

Public Schools Are ‘Hemorrhaging’ Students in Major Cities

The new academic year hasn’t even begun and public school enrollment is already not looking good in some parts of the country.

Seattle Public School fall enrollment is projected to be down to its lowest rate in a decade, declining even further from last year’s significant drop. Similarly, the New York City public schools shared data last week suggesting a continued dip in public school enrollment, with more than 28,000 fewer students expected to attend a district school this fall.

“We have a hemorrhaging of families that are leaving the city, leaving the school system,” said New York City Mayor Eric Adams.

The Seattle Times editors seemed slightly perplexed by the drop in their city’s public school enrollment. According to their recent editorial: “But even more concerning is that Seattle and some other districts’ enrollment continue trending downward even as statewide enrollment slowly recovers.”

They shouldn’t be surprised. The American Enterprise Institute analyzed extensive data in the spring showing that school districts that remained remote or that imposed ongoing school mask mandates continued to lose students in the 2021/2022 academic year, while those districts that reopened more quickly and avoided restrictive virus policies saw public school enrollment rebound from the 2020/2021 academic year slide.

Major cities such as Seattle and New York City stayed shuttered longer and reopened with Covid policies that many families found unappealing. So families fled, either moving to freer states or choosing private schools, Catholic schools, charter schools, homeschooling, microschools, and other schooling alternatives.

With cities such as San Diego reinstating a school mask mandate this summer, and Los Angeles considering bringing back its indoor mask mandate, it is likely that public school enrollment in those cities will continue to decline.

Indeed, San Diego Unified Board President Sharon Whitehurst-Payne said this week that if students don’t want to wear a mask at school, they should “just not return.”

Los Angeles lost 4.8 percent of its public school students in 2020/2021 and another 6 percent in the 2021/2022 academic year, despite schools reopening. San Diego public schools experienced a similar enrollment drop over the past two years. These enrollment declines outpaced earlier projections of declining enrollment due to demographic changes.

The good news is that coinciding with the drop in district school enrollment is the proliferation of a diverse assortment of accessible learning models, including low-cost microschools, learning pods, virtual platforms, and homeschooling collaboratives. Parents and teachers have more education options today than ever.

For Mercedes Grant, opening a new microschool is all about meeting growing demand for more transparent, personalized learning opportunities for children. A certified special education teacher, Grant taught in public middle schools in several states before deciding to launch her microschool, **Path of Life Learning**, in Yorktown, Virginia this fall.

“The public education system is failing our students’ academic and social/emotional needs due to overfilled classrooms, watered-down content, and less individualized student focus because the curriculum is the priority over student mastery,” she told me in an interview this week.

Microschools are typically small, multi-age learning communities that gather in private homes or local commercial spaces, often with hired teachers who facilitate a mastery-based curriculum. Microschools were gaining traction prior to 2020, but their popularity has surged over the past two years amidst the widespread education disruption caused by the pandemic response.

“Microschools are offering us a way that our students can get a more authentic learning experience in a much smaller setting where the adults involved have a true passion for teaching in ways that are best for students rather than being bogged down by pacing guides, student behaviors, and curriculum constraints,” said Grant.

Parents are also welcome members of most microschooling communities, something that can set these emerging learning models apart from school systems, which tend to be centralized and bureaucratic. “Parents know they are valued instead of treated as the enemy,” Grant added.

Her microschool, like most others that are sprouting nationwide, is a low-cost education option, with tuition rates that are far lower than other local private schools. Many microschools also try to offer sliding scale tuition and scholarships to reduce costs even further, or encourage families to take advantage of various school choice policies, such as education savings accounts, that make microschools and related learning models more accessible to more families.

As many families consider, perhaps for the first time, other education options beyond their local public school, they may be surprised to discover the variety of new learning models available to them. They may even discover, as more and more families have, that they prefer these education options far more than their government-assigned one.