

Institute for Reforming Government: Public school enrollment plummets, forcing tough district decisions

Posted on Thursday, Mar 12, 2026

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Declining enrollment darkens otherwise brightening school data

Delafield, Wis. - The Institute for Reforming Government (IRG) analyzed recent school data produced by the Department of Public Instruction.

DPI's [data include](#) performance indicators like attendance, suspensions, graduation, and college enrollment for the 2024-2025 school year as well as public school enrollment numbers for the 2025-2026 school year. 2026 private school enrollment data was not yet made available.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Public school enrollment is plummeting.

- Wisconsin lost 14,087 students this year, 1.7% of enrollment. This is rare, only [surpassed](#) in recent times by 2020-2021, 2004-2005, and 1982-1983.
- 68 of 72 counties lost students. Florence added 0 students, Richland added 3, Burnett added 4, and Dane added 198 due to gaining hundreds of virtual students. No Wisconsin region was a bright spot.
- Even high-performing districts (adjusted for demographics) lost students. Janesville, West Bend, and Platteville all suffered steep enrollment declines.

As a result, Wisconsin districts will continue to face difficult decisions around rising [staffing levels](#), school building count, and [referenda](#).

DIG DEEPER

Students are attending school more often, getting suspended less, graduating high school more often, and enrolling in college more often. However, schools have reached “a new normal” below pre-pandemic performance.

- Attendance rose to 92.6%, up 0.2%. Black and Indigenous students improved significantly, and no groups dropped a lot. However, attendance has not recovered from pandemic policies, when Wisconsin regularly reached 95.0% attendance.
- Suspension rates fell 0.2%, the equivalent of 1,468 fewer suspensions statewide. Suspension rates dropped 0.7% for special-needs students, but they rose 0.4% for low-income children. This remains much higher than before the pandemic.
- High school graduation rates reached a modern high of 92.3%. All groups graduated more across income, racial, special needs, and native language designations. Despite this, Wisconsin continues to struggle against other states on [graduation rates](#) and tests of [academic preparedness](#).
- College enrollment rose slightly, with roughly one half of graduates enrolling in 2- or 4-year universities. Attendance at 2-year institutions and among low-income students drove most of that increase.
- Noteworthy districts include Stevens Point, La Crosse, and West Allis-West Milwaukee, which saw general, broad improvement, and Beloit, Chippewa Falls, and Verona, which saw declines amidst struggles.

THE QUOTE

“Losing students forces tough choices on the educators looking out for our kids and the taxpayers funding our schools,” said Quinton Klabon, Senior Research Director at the Institute for Reforming Government. **“Wisconsinites must attract families and businesses to our great state, or we will never escape the cycle of referenda and layoffs.”**

WHAT'S NEXT

Private and home school numbers will arrive in the next few months. They have resisted similar decline.

Public and choice school enrollment remains open for parents seeking high-quality options.



For questions, reach out to QK@ReformingGovernment.org.

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