

New Data Show the Exodus From Public Schools Is Continuing

Since 2020, more families have been fleeing local district schools for other options. Homeschooling rates doubled in that year alone and remain high today. Home-based “pandemic pods” have evolved into established microschools and co-op arrangements that have worked better for many families than a conventional classroom. Catholic schools, like other private schools, were more likely to remain open while district schools were closed and have experienced their first enrollment hike in two decades. More students are now learning in virtual schools and charter schools than they were pre-pandemic.

Parents are recognizing that they have many more options for their children’s education and are continuing to abandon government-assigned district schools.

While it was understandable that parents might seek different learning settings for their children amidst 2020 school closures, new data suggests the exodus from district schools isn’t letting up.

Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) reported last week that statewide public school enrollment declined again this year on top of the previous pandemic-year drop. Fewer Minnesota families chose homeschooling this year than last, but private schools in the state saw a nearly 6 percent increase in enrollment, according to MPR.

This week, The San Diego Union-Tribune reported that public schools in that city are “losing students at a faster pace than school leaders expected.” This is making some of them nervous, as continued enrollment declines will likely lead to less taxpayer-funding of district schools.

Michigan public school enrollment is down again this year, as it is in Rhode Island. Larger cities such as New York City also continue to have dramatic enrollment declines this year, on top of previous enrollment losses since the pandemic began. That city saw a 5 percent drop in district school enrollment this year, for a cumulative 9 percent enrollment drop since the pandemic response began.

West Coast cities are facing similar enrollment challenges. Officials in Oakland, California voted last month to close several public schools in that city due to falling enrollment. A recent article in Time Magazine noted that at least part of Oakland’s enrollment decline is due to families fleeing California during the COVID response. (This was the topic of the second episode of my new LiberatED podcast.)

Teachers Are Leaving Too

It's not just families who are abandoning district schools for other options. Teachers are leaving too. A new teacher survey suggests that more than half of public school teachers expect to leave their profession earlier than planned. This is on top of survey results analyzed last year by the RAND Corporation finding that nearly one-quarter of teachers expected to leave their jobs by the end of the 2020/2021 academic year.

Some of these teachers are leaving education **altogether**, but others are searching for, or creating, learning environments that are freer, more flexible, more imaginative, and more responsive to family needs and preferences. I kicked off the LiberatED podcast last month with the story of Jill Perez, a longtime teacher who has created a flourishing microschool community in New Jersey.

On this week's episode, I share the story of Josh and Kirk Umbehr, Kansas-based brothers who launched a platform to help teachers leave the classroom to build their own microschools and schooling alternatives. Josh, a family physician in Wichita, created a similar platform for doctors several years ago that's been hugely successful in helping physicians leave managed care practices to launch their own direct primary care practices. He recognized the similarities in burnout and bureaucracy that plague both healthcare and education, and wants to help talented practitioners remain in the fields they love.

The educational realignment from institutions to home- and community-based models that accelerated in 2020 isn't slowing down. Now that parents and teachers have glimpsed educational possibilities beyond a traditional classroom, they are less willing to put up with the schooling status quo.