



COVID, CRT, sexuality: What's behind the mass student exodus from public schools

By Sarah Westwood

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Elicia Brand and her family moved to Loudoun County nine years ago to take advantage of well-reputed public schools in the affluent northern Virginia enclave.

But after the pandemic began, the schools she once regarded as fantastic changed. Brand said her three sons encountered sexualized reading materials, a racially fraught curriculum, and an approach to education that seemed to prioritize the politics of the district's adults over the needs of its children.

So this year, Brand, like hundreds of thousands of parents around the country, decided to remove her children from the public school system. Brand's two oldest sons, both rising ninth graders, will head to a Catholic school in a nearby Virginia town in the fall. Her youngest, a rising seventh grader, will finish middle school in a Loudoun County public school, at which point Brand said she would reevaluate.

"I'm Jewish and I'm sending my kids to Catholic school, because the values at a Catholic school more closely mirror our own family values, whereas the public schools are totally devoid of values," Brand told the *Washington Examiner*.

"But not only are they devoid of values, they've lowered the standards of education to the point that I feel my children couldn't be productive members of society if they remained in the school," she said.

Brand's decision mirrors the choices parents are making all over the nation. A toxic mix of factors, from battles over critical race theory and sexual identity education to the lingering effects of COVID-19 protocols, has driven families from the public school system in droves.

But the exodus has not been evenly distributed among public school districts.

Schools that remained closed to in-person learning the longest lost, on average, the greatest number of students.

Districts that remained mostly remote during the pandemic have since lost an average of 1 in 22 students, according to an analysis by the American Enterprise Institute and the College Crisis Initiative at Davidson College.

Districts that returned to in-person learning the quickest actually saw gains during the most recent academic year, which brought them to a net loss since the pandemic of only 1 in 93 students.

Altogether, more than 1.2 million students have left the public school system since 2020, according to that analysis.

Others put the losses even higher. An analysis from *The74*, an education news nonprofit organization, found in June that as many as 1.5 million students had fled public schools since 2020.

The enrollment drops could cause problems for districts that reverberate beyond the emptier classrooms.

In most cases, funding for public school districts is tied directly to the number of students who sign up to attend — meaning enrollment decreases could lead to budget cuts that further hamper the schools.

New York City’s public schools lost \$215 million from their budget heading into the upcoming academic year due to enrollment losses. That number would have been higher, as much as \$375 million in cuts, if Mayor Eric Adams hadn’t used COVID-19 relief funding to soften the blow.

More than 80,000 students dropped out of New York City public schools since the start of the pandemic.

The school board in Oakland, California, voted in June to close a handful of public schools and merge others in the Oakland Unified School District due to low enrollment numbers.

The Los Angeles Unified School District lost nearly 43,000 students from its noncharter schools since the 2019-2020 school year — that means nearly 1 in 10 students left during that time.

The district has been left to grapple with an acceleration of a trend it was already facing before the pandemic, forcing questions about whether lightly attended schools should close their doors.

The significant loss of students from some of the country’s largest public school districts has sent families seeking education from a variety of alternatives.

In some cases, that has meant a simple shift from one public school system to another.

Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho told education reporters last month that some families simply packed up and left Los Angeles “because of political ideology and lower taxes.”

“If they had the means, parents made decisions,” Carvalho said.

A handful of states have actually seen net increases in public school enrollment over the past two years.

Utah, which banned school districts from requiring masks heading into the most recent academic year, saw a small enrollment boost. So too did South Dakota and North Dakota, both of which ended COVID-19 requirements earlier than many states.

In other cases, parents have shifted to homeschooling.

Homeschooling saw a massive explosion in popularity during the 2020-2021 school year — the first for which COVID-19 was a reality at the start.

The number of students being homeschooled jumped 63% that year in the 18 states that shared data at the time of an *Associated Press* analysis in April. Homeschooling fell a modest 17% during the 2021-2022 school year, suggesting many parents had decided to make the homeschooling pivot permanent.

Charter schools also saw an enrollment boost during the pandemic. Funded publicly and operated independently, many charter schools are able to avoid the bureaucratic and political pitfalls that can create problematic conditions in public schools.

Enrollment in charter schools jumped 7% during the first year of the pandemic.

Catholic schools reversed a decadeslong enrollment slide during the 2021-2022 school year, during which Catholic schools recorded their first enrollment increase in 20 years.

It was the largest-ever recorded increase in students signing up for Catholic education.

Both religious and secular private school education saw gains between 2020 and 2022.

More than half of all private schools reported an increase in enrollment, compared to just 15.5% of private schools that said they saw a decrease, according to the Cato Institute.