Since virus hit, Virginia school enrollment has slipped nearly 4 percent

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Enrollment in Virginia public schools dropped again this fall and is down more than 46,000 students since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The official headcount of students statewide plunged from 1,298,083 in fall 2019 to 1,252,756 in fall 2020 — and then dipped again to 1,251,970 this fall, according to data posted online by the Virginia Department of Education.

That means the state's public schools have 3.6 percent fewer students now than before COVID-19 hit.

The drop occurred as schools generally moved online for the 2020-21 academic year and then resumed in-person instruction this year with social distancing, mask requirements and other strategies to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Since fall 2019, enrollment has dropped at 111 of Virginia's 132 school divisions, the data showed. Fairfax County has lost more than 10,000 students; Richmond, more than 4,000; Virginia Beach, more than 3,000; and Loudoun, Norfolk and Prince William public schools, more than 2,000.

For Richmond Public Schools, that represented a 16 percent drop from the number of students two years ago. The school system's media relations office and administration did not respond to a request for comment.

Seven other districts — all in less populated, rural areas — also reported enrollment declines of more than 10 percent. For example, enrollment has dropped more than 18 percent, to fewer than 180 students, in Highland County in far western Virginia; and it has dropped more than 15 percent, to fewer than 530 students, in Charles City County east of Richmond.

State officials said the drop was not unexpected.

"We anticipated that there would be declines in enrollment and that it would not be a one-year phenomenon," Charles Pyle, a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education, said Monday.

"Over time, we will see these numbers change," he said, as more parents feel comfortable sending their children back to school and more children receive COVID-19 vaccinations.

The steepest enrollment drop statewide was for preschool (down 8.6 percent from fall 2019). Enrollment was down 5.8 percent for kindergartners as well. Pyle noted that Virginia parents have always had the option to delay sending their children to kindergarten for a year.

In first- through seventh-grade, enrollment was down an average of more than 6 percent compared with fall 2019.

In eighth grade through high school, statewide enrollment this fall was about a half-percent higher than it was two years ago.

As enrollment declined, the number of home-schooled students in Virginia has risen. It is about 17,650 students higher than the pre-pandemic level.

The number of home-schoolers, including students with religious exemptions, went from 44,226 in fall 2019 to 65,571 in fall 2020. This fall, it dipped to 61,873 students — still 40 percent higher than before the pandemic.

Besides home-schooling, many students no longer attending public schools have moved to private schools. The VDOE does not track private school admissions. However, studies by groups such as the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, have found an increase in private school enrollment.

Ordinarily, school funding is based on how many students a school district enrolls. However, thanks to state legislators, the enrollment declines over the past two years will not hurt school divisions financially.

"The 2021 General Assembly provided divisions no-loss funding to ensure that no division lost funding in FY21 and FY22 as compared to the 2020-22 biennium due to enrollment dips in fall 2020," Pyle said in an email. He said the statewide funding that was potentially at risk totaled $164 million for the current fiscal year and $278 million for the previous year

"Looking beyond that, it's a matter for the General Assembly," Pyle said.