

Rise in private school enrollments could pose a problem for public schools

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Some U.S. public school districts are considering closing and consolidating schools due to enrollment declines that accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new survey from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Some 46% of private schools reported increases in their number of students over the 2022-2023 school year, the survey finds. It's all part of a tricky tug of war over student enrollment that ultimately impacts district finances.

Four years after students were sent home from public schools during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the kids are still not alright.

“We observe historic learning loss. There are multiple indicators of serious deterioration in students' mental health,” said Stanford University's Tom Dee. “And as they return to in-person instruction, we've seen an extraordinary increase in chronic absenteeism.”

And some public schools are tackling those challenges as they face budget constraints, as their funding partly depends on the number of students enrolled. There's also the problem of pandemic relief funding drying up in September.

“Many school districts have been using those federal resources to prop up their budgets during a period of sustained enrollment decline,” Dee said

Some are even considering closures, which Sofoklis Goulas with the Brookings Institution said can be very disruptive.

“And the outcomes of these students can vary a lot based on where they land,” he said.

But it's not all bad news for public schools. Goulas' research shows that some students who left during the pandemic are coming back.

“If there will be a recovery, this is how it should start looking like — a stabilization, maybe some weak increase in overall enrollment,” he said.

Plus, lots of education funding is not tied to enrollment, according to Miguel Urquiola, an economist with Columbia University.

However, the migration away from public schools does present another problem: “The people who leave the public sector, they are often, for example, more motivated people or wealthier people. Then, there could be a change in sort of the support for public spending.”

In other words, they may not want their tax dollars spent on public schools.