

# A Look at Student POPULATION TRENDS

Projections from UW researchers point toward overall increase in state's public school enrollment

*Shelby Anderson*



**W**hen it comes to Wisconsin's student population projections, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that the state's overall student population is expected to increase. The bad news is projections predict declining enrollment will continue to plague many rural schools.

While declining enrollment is expected to continue to affect many Wisconsin school districts, most suburban districts are expected to continue to experience student population growth. In the next couple of years, some urban districts are also projected to grow as minority student populations increase. In fact, the largest growth among student groups is expected to be among Hispanic/Latino students.

## ■ Student Boom of the 70s

As of the 2013-14 school year, about 874,000 students were enrolled in Wisconsin public schools. While this is a healthy number, Wisconsin actually had almost one million (999,921) public school students in the early 1970s when the baby boom generation was in school. Student population then declined sharply from the mid-70s to the mid-80s as the baby boomers graduated. Predictably, student population again climbed from the mid-80s to the mid-90s as the millennial generation (children of the baby boom generation) entered schools.

Since the mid-90s, the overall student population has remained relatively steady at right around 874,000. In fact, between the 2008-09 and 2013-14 school years,

the overall student population in Wisconsin declined by only 0.1 percent. However, as school leaders know, this slight decline hasn't been shared equally by districts.

## ■ Declining Enrollment and Rural schools

Despite the fact that the overall student population has remained relatively steady, 59 percent of Wisconsin school districts experienced declining enrollment between the 2008-09 and 2013-14 school years.

Some districts hit by declining enrollment during this period (Chetek, Weyerhaeuser, and Glidden) consolidated with other districts. Chetek and Weyerhaeuser combined to form the Chetek-Weyerhaeuser Area School District in northwestern Wisconsin in 2007. Similarly, in

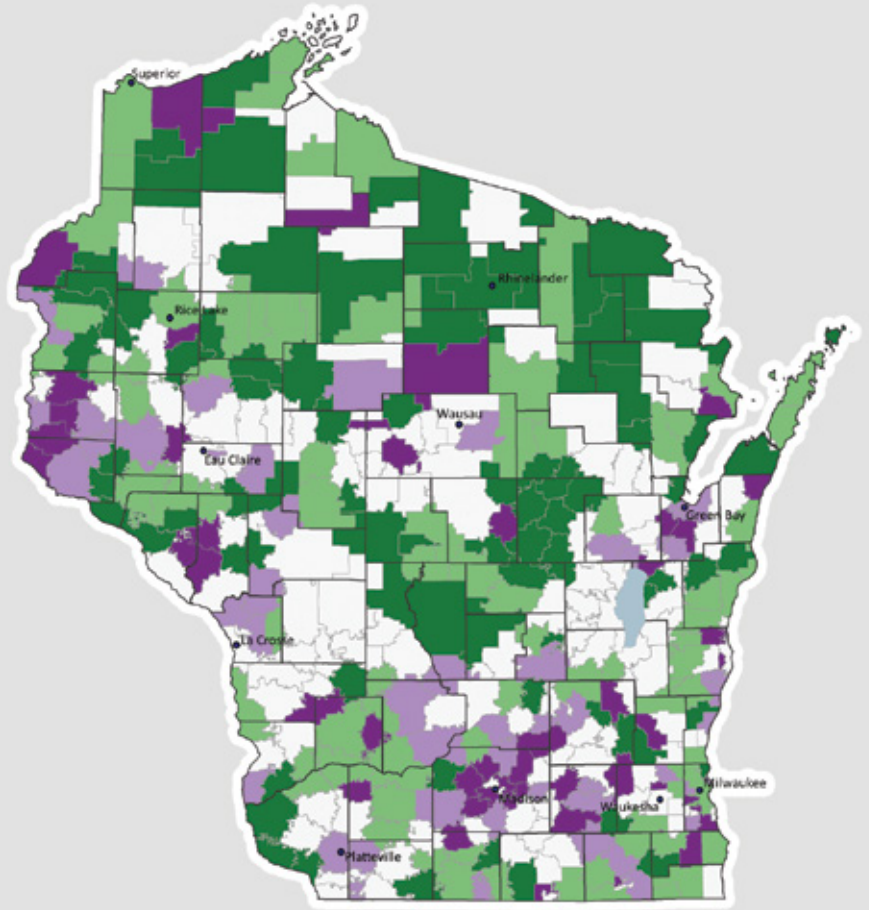
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# School District Enrollment Change

2008-09 to 2013-14

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Applied Population Laboratory



- Declined 10% or more
- Declined 4% to 9.9%
- Declined or increased less than 4%
- Increased 4% to 9.9%
- Increased 10% or more

2010, the Glidden School District joined with Park Falls to form the Chequamegon School District in northcentral Wisconsin.

Projections indicate that for many rural school districts, declining enrollment will continue. A research brief from the University of Wisconsin Applied Population Lab reports, “Districts that are particularly white, older, and rural or districts with less ability to build new housing may see more prolonged enrollment decline.”

## 4K Boost

In recent years, the number of kindergarten students beginning school hasn't replaced the number of students graduating from high school. However four-year-old kindergarten programs have helped cover this discrepancy. Districts have experienced a sharp increase in the number of pre-K students they are enrolling as these programs become more established.

During the 2005-06 school year, about 18,000 students were enrolled in public four-year-old kindergarten programs. That number has grown

to about 46,000 students during the 2012-13 school year.

“The growing popularity of the four-year old kindergarten program in many districts throughout the state has meant that recent declines in enrollment have not been as severe as it may have been without the program,” researcher Sarah Kemp reported.

### ■ Gainers

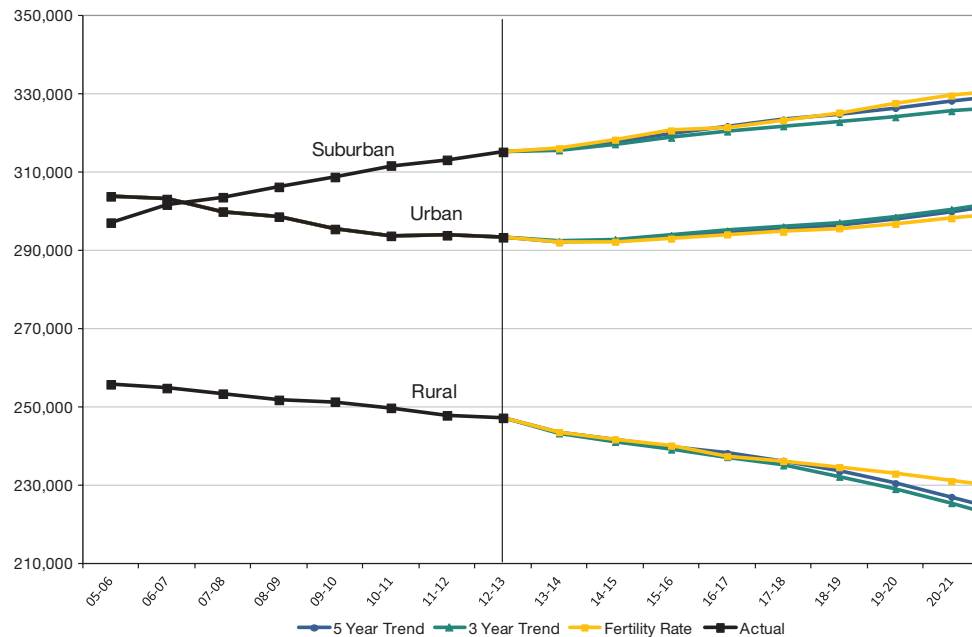
As some districts have lost students, other have experienced student population explosions. Based on percentage of its students, the McFarland School District, the Paris J1 School District, and the Union Grove UHS School District gained the most students out of all Wisconsin districts between the 2008-09 and 2013-14 school years.

Open enrollment has certainly been a factor in student gains for some districts. During the 2012-13 school

## Enrollment History and Projections

### Urban, Suburban and Rural School Districts

Source: University of Wisconsin-Madison Applied Population Laboratory



## Migrant Education

*Providing opportunities to transient students*

About 26 school districts in the state have a migrant education program in one form or another. These programs help students of transient families, who work temporary agriculture jobs, attend school and ultimately graduate from high school.

Providing education for this group of students has been a challenge as these families move often.

The Ripon School District, located in central Wisconsin, began a migrant education program last summer. In its first class, it had six students. The students’ families moved from Texas to work a seasonal job at a food processing plant in Ripon.

In Ripon, the program is open to migrant students entering grades 9-12 who are credit deficient and/or at-risk of not graduating from high school. Students in the program have an opportunity to earn credit for their work in math and language arts. Access to Netbooks and/or iPads at Ripon High School allows students to conduct research, use online mathematics tools, or complete other school-related tasks.

Myrna Toney, migrant education consultant with the



Photo courtesy of Ripon Commonwealth Press

Department of Public Instruction (DPI) said about 900-1,200 students each year enroll in a migrant education program in Wisconsin. The number of students and location can change each year because migrant families follow the job opportunities. The goal of migrant education programs is to keep students engaged in school work.

“Because of how often the students’ families move, the students don’t get a regular education,” Toney said. “The goal of migrant education is to close those gaps and encourage the students to stay in school and graduate.”

For more information about migrant education, visit [www.osymigrant.org](http://www.osymigrant.org) or [titleone.dpi.wi.gov/ttlone\\_mig\\_index](http://titleone.dpi.wi.gov/ttlone_mig_index).

year, more than 44,000 students opted to open enroll. Union Grove High School grew more than 31 percent between the 2008-09 and 2012-13 school years with much of that growth attributed to open enrollment.

Other factors that have led to student increases are virtual schools. For instance, the McFarland School District added a non-instrumentality virtual school that increased the district's enrollment by 2,020 students.

### ■ Student Population Trends by Groups

Across the country, states are becoming more diverse as minority groups are growing. Projections from researchers at the University of Wisconsin's Applied Population Lab show certain minority populations are also increasing in Wisconsin.

Districts with diverse populations, especially Hispanic or Latino students, can expect to see those numbers increase. During the 2005-06 school year, Hispanic/Latino students made up about 7 percent of student enrollment. That percentage had increased to 10 percent by the 2012-13 school year, and continues to rise.

"Projections by race/ethnicity point to the growing influence of the Hispanic population on Wisconsin's public school enrollment," Kemp reported. "The numbers of Hispanic and Asian students are projected to increase."

Projections show that the numbers of African American and Native American students are expected to remain steady. The non-Hispanic white population is projected to decline fairly significantly over the next five years.

Partly due to the expected increase in minority populations, student populations in most Wisconsin urban school districts are expected to decline slightly and then

enrollment will steadily increase in the foreseeable future.

### ■ Takeways

Since each district is unique, general statements about school district sub-groups (rural, suburban, and urban) may not always be accurate. Individual projections can help districts make informed decisions

about future facility needs and other financial considerations.

For more information about student population data trends, visit [www.apl.wisc.edu](http://www.apl.wisc.edu) or contact Sarah Kemp, associate researcher at the University of Wisconsin Applied Population Laboratory at [kemp@wisc.edu](mailto:kemp@wisc.edu). ■

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## The Changing SCHOOL LANDSCAPE

**O**ur schools' student population is changing and along with it our students' and parents' needs. More and more districts need to accommodate students and parents whose first language is not English. For districts, this means everything from providing school newsletters in different languages to rethinking assessments and classroom instruction. While many districts have established practices and policies to support these students and their families, an increasing number of districts are facing these issues in a significant way for the first time.

One of the greatest strengths of public schools is that they admit all students no matter their abilities, background, or socio-economic status. There is no question that an increasing number of students and their families have had to depend more and more on the help of their public schools.

Recent figures from the Department of Public Instruction show that most districts have seen an increase in the number of students that qualify for free and reduced-price school meals. During the 2003-04 school year, 29.5 percent of students were eligible. That number increased to more than 43 percent in 2012-13. As of the last school year, there were 110 districts that have 50 percent or more of their students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. While many of the state's urban districts have high percentages of students who qualify for subsidized school meals, it is also a challenge for many rural schools. In fact, the district with the highest percentage of eligible students is the Lac du Flambeau School District with more than 91 percent.

At the same time, as school leaders know, state funding for public education has been reduced in recent years. School leaders are encouraged to contact their legislators and give them a clear picture of how much your community relies upon your public schools to support and provide services to your students.

If applicable, share with them the percent increase in the number of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals. Make it clear to them that supporting these students is about more than providing meals. Schools are also increasingly providing services for homeless students, and providing resources and help to their families.

As public school leaders, we take pride in increasing student achievement any way we can. In recent years, this work has involved more and more resources as we support students with an array of needs. Call on your lawmakers to do their part to support our public schools. □