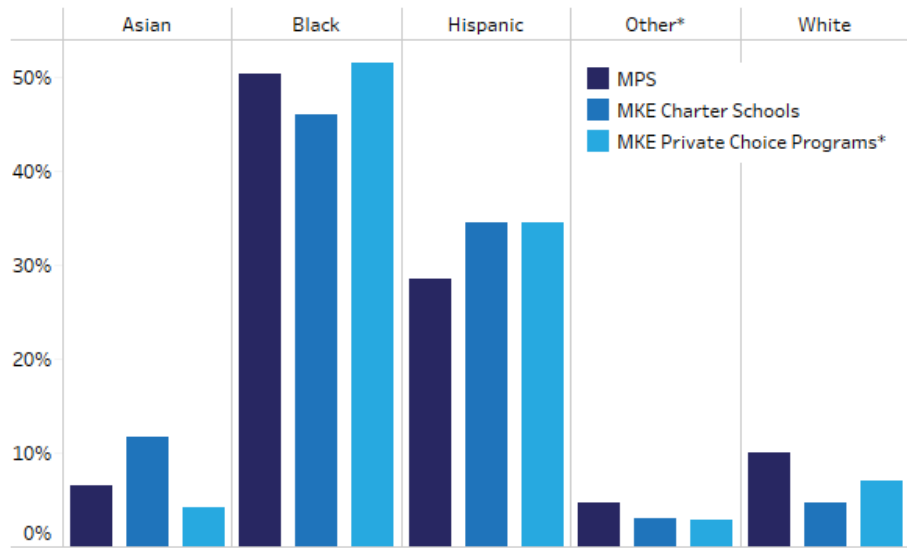
by a rise in the share of Hispanic students from 21.0% in 2006 to 34.5% in 2023. At the same time, the share of white students dropped from 6.4% to 4.7%.

For private choice program students, available data limit our ability to examine long-term demographic shifts but overall show that the sector’s makeup has remained relatively steady since 2016 even as it has grown. In 2023, Milwaukee’s choice programs served 51.5% Black students, 34.5% Hispanic students, and 7.0% white students. Asian students, students identifying as two or more races, American Indian students, and Pacific Islander students rounded out the sector’s makeup at 4.1%, 2.7%, 0.1%, and 0.1%, respectively.

Overall in 2023, all three sectors served a majority of students of color, with Black students making up the largest share in each but to a lesser extent over time. The share of Hispanic students in MPS and Milwaukee charter schools has increased, with the highest shares served in Milwaukee charter schools and private choice programs in 2023. Milwaukee charters also served the highest share of Asian students, nearly exclusively due to Hmong American Peace Academy.

Importantly, this racial and ethnic diversity is not spread evenly across the city. Milwaukee regularly ranks among the most segregated cities in the United States, so it may not be surprising – especially after the rollback of historical integration policies – that research from the [Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University](#) shows segregation between schools to be a distinct feature of the city’s education landscape. The metropolitan area is marked by even starker segregation between schools, particularly between Black students and white students. In 2023, only one other Milwaukee County district served a similar share of students of color as the average city of Milwaukee school: Brown Deer, with 85.6%. The other 16 county districts served between 24.5% (Whitefish Bay) and 57.1% (Glendale-River Hills) students of color, emphasizing the divide in student populations between the city of Milwaukee and its surrounding suburbs. Overall in Wisconsin, 32.8% of public school students in 2023 were students of color.

**Figure 5: All Sectors Serve Majority Students of Color**  
Racial and ethnic demographics of Milwaukee schools, by sector, 2023



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction WISEdash Data Files (MPS and charters) and Report Card (choice), MPS Department of Contracted School Services. \*Notes: "Other" includes American Indian, Pacific Isle, and Two or More Races. "MKE Private Choice Programs" includes students attending private school in Milwaukee through the MPCP, WPCP, or RPCP programs. No demographic data for SNSP are available.

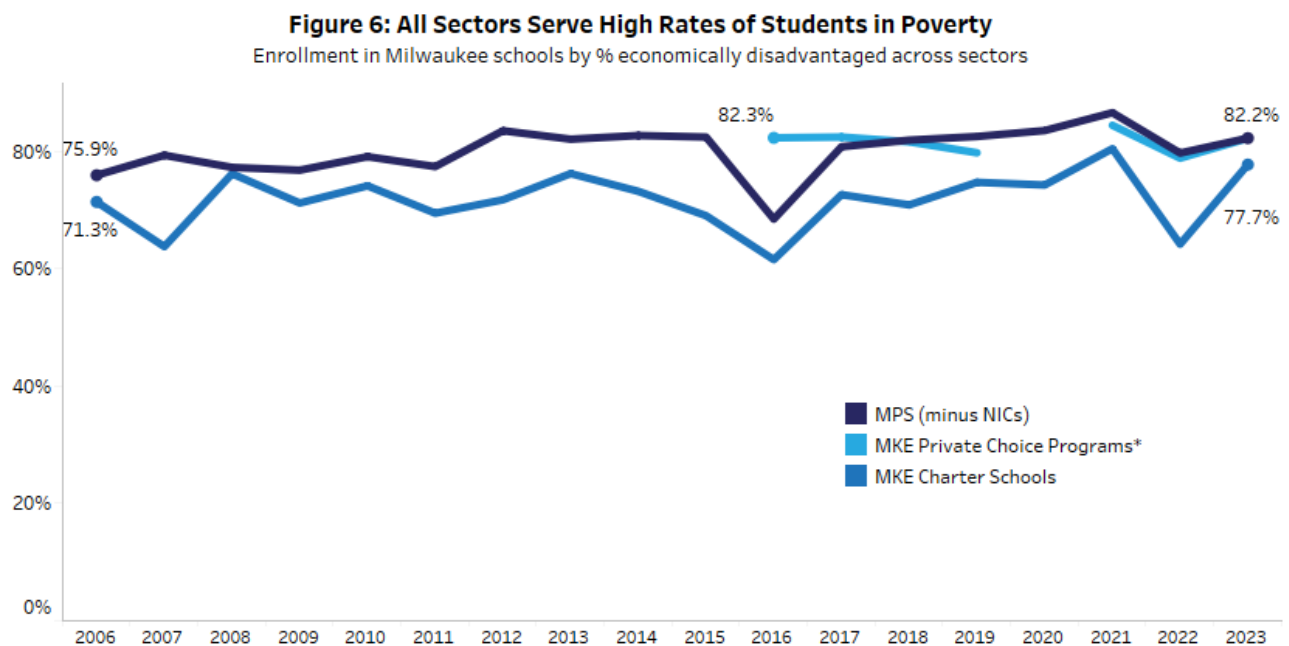


Taken together, the city’s schools across sectors reflect the increasing diversity – though not necessarily integration – and shrinking white population of the city’s youth as a whole. MPS has borne the most of the decrease in Milwaukee’s total youth population and seen particular decreases in its American Indian, Black, and white student population, while the charter schools’ and private choice programs’ enrollments have remained more stable or increased.

### Students in Milwaukee Face Many Challenges

The poverty rate for school-age children within Milwaukee is one of the very highest of any large urban center nationally. From 2006 to 2023, an average of 80.1% MPS students and 71.8% of charter school students were classified as economically disadvantaged (see Figure 6).<sup>14</sup> From 2016 to 2023, Milwaukee private choice programs served an average of 81.6% economically disadvantaged students, closely mirroring MPS and reflecting the programs’ income eligibility provisions. For comparison, the statewide average for public school students was 41.2% economically disadvantaged in 2023.

There has also been an increase across the city in the number and percentage of students who are not native English speakers and often encounter learning difficulties as a result. In 2006, MPS served 5,466 English learners (ELs), who made up 6.1% of the district’s student population, and Milwaukee’s charter schools served 394 ELs, who made up 5.4% of theirs (see Figure 7 on the following page). By 2023, MPS served 8,532 ELs, a 56.1% increase that resulted in ELs making up 14.2% of the student body. Milwaukee’s charter schools served 2,379 ELs, a six fold increase resulting in similar levels of ELs (14.7%) as MPS. The number and percentage of ELs using choice



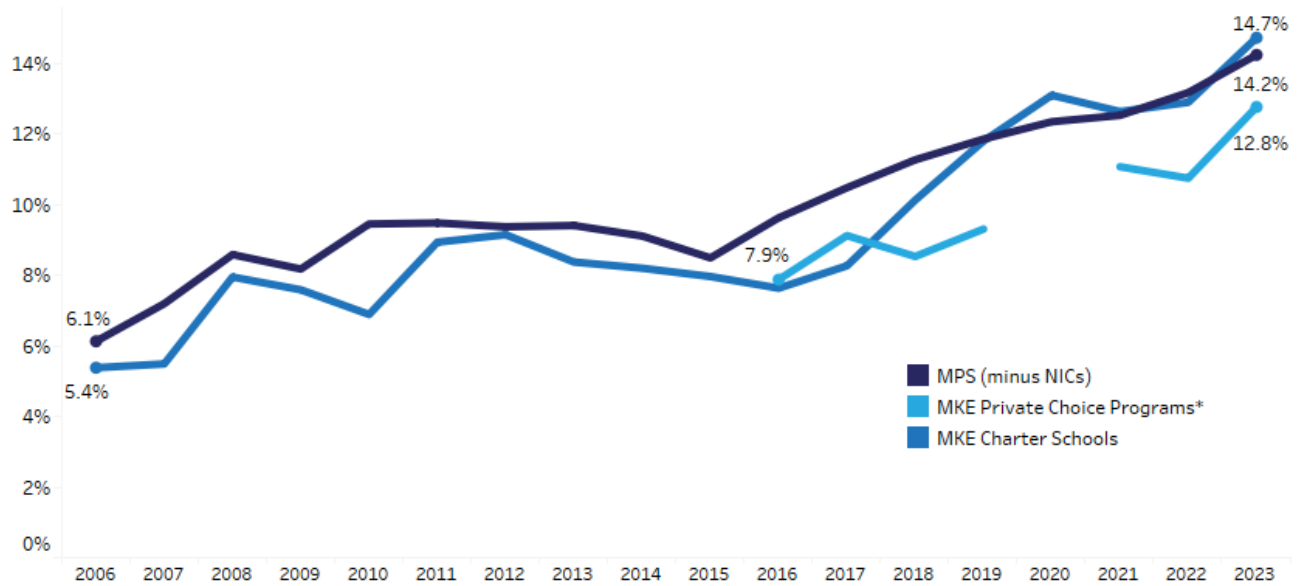
Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, MPS Department of Contracted School Services. \*Note: includes students attending private school in Milwaukee through the MPCP, WPCP, or RPCP programs. Program eligibility is tied to meeting poverty thresholds. No demographic data for SNSP are available.

<sup>14</sup> Both MPS and the charter sector saw a drop in their economically disadvantaged populations in 2016, perhaps due to the introduction of the “Community Eligibility Provision” for federal child nutrition programs, which led many schools that year to change their procedure for determining a student’s socioeconomic status. Another drop occurred in 2022, likely related to temporary federal pandemic provisions that put more money in families’ pockets.





**Figure 7: English Learners On the Rise Across Milwaukee**  
 Enrollment in Milwaukee schools by % English Learners across sectors



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, MPS Department of Contracted School Services. \*Note: includes students attending private school in Milwaukee through the MPCP, WPCP, or RPCP programs. No demographic data for SNSP are available.

programs to attend Milwaukee private schools also increased, up to 3,241 students in 2023, or 12.8% of enrollment. Statewide, ELs made up 6.3% of public school enrollment in 2023.

Differences between the sectors are much greater when it comes to students identified with disabilities. MPS served fewer students with disabilities in 2023 than in 2006 (12,063 compared to 14,650), but the 17.7% decline was lower than the district’s overall enrollment decline. As a result, students with disabilities made up 20.1% of MPS’ enrollment in 2023, up from 16.4% in 2006 (see Figure 8 on following page).

The number of charter school students identified with disabilities has nearly tripled over the same period, from 644 in 2006 to 1,776 in 2023. The percentage of charter students with disabilities has also risen, from 8.8% to 11.0%, below both the state public school average of 14.9% and MPS.

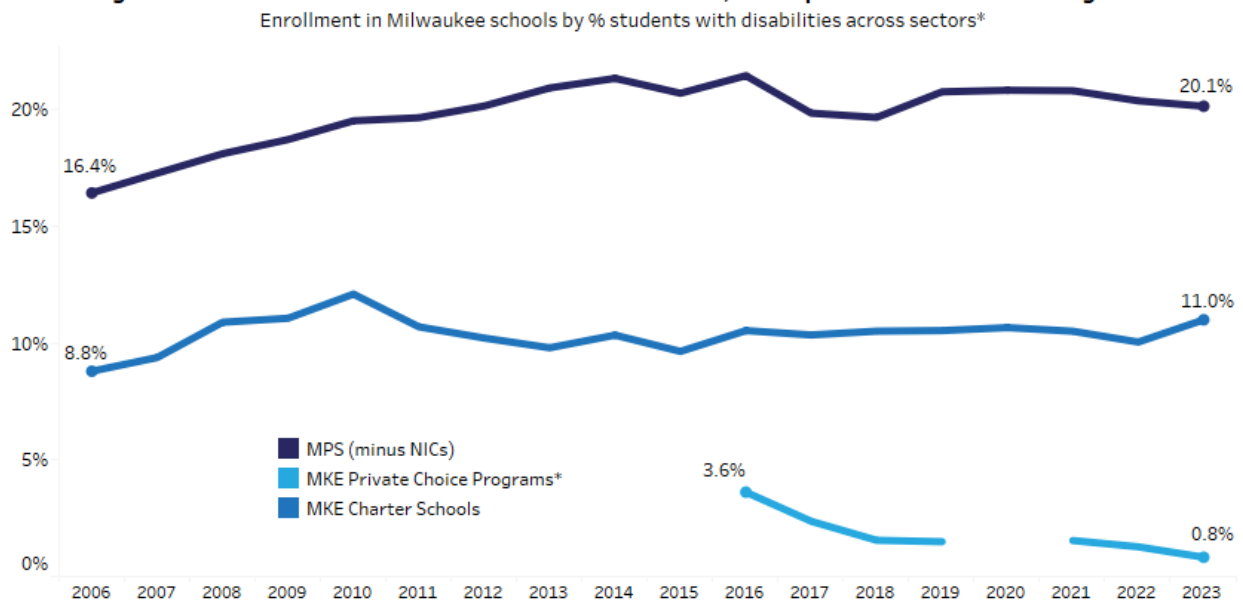
Accurate and complete public data on students identified with disabilities served in Milwaukee’s publicly funded private schools are unavailable and constitute a conspicuous omission in the state’s datasets. Demographic data reported on DPI choice school report cards show only a small population of Milwaukee choice program participants with disabilities. The number fell from 855 students in 2016, or 3.6% of enrollment, to 211 students in 2023, or 0.8%.

State law does not require the choice report cards to include participants in the state’s special needs program for private schools, however, which is notable since SNSP students must have disabilities to participate. Adding in the SNSP students yields an estimate of 786 publicly funded Milwaukee private school students with disabilities in 2023, or 3.1% of enrollment, which is still a much smaller share than at MPS or the charter schools. Other estimates have suggested the true percentage may be higher but still below MPS’ share.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Our 2014 report cited the [2012 research paper](#) by Patrick Wolf, John Witte, and David Fleming, which estimated that MPCP served between 7.5% and 14.6% students with disabilities. These data, however, have not been updated to reflect present day.



**Figure 8: Students with Disabilities Concentrated in MPS; Incomplete Data for Choice Programs**



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, MPS Department of Contracted School Services. \*Note: includes students attending private school in Milwaukee through the MPCP, WPCP, or RPCP programs. No demographic data for SNSP are available, resulting in an undercount for the choice programs.

Students with disabilities, ELs, and low-income students have learning needs that research has documented cost considerably more to address than those of their peers. Despite those additional costs, revenue streams tied to these student needs – particularly for special education and English learning – have suffered from underfunding at both the state and federal level. Therefore, these differences in demographics play an important role in our later discussions and understanding of school finance and measures of student outcomes in the city and across sectors.

## Summary

Our review of Milwaukee’s student enrollment and demographic data overall show that schools in the state’s largest city have educated fewer children over time, a trend that appears likely to continue. Its population of Black students and white students has especially dropped, with concentrated losses in MPS. On the other hand, the number of Hispanic youth in Milwaukee has increased, though to a lesser degree, and not in MPS. Overall, Milwaukee’s charter schools and private choice programs have seen enrollment gains. If current trends continue, the traditional public schools within MPS will soon no longer serve the majority of Milwaukee students.

By 2023, the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup of the three sectors – MPS, charter, and private choice – was roughly similar. Many Milwaukee schools across all sectors serve predominantly children from economically disadvantaged households and students of color, and English learners appear to be poised to continue growing as a student population across the city. Segregated schooling remains the reality within the city and the county as a whole.

One stark difference emerged between the sectors regarding students identified with disabilities. MPS historically serves a much higher percentage of these students than the other sectors, even accounting for incomplete private choice program data.

Finally, the data taken as a whole reveal there is no one standard education in Milwaukee. With nearly 250 schools in the city operated by over 100 distinct entities spread across three different sectors – plus options for students to attend schools outside of the city or home school – students’ school experience can vary widely.



# SCHOOL FUNDING IN MILWAUKEE

## Core Funding

Over the past generation, funding for education in Milwaukee has been marked by two parallel trends: per student amounts as of this school year are similar to 20 years ago, but the total dollars available from core state and local funding sources have eroded over time due to a loss in enrollment within the city, particularly for MPS. Over the entire period, student need has remained high within the city, and so have the per pupil costs of educating these students effectively.

Compared to 20 and 30 years ago, core state and local funding per student in 2024 for each type of school – traditional public, charter, and private choice – has caught up with inflation in part because of a successful referendum to increase the MPS levy in 2020 and state funding increases for charter and private choice schools in the most recent state budget. On the other hand, in 2024, total overall public funding for all K-12 schools in Milwaukee fell to its lowest levels since at least the late 1990s after adjusting for inflation – a trend that reflects the drop and shift in overall enrollment in the city.

The April 2024 passage of the MPS referendum will shift this picture. Starting in 2025, MPS revenues per student will rise to their highest levels on record – remaining above both charter schools and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) – but the district’s total inflation-adjusted revenues will remain below their peak because of the district’s massive enrollment loss since 1999.

Moreover, K-12 schools in the city collectively have fewer total resources today even as the number of schools is much greater than three decades ago due to the rise of charter and private choice options. That has meant a sharp drop in the average funding per school location in Milwaukee, which is only partly mitigated by the recent MPS referendum and state funding boosts for MPCP and charter schools.

Outside of their core funding, schools in the city – and particularly MPS – do receive additional amounts of special state and federal aid to serve the large numbers of students in poverty and students with disabilities in Milwaukee. Because of its

### Core Revenues for Milwaukee Schools

Our analysis focuses on the key public funds going to each type of school that come with relatively few restrictions on how the funds can be spent. The amounts per student are based on full-time equivalent counts of student enrollment.

**Milwaukee Public Schools** – For MPS, we track the funds subject to state revenue limits, which cap the main funding sources for school districts: local property taxes and state general school aids. In addition, we include per pupil aid, a form of state aid that began in 2013 and is not subject to revenue limits. All schools chartered by MPS have their funding and enrollment included here, both for simplicity and because these funds help support the district. These financial figures account for the effects of independent charter and private schools on MPS but not the effect of open enrollment programs, which require MPS to transfer part of its funding for outgoing students to the receiving district.

**Milwaukee Parental Choice Program** – Schools serving MPCP participants receive a flat state payment for each student that is set in the state budget, with a larger amount for high school students. References to MPCP in this analysis include private schools serving MPCP students located both within and outside Milwaukee.

**Independent Charter Schools** – These schools chartered by independent entities such as the city of Milwaukee and UWM also receive a flat payment per student from the state. (Charter schools within MPS receive the same flat payment per student but from MPS and are included in the MPS numbers in this analysis.)



high poverty rates and high rates of students with disabilities, MPS ranks as one of the top large districts in the country for federal aid per pupil. The private schools generally do not benefit directly from federal aid, but MPS is required to use a substantial portion of its funds to provide local private school students and staff with equitable services. During the pandemic, nearly \$800 million in federal COVID-19 relief aid also flowed into the district, plus additional amounts for independent charter schools and MPCP institutions.

The federal pandemic aid ends in 2024, however, and the costs to schools of serving students with special needs will still exceed the state and federal aid available for them. That means the work of teaching them adds to the financial challenges of schools in the city, particularly for MPS and to a lesser extent charter schools. In addition, schools of all types in the city serve a large share of students in poverty. Ultimately, all of these schools face greater hurdles in fulfilling their mission than their counterparts in more affluent communities around the state.

### Total Funding Levels

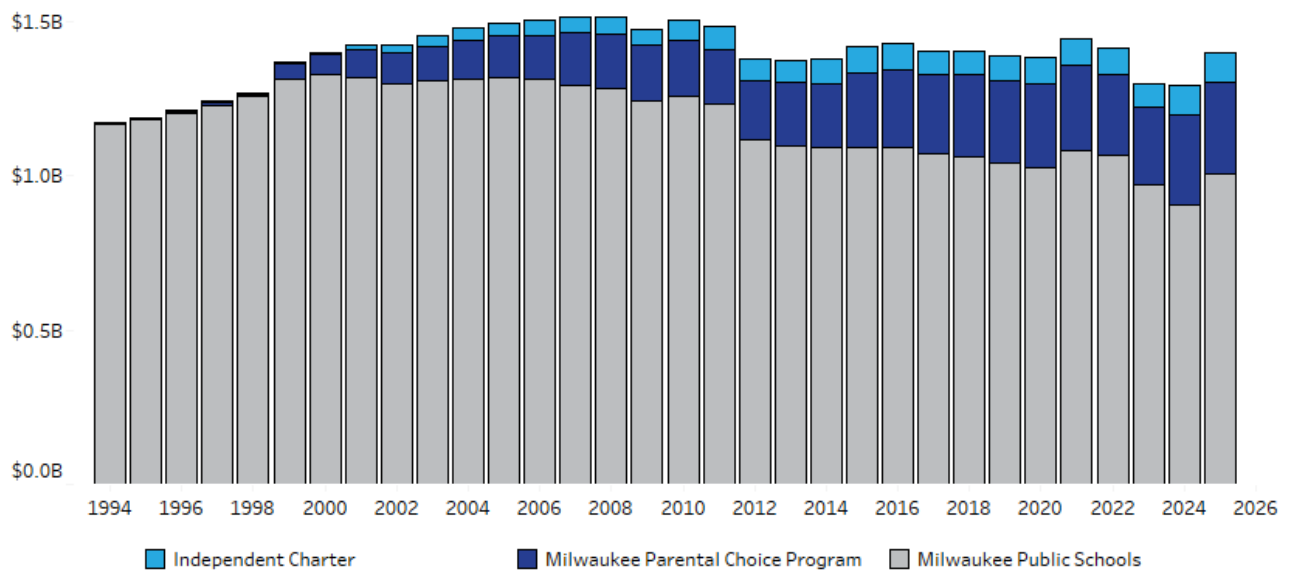
Using data from DPI and the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, we explored how total public funding for all K-12 schools for Milwaukee students has changed over time. Our analysis covers funding going to MPS (including its charters), independent charter schools, and MPCP schools.

In the 2004 school year, \$891.8 million in state and local funding went to schools serving Milwaukee students, or \$1.48 billion after adjusting for inflation (see Figure 9). Projected funding from these sources for the 2024 school year is \$1.29 billion, a 12.5% drop from the 2004 inflation-adjusted total.

**How the Analysis Was Done**

This section examines core funding for each type of school as described in the textbox on the previous page. It does not include the separate state and federal revenue streams available for particular groups of students such as those with disabilities.

**Figure 9: Total Core Funding for Milwaukee Schools Has Lagged Inflation Recently But Will Rise in 2025**  
Main forms of state and local public funding\* for Milwaukee students in 2023\$ (billions), 1994 to 2025



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Legislative Fiscal Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; \*Includes all state and local funding subject to revenue limits on MPS, per pupil aid to MPS, and state payments to MPCP and independent charter schools. Amounts for 2025 are projected.



Core funding for MPS has seen an even bigger inflation-adjusted decline through the current year. In 2004, MPS received \$793.5 million in funding subject to revenue limits (that is, state general aids and the applicable part of its local levy), which translates into an inflation-adjusted \$1.31 billion. The \$903.2 million projected for MPS in the 2024 school year is a 31.1% decline from the inflation-adjusted amount from 20 years ago. For more on MPS finances, see WPF's recent [brief on the April referendum](#) and [our latest budget brief](#) on the district.

Without accounting for inflation, the April referendum will raise the MPS revenue limit and per pupil aid to more than \$1 billion in 2025. Overall funding for Milwaukee schools across sectors will rise to a projected \$1.4 billion.

One reason for the inflation-adjusted declines in previous years was the decrease in students in Milwaukee due to demographic changes. For MPS, an additional major contributor was the loss of students due to the competition from other schools. The number of full-time equivalent students in MPS, MPCP, and charter schools fell from a combined 116,325 at its peak in 2007 to an estimated 103,715 in 2024. Between 1999 and 2024, MPS' enrollment declined by 31.5% under this form of count, which is used by the state for funding purposes.

Another reason for the declines is that the state's annual changes in revenue limits are no longer tied to inflation as they were from 1999 to 2009. From 2009 to 2024, the state increased revenue limits and per pupil aid for all Wisconsin districts by 26.2% over the statewide average for districts in 2009. Over that same period, the Consumer Price Index increased by 41.5%. The recent state budget approved by legislators and Gov. Tony Evers raised revenue limits by \$325 this year and will do so by that same amount in 2025 – a significant increase but not enough to catch districts up.<sup>16</sup>

A key difference between revenue limits and categorical per pupil aid is also relevant here: While increases to both provide additional revenue for school districts, the newer per pupil aid is distributed on a flat per student basis without regard for a district's property wealth. In years in which the state increased education funding via per pupil aid instead of through revenue limits and equalization aid, MPS received less state funding than it would have under the traditional approach.

Several major recent changes have enhanced state and local funding for Milwaukee schools despite the enrollment losses and lagging revenue limits. Milwaukee voters approved an \$87 million referendum in April 2020 and a \$252 million referendum in April 2024 that allow the MPS board to exceed state revenue limits by those amounts over a four-year phase-in period. In the current state budget adopted last summer, lawmakers and Gov. Tony Evers also increased per pupil funding for charter schools and private choice programs, which we will discuss further in the next section. Without the funding increases from the 2020 referendum and the state budget, core state and local funding for Milwaukee in 2024 would have been much less.

### **Funding Per Student More Stable**

When examined on a per pupil basis, trends in state and local funding levels no longer tell a story of overall decline. Instead, inflation-adjusted funding per pupil for nearly all of the school sectors in Milwaukee sits at about the same level in 2024 as it did in 2004, with MPS set to grow substantially

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<sup>16</sup> In some years, these factors have worked together to force MPS to lower property taxes. As noted earlier, the state limits cap the district's combined revenues from property taxes and state general aid. From 2015 to 2019, the tight revenue limits and increases in state aid meant the district had to cut its overall property tax levy by \$44.6 million – a 14.4% decrease even before accounting for inflation.

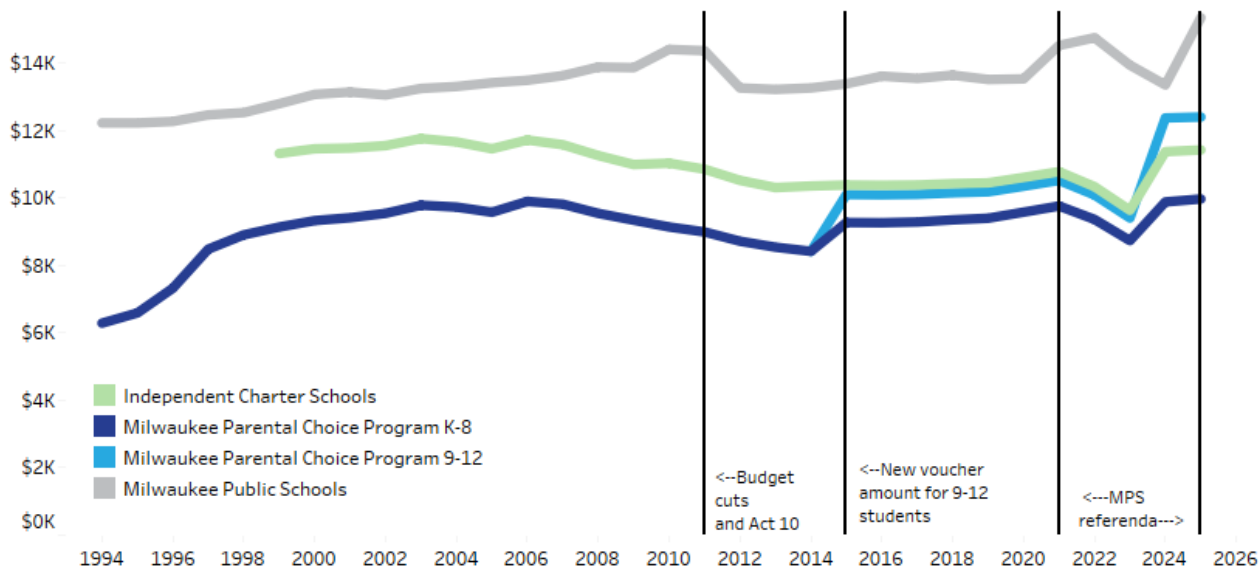


next year as a result of this year’s referendum. After a dip in 2012 and little growth in the following years, the 2020 MPS referendum raised core per pupil funding in the district to \$13,366 in 2024, up slightly from an inflation-adjusted \$13,319 in 2004 (see Figure 10). When fully phased in, the April 2024 referendum could increase MPS per pupil revenues by nearly \$4,000 over the next four years, raising them above \$17,000 per student.

The increase would likely lift MPS core funding above that of each of the 10 largest school districts in Wisconsin except potentially Racine Unified and Madison, and also above that of comparable suburban Milwaukee districts except possibly Shorewood and Glendale-River Hills (for more detail, see our [March brief on the MPS referendum](#)). These possible exceptions will depend on how much those districts increase their own funding over the next four years. As noted in our March brief, however, MPS also has higher costs than suburban districts in particular and some additional federal aid because it is serving students with much greater needs than these other districts, including the highest percentages of low-income students and students with disabilities out of the peer groups. Despite these needs, MPS per pupil funding had lagged its neighboring districts’ prior to the 2020 referendum; district leaders framed the referendum as a step toward achieving more regional parity.

Starting in 2025, MPS core per pupil funding levels will rise further above those for Milwaukee’s independent charter or MPCP students, particularly those not yet in high school. At the same time, MPS and to some extent charter schools serve a greater share of students with identified disabilities – a responsibility that comes with substantially greater costs as we will see. A large increase in the state payment to independent charters to \$11,385 per student in 2024, up from \$9,264 last year, narrowed the difference with MPS, but the gap will once again widen starting in 2025, as Figures 10 and 11 show. (The charters within MPS will face a similar gap, since their per pupil payment from MPS is not affected by the MPS referenda.)

**Figure 10: Funding for Most Types of Schools Now Even with 2004**  
Core public funding\* per student in Milwaukee by type of school in 2023\$, 1994 to 2025



Sources: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Legislative Fiscal Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. \*Notes: Includes all state and local funding subject to revenue limits on MPS, per pupil aid to MPCP, and state payments to MPCP and independent charter schools. Prior to 2015, MPCP high schools received the same state payment as MPCP elementary schools. Amounts for 2025 are projected.

Funding for private choice programs is more complicated. The state payment amount for grades K-8 rose to \$9,893 per pupil in 2024, up from \$8,399 the previous year. That left the payment 1.6%

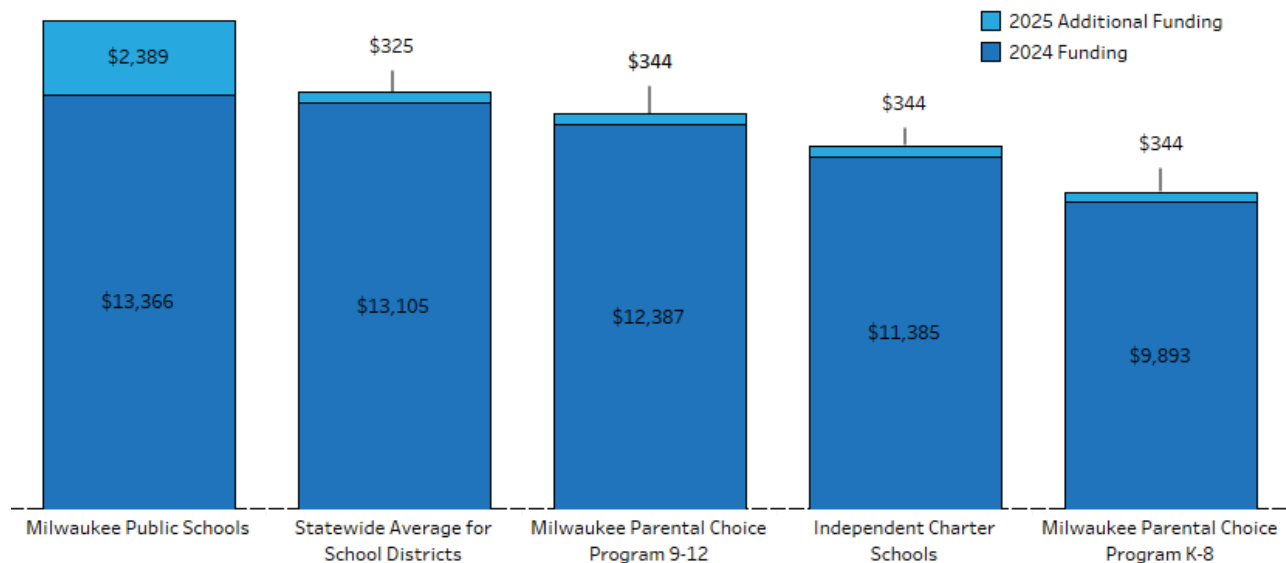


more than it was in 2004 after adjusting for inflation. The state also created a separate, larger payment for high school students in 2015, and that payment also increased in 2024 to \$12,387, up from \$9,045 the previous year. The new amount is 27.2% higher than the inflation-adjusted amount that MPCP schools received per high school student in 2004 (when the state payment was the same for all K-12 students).

The average inflation-adjusted state and local funding per student for all three sectors combined fell from \$12,860 in 2004 to \$12,459 in 2024, but it will rise in 2025 to a projected \$13,732 – the highest level on record. That reflects the impact of the MPS referendum as well as recent increases in charter and MPCP funding.

As shown in Figure 11, the projected funding for MPS in 2025 will rise by more \$2,000 per pupil to an estimated \$15,755. Estimated funding for charter and MPCP schools will also rise in 2025 but by a more limited amount of \$344. That will leave projected differences of between \$3,000 to \$5,500 in core funding per pupil between MPS and the other sectors.

**Figure 11: Milwaukee Public Schools Funding Per Pupil Will Rise the Most Next Year**  
Core public funding\* authorized per student by type of school in 2024 and 2025, not adjusted for inflation



Sources: Dept. of Public Instruction and Legislative Fiscal Bureau; \*Includes all state and local funding subject to revenue limits on MPS, per pupil aid to MPS, and state payments to MPCP and independent charter schools. Amounts for 2025 are projected and statewide average does not include referenda impacts.

These amounts, however, do not form a perfect basis of comparison because they do not necessarily account for all the varying revenues or costs for each type of school. For example, MPS receives additional federal aid for low-income students and students with disabilities but must share those funds equitably with private school students and staff. The district also has substantial special education costs that are not reimbursed by the state or federal government, and charter schools have smaller but still significant amounts as well. MPCP schools, on the other hand, do not receive direct federal aid for students in poverty or students with disabilities but have fewer regulations and their students do benefit from some services provided by MPS. Neither MPCP nor charter schools engage in collective bargaining with unionized staff, which can also affect costs.



## Funding Per School Has Fallen Sharply

Despite the size of the April 2024 MPS referendum, it will not eliminate the financial challenges in the current system. This conclusion emerges most clearly from an examination of average funding levels per school across all sectors. In 1994, MPS and the schools participating in the then-fledgling MPCP separately operated a total of 167 school buildings or schools – 155 for MPS and 12 for the MPCP schools.<sup>17</sup> As Figure 12 shows, the number of school locations has risen 79.6% to 300 in 2024.

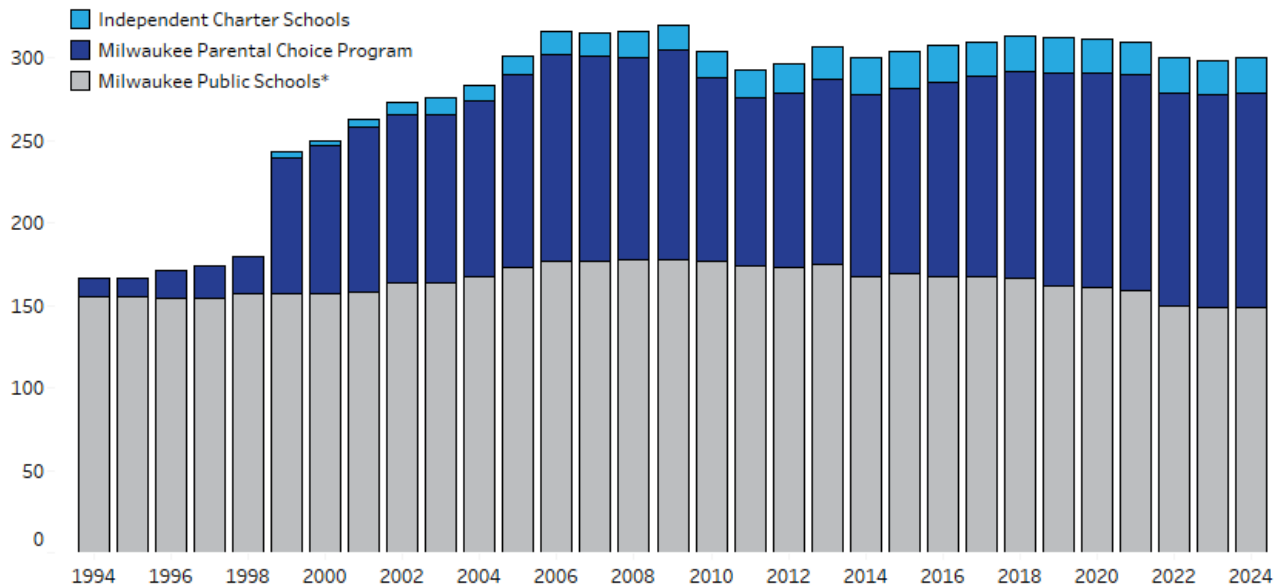
Our figures for MPS come from the district’s financial statements and show it grew its number of school buildings to a high of 178 in 2008 and then gradually reduced them to its present number of 149. Over the full three decades, however, the number of district buildings decreased by only 3.9% despite a 29.1% drop over that period in MPS’ full-time enrollment.<sup>18</sup>

**How We Analyzed Schools**

This section examines trends in core funding amounts on a per-school basis. To do so, we analyzed the number of tax-supported school locations in Milwaukee over the past generation by gathering data on the number of MPS school buildings and the number of MPCP and independent charter schools (those not chartered by MPS) as reported in MPS and DPI data. Challenges with the data make it difficult to identify the number of school locations with perfect precision over each of the 30 years but do allow for identifying broad trends.

The number of schools participating in MPCP grew rapidly during the 1990s and then steadily over the next two decades, hitting 130 at the beginning of 2020 and remaining at about that level through this year, with 85 located within city boundaries according to DPI data. After starting in

**Figure 12: Number of Schools Has Proliferated and Remained High Even as Overall Enrollment Falls**  
 Number of school locations\* serving Milwaukee students by type of school and year, 1994 to 2024



Sources: Dept. of Public Instruction, Legislative Fiscal Bureau, and MPS. \*For MPS, the chart shows school buildings and for MPCP and charters it shows schools.

<sup>17</sup> The data on the 30-year period available from the state Department of Public Instruction somewhat understates the number of MPCP school locations since some institutions such as Saint Marcus Lutheran School actually have three campuses that are counted as a single school.

<sup>18</sup> To check these numbers, we separately looked at the number of MPS schools, since two schools can potentially operate out of the same building. Over this same three-decade period, the number of MPS schools started and ended at a similar number to the number of buildings. Though arriving at an exact count over 30 years is difficult, the overall trend of fewer students per building is clear.



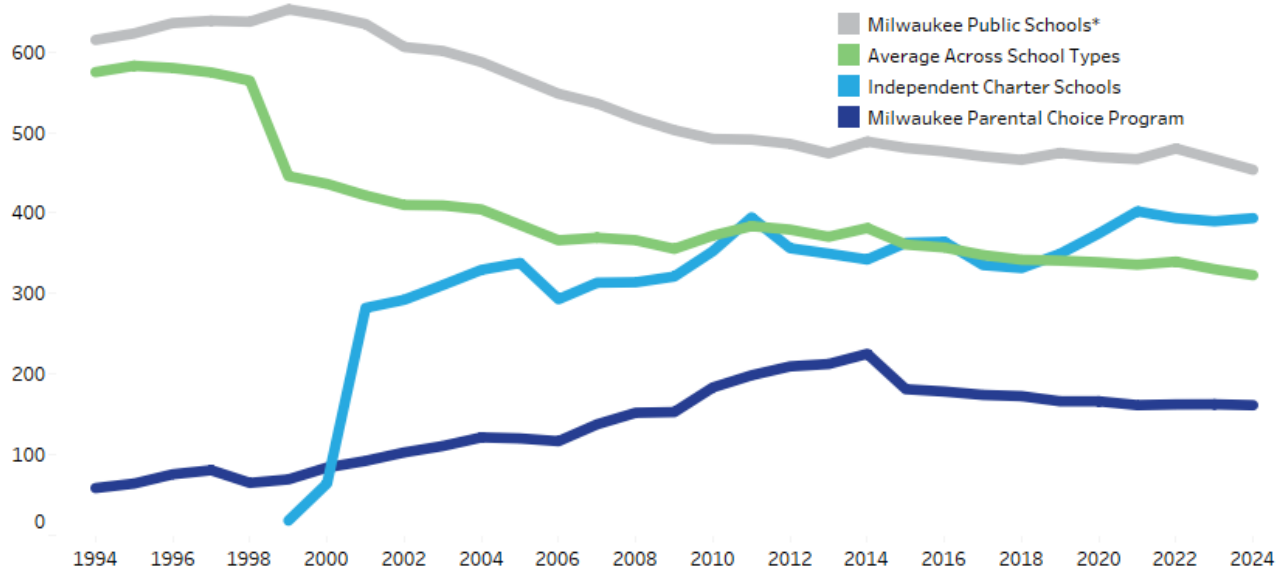


1999, the number of independent charter schools (those not chartered by MPS) reached as many as 23 in 2016 and has since fallen to 21. Though MPS still has more students in its school buildings, the number of combined MPCP and charter schools not authorized by the district together has reached 151. Of those, 105 are within the city proper, 70.5% of the number of MPS school buildings.

In other words, the number of schools in Milwaukee has proliferated even as the number of students – and total inflation-adjusted funding – has first stagnated and then fallen. The average number of full-time students per MPS building fell to 454 in 2024, the lowest level on record and down 22.8% from 587 in 2004 (see Figure 13). The average number of students across all schools also hit a record low at 323 this year. Meanwhile, the average number of MPCP students per school fell to 162 in 2024, the lowest since 2009. Only independent charters not chartered by MPS have kept their numbers stable in recent years and now count nearly as many students per school as MPS with 394.

**Figure 13: Sharp Drop in Students Per School for MPS, Modest Dip for MPCP Over Last Decade**

Number of students per school location\* by year and type of school, 1994 to 2024



Sources: Dept. of Public Instruction, Legislative Fiscal Bureau, and MPS. \*For MPS, the chart shows school buildings. For MPCP and charters, it shows schools.

Because of a lack of available data going back to 1994, Figures 12 and 13 do not show MPS charter schools that are operated by outside entities. In addition to five buildings that these schools rent from MPS, these independently-run charters authorized by MPS (also known as non-instrumentality charters) own seven additional buildings not shown in the figures or in the numbers above. They include the four operated by Milwaukee College Prep, and one each run by the Hmong American Peace Academy, Highland Community School, and La Causa Charter School. The number of MPS students per building for this year would be somewhat lower if the seven independently owned charter schools were shown separately.

The clear implication of these numbers is that the overall education system is operating less efficiently. Older school buildings in urban districts in particular often require large capital investments as well as operating costs such as maintenance, transportation, cafeteria meals, custodial work, and utilities. Each school must also have a principal and clerical staff as well as coverage by staff such as nurses, librarians, and counselors. Adding more schools with fewer students may stretch funds or lead to schools with fewer resources and opportunities for students.



Milwaukee is far from the only large city dealing with this problem nationally. The [Wall Street Journal recently noted](#) that districts in Los Angeles and San Antonio, for example, are facing the same issue. Private schools are not immune either, with [similar reports](#) of Catholic schools nationally facing consolidation and closure. The [Archdiocese of Milwaukee](#), for example, reports that, historically, 60 Catholic schools within its area closed or consolidated between 1965 and 1975 as a result of enrollment declines.

These observations are borne out by the drop in the average funding per school. In 1994, MPS and the small number of MPCP institutions at the time together received an inflation-adjusted average of \$7 million for each school location they collectively operated. By 2024, the average funding per school across MPS, MPCP, and independent charters had fallen to an average of \$4.3 million, the lowest on record and a drop of 38.5% from three decades earlier.

Among these groups, only the independent charters – those not chartered by MPS – have been able to increase their average funding per school over the past decade by a significant amount. Even with the recent funding increase for private choice programs, the average public revenue per MPCP school is up only modestly since 2015 after accounting for inflation. The average funding per school building for MPS hit a record low in 2024 after adjusting for inflation. The April 2024 MPS referendum will temporarily reverse this downward slide for the district but not erase it as a long-term source of financial stress.

To some degree, the decrease in the overall average enrollment and funding per school may be appropriate given the shift toward MPCP and charter schools, which typically have smaller footprints and fewer students per building. MPCP schools also may serve other students from outside the program. It also should be said that opening or closing a school takes time and therefore these building changes will always lag a rise or fall in enrollment. In addition, even though schools with more students may be more efficient, they may not necessarily be better for students. Education leaders also point out that, while schools in some parts of the city have seen enrollment plummet, others are full and need additional capacity.

Yet for now at least, the overall trend suggests that the current number of publicly supported school buildings in the city may not be sustainable over the next decade, even taking into account the latest MPS referendum. This expectation is supported by the current trend – the total number of Milwaukee schools has already fallen somewhat since 2009. If schools do close in the future, policymakers and leaders within each sector may wish to use that trend to encourage consolidation toward high-quality schools of all types or at least consider that as one factor among others. They could also consider whether closures disproportionately impact vulnerable student groups.

### **State Aid Targeted to Property Taxpayers**

Outside of state aid payments to schools, the state also makes tax credit payments to municipalities to lower net bills to property owners from all types of property taxes, including schools. The biggest of these tax relief tools is known as the school levy tax credit because it is distributed to each municipality based on the amount of school property taxes in their boundaries. The money cannot be used to increase school spending – its sole purpose is to lower net tax bills.

These tax credit payments provide less benefit to residents of communities such as Milwaukee, where relatively large amounts of state aid to schools mean the K-12 property tax levy accounts for a much smaller share of district budgets compared to wealthier suburban communities. City of Milwaukee taxpayers received approximately \$68.6 million in state tax credits to help offset their

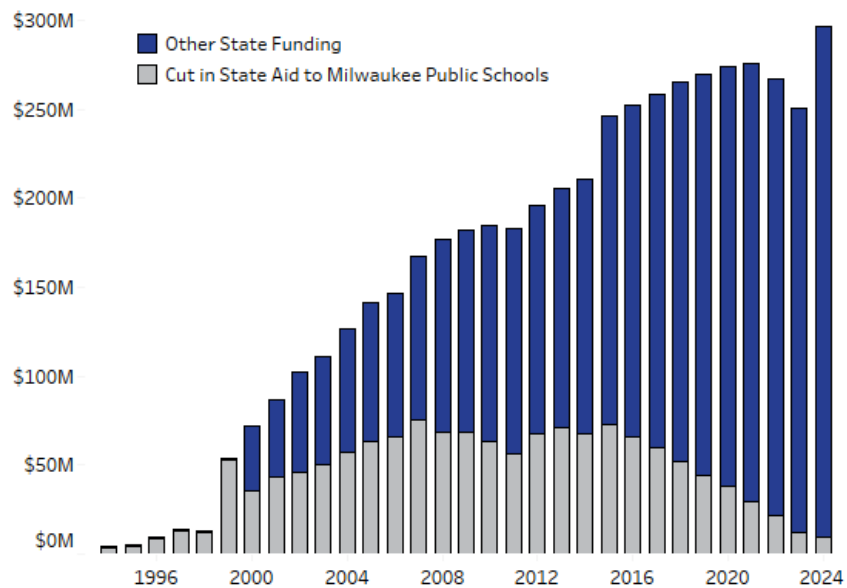


December 2023 tax bills – above the 30-year average for the credit but down somewhat from an inflation-adjusted peak of \$73.2 million on December 2017 bills. Analysis by the Forum shows that shifting more of these state credits into state general school aids would provide a greater benefit to Milwaukee students and taxpayers, though at a cost to their suburban counterparts.

One final factor that has helped to reduce MPS property taxes has been a policy change by the state to how MPCP schools are funded. In the past, a major

portion of the cost of the private choice program was funded through a deduction in state aid to MPS, with the district in turn increasing property taxes to cover the loss. As Figure 14 shows, the deduction in aid rose to as much as \$72.5 million in 2015 after adjusting for inflation. By 2024, the aid deduction had fallen to \$9.5 million and next year it will phase out completely, leaving MPCP entirely funded by state taxpayers.

**Figure 14: As Voucher Costs Rise, State Shoulders More of the Expense**  
Funding for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program by source in 2023\$



Source: Legislative Fiscal Bureau

## Funding for Specific Students and Programs

### Special Education Aid Has Been Outpaced by Costs

In addition to the core revenues discussed thus far, school districts such as MPS also receive various streams of state aid for different categories of students and programming. By far the most of material of these are per pupil aid (which we have already mentioned) and aid for special education costs. Together, these two forms of aid accounted for 79.8% of what are known as state categorical aids in 2024.

One of the top fiscal challenges of public school officials across the state over the past decade has been the low reimbursement rate for state special education aid. Districts and all charter schools are required by state and federal law to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, and in doing so they incur added costs. Yet despite some progress in recent years, the state today covers fewer of those eligible excess costs for students with disabilities than it did a generation ago. This is a

### Special Needs Scholarship Program

Since 2017, some private schools in Wisconsin have been serving qualifying students with disabilities in exchange for a state payment that for the 2024 school year was typically \$15,065 per pupil in lieu of the traditional tuition voucher. The great majority of payments are funded through a reduction in the state aid that would otherwise be paid to the student's home district. This is a different approach than is used for public school students with special needs. In 2023, 41 schools participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program enrolled an additional 763.5 full-time equivalent students in the special needs program, according to DPI data. Notably, not all private school students with an identified disability participate in this program.



particular concern for MPS and to a lesser extent charter schools in Milwaukee given their shares of students with disabilities and need to divert general education funds toward these mandated services.

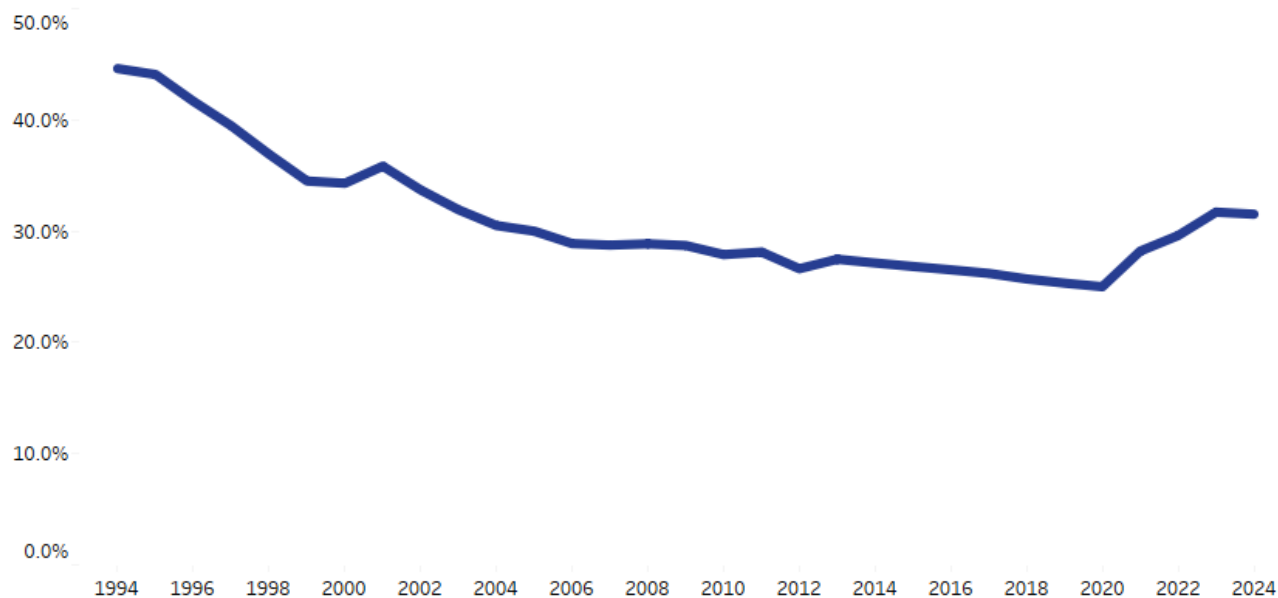
Private choice programs in Milwaukee serve students with disabilities at lower rates and do not receive traditional special education aid, but they also can participate in a separate program for special needs students (see textbox on previous page). MPS is also responsible for assessing and providing services to special needs students attending private schools in Milwaukee.

As Figure 15 shows, in 1994 the state’s main form of special education aid covered 47% of the statewide additional costs incurred by school districts like MPS and charter schools. Since then, the state has nearly doubled its funding for special education aid, falling only somewhat short of matching the rate of inflation. Yet statewide special education costs have nearly tripled over the period, driving down the reimbursement rate for school districts and charters to 31.5% in 2024.

Within MPS, unreimbursed special education costs rose from \$151 million in 2004 to \$201 million in 2014 after adjusting for inflation. They have since dropped to \$124.2 million in 2024, a reflection both of the district’s declining enrollment of special education students as well as a modest increase in reimbursement rates over the past four years due to increases in state funding. Special education costs also rose significantly for charter schools in Milwaukee, since their number of students with identified disabilities nearly tripled between 2006 and 2023.<sup>19</sup>

**Fig. 15: Despite Progress On Special Education, State Covers A Smaller Share of Costs Than A Generation Ago**

Share of qualifying special education costs for school districts and independent charters covered by state aid payments



Sources: Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau and Department of Public Instruction

<sup>19</sup> State categorical aid for English learners, another vulnerable student group, is prorated at even lower levels than the aid for students with disabilities: under 8% in every year since 2021. The total money involved is not as material as for special education, however; in 2023, MPS’ unreimbursed costs approved for bilingual-bicultural education aid were \$15.2 million, a fraction of the district’s unreimbursed special education costs. If the EL population of Milwaukee schools continues to rise across sectors, both the amount and program for EL aid may receive more attention in the future. For more, see the Forum’s [2021 brief](#) on the topic.



## Federal Aid Helps Address Additional Needs

Public schools including charters also receive federal aid to offset some of the costs associated with serving students with greater needs. The main types include aid for students in poverty (known as Title I aid), aid for special education students through grants from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and aid for other purposes such as school lunch programs.

The large federal payments to MPS and some charters in Milwaukee reflect the high poverty rates in the city as well as the rates of students with disabilities. For example, the poverty rate for five to 17-year-old Milwaukee residents in 2021 was 30.4%, which was seventh-highest among the 120 largest school districts nationally, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the U.S. Census Bureau. As a result, MPS received \$2,476 in federal aid per student in the 2020 school year, not including pandemic relief aid. That was nearly double the average of \$1,279 per student among the 120 largest districts nationally and was fifth highest among those districts, ranking behind only Detroit, San Antonio, Philadelphia, and the District of Columbia. Unlike in nearly all other states, Wisconsin's primary state aid formula does not take student poverty into account.

In 2020, the city's independent charter schools received an average of \$678 per pupil in combined Title I aid and IDEA funding, ranging from \$219 per pupil at Downtown Montessori Academy to \$1,265 at Milwaukee Math and Science Academy. In the same year from the same sources, MPS received \$1,217 per pupil.

MPCP schools also often have low-income students but generally do not have direct access to federal aid. MPS, however, is federally required to provide some services such as professional development, family engagement, and materials and supplies to eligible private school students and staff in Milwaukee that are equitable to those provided to public school students. That represents a significant amount – \$24.7 million in 2024 for Title I funds alone, or 29.8% of the \$82.8 million Title I allocation to MPS.

All sectors do also receive some funding from private donors. In some cases, these amounts may be significant. We have not included any data on these donations, however, since compiling such figures would be difficult and might not even be possible in all cases.

## Comparisons of Total Funding

These additional amounts of state and federal aid for students facing challenges such as disabilities and poverty – and the accompanying costs – add to the total revenues and spending for MPS and charter schools. We can show that by looking at the overall operating funds available to the district from local, state, and federal sources. Using a metric developed for the Forum's [School DataTool](#), we found that MPS had operating spending in the 2022 school year of \$17,843 per pupil, which was 13.4% above the statewide average of \$15,734 and ranked 120<sup>th</sup> among the 421 districts in Wisconsin. Declining enrollment and the latest referendum will send those amounts higher for MPS starting in 2025.

MPS also ranks relatively high in total revenue per student compared to other large districts nationally. The NCES data show MPS with 2020 revenues of \$17,520 per student, 3.7% more than the average funding of \$16,894 per student and 25<sup>th</sup>-highest among the 120 largest districts in the country. As noted earlier, however, there are reasons for higher funding levels given that the poverty rate for school-age children in Milwaukee is among the highest for these districts and is relatively high for districts in Wisconsin as well.



The inclusion of the state and federal aid and the 2025 referendum will boost MPS funding above that of most suburban Milwaukee districts. However, readers should not see these additional state and federal aid amounts purely as a boost to the general operations at MPS since they fail to cover the true costs of educating students with special challenges or disabilities. In 2024, for example, MPS had \$1,838 in special education costs per pupil that were not reimbursed by the state, and additional federal aid would cover at most several hundred dollars of this remaining cost. The situation for charter schools is the same.

In other words, if the percentage of MPS or charter students with disabilities were to rise, the district or individual school would receive more state special education aid and federal IDEA payments. Yet in this scenario the financial challenges for MPS or the charter school would grow, not shrink, since the additional state and federal aid would not cover the additional expenses for these students that are mandated under the law.<sup>20</sup> If the state were to increase the reimbursement rate for special education aid, both MPS and charter schools would benefit – one reason why this goal is shared by many education advocates in the city.

### **Massive Federal Pandemic Funding Coming to an End**

Over the past several years, Wisconsin school districts, charters, and private schools received pandemic relief aid through several rounds of federal stimulus legislation, most notably the American Rescue Plan Act. These funds were substantial for MPS and some charters. MPS and its charter schools received \$797.2 million, about one third of the statewide total, because of the district's size and the federal formula's emphasis on low-income students such as those in Milwaukee. These one-time funds could be used for a variety of academic, health, and mental health supports during the pandemic as well as for other needs such as building projects.

MPS received \$10,678 in federal aid per pupil (using 2019-20 enrollment) over five years of stimulus funding, ranking it fourth-highest among the state's 421 school districts. The independent charter schools in the city also were allocated funds based on enrollment and poverty data, ranging from \$1,496 per pupil for Downtown Montessori Academy to \$11,458 per pupil for Milwaukee Math and Science Academy. On average, the independent schools chartered by UW-Milwaukee and the city of Milwaukee received \$6,115 in pandemic funds per pupil. The majority of other school districts in the Milwaukee area were allocated less than \$3,000 per pupil in pandemic relief aid, with Wauwatosa and Whitefish Bay receiving less than \$1,000 per pupil.

Milwaukee private schools also received some funding. MPS had to pass a portion of its initial pandemic aid on to private schools, and later rounds of federal funding targeted private schools directly through the Emergency Assistance for Non-Public Schools program. Some charter and MPCP schools also received pandemic relief through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), although private schools that chose to participate in PPP were not eligible for the Emergency Assistance program. The Emergency Assistance data, although not exhaustive of all relief aid distributed to private schools, suggest that Milwaukee private schools received much less than MPS or some

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<sup>20</sup> Drawing on the literature on the costs of education, Andrew Reschovsky, an emeritus professor at UW-Madison, recalculated Wisconsin's main form of general school aid for the 2022 school year by adjusting the cost factor used in the state formula for the additional costs associated with educating low-income students, students with disabilities, and English learners. As part of this exercise, Reschovsky then simulated a reform of total state aid that resulted in an overall 15% increase in the state aid budget. His simulated reform increased state aid for MPS by 81%. His work includes an [examination of Wisconsin's school funding formula](#) and a paper comparing [Wisconsin's system to both Texas and Massachusetts](#). Reschovsky has further noted that, not only does Wisconsin's primary state aid formula not take student poverty into account, but it also does not account for *concentration* of poverty.



charter schools. On average, they received \$1,114 in pandemic funds per pupil from the first round of the Emergency Assistance program and \$1,134 per pupil from the second and final round.

For the schools that received substantial amounts, COVID-19 funds represented a lifeline that they used for staff, personal protective equipment, laptops, books and other materials, building projects and more (see this [May 2022 brief](#) for more on how the funds have been spent). When state revenue limits did not increase for 2022 or 2023 despite record inflation, some districts also drew upon the federal aid to plug budget holes. However, these funds need to be spent or obligated by September 2024 – meaning that though they have been a major factor in recent years, that will no longer be the case in 2025.

### Financial Management Also Key

Though this report focuses mainly on funding levels for K-12 education in Milwaukee, the importance of strong financial management has been highlighted by recent events. In the Forum’s recent MPS budget brief, we noted that the district had not yet filed audited financial statements for the 2022-23 fiscal year and had not provided our staff or the public with essential financial information such as fund balance levels and the assumptions underlying its revenue and expenditure forecasts. Just days after our research concluded, DPI officials notified the district that state special education [aid payments would be frozen](#) because of delayed financial reporting by MPS and that its general aid payments might be reduced significantly because the district had made errors in reporting its so-called “shared cost” spending that was eligible to be offset by state general school aid in 2023. Since then, the MPS superintendent, chief financial officer, and comptroller have left their jobs, and elected leaders in the community have called for the district and its board to explain and address these problems.

Adequate financial reporting by MPS is essential to running not only MPS but the larger school finance system in Wisconsin as well. In addition, a review of the district’s reporting of its shared costs in recent years raises immediate questions. After the initial filing, the shared costs used for the district’s 2023 aid payment were revised substantially upward to \$933.9 million, which was \$112.1 million more than the shared costs used for this year’s aid payment and \$139.4 million more than the costs used for the 2022 payments.

Explaining this strange anomaly in the MPS reporting goes beyond the scope of this report and ultimately is the responsibility of the district. Yet the looming prospect of a deduction in state aid – [recently calculated](#) at \$42.6 million by DPI – underlines the stakes for the district and community. If the state reduces future general aid payments to MPS in 2025, the district would either have to cut spending, dip into reserves, or raise taxes further on property owners in addition to the substantial increase already approved by voters in the April 2024 referendum.

The need for responsible management is not unique to MPS, as the last decade has illustrated, with several charter and MPCP schools closing abruptly when faced with operational difficulties. In all cases, taxpayer funds and care for the students themselves merit careful attention.

## Summary

The recent funding increases approved by voters for MPS in the April 2020 referendum and by the governor and lawmakers for charter schools and private choice programs in the current state budget have largely caught up per pupil funding amounts for each type of school to the growth in inflation



over the past two decades. Following the April 2024 referendum, MPS in particular will see its per pupil funding rise sharply next year, though those funds will not go to independent charter schools or MPCP.

Yet in the years to come, financial challenges likely loom for Milwaukee's publicly funded schools as a whole for two main reasons. First, falling enrollment has meant that the total inflation-adjusted funding for schools in Milwaukee has fallen over the past two decades, particularly for MPS, even after taking the latest referendum into account. Second, the city's total number of MPS, charter, and MPCP schools has risen substantially over the past generation, driving down the average funding per school and creating impacts for both students and the schools themselves.





# STUDENT OUTCOMES AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

The final and most critical questions we seek to address in our examination of Milwaukee’s education landscape are whether it is serving children and families well and whether the growth in choices outside of traditional public schools has been a lever for positive change.

If one goal of the original parental choice movement was to offer families – especially low-income families of color – a broader array of schooling options, then the ongoing spread of student enrollment across sectors shows that they have actively exercised that power of choice. The net result of families “voting with their feet” has been that a smaller share of students now attend MPS, and more Milwaukee students enroll in charter schools, private choice programs, homeschooling, and other districts (via Open Enrollment) compared to two decades ago.

Yet many choice proponents argued that parental choice was not just an end unto itself, but also a means of increasing competition between schools and deploying market forces that would drive improvements for students across the city.<sup>21</sup> We do not find evidence of this sort of broad transformative change, although measurement is undermined by inconsistent, unavailable, or incomplete datasets. More detailed and reliable data, especially from the private choice programs, would allow for a clearer picture of student success across the whole city.

Perhaps most challenging of all is the fact that students are not randomly assigned to schools. Both their families and in some cases the schools themselves made decisions that helped determine where they studied. As a result, the characteristics of students may differ across schools in important, systematic ways, some of which we mark in our analysis below (e.g., shares of students with disabilities, selective admissions) and others of which we are not aware or do not have data available (e.g., student mobility between schools as a result of school or family decisions or circumstances). The outcomes data represented here are therefore useful for understanding the present landscape, but they are not sufficient for a definitive evaluation of the sectors.

What is clear, however, is that, despite the efforts of the last generation, Milwaukee’s student outcomes in all sectors are still far below what families and the community would wish for our children. The pandemic wiped away much of any incremental progress made in the last 15 years. Perhaps most pressingly, it exacerbated the city’s already persistently large gaps between its most vulnerable students and their peers, worsening already poor results for Black students in particular.

## Nation’s Report Card Reveals Persistently Low Scores and Wide Gaps

### Little Meaningful Growth in Proficiency

Milwaukee’s most consistently administered assessment offers the first proof point that student results have not meaningfully shifted in the city. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly known as the Nation’s Report Card, is given every other year across the country. Within NAEP, the Trial Urban District Assessment focuses on major cities, testing reading and math in randomly selected fourth and eighth grade classes in each city’s public school district (including

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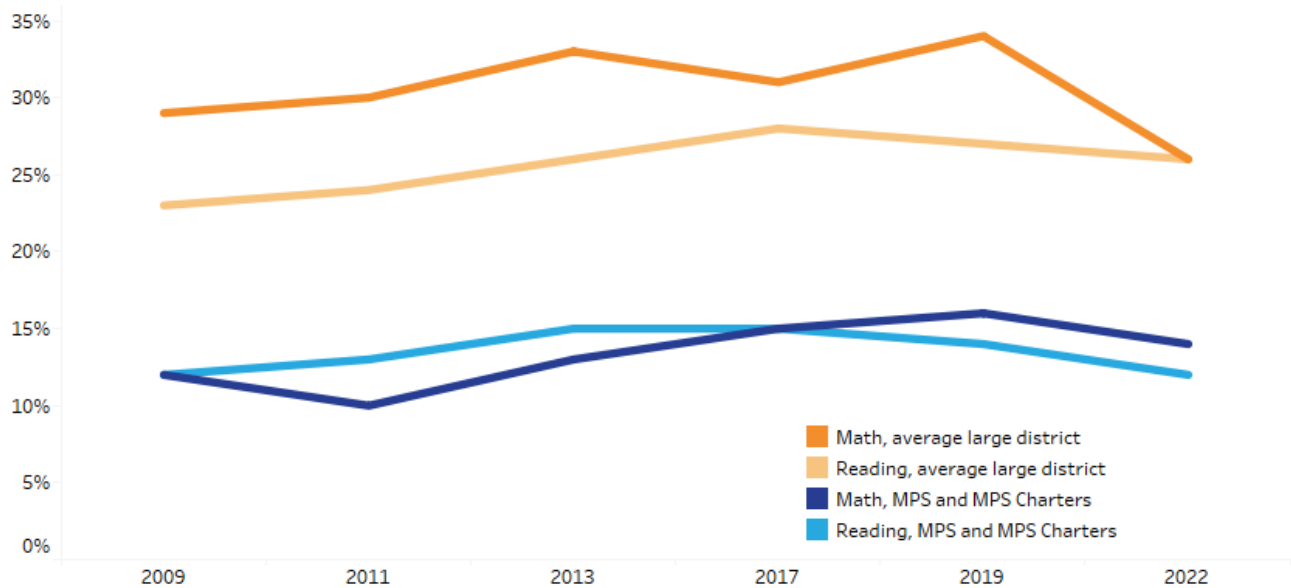
<sup>21</sup> Proponents had other goals as well. Polly Williams, for example, hoped that expanding school choice would lead to more schools led and staffed by Black educators, as another manifestation of Black empowerment.



both traditional schools and charter schools authorized by the district). MPS began participating in this national assessment as a large urban district in 2009 and has continued since then, with the exception of 2015. Neither private schools nor independent charters are included in the NAEP data or in the analyses presented here.<sup>22</sup>

In MPS’ first decade of NAEP participation, proficiency scores rose somewhat overall.<sup>23</sup> Fourth grade proficiency increased minimally: by two percentage points in both reading (from 12% to 14%) and math (15% to 17%) from 2009 to 2019 (see Figure 16). Eighth grade proficiency showed slightly larger gains of four percentage points in both reading (from 12% to 16%) and math (from 7% to 11%) in the same timeframe.

**Figure 16: Pandemic Erased a Decade of Incremental Growth**  
Average fourth grade proficiency\*, Milwaukee versus national large city average



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress. Note: “Average large district” includes not only MPS and the other districts participating in NAEP’s Trial Urban District Assessment but also public school students within all U.S. cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

Still, these proficiency levels remained hauntingly below the national average for large districts, which never fell below 21% in any grade or subject and reached as high as 34% (in 2019, for fourth grade math). As we noted in the finance section, Milwaukee has a higher poverty rate than all but a handful of other large cities nationally. The challenges that MPS students face as a result likely underlie some of the disparity in proficiency scores. It may not fully explain, however, why the gap between Milwaukee’s proficiency score and the average large district score *widened* from 2009 to 2019 in every grade and subject except eighth grade math. This growing gap instead suggests that many other districts made more progress at improving student outcomes.

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, negatively affecting the academic achievement of students across the country. Only one year of NAEP testing has occurred since then, capturing data from 2022. Milwaukee’s decline from 2019 to 2022 was not substantially worse than the average large district nationally. On average, reading scores in large districts had largely recovered, while Milwaukee was

<sup>22</sup> Private schools can opt into NAEP but do not do so widely. Independent charter schools (those not authorized by MPS) take NAEP but are not included in the public school district’s numbers.

<sup>23</sup> NAEP [defines](#) proficiency as “solid academic performance” and “competency” – above the “partial mastery” denoted by a basic score but below the “superior performance” of an advanced score.



only down by two percentage points. Milwaukee's decline in math was also less dramatic than the average large district: six and four percentage points in fourth grade and eighth grade, respectively, compared to the average of eight and six points. Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on students living in poverty, these results are notable.

Unfortunately, the pandemic decline also largely erased any of Milwaukee's gains of the previous decade. The city returned to its 2009 proficiency rates in fourth grade reading (12%) and eighth grade math (7%). In fourth grade math, proficiency rates fell to 11%, their lowest point since Milwaukee began participating in the test. Only in eighth grade reading did the district retain any progress, dropping from 16% proficiency in 2019 to 14% proficiency in 2022, which remained two points above the 2009 percentage.

Of the two grade levels and two subject areas tested, eighth grade math showed the lowest proficiency levels in every year. Interestingly, fourth grade math showed the highest proficiency levels in every year except 2022, suggesting that the transition to the middle school years may be particularly harmful to Milwaukee students' math performance. The same does not appear to be true statewide; in 2022, Wisconsin's math scores in both fourth and eighth grade were the sixth-highest in the nation.

The larger point underlying these important granular measures and trends is that proficiency levels in both math and reading remain concerningly low. Performance in both subject areas deserves further attention and support.

### **Alarming Gaps Between White and Non-White Students**

Milwaukeeans may be most familiar with the NAEP data as a source behind the oft-repeated and accurate assertion that the city's gap in average fourth grade reading scores between white and Black students is one of the largest in the country. In 2009, Milwaukee had the third-worst gap of the 17 tested districts, while in 2022, it had the fourth-worst gap of 20 tested districts. Furthermore, the size of the gap expanded tremendously (from 36 points in 2009 to 50 points in 2022), especially during the pandemic, as average scores for Black fourth graders declined substantially while those for white fourth graders showed less change (see Figure 17 on following page). The gap between white and Black students in Milwaukee was only somewhat better in other grades or subjects and also grew in the pandemic (see Appendix B for more details).

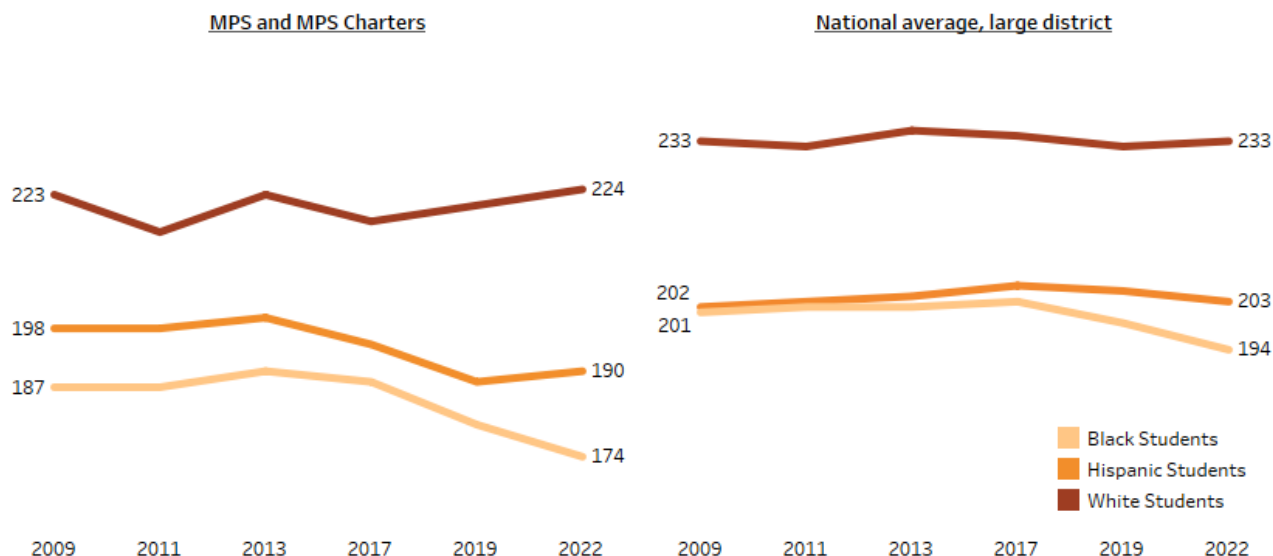
In all cases, the gap widened because average scores for Black children decreased faster than average scores for white children. That's in contrast to some other cities such as Washington, D.C., where proficiency gaps between white and Black students are driven more by strong results for white students rather than by performance declines among Black students. Although any increase in the disparity would be a cause for concern, growth in Milwaukee's gap due to lower scores for Black students represents the most unsettling outcome.

Indeed, Milwaukee stands out nationally for how poor its outcomes for Black students are. In 2022, Black fourth graders in Milwaukee scored lower on average in reading than Black students in any of the other 24 tested districts. The same was true for eighth grade math. In fourth grade math and eighth grade reading, only one other district – Detroit – saw worse scores for its Black students.



**Figure 17: Milwaukee's Gap Between White and Non-White Students Widens**

Average fourth grade reading score\*, Milwaukee versus national large city average



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress. \*Note: score is out of a possible 500 points. The minimum score for achieving "basic" is 208; the minimum score for achieving "proficient" is 238. Average large district includes public school students within all U.S. cities with populations of 250,000 or more (including MPS).

The disparity between Hispanic and white students in Milwaukee is not as glaring compared to other large districts' gaps, but it has also grown over the past decade (as also shown in Figure 17). As with the comparison between Black and white students, the divergence widened as scores for Hispanic students decreased. This decline generally started after 2013, well before the pandemic. Scores fell most sharply in fourth grade math, with a 20-point drop from 2013 to 2022 and half of the drop occurring from 2019 to 2022. Even in fourth grade reading, which saw the smallest decrease from 2013, the average score for Hispanic students dropped 10 points by 2022.

These declines meant that, by 2022, Milwaukee's white-Hispanic gap ranged from 19 points in eighth grade math to 34 points in fourth grade reading. Encouragingly, the eighth grade math gap was the second smallest of the 22 tested districts. On the other hand, fourth grade reading was the ninth largest. Of even greater concern is that the city's worsening results for Hispanic students show Milwaukee losing ground on earlier, more promising outcomes: In 2009, the city's Hispanic students were largely scoring close to their peers in other tested districts. By 2022, that was far less the case, with Milwaukee's Hispanic students trailing the average Hispanic student in other districts by as many as 14 points.

Among specific student groups, only white students in eighth grade reading and white and Hispanic students in eighth grade math demonstrated growth from 2009 to 2019.<sup>24</sup> Then, from 2019 to 2022, all student groups except white and Hispanic fourth grade readers declined, reflecting the impact of the pandemic.

<sup>24</sup> At first, this figure seems incompatible with our previous finding that proficiency in MPS and its charters increased from 2009 to 2019. Upon consultation, a NAEP statistician detailed that fewer Milwaukee students over time are scoring "basic" and are either decreasing into "below basic" or increasing into "proficient." The decline in average score reflects those students who are doing worse than previously. The simultaneous increase in proficiency is not statistically significant, but it can appear because there is also a real contingent of students who are doing better than previously.



These results may not fully reflect Milwaukee students as a whole, given the exclusion of the private and independent charter schools and the high percentages of non-white students in the non-MPS sectors.<sup>25</sup> If one theory behind the spread of school choice was that it would produce improved outcomes at all schools, including MPS, however, then that does not appear to be the case – especially not for students of color.

## State Report Cards Reveal Gaps and Small Improvements

Annual report cards issued by the state lack the long-term consistency of NAEP but offer a more detailed recent look at school performance in Milwaukee, especially since the independent charter schools and private choice programs are not included in the city’s NAEP results. We start with scores from 2017, the first year in which schools participating in the private choice program received full report cards from DPI. The overall results show some pre-pandemic improvements, led by high-scoring charter schools and improving private choice program outcomes, followed by an overall

**Background: Understanding School Report Cards**

DPI issues annual report cards for every school in the state receiving taxpayer funding. These report cards measure four areas:

**Achievement** – students’ level of knowledge and skills in English language arts (ELA) and math as measured on the Forward exam (for grades 3-8) or ACT suite (for grades 9-11).

**Growth** – the annual change in student achievement compared to students’ demographically similar peers.

**Target Group Outcomes** – combined scores in achievement, growth, chronic absenteeism, and attendance or graduation for the school’s student group with the lowest test scores.

**On-Track to Graduation** – combined scores in chronic absenteeism, graduation or attendance, third grade ELA achievement, and eighth grade math achievement.

Starting in 2016, these four areas were no longer weighted equally. Instead, the higher a school’s population of economically disadvantaged students, the more growth counts toward the school’s overall score, and the less impact achievement has. For the vast majority of Milwaukee schools, the growth area is weighted nine times more than the achievement area.

DPI issues overall accountability scores (out of 100 points) and ratings (out of five stars) based on schools’ weighted results. DPI adjusted the scoring thresholds in 2021 such that fewer scores qualified for the lowest rating. For the sake of data legibility, our analyses combine schools receiving one and two stars as “poorly rated” and schools receiving four or five stars as “highly rated.”

Rating: description	Overall accountability score, pre-2021	Overall accountability score, post-2021
1 star: Fails to meet expectations	0 - 52.9	0 - 47.9
2 stars: Meets few expectations	53 - 62.9	48 - 57.9
3 stars: Meets expectations	63 - 72.9	58 - 69.9
4 stars: Exceeds expectations	73 - 82.9	70 - 82.9
5 stars: Significantly exceeds expectations	83 - 100	83 - 100

<sup>25</sup> As of 2023, 33.6% of publicly funded Black students in Milwaukee attended schools not included in the NAEP sample, i.e., independent charters and private choice programs. The same was true for 29.6% of white students and 39.6% of Hispanic students. See the later analysis of Forward exam below basic scores for more details on Hispanic students in charter schools and private choice programs.



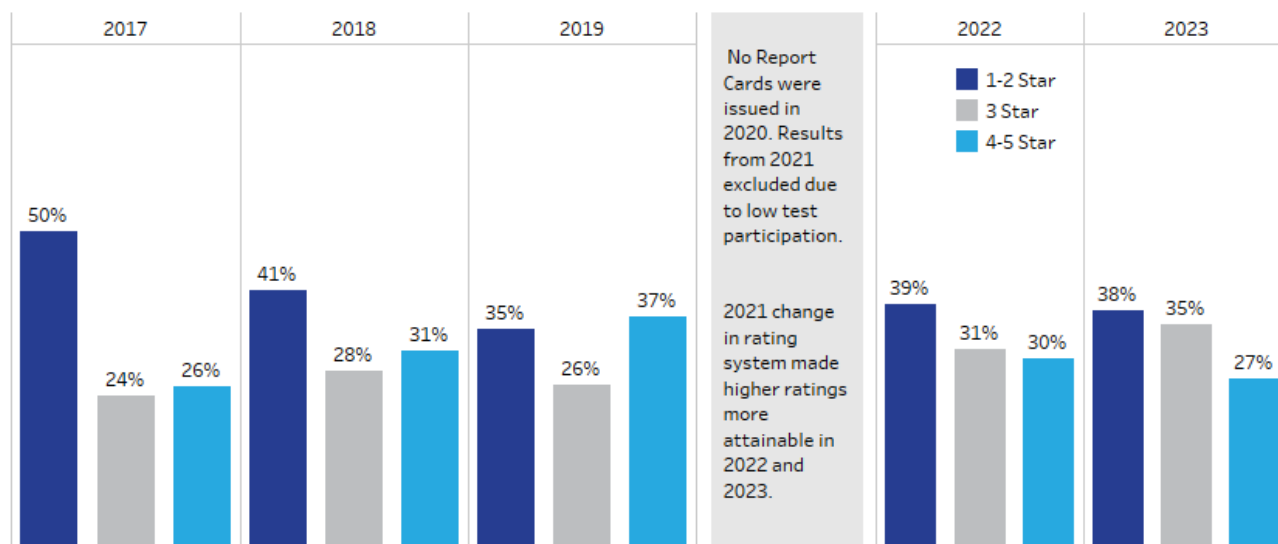
decline in school performance following the pandemic. A closer look, however, also reveals some structural concerns that predated and persisted through COVID-19. Across the city, children lack equal access to high-performing schools, and that is especially true for students in concentrated poverty and racial segregation within MPS, Black students, and students with disabilities.

### Pre-Pandemic Progress Interrupted

Report card ratings showed improvement from 2017 to 2019.<sup>26</sup> Progressively fewer students were educated in schools receiving one or two stars, the lowest possible ratings (see textbox on previous page for details). In 2017, 50.3% of students educated in Milwaukee attended schools with one or two stars (see Figure 18). By 2019, only 35.9% did. At the same time, an increasing share of students attended schools with four or five stars, the highest possible ratings. In 2019, 37.3% of students attended one of these schools, a gain of 11.8 percentage points from 2017.

**Figure 18: Pandemic Disrupted Movement Toward Fewer Poorly Rated Schools**

Percent of Milwaukee students enrolled in schools by performance ratings



Source: Department of Public Instruction Report Cards

Notably, however, state report cards put a higher value on schools improving students' scores relative to their peers than on student proficiency. This approach means that a school can attain a high rating for growth and still have students scoring quite low in math and reading achievement. For example, Destiny High School received a four-star rating in 2023 despite only 2.3% of its students scoring as advanced or proficient in reading and 0.8% in math, thanks to its growth from 0% in the previous years. Eight other schools across the sectors were rated as four stars in 2023 with fewer than 10% of students scoring proficient in math. We examine this distinction between achievement and growth in the next section.

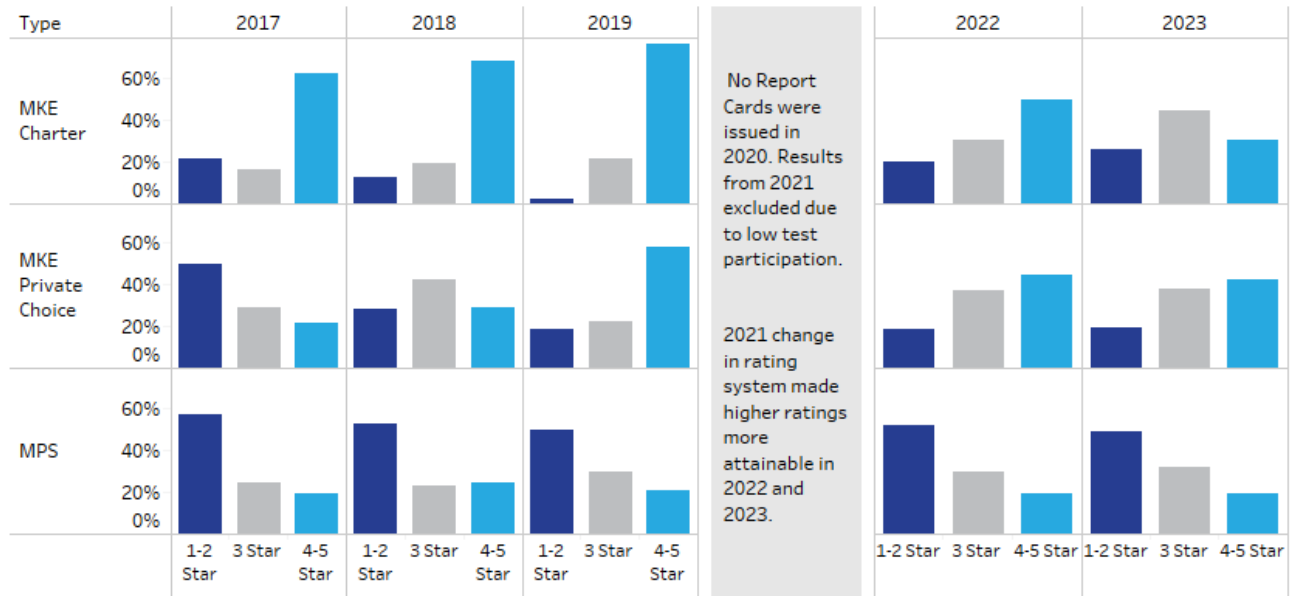
The improvement from 2017 to 2019 occurred across all three sectors (see Figure 19 on the next page). By percentage, the growth was most pronounced for students in the private choice programs and charter schools. The share of private choice program participants in highly rated schools (four or five stars) increased from 21.6% to 58.4%, and the share in poorly rated schools declined from

<sup>26</sup> Excluded from our Report Card analysis are schools receiving no ratings or alternate ratings. In 2023, they included nine private choice schools, 11 MPS schools, and one charter school.



**Figure 19: Charters Highest Rated Pre-Pandemic; Choice Highest Rated Post-Pandemic**

Percent of Milwaukee students enrolled in schools by performance ratings, by sector



Source: Department of Public Instruction Report Cards. Note: Students are not randomly distributed between sectors, and some selection effects likely exist. Differences in outcomes should be interpreted with caution.

49.6% to 18.9%.<sup>27</sup> The share of charter students in highly rated schools increased from 62.3% to 76.1% and the share in poorly rated schools declined from 21.8% to only 2.5%. MPS saw less movement of students into four- and five-star schools, from 19.0% to 20.4%, but successfully dropped the share of students attending one- and two-star schools, from 56.8% to 50.0%. That amounted to 3,927 fewer students in poorly rated MPS schools in 2019 than 2017, compared to 2,714 fewer students in poorly rated charter schools and 7,131 fewer private choice program students in poorly rated private schools.

COVID-19 interrupted the positive trend for Milwaukee students. By 2023, the total share of students educated in highly rated schools had nearly dropped back to 2017 levels (26.9%). The increase in the share of students at poorly rated schools was not as large (from 35.9% in 2019 to 37.7% in 2023) but also not encouraging. Also, this two percentage-point change underestimates the decrease in school quality, since DPI adjusted the scoring thresholds in 2021 such that fewer schools qualified for the lowest rating (see textbox on page 35).

The sectors weathered the pandemic with distinctly different outcomes. The private choice schools became the sector serving the highest share of students in highly rated schools, with 42.1% by 2023, plus another 38.2% in three-star schools. Charters, which had previously served the largest share of students in highly rated schools, dropped down to only 30.3% by 2023, although another 43.9% attended three-star schools. The results for MPS actually improved slightly from 2019 to 2023, with 19.6% of students in highly rated schools and another 32.0% in three-star schools. Only

<sup>27</sup> In all cases, references to the Report Card results for private choice program participants – sometimes shortened to “private choice schools” – draw from the schools’ Choice Report Cards, not their “All Students” Report Cards. The former is mandatory for all private schools accepting private choice program participants and reflects only the outcomes of those students. The latter is optional and reflects the outcomes of all students, regardless of whether they receive taxpayer funding to attend the school or are private pay students.



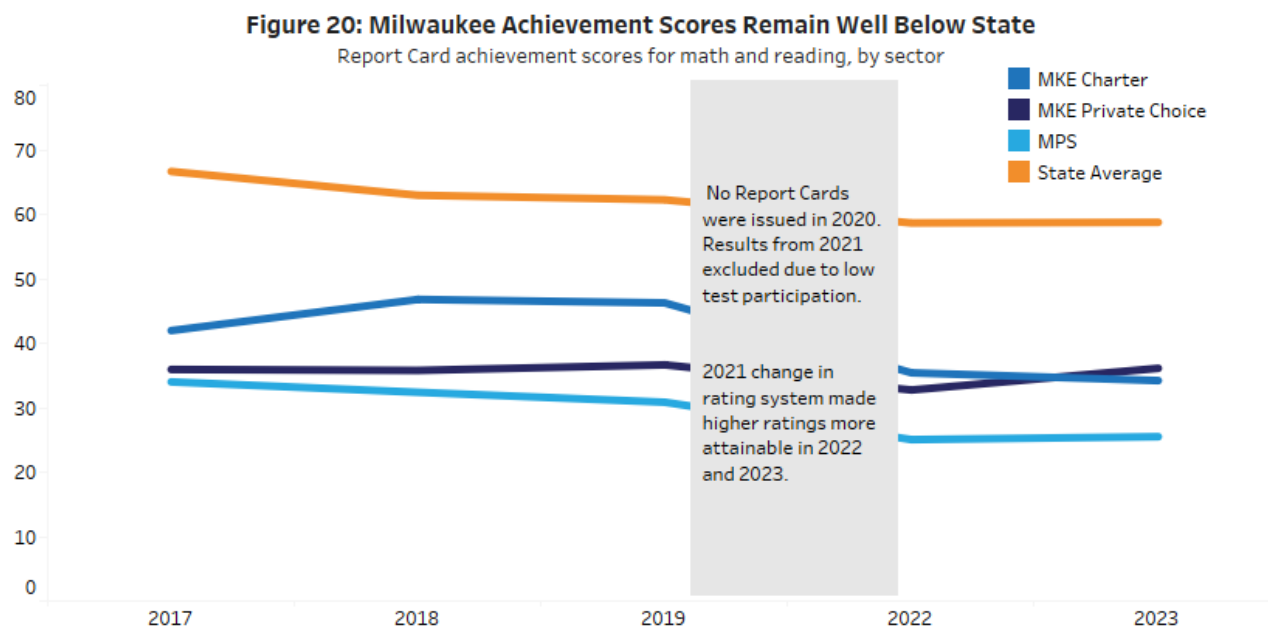
90% of MPS students took the standardized tests underpinning the 2023 Report Cards, however, raising the possibility that ratings may have been lower if test participation had been higher.<sup>28</sup>

Consideration of these results must take into account both the demographic and funding differences described in previous sections. MPS receives more funding per pupil overall, but also has greater costs and greater classroom responsibilities due largely to its higher share of students with identified disabilities. Changes within MPS may not appear as pronounced as in the smaller and more statistically volatile charter and private choice sectors. Data are also not readily available to discern the degree to which families’ considerations about where to enroll, or schools’ decisions about whom to enroll and retain, influence these results.<sup>29</sup> Finally, we did not examine the role of school closures prior to or during the time period studied on these findings.

### Sobering Achievement Scores, Some Promising Growth Scores

Because growth scores heavily outweigh achievement scores in the Report Card ratings, we separated the two to better illuminate how well Milwaukee’s schools are serving children. Achievement measures students’ reading and math scores on state tests from the most recent three years; growth measures how those scores have *changed* relative to demographically similar peers. DPI’s Report Card measures both achievement and growth on a 100-point scale.

While the Report Card’s rating system shows most Milwaukee schools to be meeting expectations, achievement scores largely mirror the story described by NAEP: overall reading and math scores



Source: Department of Public Instruction Report Card. Note: Scores are out of 100. Students are not randomly distributed between sectors, and some selection effects likely exist. Differences in outcomes should be interpreted with caution.

<sup>28</sup> Test participation dropped in all sectors following the pandemic. In 2023, 89.9% of MPS students, 95.2% of private choice participants, and 97.8% of charter students tested in English language arts (ELA). That’s compared to 2018, in which 94.2% of MPS students, 97.8% of private choice participants, and 99.2% of charter students tested in ELA.

<sup>29</sup> As an example of how this influence may manifest, [2012](#) and [2013](#) research on the private choice program in Milwaukee found that, first, private choice program participants who scored lower on standardized tests in one year were more likely than their peers to switch into the public sector the following year. Second, students who moved from the private choice program to the public sector scored higher after their moves. These data, however, have not been updated since then.





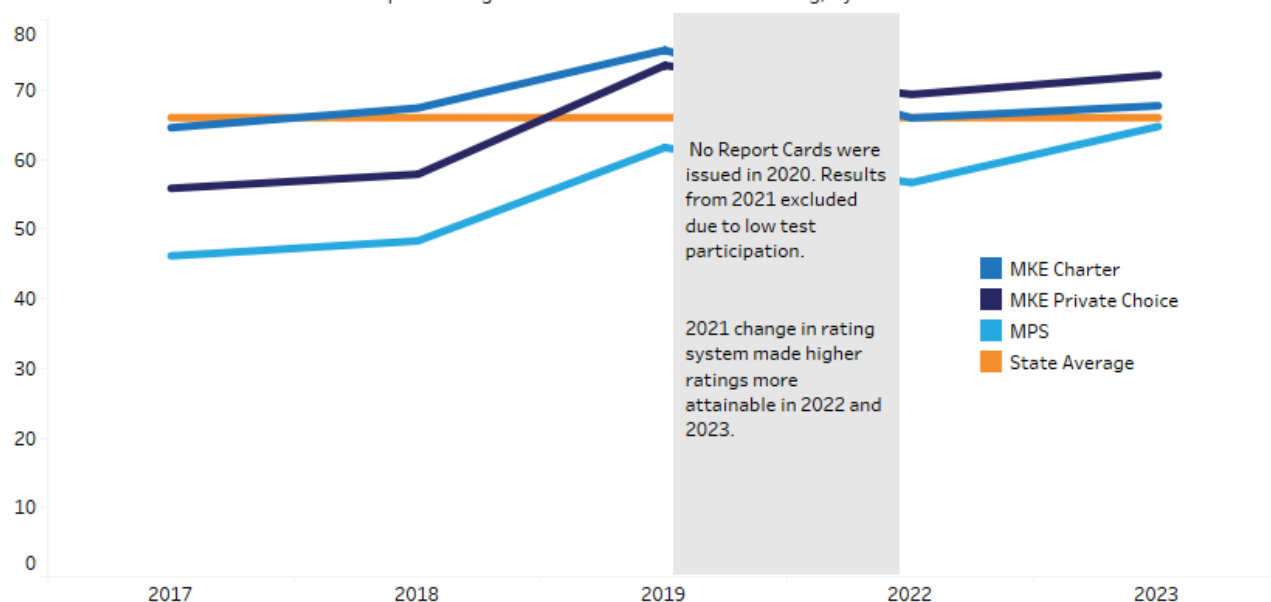
remain very low in the city. Achievement scores in Milwaukee schools remained well below the state average in every year from 2017 to 2023 and across all sectors (see Figure 20 on the previous page). MPS' scores dropped in every year, both pre- and post-pandemic, from 34.0 in 2017 to 25.5 in 2023. The total drop was slightly larger than the state's achievement decline over the same time period. Achievement scores at charter schools were highest prior to the pandemic, peaking in 2018 at 46.8, but have fallen since, down to 34.2 in 2023. Achievement for private choice students held steady, hovering between 35.8 and 36.7 in every year except 2022. These variations by sector echo the previously discussed variations in overall Report Card ratings.

Research shows that students' achievement scores are correlated to their parents' race, income, and educational attainment. This relationship is critical to consider when examining Milwaukee's scores compared to the state's and also manifests in Milwaukee even within its overall low scores and shared demographics. For example, the 27 Milwaukee schools with the lowest achievement scores in 2023 (all under 10.0) served populations made up of 90.9% Black students and 93.4% economically disadvantaged students, plus 23.8% students with disabilities. In contrast, the 27 Milwaukee schools with the highest achievement scores (all above 55.0) had student populations with only 22.8% Black students and 48.7% economically disadvantaged students, plus 7.0% students with disabilities.

Measures of growth are less tied to students' backgrounds and can offer more insight into the impact of schooling on student learning. Milwaukee's growth scores are closer to and in some cases exceed the state average, which is normed at 66.0 (see Figure 21). The charter schools have traditionally held the highest growth scores in the city, but private choice schools have challenged them for the top position in recent years. Both charter and private choice schools saw growth scores drop post-pandemic and have yet to regain their 2019 highs of 75.7 and 73.5, respectively, although the private choice schools came close in 2023 with 72.1. MPS schools saw the greatest increase in growth scores from 2017 to 2023, from 46.1 to 64.7, and are now within striking distance of the

**Figure 21: Milwaukee Growth Scores Approach or Exceed Peers in State**

Report Card growth scores for math and reading, by sector



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Report Cards. Note: Students are not randomly distributed between sectors, and some selection effects likely exist. Differences in outcomes should be interpreted with caution.



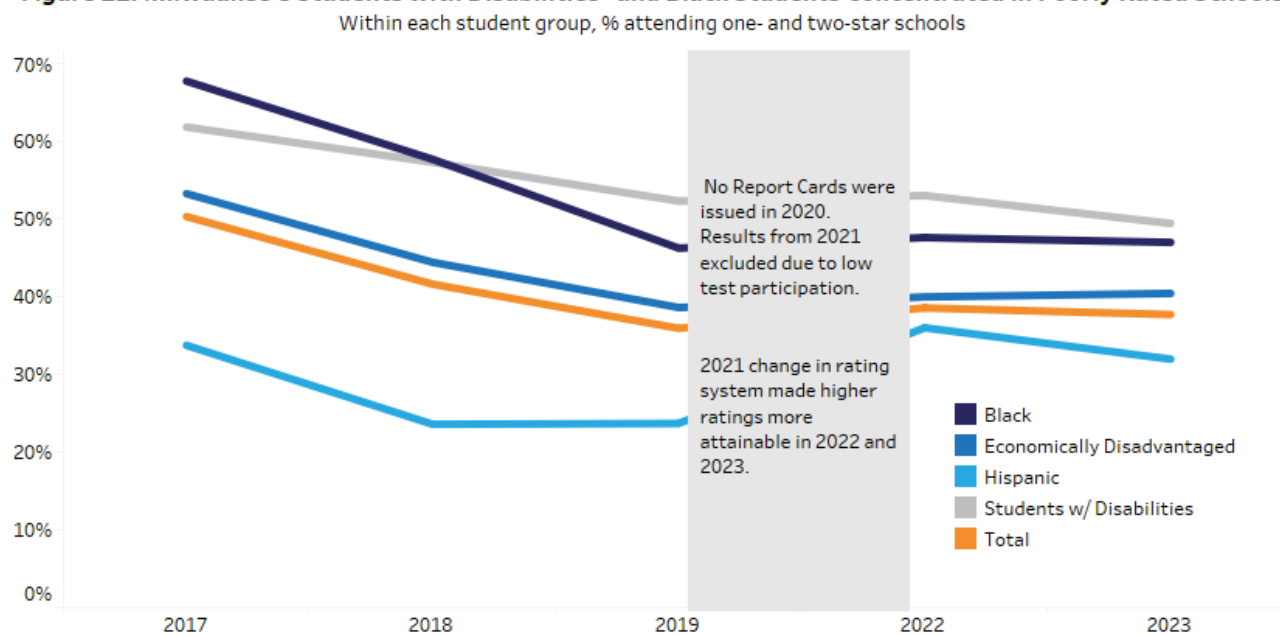
state average. Unlike the other two sectors, MPS has already surpassed its 2019 growth score of 61.7. While these post-pandemic improvements are encouraging, we might also expect them: since achievement dropped during the pandemic, growth was easier to attain during the recovery period.

Because growth scores are calculated based on comparisons between peer groups, the results indicate that Milwaukee students are outpacing students like them educated elsewhere in the state in this respect.<sup>30</sup> It does not necessarily mean, however, that scores for Milwaukee students are growing faster today as compared to five years ago. Indeed, the fact that Milwaukee’s (and Wisconsin’s) achievement scores have largely fallen from 2017 to 2023 leaves open the possibility that the opposite may be true. And, like achievement, growth is not spread evenly across the city. The same 27 schools with the lowest achievement scores in 2023 earned an average growth score of 57.5 compared to the 27 highest-achieving schools, which earned an average growth score of 80.1. These results are especially troubling given that the lower achieving schools had the most room for potential growth.

### Inequitable Access to Highly Rated Schools

Like the 27 lowest-achieving, low-growth schools, schools that receive ratings of one or two stars on the Report Card disproportionately serve students with disabilities and Black students. From 2017 to 2023, 54.8% of students with disabilities and 53.3% of Black students attended a one- or two-star school, far above the citywide average of 39.1% (see Figure 22). These data do not include students with disabilities served in the private choice programs because of incomplete and inaccurate data.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 22: Milwaukee’s Students with Disabilities\* and Black Students Concentrated in Poorly Rated Schools**



Source: Department of Public Instruction Report Cards. \*Note: private choice programs excluded from analysis of students with disabilities due to incomplete data.

<sup>30</sup> This apparent outpacing may also be due in part to the high pandemic-era test nonparticipation rates in Milwaukee, which affected the data available for the growth calculation.

<sup>31</sup> Students with disabilities appear as those least well served in the overall city numbers due to a statistical quirk tied to this exclusion. In each of the sectors, Black students are actually those most likely to attend poorly rated schools: 66.9% of Black students in MPS, 34.3% of Black private choice program students, and 25.1% of Black students in charter schools, on average.



Low-income students were also more likely to go to a school with a low rating, with 43.3% of them attending a one- or two-star school in the five years examined. Only 29.7% of Hispanic students, on the other hand, attended poorly rated schools over the same time period. None of these student populations are mutually exclusive.

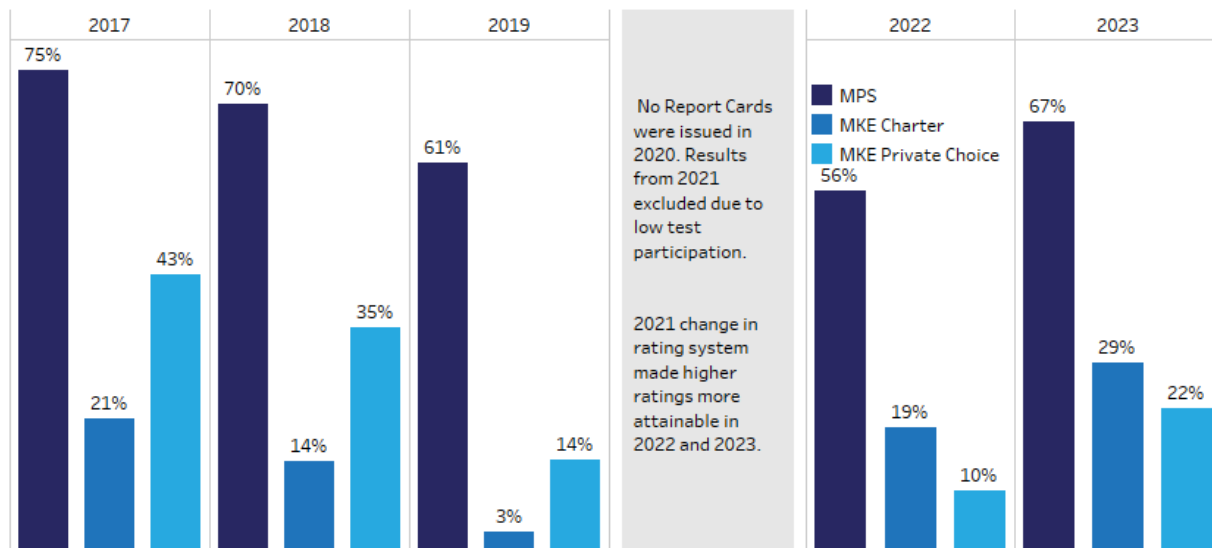
The combined effects of poverty and segregation can be particularly challenging, though not impossible, for schools to overcome. Half of Milwaukee schools are so-called “80/80 schools” – schools that serve a student population that is over 80% economically disadvantaged and over 80% of a single race. Nearly three-quarters (76.4%) of charter school students, 56.1% of private choice program students, and 36.3% of MPS students attended an 80/80 school in 2023.

Overall, 80/80 schools were somewhat more likely to receive low ratings. For example, in 2017, 53.7% of 80/80 students attended a poorly rated school, compared to 50.3% of all students. The gap between the two groups shrank to only one percentage point in 2019, suggesting that the pre-pandemic progress of the city as a whole in lowering the percentage of schools with one- and two-star ratings was tied to moving more 80/80 schools into three-, four- and five-star ratings. By 2023, however, the gap had widened again as 44.4% of 80/80 students, or 20,993 children, attended a poorly rated school, compared to 37.7% of all students.

Pre-pandemic, the city’s charter schools saw the smallest proportion of 80/80 students educated at poorly rated schools, with 20.6% in 2017 and only 2.9% in 2019 (see Figure 23). These results nearly mirrored the overall charter results previously analyzed, which is not surprising, given the high concentration of charter students in 80/80 schools.

**Fig. 23: MPS Students in Concentrated Poverty and Segregation Attend Poorly Rated Schools at High Rates**

% of students enrolled at “80/80” schools within each sector who attend one- and two-star schools



Source: Department of Public Instruction Report Cards. Notes: “80/80” schools educate a student body that is at least 80% economically disadvantaged and 80% single race. Students are not randomly distributed between sectors, and some selection effects likely exist. Differences in outcomes should be interpreted with caution.

Post-pandemic, private choice schools edged out the charters for the lowest share of 80/80 students in poorly rated schools (9.5% in 2022, 22.2% in 2023). And, in three out of the five years studied (2017, 2019, 2022), students in 80/80 private choice schools were *less* likely to attend poorly rated schools than the average private choice program participant.



Students attending 80/80 MPS schools, however, had much higher odds of attending a poorly rated school compared both to the other sectors and to the average MPS student. In every year studied, over half of MPS 80/80 students were in one- or two-star schools, with the proportion reaching as high as three-quarters (in 2017). Also in 2017, more than 18 points separated the share of 80/80 students in one- or two-star schools from the share of all MPS students in those schools. The gap shrank in subsequent years and reached a low of 4.4 percentage points in 2022, but returned to 2017’s high in 2023. These numbers indicate that MPS in particular struggles to consistently offer the same quality of education to students educated in concentrated poverty and segregation as to their peers.

The distinction between MPS’ 80/80 schools and other schools also illuminates the broad range of student experiences within the district’s more than 140 traditional public schools, which single-figure averages cannot fully capture. For another look at these differences, we examined the Report Card scores for selective high schools, which use admissions criteria, compared to non-selective high schools. MPS operates four selective high schools: Rufus King International Baccalaureate High School, Reagan College Preparatory International Baccalaureate High School, Riverside University High School, and Milwaukee High School of the Arts.<sup>32</sup> Charter and private choice selectivity is less clearly defined, although several private choice high schools require testing for admission.

The four selective MPS schools educate nearly a quarter (24.6%) of the city’s high school students. As Table 1 shows, they scored notably higher on the 2023 report card (72.1) than the non-selective MPS high schools (55.2), private choice high schools (62.5), and charter high schools (59.6). That was a reversal from 2019, when charter high schools had the highest average overall accountability score at 74.5 and private choice high schools and MPS selective high schools were neck-and-neck at 64.7 and 64.4, respectively. Non-selective MPS high schools remained at the bottom, with a 43.8 rating.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 1: MPS High School Results Diverge Sharply for Selective and Non-Selective Schools**  
Report Card results for schools serving grades 9-12 only, 2023

High School Type	Number of schools	Student enrollment	Overall accountability score*	% Black	% Hispanic	% white	% economically disadvantaged	% with disabilities
MPS Non-selective	14	8,923	55.2	56.5%	28.3%	5.3%	84.8%	24.8%
MPS Selective	4	4,844	72.1	43.3%	28.1%	15.0%	66.9%	15.4%
MKE Charter	7	2,535	59.6	23.1%	70.2%	5.1%	84.9%	12.6%
MKE Private Choice	10	3,633	62.5	46.0%	37.5%	10.0%	69.5%	*

Source: Department of Public Instruction Report Cards. \*Notes: Overall accountability score is out of 100 points. Available data on private choice program participants with disabilities are incomplete and inaccurate and are therefore excluded. Students are not randomly distributed between sectors, and some selection effects likely exist. Differences in outcomes should be interpreted with caution.

<sup>32</sup> Golda Meir is also selective enrollment but is classified as a combined middle-high school in the DPI report card data, meaning that its results for grades 9-12 cannot be isolated from its younger grades. It is therefore excluded from this analysis.

<sup>33</sup> Results for non-selective MPS high schools should be treated with caution due to low test participation rates. In 2019, 71.9% of students at non-selective MPS high schools took the required state standardized test in ELA. In 2023, 63.5% did. Private choice, charter, and selective MPS high schools all averaged test participation rates at or above 90% in both 2019 and 2023, although no sector had participation rates above 95% in 2023, which could affect the results shown in Table 1. Chronic absenteeism may play a role in sustained test participation issues, as explored later in this report.



These results reflect two of our previous findings: first, that the Milwaukee charter sector received the highest ratings before the pandemic but has not regained that standing post-pandemic; and second, that Milwaukee’s private choice sector overall remained relatively stable through the pandemic.

On the other hand, the strong relative performance from the MPS selective high schools also at first appears to complicate our previous data points that showed MPS schools largely lagging charter and private choice schools. Here we re-enter the tricky territory of distinguishing between when a school is providing an objectively better education, versus when a school’s performance is likely to be higher because students arrive knowing more, face fewer challenges outside the classroom, or are more motivated or better positioned to learn for a variety of reasons.

Selective enrollment high schools in MPS receive higher ratings than their non-selective peers in the district while serving a greater racial and ethnic diversity of students, fewer economically disadvantaged students, and fewer students with disabilities. In fact, demographically, selective high schools in MPS are more similar to private choice high schools than they are to other MPS high schools.

These schools are to be commended for their success, and for the benefits they offer to their students. Yet they also illustrate the potential impact on school ratings when schools select their students or when students self-select to attend certain schools or, indeed, sectors. As noted earlier, that selection process may mean that the students who choose or are chosen to attend a particular school differ in meaningful ways from those who are not selected, and that appears to be the case for at least the MPS selective high schools and the private choice high schools.

This caution does not mean that we discount every apparent difference in outcomes between sectors or types of schools. Still, it does mean that we encourage readers to be mindful of structural differences between schools and sectors that may affect their metrics. While we have done our best to highlight obvious cases, there may be others that are more difficult to detect.

Finally, awareness of structural differences should inform any consideration of possible solutions. They might complicate efforts to apply one school’s approach to a school serving a different population. Conversely, they may encourage efforts to target resources to the schools with greatest need. More transparency on student mobility is likely to be useful for any of these endeavors, both for the sake of understanding comparability or lack thereof between schools and sectors and because frequent transfers between schools can undercut students’ achievement.<sup>34</sup>

## Majority of Students Score “Below Basic”

While the Report Card allows for many different ways of examining student data, our final academic analysis asks a more elementary question: How many Milwaukee students are behind in reading and math? To answer, we used the state standardized test administered to third through eighth graders (the Forward exam) and measured the percentage of students who scored “below basic” since

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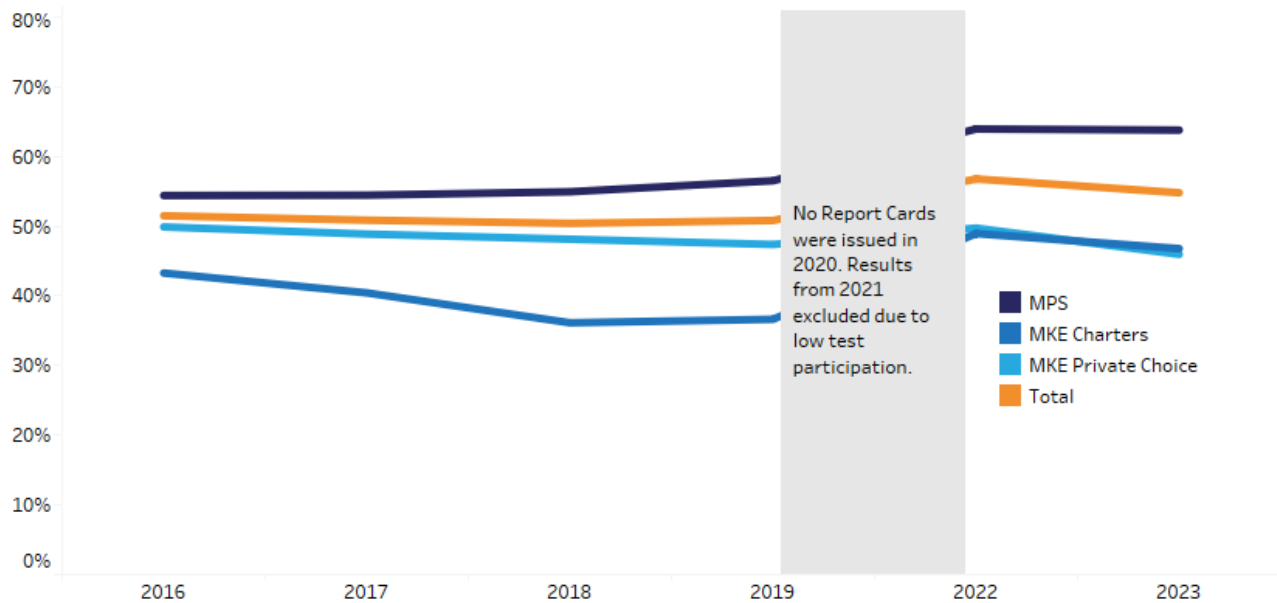
<sup>34</sup> Public data are not easily available to show the extent to which student mobility historically or presently undermines school improvement efforts in Milwaukee, but a [2018 analysis](#) by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh pointed to high mobility within the city as an “under-explored phenomenon [that] contributes to a cycle of low performance.”



2016.<sup>35</sup> (DPI sorts student scores into four performance levels. “Below basic” is the lowest of the four, indicating the need for substantial academic support to be on track for college and career readiness. [Starting in 2024](#), this lowest level will be renamed “developing.”)

We found that almost half of students educated in Milwaukee (45.9%) scored below basic in English language arts (ELA) on average from 2016 to 2023. In 2023, that amounted to 21,771 third through eighth graders. The numbers were even higher for math: on average from 2016 to 2023, over half (52.5%) of students educated in Milwaukee scored below basic in math (see Figure 24). That was 25,826 third through eighth graders in 2023.

**Figure 24: Over Half of Milwaukee Students in Grades 3-8 at Lowest Performance Level in Math**  
Percent of students scoring below basic in math on Forward Exam by sector



Source: Department of Public Instruction. Note: Calculations include “no test” results in the denominator. Students are not randomly distributed between sectors, and some selection effects likely exist. Differences in outcomes should be interpreted with caution.

There are some distinctions between sectors and over time, which largely mirror our findings from other analyses. Once again, Milwaukee’s charter schools stood out pre-pandemic, shrinking the share of students scoring below basic from 38.5% in 2016 to 31.9% in ELA in 2019. Post-pandemic, they have vied with Milwaukee’s private choice schools – which saw relative stability during the pandemic – for the lowest below basic percentages. In 2023, private choice program students held the lowest percentages in both ELA (36.4%) and math (46.0%). MPS, meanwhile, has seen an increase in shares of below basic scores in both ELA and math in every year since 2016 except for 2023, when they improved by one point from 2022 to land at 54.6% in ELA and 63.8% in math.

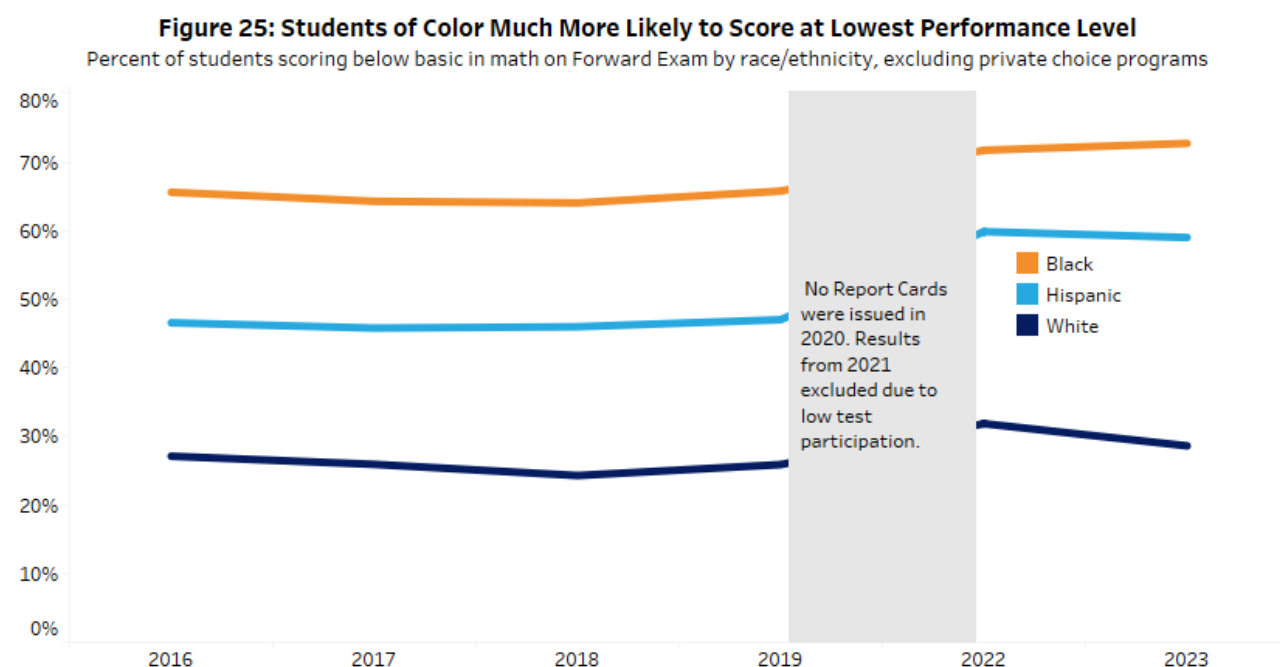
Even where schools have seen progress, however, these numbers are of serious concern both for students’ ability to read and do math today and for their long-term impact. According to the [Annie Casey Foundation](#), 23% of students who score below basic in reading in K-8 will drop out or fail to finish high school on time, compared to 9% of students who score basic and only 4% who score proficient. While the city might well hope for higher proficiency rates for all students, these data

<sup>35</sup> Private choice schools began taking and reporting Forward exam results to the state in 2016. The state did not administer the Forward exam in 2020. As in our other analyses, we excluded 2021 results due to low test participation. Calculations of “below basic” percentages include eligible students who did not take the state test in the denominator.



suggest that even raising students to “basic” instead of “below basic” would make a meaningful difference for tens of thousands of Milwaukee children.

The children currently scoring below basic on the Forward exam are most likely to be Black students, according to our demographic analysis, which solely includes MPS and charter schools due to unavailable private choice program data. Between 2016 and 2023, an average of 60.6% of Black students scored below basic in ELA, and an average of 67.1% scored below basic in math. Math results are particularly concerning: by 2023, 72.7% of Black third through eighth graders were well below grade level in math (see Figure 25). These rates are lower in charter schools but still troubling. For example, in 2023, 66.0% of Black charter students scored below basic, compared to 73.3% of MPS’ Black students. These results are consistent with our earlier Report Card analysis that Black students and students with disabilities were most likely to be educated in low-rated schools.



Source: Department of Public Instruction. Note: Calculations include “no test” results in the denominator. Demographic breakdowns for private choice program participants are not available; results reflect MPS and charter students.

Although Hispanic students were less likely to be educated in low-rated schools, they still face challenges. The Forward exam results show 43.9% of Hispanic students in MPS and charter schools combined scored below basic in ELA from 2016 to 2023, and 50.5% scored below basic in math. Charters saw relatively steady ELA below basic scores for Hispanic students prior to the pandemic, remaining under 28%, but rose past 40% post-pandemic. Math was somewhat choppy, with shares of below basic oscillating between 20.8% and 37.1% before the pandemic and reaching 50.9% in 2022. In MPS, math below basic results for Hispanic students were largely unchanged pre-pandemic, averaging 47.5% from 2016 to 2019, but then worsened to over 60% post-pandemic. ELA results also suffered, reaching over 50%, and had been slipping before the pandemic as well.



As discussed earlier in this section, NAEP results show MPS' Hispanic student scores largely declining since 2013.<sup>36</sup> We hesitated in that analysis to assume that this trend applied to the city as a whole, since almost 40% of Milwaukee's Hispanic students are not captured by NAEP. These Forward exam results appear to generally corroborate that, on average, Hispanic students in not only MPS schools but also charter schools saw a decline in both math and reading, which began at some point between 2013 and 2017. A higher share of Hispanic MPS students than Hispanic charter students scored below basic, both before and after the pandemic.<sup>37</sup>

Demographic data for the private choice schools, which in 2023 educated 27.9% of Hispanic students in Milwaukee, would help fully round out this picture. One indicator suggesting that Hispanic private choice students may be experiencing different and more positive trends comes from the Report Card. Although disaggregated Report Card performance data are not readily downloadable, we can approximate results by isolating the private choice schools serving over 80% Hispanic students. Among these schools, both ELA and math proficiency in 2023 were nearly back to their pre-pandemic highs, and both exceeded proficiency levels at 80% Hispanic charter and MPS schools. With Hispanic students potentially achieving at different levels in different sectors, their successes and challenges will be important to track alongside the other identified student concerns.

## Chronic Absenteeism Crisis Threatens Pandemic Recovery Efforts

Any attempt to combat sliding scores will have to contend with the city's steep increase in chronic absenteeism since the return to in-person schooling. Students are designated as chronically absent if they miss more than 10% of possible school days, whether excused or unexcused. Research ties high rates of chronic absenteeism to lower student achievement, decreased student mental health, higher dropout rates, and more challenges in adulthood. Put simply, if students are not in school, they cannot reap any benefits from school.

Limited year-over-year comparable data are available for the private choice schools, but MPS and Milwaukee's charter schools both saw chronic absenteeism jump in 2021, spike in 2022, and only somewhat decline in 2023. Charter school absenteeism had remained reliably below 20% for the years preceding the pandemic but peaked at 41.1% in 2022 before coming down to 36.8% in 2023, still over twice as high as the 2019 rate of 17.9%. MPS absenteeism had already been above 30% pre-pandemic and soared as high as 59.8% in 2022 before ticking down to 51.3% in 2023. That means over half of MPS students missed at least 18 days of school in each of the past two years (see Figure 26 on the next page).

The current overall elevated levels are not unique to Milwaukee. [Wisconsin, too](#), and the [nation](#) as a whole have all seen sharp rises in more students missing school. [Hypotheses](#) for the trend include pandemic school closures having implicitly taught families that in-person schooling is not critical; increased caution around sending children to school when sick; heightened student mental health issues; and frayed relationships between home and school. Still, MPS' levels stand out in particular: while the charter schools' 2023 numbers are on par with the 32% absenteeism rate reported for the poorest districts in the U.S., MPS' 51.3% was strikingly higher.

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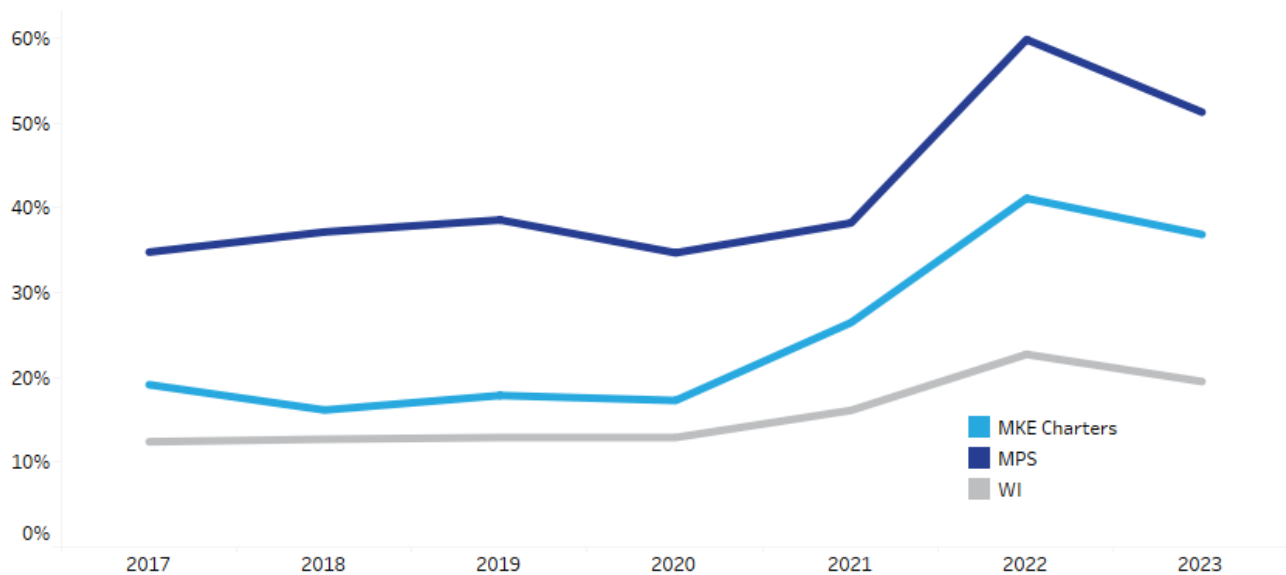
<sup>36</sup> Fourth grade math and eighth grade math NAEP results featured year-over-year declines for MPS' Hispanic students from 2013 to 2022. Eighth grade reading scores held steady from 2013 to 2017 but then declined in each subsequent tested year. Fourth grade reading began declining in 2013 but saw a slight bump back up from 2019 to 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Any Hispanic students who are also English learners – or indeed any English learners – may be at a disadvantage on standardized tests depending on the test and on available [accommodations](#).





**Figure 26: Chronic Absenteeism Remains Concerningly Elevated**  
 Percent of students who missed over 10% of school days, excluding private choice programs



Source: Department of Public Instruction. Note: Aggregated single-year rates for private choice program participants are not available. Students are not randomly distributed between sectors, and some selection effects likely exist. Differences should be interpreted with caution.

Charter school leaders we interviewed pointed to these high absenteeism rates as partial explanation for the charter sector’s performance decline since the pandemic, since many typical interventions and supports rely upon students’ attendance. Writ large, across all sectors, they mark a challenge for nearly any school-based intervention effort (as does high student mobility, as discussed earlier). If outcomes in Milwaukee were already difficult to systemically improve prior to the pandemic, those difficulties will be exacerbated for as long as chronic absenteeism remains high.

## Summary

It is difficult to determine which is more disturbing in the outcomes metrics examined here: what they say about the quality of K-12 education in Milwaukee today, or what they say about the city’s inability to show improvement given how *consistently* low those metrics have been over time. In either case, what is clear is that many students in Milwaukee still are not able to read or do math close to grade level and are not educated in a highly rated school.

Even worse, alarming differences among different types of students lie behind the averages. Black students in particular see extraordinarily low Forward and NAEP scores – compared both to other Milwaukee students and to the nation – and are much more likely to attend poorly rated schools. The pandemic appears to have exacerbated the issue: The gap between Black and white students scoring below basic on the Forward exam was at its largest in at least six years in 2023. The 2022 gap in NAEP scores between Black and white students, meanwhile, was at its largest since Milwaukee’s participation in the exam began.

While our academic analyses focused on NAEP, Report Card ratings, and the Forward exam, one can find similarly disquieting stories across any number of other metrics. For example, the most recent official national data on public high school graduation, from the [National Center for Education](#)



[Statistics](#) for 2022, shows Wisconsin as one of only five states with a graduation rate at or above 90% – yet the same dataset also shows Wisconsin with the largest graduation rate gap between white and Black students. Milwaukee, home to the greatest number of Black students in the state, is one driver of this disparity, with MPS and the charter schools together averaging a 66.6% four-year high school completion rate, including 76.1% for white students but 61.4% for Black students. (Directly comparable high school completion rates are not available for the private schools.)

Available data on students with disabilities also raise concerns about the quality of education they receive in the city. Hispanic students are not thriving in all sectors, either; although their metrics are less dire, they have largely been sliding and merit attention as well. White and more affluent students are more likely to score higher on various metrics, as are students in selective schools.

While the city saw some overall progress prior to the pandemic, those small gains have largely disappeared. Charter schools previously led those gains but have struggled to recover from the pandemic. Private choice schools are increasingly likely to receive higher Report Card ratings and have held academic achievement relatively steady on the metrics on which they participate. MPS saw some pandemic recovery and on other metrics continued a downward slide.

However, as in most school systems, students are not assigned to schools randomly in Milwaukee. Choices by parents and to a lesser extent schools help determine where a student matriculates and persists. At a minimum, these differences between schools may make it difficult to translate or expand success from the students at one school to those in another sector or neighborhood. They impede any conclusive findings with regard to educational quality, and they may even lead to questions about whether the success of some schools may be due in part to their particular student population or other structural differences, as opposed to primarily crediting success to the quality of instruction and operations. Finally, the lack of readily available data on student mobility makes it difficult to determine the degree to which a school's successes or challenges are tied to a stable or transient student population.

The last 30 years may have seen many changes in schooling options and funding levels, but they have not seen educational outcomes fundamentally transform for the city as a whole. Across school types, too many Milwaukee students are not able to demonstrate academic skills and knowledge at the level they need to in order to succeed beyond their school years. Milwaukee leaders thus must continue to contend with what it will take to increase growth and raise achievement for *all* students.

# CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the current educational landscape in Milwaukee finds a city with many more schooling options available to families than 30 years ago, with three distinct, well-established, and publicly funded sectors within the city: traditional public schools at MPS, charter schools both within and outside MPS, and private schools accepting public funding through choice programs. In addition, Milwaukee families may choose to homeschool their children, pay for their children to attend private school, or enroll them in a school district outside of MPS through the Open Enrollment program.

These offerings are largely the same as 10 years ago, when we did our last landscape analysis. In addition, the current analysis notes the end of the Chapter 220 integration program and an additional option for students with disabilities to use public funds to attend private schools through the Special Needs Scholarship Program.

Amid these structural shifts and despite greater access to a wider range of choices, outcomes for the average child have not transformed over the last decade and in many respects have worsened in the wake of the pandemic. This is especially true for Milwaukee's Black children, economically disadvantaged children, and children with disabilities. While Milwaukee schools saw some pre-pandemic progress, overall scores remained low and gaps between student groups remained wide, with some variation across schools and sectors. The pandemic exacerbated existing school underperformance and erased much of the city's incremental growth.

Milwaukee also faces declining student enrollment, which increases the pressure for schools to compete for students and funding. The accompanying financial challenges will likely play a large role in defining the next developments in Milwaukee's K-12 landscape.

## Key Findings

Specific key findings include the following in the areas of student enrollment and demographics, financing, and school performance and student outcomes:

### Student Enrollment and Demographics

- **Total student enrollment in Milwaukee is falling – but enrollment in charter schools and private choice programs has increased.** Declining birth rates and migration out of the city left Milwaukee with 26.8% fewer youth under the age of 18 in 2020 than in 2000. These trends have directly impacted school enrollment and appear poised to continue. MPS has felt the brunt of this decline, with an enrollment drop of nearly 30,000 students (32.8%) between 2006 and 2024. Over the same period, both charter school and private choice program enrollment actually expanded in the city, by 8,372 (114.3%) and 14,239 students (89.8%) students, respectively. As of 2023, MPS served only a little over half (54.9%) of students educated in Milwaukee.
- **The major school sectors in Milwaukee all serve a high proportion of vulnerable students, but MPS serves a much higher percentage of students with disabilities.** MPS, charter schools, and private choice programs in the city all serve similar shares of students of color, students from low-income households, and students learning English for the first time. Students with disabilities, however, are most heavily concentrated within MPS, where 20.1% of students are identified with a disability, compared to 11.0% of charter school students. Accurate



counts of students with disabilities within private choice programs are not publicly accessible, but the data available suggest that they are lower than in MPS or charter schools.

## School Finance

- **Per-student funding is now largely even with two decades ago after adjusting for inflation, even as total public funding for schools in Milwaukee is at its lowest level since 1998.** The 2020 MPS referendum and per pupil increases in the 2023-25 state budget for charter schools and private choice programs restored inflation-adjusted core funding in 2024 to its 2004 levels. For MPS, the 2020 referendum increase improved the district's core funding relative to its neighboring districts, which serve students with lower levels of need. MPCP high schools saw the most growth from the state budget, receiving a 27.2% increase that put them well ahead of previous funding levels. As a city, however, Milwaukee received 12.5% less *total* public money from its core education revenues in 2024 than in 2004, after adjusting for inflation. This decline derived from both the city's overall loss of students – since state funding formulas are based on enrollment – and to a lesser extent from state allocations that have failed to keep pace with inflation. This loss in students had the greatest financial impact on MPS.
- **Gaps between core per pupil funding levels for the three sectors continue to exist and will grow as revenues for MPS will rise in 2025 and beyond.** The increases in the state budget in 2023 for charter schools and private choice programs narrowed per pupil funding differences between the sectors, with MPS still receiving the highest levels of core funding, followed by the MPCP high schools, then the independent charter schools, and finally the MPCP K-8 schools. As a result of the 2024 MPS referendum, the gap between MPS and the other sectors will grow again to between \$3,000 and \$5,500 per student in 2025. One may expect MPS to receive the most core public funding due to structural differences in its costs. At the same time, the divergence may also be considered in the context of what private choice and charter schools need to serve students and recruit and retain staff.
- **Beyond core funding, MPS receives more state and federal special education funding to serve its higher proportion of students with disabilities, but the amount it receives reimburses only a fraction of its special education costs.** Schools incur higher costs to educate students with disabilities, but state reimbursement rates covered less than a third of these costs in 2024. This underfunding impacts MPS most heavily, since it educates the city's largest share of students with disabilities. It further erodes MPS' core revenue, since the district must shift general education dollars to provide the mandated services. Charter schools are also negatively impacted, as they are subject to the same reimbursement rates. Both MPS and charter schools receive federal aid targeted to students living in poverty and students with disabilities. MPCP schools do not have direct access to this aid, although MPS is required to use a portion of its funds to provide services to eligible private school students and staff, and some private schools also receive separate state funding for children with disabilities.
- **Financial challenges likely will grow due to declining enrollment spread across a large number of schools.** The number of schools rose during the 1990s and early 2000s and has stayed relatively steady even as enrollment declined overall within the city, lowering per-student funding on average per school. This raises strategic questions, particularly for MPS, and increases financial stress on the system that may not be easily resolved since under- and over-enrollment are not distributed equally across the city. Federal pandemic relief aid is no longer available to help mitigate budget pressures and student needs after this year.



## School Performance and Student Outcomes

- **Prior to the pandemic, students in the city showed some limited improvement, but the pandemic erased the majority of those small gains.** State report card ratings show that the pandemic disrupted some improvements among Milwaukee schools as a whole: while the city had more highly rated schools in 2019 than in 2017, by 2023 the system's progress had stalled. Students at MPS and its charter schools tested on the national NAEP exam made modest improvements in math and reading in the decade before the pandemic but increasingly lagged the national average for large urban districts. As in other districts, student scores in MPS and its charter schools lost ground during the pandemic and by 2022 had largely sunk back to 2009 levels. (Nationally normed scores for the private choice programs and non-MPS charters are not available.)
- **Not only has progress stalled or been eliminated, but by any standardized measure the quality of K-12 education in Milwaukee remains deficient.** In 2023, over one-third (37.7%) of Milwaukee students were educated in a school receiving a rating of only one or two stars, despite a 2021 state change that made it easier for schools to receive a higher rating. In the same year, nearly half (46.2%) of third through eighth graders scored below basic – the lowest level – in ELA, and over half (54.8%) scored below basic in math.
- **Black students, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and students in MPS' 80/80 and non-selective schools are the least likely to attend highly rated schools.** Disparities between Black and white students are particularly alarming and appear across all sectors. For MPS and its charter schools, the Black-white gap in reading and math achievement was already among the worst in the nation before the pandemic, and it grew even wider from 2017 to 2022 due to sharp drops in Black student outcomes. In contrast, Milwaukee's Hispanic students have a low likelihood of attending a poorly rated school, though other data show that scores for Hispanic students at charter and especially MPS schools began slipping even before the pandemic. A lack of disaggregated data impairs our ability to see how student groups are faring in private choice programs.
- **Both before and after the pandemic, the majority of Milwaukee students did not attend highly rated schools, with some notable variation by sector.** Charter schools in Milwaukee led the city from 2017 to 2019 in the largest share of students educated in highly rated schools, the smallest share of 80/80 students at poorly rated schools, the highest Report Card achievement scores, and the lowest share of students scoring below basic on the Forward exam. They faltered, however, during the pandemic. Results from the private choice programs also improved from 2017 and 2019 and largely remained steady through the pandemic such that they now vie with the charter schools for the top spot across various metrics in Milwaukee. MPS has not yet fully recovered from the pandemic and remains the lowest rated on average across all metrics examined, though outcomes can vary considerably between schools in the large district. Any comparison of performance between sectors, however, should take into account our inability to truly control for differences in student composition, school resources, selectivity, student mobility, and other less tangible factors affecting school success.
- **The number of students missing school has jumped.** Chronic absenteeism for at least MPS and charter school students peaked in 2022 and came down only somewhat in 2023, with more than one in three charter students and more than half of MPS students still missing over 10% of school days. Only limited year-over-year comparable data are available for the private choice schools. Inconsistent student attendance leaves students disconnected from



the benefits of school and hampers schools' ability to support ongoing pandemic recovery or address longstanding achievement concerns.

While these findings are discouraging and merit prompt corrective action, there are bright spots across the city where individual schools are serving highly vulnerable students and delivering above-average scores in both achievement and growth. These schools offer evidence of what is possible in Milwaukee and may provide guidance to school and system leaders hoping to materially improve outcomes for children across the city.

## Next Steps

Subsequent WPF research will analyze these high-growth, high-achieving schools and will also consider promising practices and innovations occurring in other cities around the country. In both cases, we will hone in on one of Milwaukee's largest challenges: closing disparities between the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and white students. We will end by laying out policy options for consideration in the ongoing and increasingly timely dialogues at both the state and local level on how to most effectively improve educational outcomes in Milwaukee.

In the meantime, we urge local and state policymakers to consider two policy insights that emerged from this report:

- **While DPI Report Cards and other state reports have increased the amount of publicly available data, some aspects of publicly funded education in Milwaukee remain obscured.** Unavailable or unwieldy datasets limited the extent of our research in some cases, particularly in regard to the private choice programs. For example, school choice report cards for these programs do not include SNSP students, meaning that these publicly funded students with disabilities are excluded from participating schools' demographic and performance data. Other items on both public and private school report cards – perhaps most critically, graduation rates and disaggregated student performance results – are displayed for individual schools but not in DPI's downloadable compilation of all schools, impeding leaders' view of the city as a whole. These data points are often available via other published datasets for the public schools but not the private choice programs. In at least some cases, these differences reflect that state and federal law requires more data from public schools than private schools.

Other options for increasing opportunities to assess educational performance and challenges include:

- Publishing the demographics of Open Enrollment participants, to learn which students are using the program
- Reconsidering the interaction between achievement, growth, and other facets of the Report Card, to communicate school quality more clearly
- Making the relationship between student mobility, enrollment counts, funding, and outcomes more transparent between sectors and schools
- Gauging the degree to which changes in exams or standards incur tradeoffs: on the one hand, potentially greater precision, and on the other hand, disruption of year-over-year comparisons used to understand if and how schools and students are improving

- **Despite their variability, Milwaukee schools share some common concerns.** While it can be easy to talk about the city’s education landscape solely in terms of its sectors, our analysis – supported by insight from our study advisory committee and key informants – found multiple areas of shared concern across school types. The vast majority of schools face challenges serving vulnerable students and particularly struggle to effectively educate Black students, with performance data indicating that this problem is most acute at MPS. On some metrics, the gaps between Black and white students widened even further through the pandemic. Schools across the city are also grappling with state and federal underfunding of special education and English learner aid, and a dramatic escalation in chronic absenteeism. These shared issues create opportunities for cross-sector strategizing and action – for example, unified lobbying for more special education and English learner funding (as has been attempted in the past), peer learning communities for educators, or citywide efforts on common goals like reducing chronic absenteeism.

After 30 years in which only pockets of progress have materialized within publicly funded schools in Milwaukee – and faced with the reality that Black students in particular continue to perform academically at levels far below their peers in other urban cities – city leaders and stakeholders once again find themselves at a crossroads.

The dramatic events of this spring have already re-focused the spotlight on MPS, bringing to light the need for substantial improvement in its financial management and oversight on top of the need for vast improvement in its educational outcomes as has been made clear once again by this report. Yet, at the same time, the report clarifies that the question of education in Milwaukee is not solely one for MPS, as most schools across sectors continue to struggle with pandemic recovery and longstanding disparities.

We hope this report provides fact-based perspective on the demographic, financial, and performance-related challenges facing the “system” of schools in Milwaukee that will be helpful as public and private sector leaders grapple with a set of challenges that has persisted for decades, took on even greater urgency within the past few months, and shows no signs of abating. Indeed, demographic trends predict a significant continued decline in Milwaukee’s school-age children over the next decade, intensifying the financial and perhaps even the academic threats we share in this report. We hope, further, that our data and analysis will be used productively: not as ammunition to foment greater discord among the three K-12 sectors, but rather to confront both historical obstacles and oncoming hazards, providing critical evidence of the need for greater collaboration and accountability to improve the performance of the city’s schools regardless of their governance.



# APPENDIX A: WPF STUDY ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Committee Member	Most Recent Organizational Affiliation
Alan Borsuk	Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education at Marquette University Law School
Anne Chapman	Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials
Bob Peterson	Milwaukee Board of School Directors
Chris Thiel	Milwaukee Public Schools
Colleston Morgan	City Forward Collective
Gabriel Velez, Ph.D.	Marquette University, College of Education and BLEST Hub
Jeanette Mitchell, Ed.D.	Leadership by Dr. Jeanette
Joshua Cowen, Ph.D.	Michigan State University, College of Education
Laura Gutiérrez	United Community Center
Quinton Klabon	Institute for Reforming Government
Walter Lanier	African American Leadership Alliance Milwaukee

Note: Listings reflect members' organizational affiliations at the time of the study advisory committee's first convening in December 2023.





# APPENDIX B: NAEP SCORES

## Fourth Grade Reading Scores

Average NAEP results for representative sample of MPS and charter schools authorized by MPS

Student group	2009	2011	2013	2017	2019	2022
All students	196	195	199	195	190	187
Black students	187	187	190	188	180	174
White students	223	216	223	218	221	224
Hispanic students	198	198	200	195	188	190

Source: National Assessment of Educational Proficiency. \*Notes: Scores are out of a possible 500 points. The minimum score for achieving “basic” is 208; the minimum score for achieving “proficient” is 238.

## Fourth Grade Math Scores

Average NAEP results for representative sample of MPS and charter schools authorized by MPS

Student group	2009	2011	2013	2017	2019	2022
All students	220	220	221	216	215	206
Black students	211	211	209	206	206	195
White students	242	239	246	240	239	239
Hispanic students	226	221	227	219	217	207

Source: National Assessment of Educational Proficiency. \*Notes: Scores are out of a possible 500 points. The minimum score for achieving “basic” is 214; the minimum score for achieving “proficient” is 249.

## Eighth Grade Reading Scores

Average NAEP results for representative sample of MPS and charter schools authorized by MPS

Student group	2009	2011	2013	2017	2019	2022
All students	241	238	242	245	240	239
Black students	233	232	232	234	228	227
White students	265	255	262	265	267	266
Hispanic students	249	243	253	253	248	242

Source: National Assessment of Educational Proficiency. \*Notes: Scores are out of a possible 500 points. The minimum score for achieving “basic” is 243; the minimum score for achieving “proficient” is 281.

## Eighth Grade Math Scores

Average NAEP results for representative sample of MPS and charter schools authorized by MPS

Student group	2009	2011	2013	2017	2019	2022
All students	251	254	257	254	252	246
Black students	244	246	247	242	242	232
White students	271	274	282	277	280	272
Hispanic students	256	259	266	260	259	253

Source: National Assessment of Educational Proficiency. \*Notes: Scores are out of a possible 500 points. The minimum score for achieving “basic” is 262; the minimum score for achieving “proficient” is 299.

