

# SHIFTING STUDENT POPULATIONS:

## How New York schools can address the shifting needs and priorities of students and families.



The Education Trust—New York

While New York State schools have been experiencing declining enrollment for much of the past decade, the pandemic accelerated this trend in every region in the state, with New York leading the nation in **enrollment loss** between 2019-20 and 2021-22.

New York State's public schools — traditional and charter — serve approximately 2.5 million school-aged students. And while traditional public schools continue to serve the vast majority of New York's K-12 students, a recent analysis suggests that parents are making new and interesting choices about where their children attend school, signaling that our traditional school systems may not be meeting the evolving needs of New York families.

The analysis of K-12 enrollment trends over the past five years reveals major shifts across the state, showing decreases at traditional public and private schools and increases at charters and homeschools.

Recent enrollment losses added to the declines going back to the 2017-18 school year, with enrollment in traditional public schools dropping by 8% between the 2017-18 and 2021-2022 school years.

The vast majority of New York school districts — 88% — experienced enrollment declines during this period. Just 12% of districts had enrollment that remained flat or increased.

As education leaders and other stakeholders across the state work to manage the implications of enrollment losses, this analysis offers insight into statewide and regional trends that may reflect shifting needs and

priorities amongst students and families with the current state of New York's traditional public schools.

New Yorkers are making choices about schools outside of their traditional district assignments and school placements, signaling a need to better align school offerings to what parents value.

The analysis of enrollment data from the 2017-18 through the 2021-22 school years also offers an opportunity for state and local education leaders to sharpen their focus on community engagement, high-quality instructional materials, and better student outcomes to help stem these current enrollment trends.

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## THE FINDINGS

### FINDING 1:

In every region of the state, traditional public school enrollment declined between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 school years.

### FINDING 2:

New York traditional public school and private school enrollment declines were largest in the early elementary grades during the first year of the pandemic.

### FINDING 3:

Enrollment in New York public charter schools and homeschools increased.

### FINDING 4:

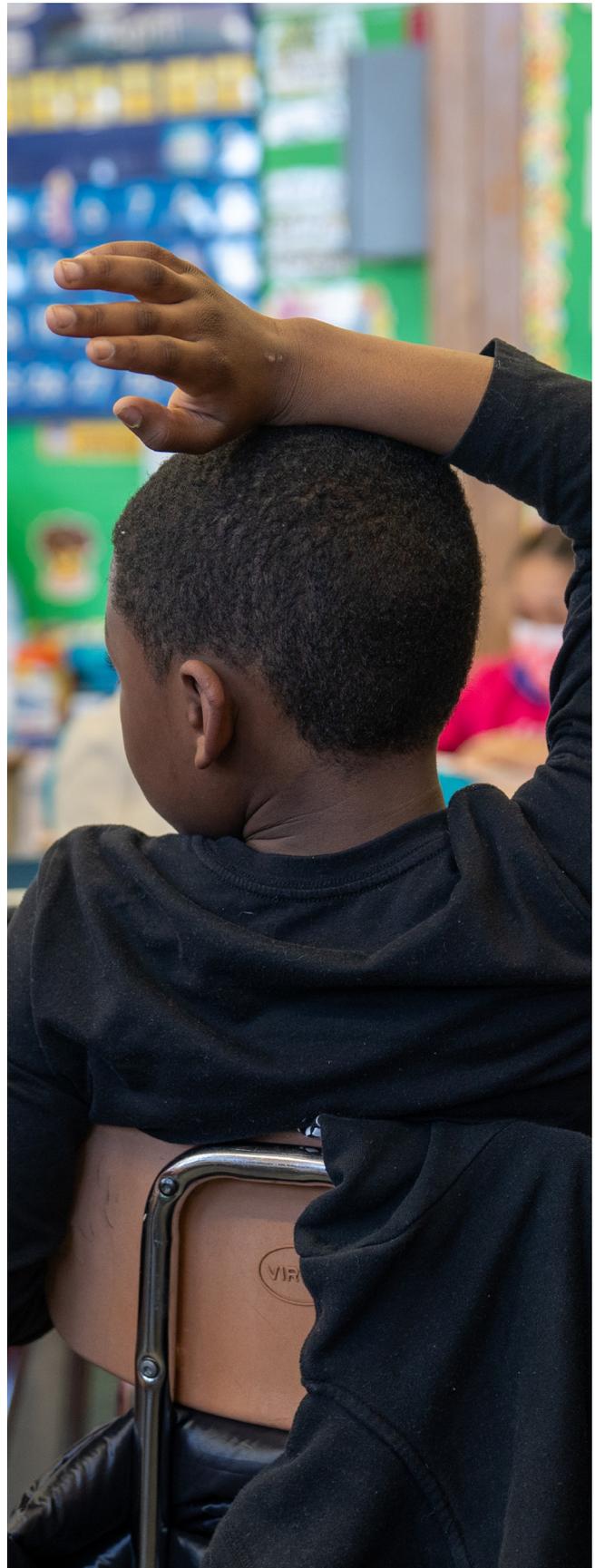
Traditional public schools experienced a decrease in enrollment of students from both low-income and non-low-income backgrounds, while charter schools experienced an increase in both — 26% for students from low-income backgrounds and 40% for students from non-low-income backgrounds.

### FINDING 5:

Traditional public schools continue to serve the most racially diverse groups of students.

### FINDING 6:

The Rochester City School District (RCSD) and New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) experienced the most dramatic enrollment declines of the state's largest city districts.



# A CLOSER LOOK

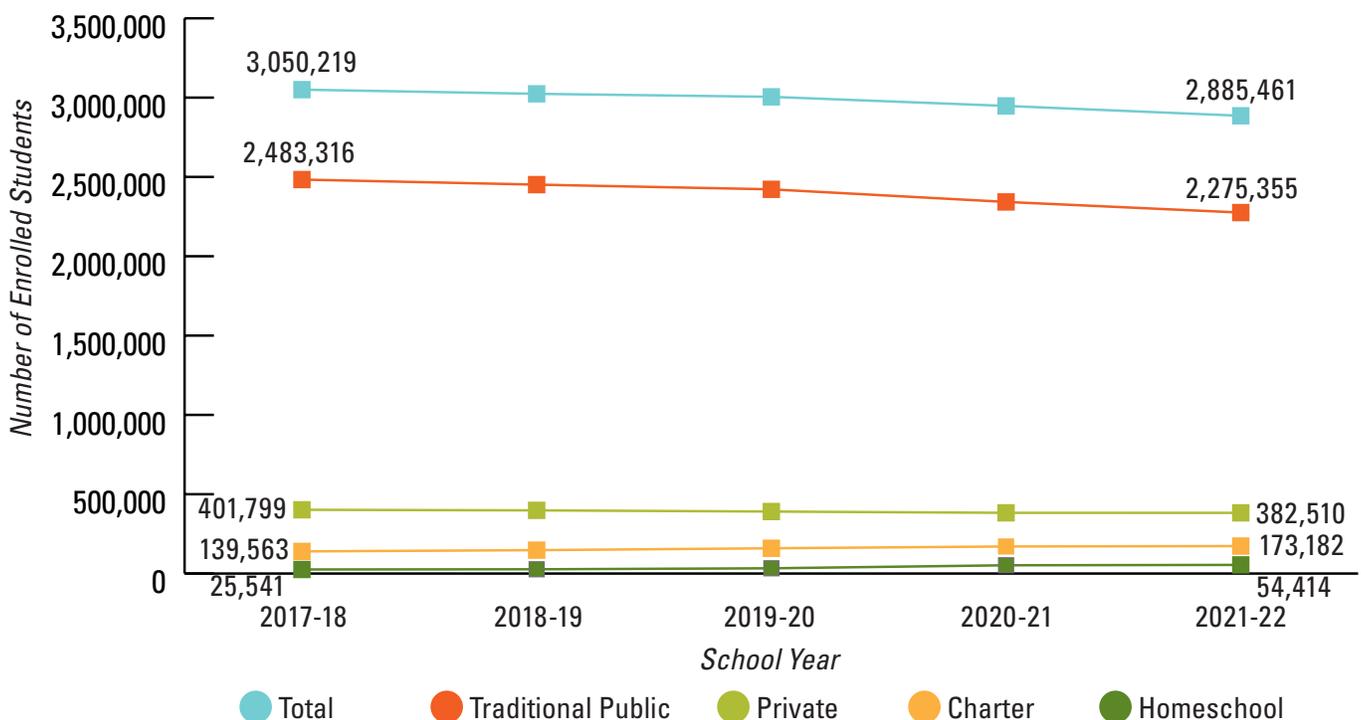
## FINDING 1:

In every region of the state, traditional public school enrollment declined between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 school years.

While New York’s traditional public schools have been experiencing enrollment declines for much of the past decade, in recent years the pandemic has accelerated the exodus of students from traditional public schools in every region.

There are a variety of reasons why enrollment has shifted. There is reason to believe that parents and families have found new value in both public charter schools and homeschooling — both of which increased during the pandemic school years. Even while traditional public schools continue to serve the vast majority of New York States’ K-12 students, sharp disenrollment from these schools seems to be driving overall enrollment trends in the state.

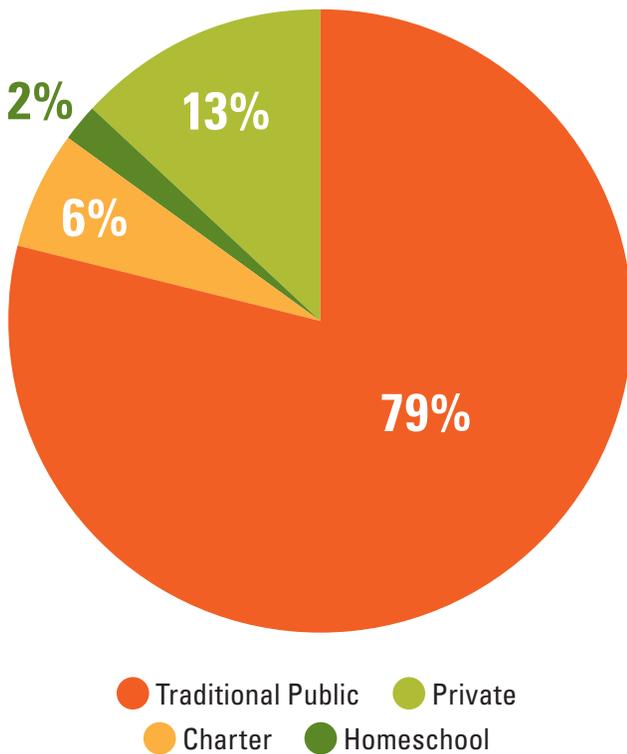
### New York State Total K-12 Enrollment from 2017-18 through 2021-22



## New York State Total K-12 enrollment from 2017-18 through 2021-22

School year	Traditional Public	Charter	Homeschool	Private	Total <sup>1</sup>
2017-18	2,483,316	139,563	25,541	401,799	3,050,219
2018-19	2,451,499	147,422	26,805	398,228	3,023,954
2019-20	2,421,858	159,211	33,013	390,779	3,004,861
2020-21	2,342,473	170,500	52,052	382,644	2,947,669
2021-22	2,275,355	173,182	54,414	382,510	2,885,461

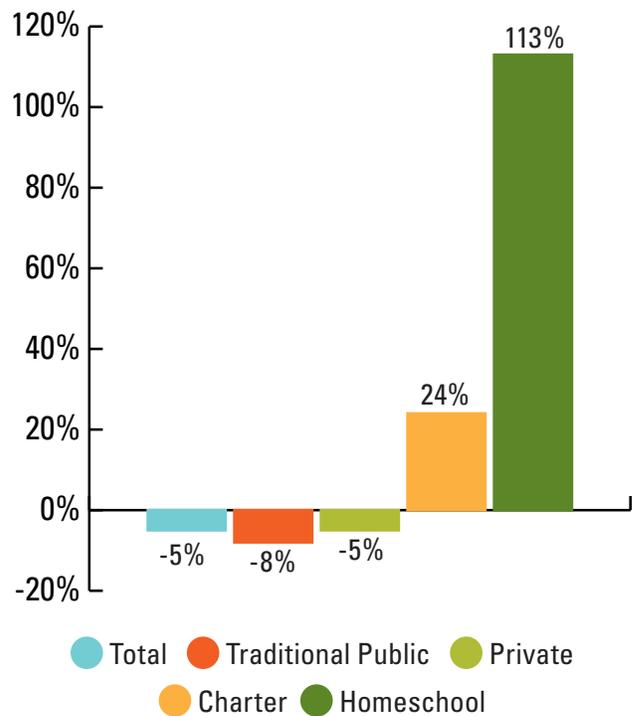
### K-12 Student Enrollment by School Type 2021-22



In New York’s traditional public K-12 systems, traditional public schools experienced the steepest 5-year decline in K-12 enrollment between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 school years. Private school enrollment also dropped each year in this timeframe.

Charter school and homeschool enrollment both increased between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 school years, though they both remain a small share — less than 10% — of the state’s total K-12 enrollment.

### K-12 Enrollment by School Type Over Time (Percentage change from 2017-18 to 2021-22)



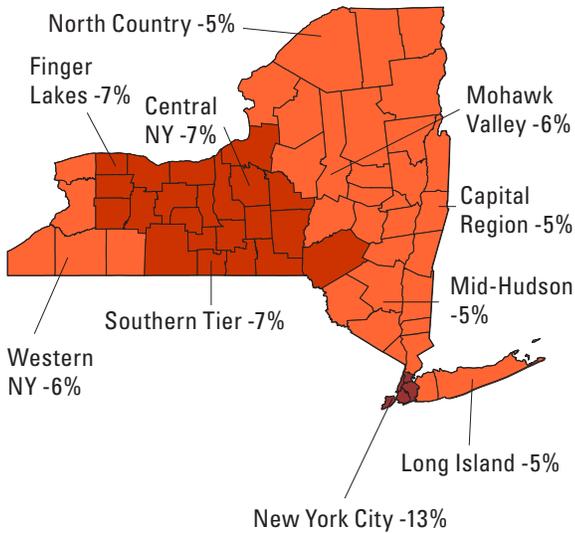
<sup>1</sup> The “total” enrollment depicted in Finding 1 is a sum of traditional public, charter, homeschool, and private enrollment from each year in the analysis.

Traditional public school enrollment fell in every geographic region between the 2017-18 and 2021-22 school years while homeschool and charter school enrollment increased in every region that has charter school options. Private school enrollment declined in all regions except the Mid-Hudson.

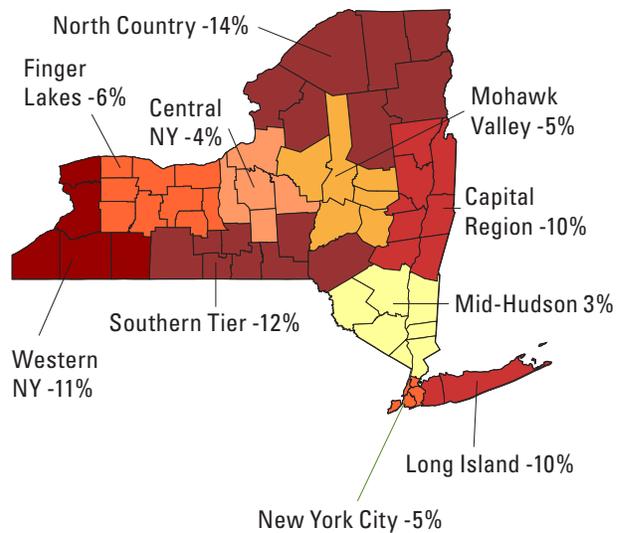
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**Overall percentage change of K-12 students from 2017-18 school year to 2021-22 school year by school type and region**

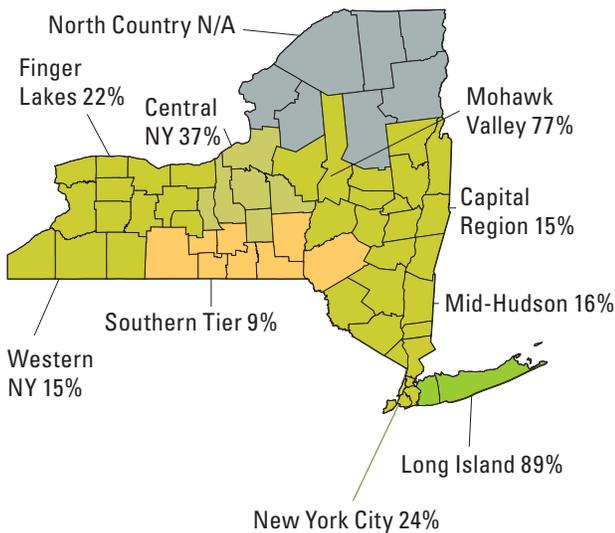
**Traditional Public**



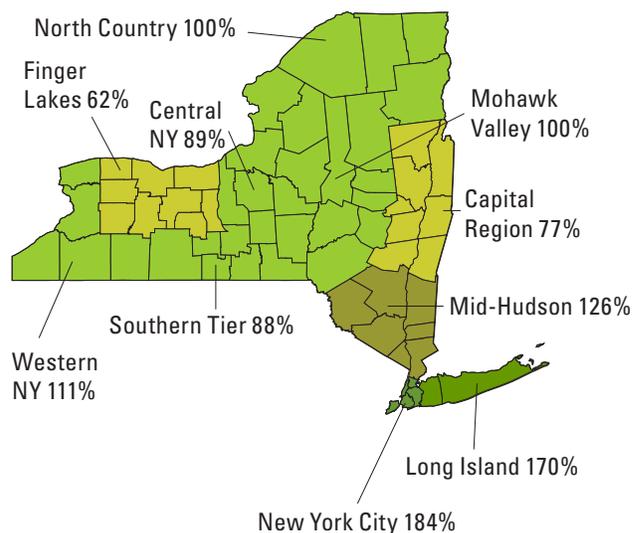
**Private**



**Charter**



**Homeschool**



Enrollment percent change between 2017-18 school year and 2021-22 school year



map graphic source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_New\\_York\\_Economic\\_Regions.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_New_York_Economic_Regions.svg)

## FINDING 2:

New York traditional public school and private school enrollment declines were largest in the early elementary grades during the first year of the pandemic.

Trends in grades K-2 align with information gathered from pandemic polling. A **poll** conducted by The Education Trust–NY in the fall of 2021 showed that about 11% of parents delayed enrolling their child in kindergarten.

**Statewide Traditional Public School Enrollment, Percentage Change Year Over Year by Grade Level**

	Early Elementary (K-2)
2017-18 to 2018-19	-2%
2018-19 to 2019-20	-2%
2019-20 to 2020-21	-6%
2020-21 to 2021-22	-2%

**Statewide Private School Enrollment, Percentage Change Year Over Year by Grade Level**

	Early Elementary (K-2)
2017-18 to 2018-19	-2%
2018-19 to 2019-20	-3%
2019-20 to 2020-21	-3%
2020-21 to 2021-22	-1%

Private school enrollment decreased more for elementary students than for middle and high school students over the five-year period. However, early elementary enrollment at private schools increased in the 2021-22 school year.

**Statewide Traditional Public School Enrollment, Percentage Change Year Over Year by Grade Level**

	Late Elementary (3-5)	Middle (6-8)	High (9-12)
2017-18 to 2018-19	-2%	0%	-1%
2018-19 to 2019-20	-2%	0%	-1%
2019-20 to 2020-21	-4%	-2%	-1%
2020-21 to 2021-22	-4%	-4%	-2%

**Statewide Private School Enrollment, Percentage Change Year Over Year by Grade Level**

	Late Elementary (3-5)	Middle (6-8)	High (9-12)
2017-18 to 2018-19	-1%	0%	0%
2018-19 to 2019-20	-3%	-2%	-1%
2019-20 to 2020-21	-3%	-1%	-1%
2020-21 to 2021-22	-1%	0%	0%

## FINDING 3:

### Enrollment in New York public charter schools and homeschools increased.

Since the 2017-18 school year, the number of public charter schools across the state increased from 281 to 330. New York’s charter schools experienced large increases in enrollment before the pandemic, with even greater increases during the first year of the pandemic.

Statewide Charter Enrollment, Percentage Change Year Over Year by Grade Level				
	Early Elementary (K-2)	Late Elementary (3-5)	Middle (6-8)	High (9-12)
2017-18 to 2018-19	5%	4%	7%	7%
2018-19 to 2019-20	8%	7%	8%	9%
2019-20 to 2020-21	4%	8%	11%	7%
2020-21 to 2021-22	-3%	3%	4%	5%

During the first year of the pandemic homeschooling continued to increase, particularly in grades K-6.<sup>2</sup>

Statewide Homeschool Enrollment, Percentage Change Year Over Year by Grade Level		
	Grades K-6	Grades 7-12
2017-18 to 2018-19	5%	5%
2018-19 to 2019-20	26%	20%
2019-20 to 2020-21	74%	38%
2020-21 to 2021-22	3%	7%

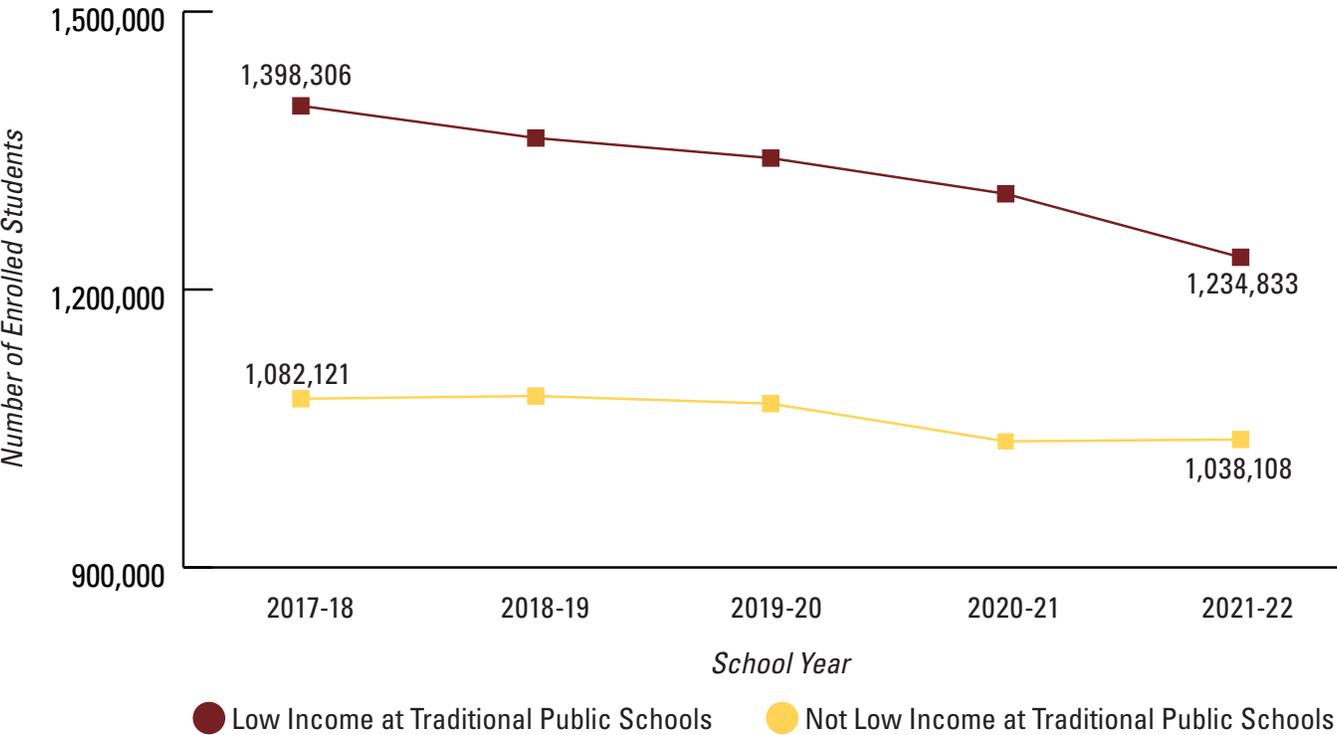


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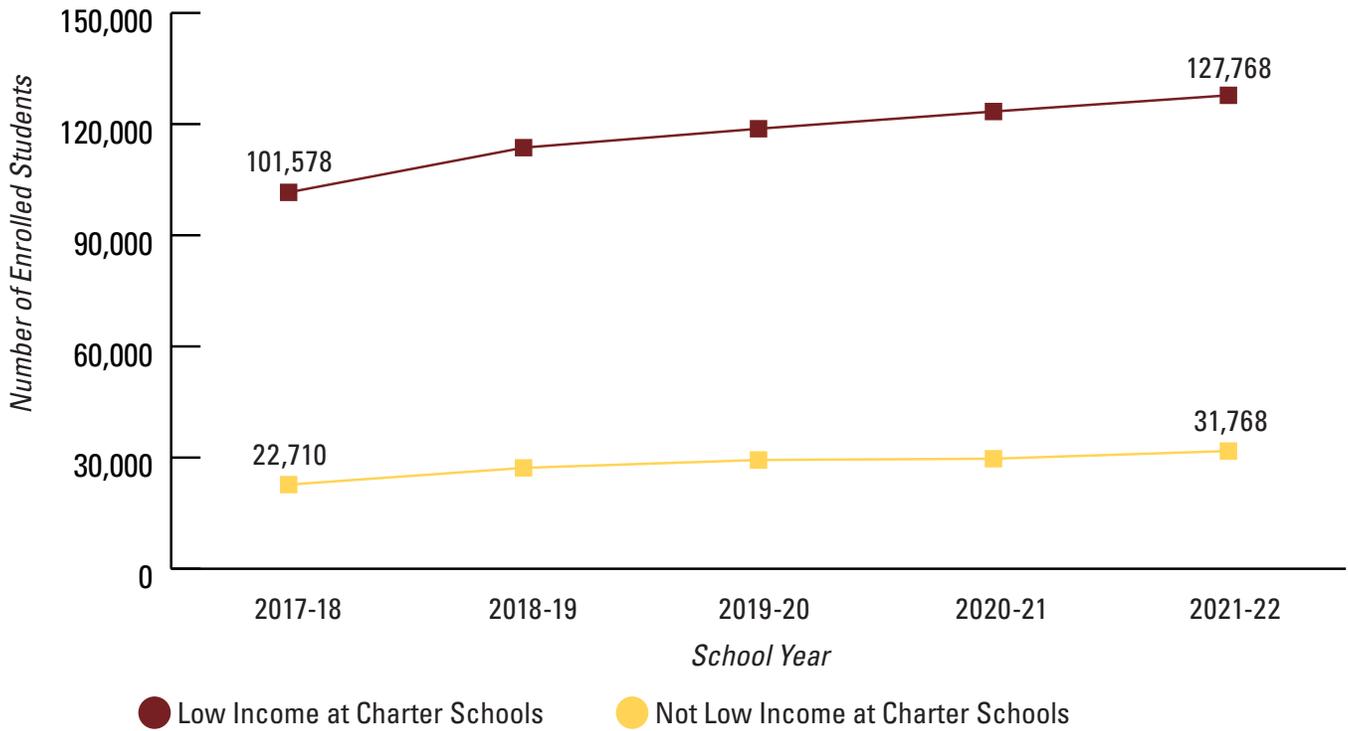
Traditional public schools experienced a decrease in enrollment of students from both low-income and non-low-income backgrounds, while charter schools experienced an increase in both — 26% for students from low-income backgrounds and 40% for students from non-low-income backgrounds.

Statewide, about 163,000 fewer students from low-income backgrounds were enrolled in traditional public schools in the fall of 2021 compared to the fall of 2017. At the same time there was a decrease of about 44,000 students from more affluent backgrounds enrolled in traditional public schools.

Enrollment in Traditional Public Schools by Economic Background, 2017-18 through 2021-22



## Enrollment in Charter Schools by Economic Background, 2017-18 through 2021-22



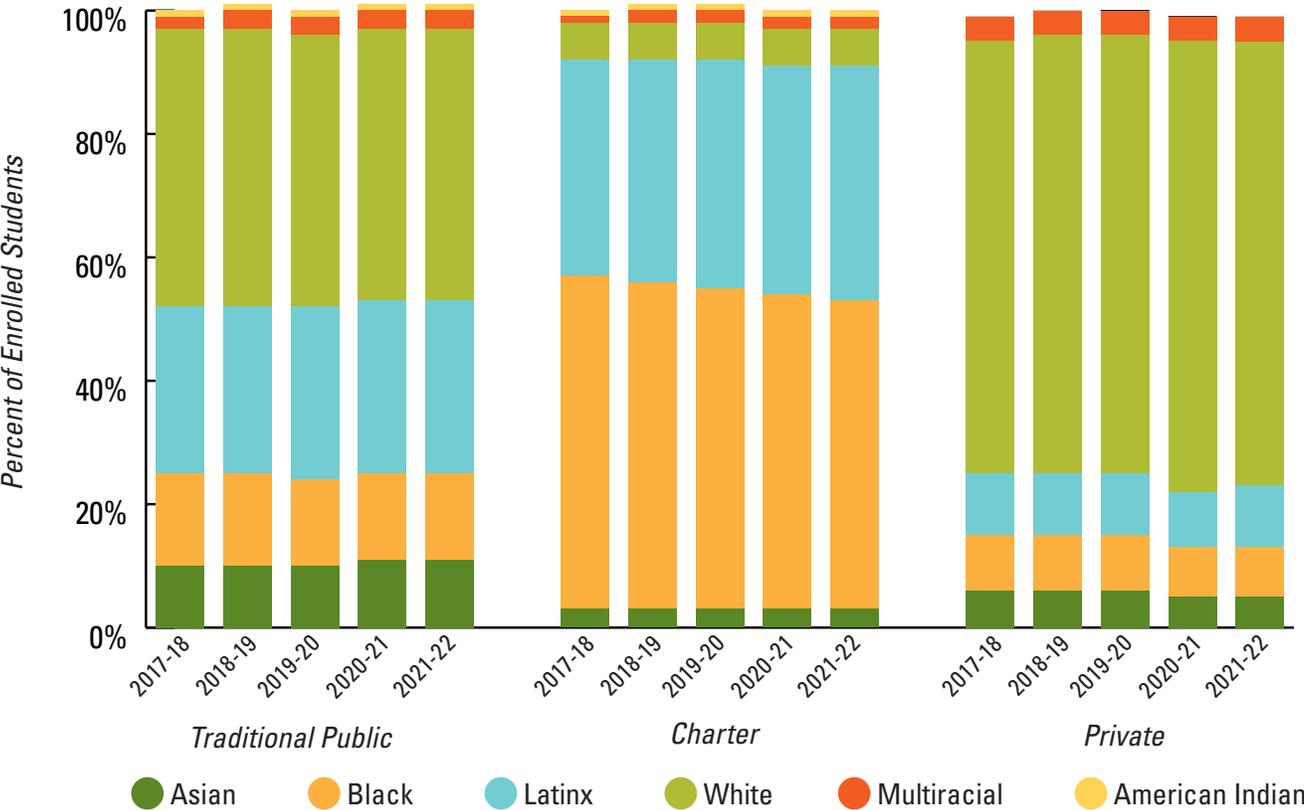
# FINDING 5:

## Traditional public schools continue to serve the most racially diverse groups of students.

New York has one of the most racially and linguistically diverse student populations in the nation. Equally, there are significant differences in school experiences for students across our state — rural, urban, big cities, and small cities. Even with the significant changes in enrollment, traditional public schools continue to serve the most racially diverse student populations.

While public charter schools make up about 6% of the public school ecosystem, they serve the largest shares of Black and Latinx students relative to their private and public counterparts. Additionally, traditional public and private schools serve more White students than other school types.

Statewide Racial Composition at Traditional Public, Charter, and Private Schools, 2017-18 to 2021-22



## FINDING 6:

The Rochester City School District (RCSD) and New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) experienced the most dramatic enrollment declines of the state's largest city districts in five years.

The Big 5 school districts and Albany experienced at least a 9% loss in student enrollment. Notably, K12 enrollment in the Rochester City School District and the New York City Department of Education dropped by 15% and 13% respectively.

### Big 5 Plus Albany Breakdown: 5-Year Percent Change of K-12 students from 2017-18 to 2021-22

Albany	Buffalo	Rochester	Syracuse	Yonkers	NYC
-12%	-9%	-15%	-9%	-9%	-13%

Although the pandemic exacerbated enrollment drops in all six school districts, the losses were not evenly distributed. Albany, Rochester, and Syracuse experienced the largest percent decrease in the first year of the pandemic. Buffalo, Yonkers, and New York City experienced larger percent decreases during the second year of the pandemic.

### Big 5 Plus Albany: Annual Percent Change of K-12 students from 2017-18 to 2021-22

School Years	Albany	Buffalo	Rochester	Syracuse	Yonkers	NYC
17-18 to 18-19	-3%	-0.5%	-1%	-2%	-0.1%	-2%
18-19 to 19-20	-2%	-1%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-2%
19-20 to 20-21	-4%	-3%	-7%	-4%	-3%	-4%
20-21 to 21-22	-3%	-4%	-5%	-3%	-4%	-6%



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

## Create infrastructure for authentic parent engagement.

Schools with effective parent engagement strategies can better understand and address issues and barriers that can lead to student disenrollment. Many school districts across the country maintain multiple ways to communicate with families and user-friendly dashboards, text messaging services, and automatic calls are a great alternative to the traditional flyer in a student's bookbag. Districts should leverage the expertise of staff within their school to ensure that every parent has at least one reliable adult to contact for information or solutions. Districts should also create opportunities for shared decision making with parents and caregivers and **leverage policies** that support participation in school-level planning and decision making.

2

## Collect and share the bright spots.

Even before the pandemic, traditional public schools were experiencing enrollment declines in New York; however, that does not mean that there are not great schools available for the state's students. In fact, many districts around the state have implemented promising practices and innovations that are attractive to students and their families. State and district leaders should work to amplify and scale these promising practices, with targeted outreach to parents.

3

## Examine the root causes of enrollment changes.

Early data suggests that some of the enrollment changes in New York may be driven by declining birth rates; however, additional factors may be contributing to the recent trends. Districts, with the support of NYSED and BOCES, should work to identify two to three key factors that are contributing to declining enrollment in their community and work together to disrupt the impact factors within their control. For example, districts could conduct exit interviews with families who are leaving the school or district. If parents are opting for charter, private, or homeschool options, leadership should seek to understand the reasons behind these decisions. Because of the fiscal implications associated with enrollment loss, state and district leaders should also be preparing for difficult decisions ahead. State and district leadership should focus on informing the community of enrollment projections and gathering input on ways to keep students and families attending district schools, while also making plans to right-size their system.

4

## Invest in a cradle-to-career state longitudinal data system.

Current data infrastructure is insufficient for tracking social supports and addressing the complex needs that are unique to the diversity of New York. Investing in a cradle-to-career or P-20 statewide longitudinal data system will help policymakers design data-informed policies and provide actionable information to support all New Yorkers. Data collected in the system should be disaggregated by race and income level — for all school types, including private and homeschool. Disaggregated data is necessary for us to understand what types of students are transitioning between different educational options within New York State and/or leaving the state. This will allow parents and policymakers to study the long-term impacts of the school choice decisions that parents are making during this time period.

**5****Provide support and technical assistance to districts to address chronic absenteeism and re-engagement of students who stopped attending school during the pandemic.**

Many districts around the state are challenged by chronic absenteeism. NYSED should utilize new federal and state funds to provide technical assistance and guidance that can support districts with re-engaging students and their families. Guidance should focus on strengthening connections between schools, home and community-based resources. NYSED should support districts to solicit feedback from students and families about their experiences to improve student learning experiences, programs, and course offerings.

**6****Provide more engaging and rigorous educational options for students.**

Many parents and students are seeking better academic opportunities that lead to college and career success. Schools should be investing their federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds in evidence-based math and reading instruction, while offering all students access to advanced coursework and dual enrollment programs. Students are also interested in coursework that is relevant to their future. These courses could include coding, data science, and media production. Districts should learn more about students' desires and adjust course offerings and extracurricular activities to fit student interest. Courses and programs that are interesting, engaging and relevant to students' futures can help re-engage students who are chronically absent or who are disengaged from school.



## DATA NOTE

All data used in this report are publicly available on NYSED's website. Traditional public school enrollment data are sums of district-level data found [here](#). Charter school enrollment data are sums of school-level enrollment found [here](#). Private school enrollment data are sums of school-level nonpublic enrollment found [here](#), and homeschool enrollment data are sums of the homeschool enrollment found [here](#). The "total" enrollment depicted in Finding 1 is a sum of traditional public, charter, homeschool, and private enrollment from each year in the analysis.

For the regional analysis, we used the 10 regions defined by the Empire State Development, which can be found [here](#). For charter schools and private schools, regional enrollment data reflects the region where the school is located, which in some cases may not be the same as the region where the student resides.

For the analysis of enrollment by economic background, NYSED shares this enrollment in two subgroups: economically disadvantaged and not economically disadvantaged, for traditional public and charter schools only. The state also applies data suppression to protect student privacy. Our analysis of charter schools includes all schools for which no K-12 grades had suppressed data for both economic

subgroups. The following number of charter schools are included in each year of our economic background analysis: 25 out of 305 (92%) in SY 21-22; 291 out of 325 (90%) in SY 20-21, 289 out of 316 (91%) in SY 19-20; 276 out of 291 (95%) in SY18-19; and 252 out of 281 (90%) in SY 17-18.

Race/ethnicity composition data for traditional public and charter schools are a sum of K-12 enrollment. Race/ethnicity data for private schools are a sum of PK-12 enrollment because that is the only format in which they are publicly available. Race/ethnicity data are not available for homeschool students.

For data that is broken down by grade level, homeschool data is only available in two grade bands: K-6 and 7-12. For all other school types, early elementary is defined as grades K-2, late elementary is defined as grades 3-5 plus ungraded elementary students, middle is defined as grades 6-8, and high is defined as grades 9-12 plus ungraded secondary students.

Year-over-year percentage change calculations show the positive or negative change in enrollment from one year to the next. For example, a 100% change would mean that enrollment doubled, and a -50% change would mean that enrollment is half of what it was the previous year.

