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Breaking down enrollment declines in public schools

Sofoklis Goulas

MARCH 2024

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The Hamilton Project and The Brookings Institution

March 2024

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Abstract

The newly released enrollment data from the National Center on Education Statistics for the 2022–23 school year point to moderate enrollment gains for traditional public schools. The recent enrollment gains though are smaller than the cumulative enrollment losses since 2019–20 and are not uniform. This paper takes stock of enrollment losses today by comparing the distribution of changes in public school enrollment since the COVID-19 pandemic to the distribution of pre-pandemic changes across the nation. Roughly 59, 69, and 69 percent of small, medium-sized, and large schools, respectively, saw their enrollment decline between 2019–20 and 2022–23. One third of small, medium-sized, and large schools with enrollment declines lost 26, 54, and 96 students or more, respectively (i.e., top third). The share of schools experiencing such declines after COVID-19 is larger than what would be expected based on historical variation for medium-sized and large schools. Urban schools and middle schools are disproportionately represented among schools with enrollment losses in the top third.

Introduction

In a prior THP paper, we documented the declining school enrollment across the nation between 2019–20 and 2021–22. We showed that the share of school-age children attending traditional brick-and-mortar public schools declined from roughly 84 percent in 2019-2020 to 79 percent in 2021–2022. This decline is associated with an increase in the share of school-age children outside the public school system entirely. This updated analysis uses newly released enrollment data for 2022-23 from the National Center for Education Statistics to take stock of enrollment declines today and provide historical benchmarks of enrollment changes.

I find that while the share of students attending traditional public schools (TPS) remains below its pre-pandemic level in 2022–23, it increased by roughly 1 percentage point between 2021–22 and 2022-23. This paper also compares the distribution of changes in public school enrollment after COVID-19 (i.e., the three-year change between 2019–20 and 2022–23) to the distribution of pre-pandemic changes (i.e., all three-year windows between 2011–12 and 2019–20) across the nation. I find that the majority of schools experienced declining enrollment between 2019–20 and 2022–23. This paper then investigates the variation in school-level enrollment through the 2022–23 school year for schools in three size categories based on pre-pandemic enrollment: small, medium, and large. I also provide historical benchmarks of enrollment declines in each size category to identify atypical changes in school enrollment in different communities.

I find that small (59 percent), medium-sized (69 percent), and large (69 percent) schools saw their enrollment declining between 2019–20 and 2022–23. The top third of declines between 2019–20 and 2022–23 is used to define a relatively high level of decline. This translates to losing at least 26, 54, and 96 students for small, medium-sized, and large schools, respectively. In the three-year window between 2019–20 and 2022–23, small (21 percent), medium-sized (23 percent), and large (23 percent) schools experienced a relatively high level of enrollment decline. This is large by historical standards; for example, averaging across all three-year windows between 2011–12 and 2019–20, only 18, 15, and 12 percent of small, medium-sized, and large schools experience relatively high enrollment decline. Binomial tests show that the share of schools experiencing a relatively high level of declines between 2019–20 and 2022–23 is outside the range of the share of schools experiencing such declines before COVID-19 with statistical confidence for medium-sized and large schools. Urban schools and middle schools are disproportionately represented among schools with enrollment losses in the top third.

School enrollment trends after COVID-19

The newly released enrollment data from the National Center on Education Statistics for the 2022–23 school year allow us to take stock of another year of changing school enrollment patterns after the COVID-19 pandemic. Enrollment in public schools was relatively steady between 2021–22 and 2022–23, but the number of K–12 students remained below 2019–20 levels and the pre-pandemic trend. The new data confirm key enrollment patterns documented in a prior THP analysis of national-level figures (Burtis and Goulas 2023). Specifically, the loss of students from traditional public schools since 2019–20 may to some extent indicate a shift toward private and home education.

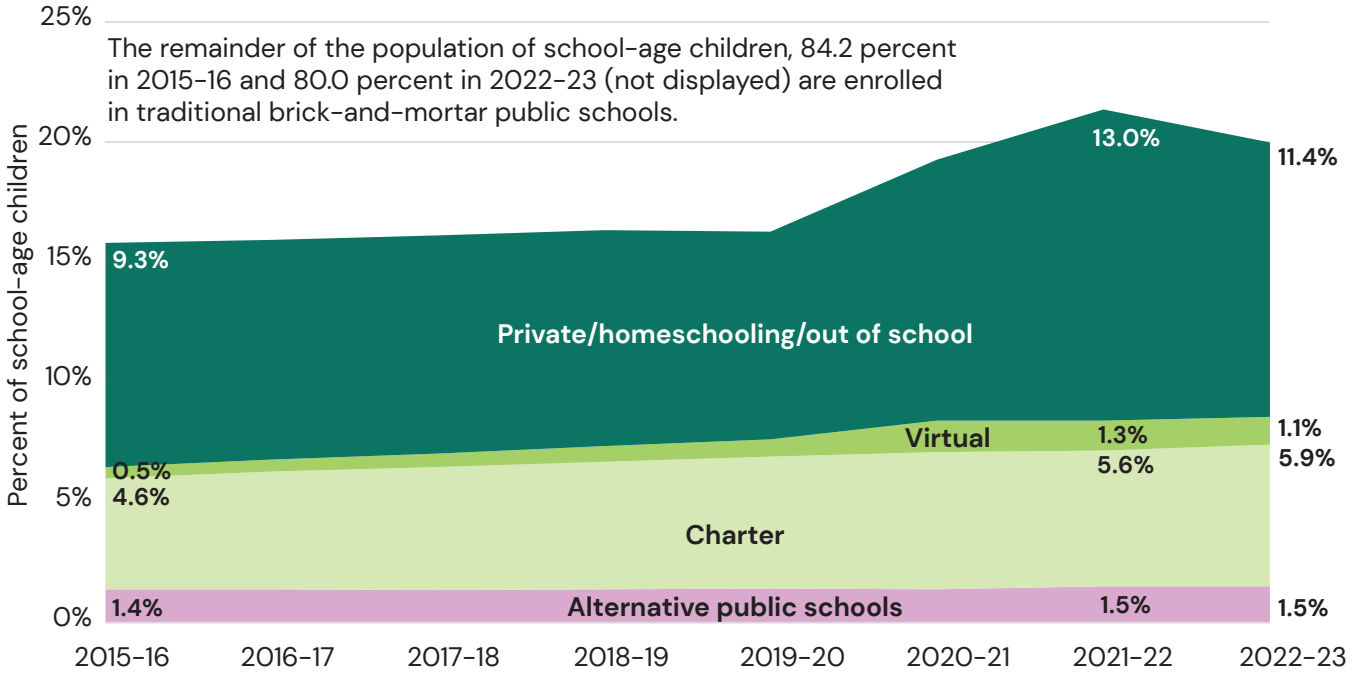
Figure 1 combines estimates of school-age children from the Census Bureau with information from the Department of Education's census of school enrollment, the Common Core of Data (CCD) (National Center for Education Statistics 2024; U.S. Census Bureau 2024), to provide estimates of the share of all school-age children attending different school types over time. We note that school-age population estimates may not align exactly with school enrollment data because the latter typically reflect student counts in early October. I find that even though the share of students attending traditional public schools (TPS) remains below its pre-pandemic level (83.7 in 2019–20), it increased from 78.6 in 2021–22 to 80.0 in 2022–23. This result indicates that, in 2022–23, traditional public schools gained back one out of 5 percentage points in the share school-age children they lost between 2019–20 and 2021–22.

However, not all public-school options experienced similar enrollment gains in the most recent school year. Brick-and-mortar charter schools increased their share among all school-age children from 5.6 percent in 2021–22 to 5.9 percent in 2022–23. In contrast, virtual public schools slightly lost ground. While 1.3 percent of students attended a virtual public school in 2021–22, that share decreased to 1.1 percent in 2022–23. These transitions translate to a decrease of the share of students outside the traditional public school system from 13 percent in 2021–22 to 11.4 percent in 2022–23.

Even though the public-school sector overall gained students in the most recent school year, these enrollment gains are not uniform. To understand how localized enrollment gains in 2022–23 are, I investigate

FIGURE 1

Evolution of the share of students out of traditional public schools, 2015-16 to 2022–23



Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau 2015–23; author's calculations.

Note: The remainder of the population of school-age children not displayed in this figure are enrolled in traditional brick- and-mortar public schools (84.2 percent in 2015–16 and 80.0 percent in 2022–23). For 2022–23, our dataset captures 81,357 brick-and-mortar traditional public schools (TPS), 6,892 brick-and-mortar charter schools, 1,159 virtual public schools, and 5,890 alternative brick-and-mortar public schools. Schools classified in the Common Core of Data as full, primarily, or exclusively virtual were identified as virtual.

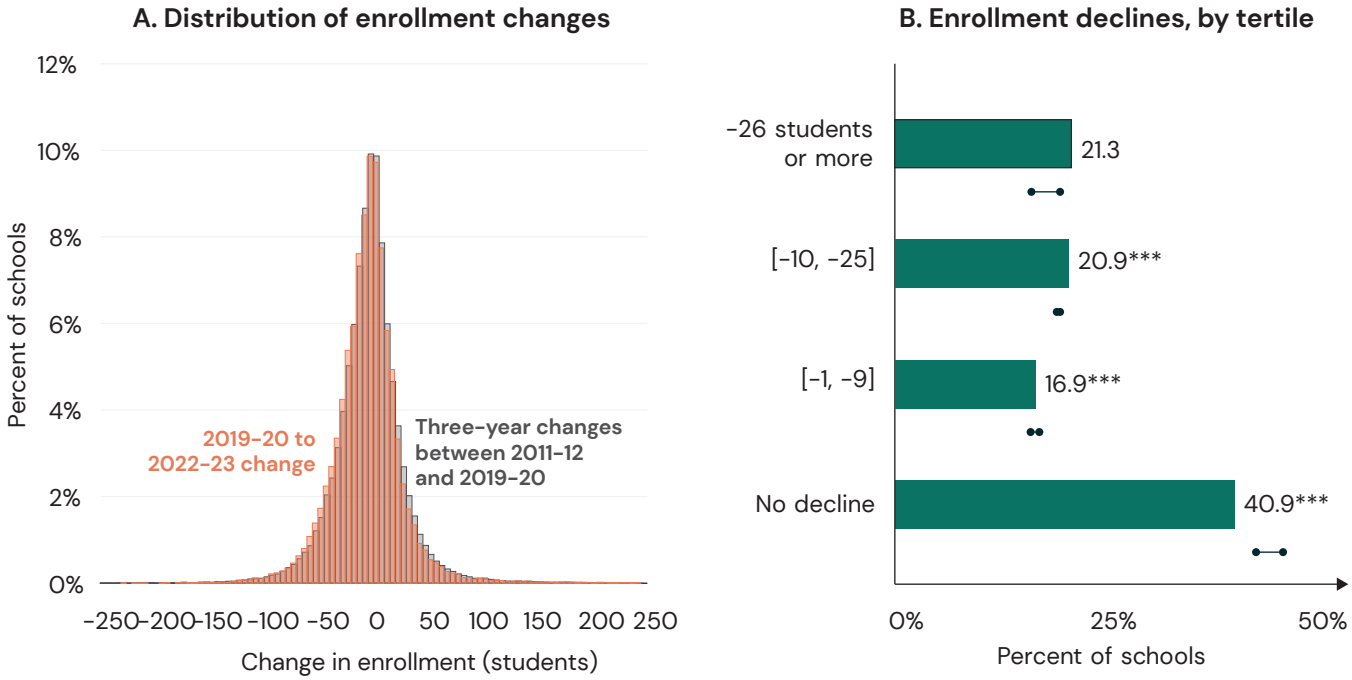
the share of schools that lost or gained students between 2021–22 and 2022–23. I focus on schools serving the same grade span over this period (i.e., not adding or dropping grades). Fifty-two percent of schools held steady or saw enrollment gains in the most recent year of data. Roughly 35 percent of the studied schools (27,000 schools) lost more than two percent of their student enrollment between 2021–22 and 2022–23. Approximately 18 (14,000 schools) and 6 percent (4,600 schools) of schools under study lost more than 5 and 10 percent of their students, respectively, in the most recent year. Continued enrollment losses may lead to operational pressures for these schools.

This study uses enrollment information on brick-and-mortar traditional public and charter schools from the Common Core of Data of the National Center for Education Statistics between 2011–12 and 2022–23 to investigate enrollment declines by school size. Following Dee & Murphy (2021), schools are categorized by size in small (up to 330 students), medium (between 331 and 574 students), and large (more than 575 students) schools. The school size cutoffs reflect tertiles of school size in 2019–20. A school is assigned to a size category if its size falls within this category's range at least half of the years between 2011–12 and 2019–20. For each size category, the share of schools not experiencing any decline in a given three-year period is reported. The remainder of schools is then split in three categories of decline using tertile cutoffs from the enrollment change between 2019–20 and 2022–23.

Prior analyses have examined pandemic-related enrollment declines as percent changes from pre-pandemic enrollment levels. School characteristics though are associated with school size. For example, the preponderance of small schools are in rural locations. At the same time, most medium-sized schools are elementary schools. Charter schools are more often found in the small size category rather than among the medium-sized or large schools. Large percent change fluctuations however may be more likely

FIGURE 2

Enrollment declines of small schools (up to 330 students)



Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; author's calculations.

Note: Tertiles cutoffs of enrollment decline between 2019-20 and 2022-23 are used to determine decline categories. Horizontal range bars represent the range of the share of schools in a given enrollment declines category across all three-year windows between 2011-12 and 2019-20. Binomial tests were performed for the following null hypothesis: share of schools in decline category d ∈ [a, b], where a and b represent the minimum and maximum, respectively, of the historical range between 2011-12 and 2019–20 of the share of schools in decline category d. * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01.

among smaller schools than among larger schools because the percent change denominator is smaller for smaller than it is for larger schools. This suggests that the post-pandemic percent changes in enrollment of certain schools may be large because these schools were small even before COVID-19. To understand whether the post-pandemic enrollment change in each school is atypical relative to the pre-pandemic era, we must consider its pre-pandemic enrollment size. This study investigates the distribution of enrollment declines by pre-pandemic school size and provides historical benchmarks for each school size.

Enrollment declines of small schools (up to 330 students)

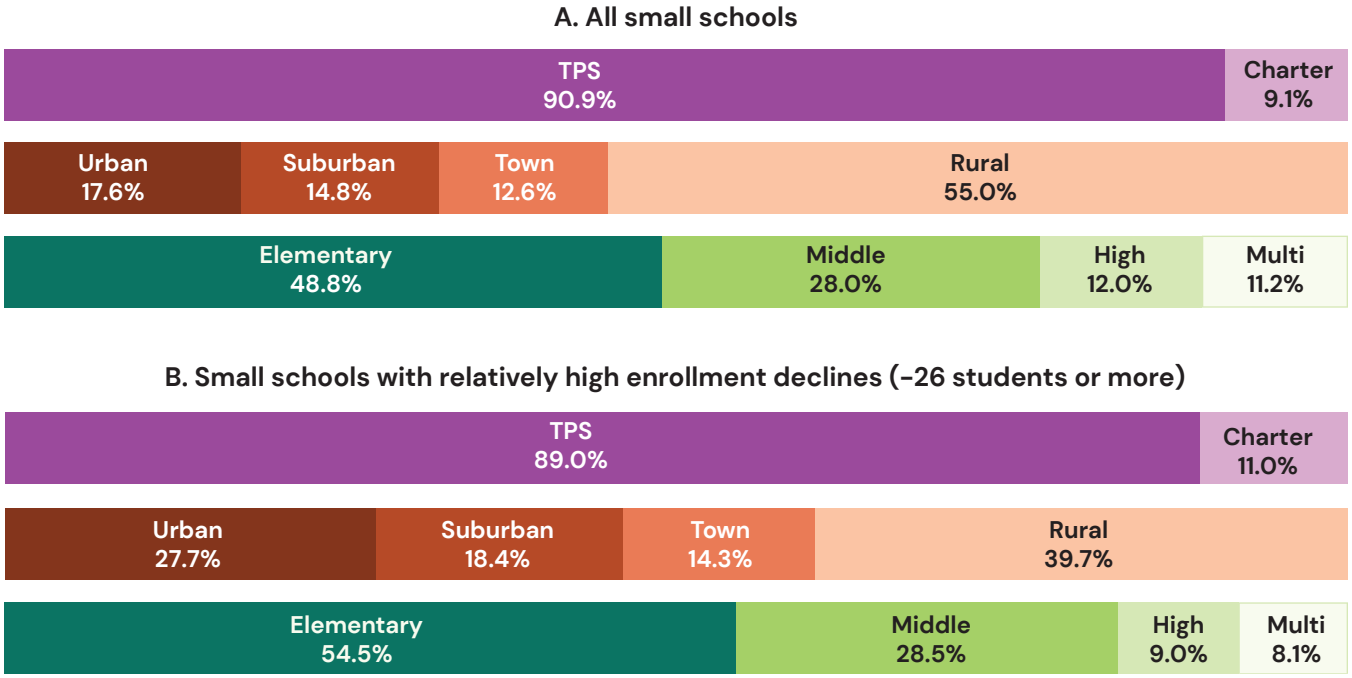
Panel A of figure 2 shows the distribution of enrollment count changes in the three-year period after COVID-19 (between 2019–20 and 2022–23) is relatively similar to the distribution of three-year enrollment count changes in the pre-COVID-19 period (i.e., across all three-year windows between 2011–12 and 2019–20). This suggests that the share of small schools that experience large enrollment losses after COVID-19 is not substantially different from the corresponding share prior to COVID-19.

When looking at tertiles of enrollment losses (panel B of figure 2), I find that approximately 59 percent of small schools saw their enrollment decline between 2019–20 and 2022–23. Roughly 21 percent of small schools lost 26 students or more between 2019–20 and 2022–23 (the top third of enrollment losses). This share is not statistically different from the range of corresponding shares from three-year periods prior to COVID-19 (between 16 and 20 percent).[1] At the same time, the share of small schools that experience

1. In an investigation of enrollment losses between 2019–20 and 2021–22, the share of small schools with relatively high enrollment declines was statistically significantly higher than the corresponding range of historical benchmarks. This indicates steps toward recovery from enrollment losses for small schools between 2021–22 and 2022–23.

FIGURE 3

Comparison of characteristics of all small schools and characteristics of small schools with relatively high enrollment declines



Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; author's calculations.

Note: A school is assigned to a size category if its size falls within this category's range at least half of the years between 2011–12 and 2019–20.

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no decline in the three-year period after COVID-19, 41 percent, is statistically lower than the range of corresponding shares from three-year periods prior to COVID-19 (between 44 and 47 percent). These results indicate that a large share of small schools experience relatively moderate changes in enrollment counts after COVID-19.

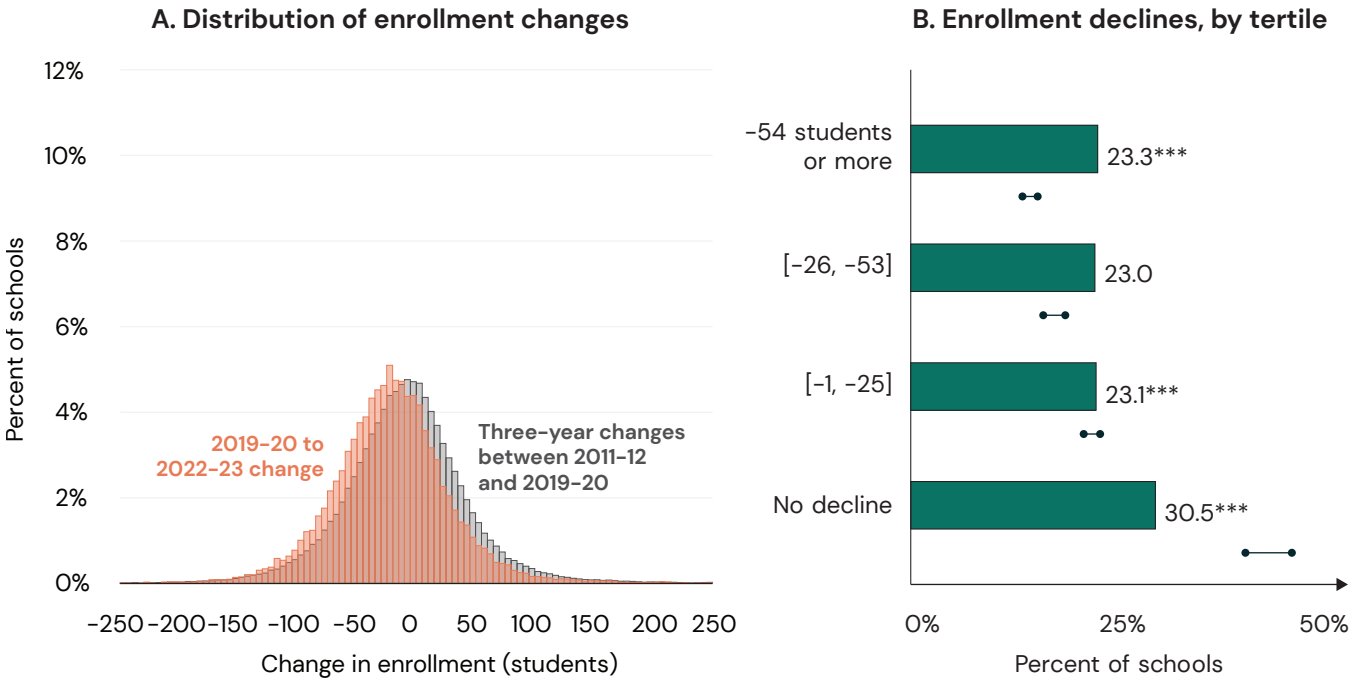
Figure 3 compares the characteristics of all small schools (i.e., schools with up to 330 students) with those of small schools in the top third of enrollment losses (i.e., those losing 26 students or more). Roughly 9 percent of all small schools are charters, while 45 percent of them are in non-rural locations. Charters and rural schools are more prevalent among small schools than among medium-sized or large schools. Charter schools, non-rural schools, elementary, and middle schools have a higher representation among small schools with high enrollment losses than among all small schools. This suggests that these types of schools become even smaller in the post-pandemic era.

Enrollment declines of medium-sized schools (331–574 students)

To understand how enrollment patterns differ after COVID-19 relative to prior to COVID-19, we compare the distribution of enrollment count changes between 2019–20 and 2022–23 to the distribution of three-year enrollment count changes between 2011–22 and 2019–20 in panel A of figure 4. I find that the entire distribution of enrollment changes of medium-sized schools shifted to the left after the COVID-19 pandemic. This indicates widespread enrollment losses for medium-sized schools after COVID-19, that are atypical to the corresponding pre-pandemic changes. Approximately 69 percent of medium-sized schools saw their enrollment decline between 2019–20 and 2022–23. Roughly 23 percent of medium-sized schools lost 54 students or more during the same period (panel B of figure 4). Across three-year changes before COVID-19 (between 2011–12 and 2019–20), the corresponding share ranged between 14 and 16 percent.

FIGURE 4

Enrollment declines of middle-sized schools (331–574 students)



Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; author's calculations.

Note: Tertiles cutoffs of enrollment decline between 2019-20 and 2022-23 are used to determine decline categories. Horizontal range bars represent the range of the share of schools in a given enrollment declines category across all three-year windows between 2011-12 and 2019-20. Binomial tests were performed for the following null hypothesis: share of schools in decline category d ∈ [a, b], where a and b represent the minimum and maximum, respectively, of the historical range between 2011-12 and 2019–20 of the share of schools in decline category d. * p < 0.1; ** p < 0.05; *** p < 0.01.

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Figure 5 compares the characteristics of all medium-sized schools to those of schools in the top third of enrollment losses (i.e., those losing 54 students or more). Less than five percent of medium-sized schools are charters. Sixty-five percent of medium-sized schools are roughly equally distributed across urban or suburban locations. Elementary schools more likely to be represented among medium-sized schools than among small or large schools (69 percent versus 49 and 45 percent, respectively). The share of certain types of medium-sized schools with relatively high enrollment losses exceeds their corresponding share across all medium-sized schools. Specifically, urban schools (43 vs. 32 percent), elementary schools (70 vs. 69 percent), and middle schools (24 vs. 20 percent) are overrepresented among medium-sized schools with relatively high enrollment losses.

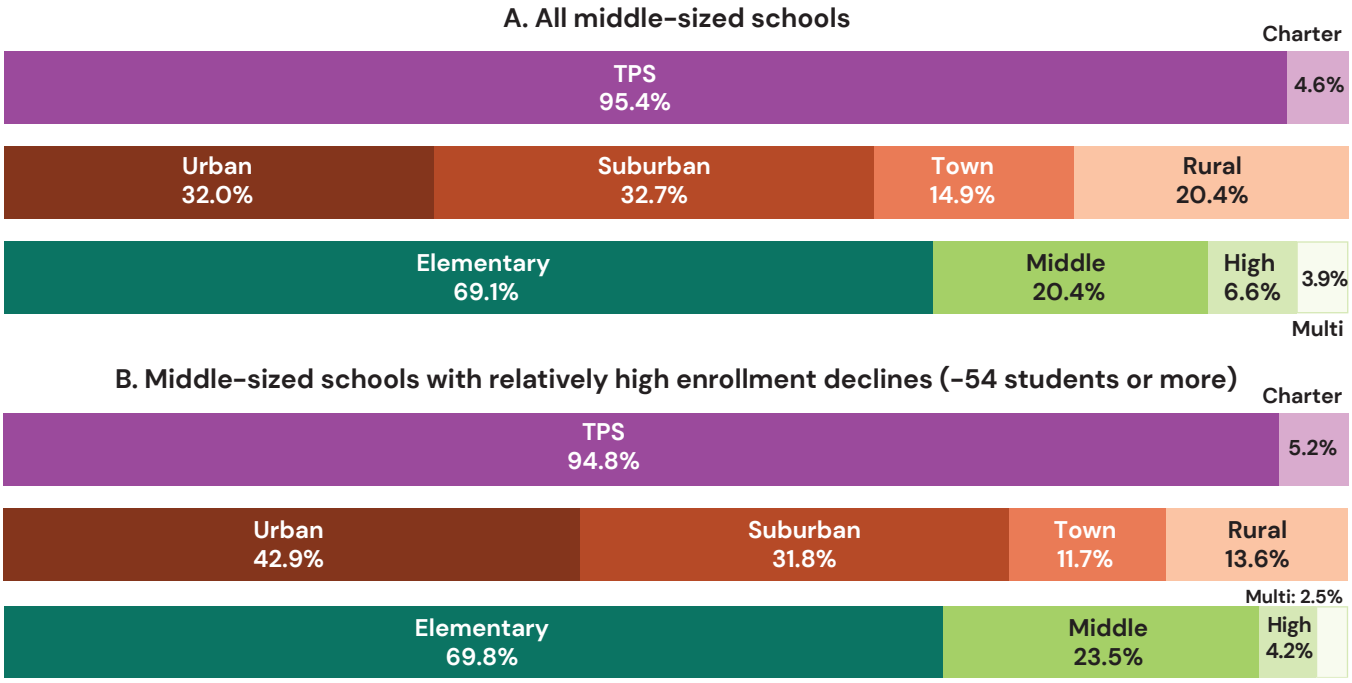
Enrollment declines of large schools (575 students or more)

Panel A of figure 6 compares the distribution of enrollment changes between 2019–20 and 2022–23 to the distribution of three-year changes prior to COVID-19. I find that the entire distribution of enrollment changes shifted to the left in the post-pandemic period. This suggests that more large schools experience meaningful enrollment losses after COVID-19. Roughly 69 percent of large schools experienced an enrollment decline between 2019–20 and 2022–23. In particular, between 2019–20 and 2022–23, approximately 23 percent of large schools experienced an enrollment decline of 96 students or more (panel B of figure 6). As a benchmark, the share of large schools that experiences such an enrollment loss over the course of three years prior to COVID-19 ranged between 10 and 14 percent.

Figure 7 compares the characteristics of all large schools to those large schools with relatively high

FIGURE 5

Comparison of characteristics of all middle-sized schools and characteristics of middle-sized schools with relatively high enrollment declines



Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; author's calculations.

Note: A school is assigned to a size category if its size falls within this category's range at least half of the years between 2011–12 and 2019–20.

enrollment losses (i.e., those losing 96 students or more). Nearly 45 percent of large schools are in suburban locations. Suburban schools are more common among large schools than among small or medium-sized schools. Charter schools have a roughly balanced representation among large schools and large schools with relatively high enrollment losses. Large schools in urban locations are overrepresented among large schools with relatively high enrollment losses. Roughly 35 percent of large schools are in urban locales, but approximately 45 percent of large schools with relatively high losses are in urban locales. Large middle schools are also more likely to suffer substantial enrollment losses relative to large schools that serve other grade levels. Roughly 33 percent of large schools are middle schools, while approximately 39 percent of large schools with relatively high enrollment losses (i.e., those losing 96 students or more) are middle schools.

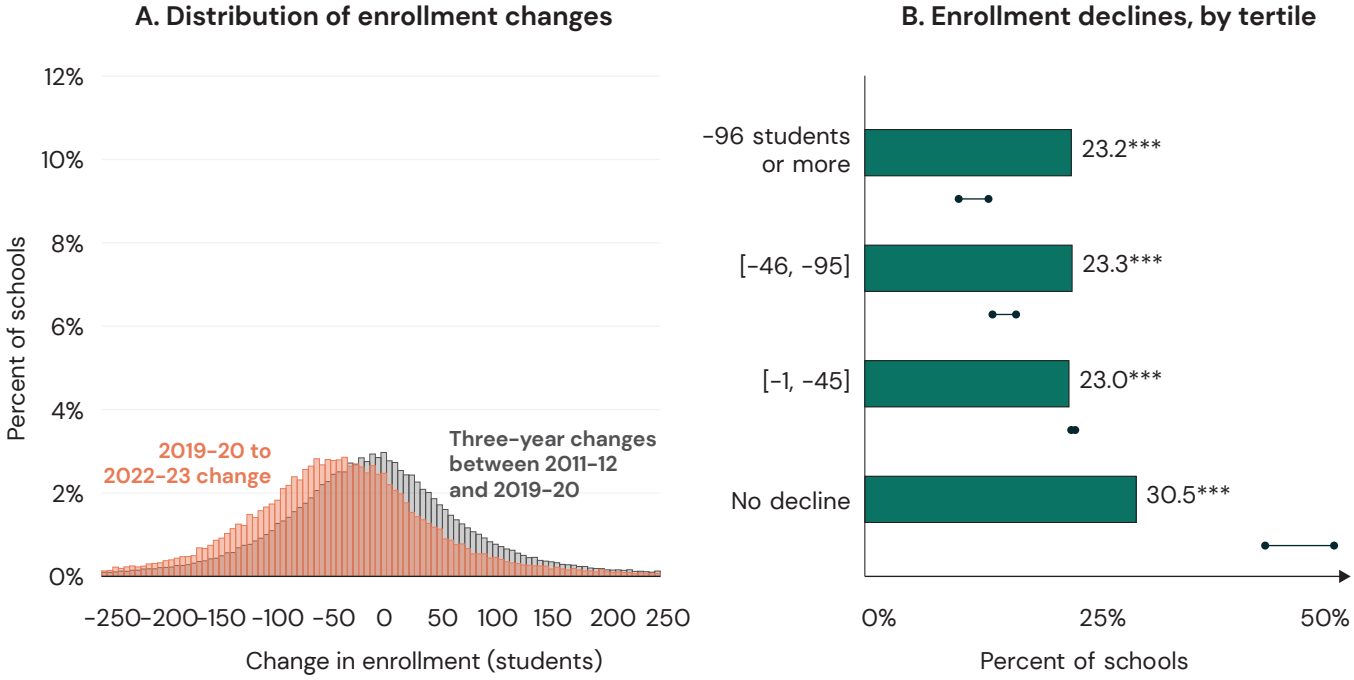
Taken together, the results show that urban schools and middle schools across size categories are more likely to experience substantial enrollment losses in the post-pandemic period. These findings might suggest that there may be alternatives to public schools for students in middle school grades or that families are willing to pursue these alternatives when their child is in middle school. Moreover, middle-school-grade children and families in urban locations may be more likely to consider alternative schooling arrangements or dropping out than those in rural locales. While brick-and-mortar charter schools, which are more likely to be smaller, are overrepresented among small schools with relatively high enrollment declines, figure 1 shows that the charter sector is growing. This is consistent with an increase in the number of charter schools after COVID-19.

Conclusion

The newly released enrollment data from the National Center on Education Statistics for the 2022–23 school year provide signs of enrollment recovery. In 2022–23,

FIGURE 6

Enrollment declines of large schools (575 or more students)



Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; author's calculations.

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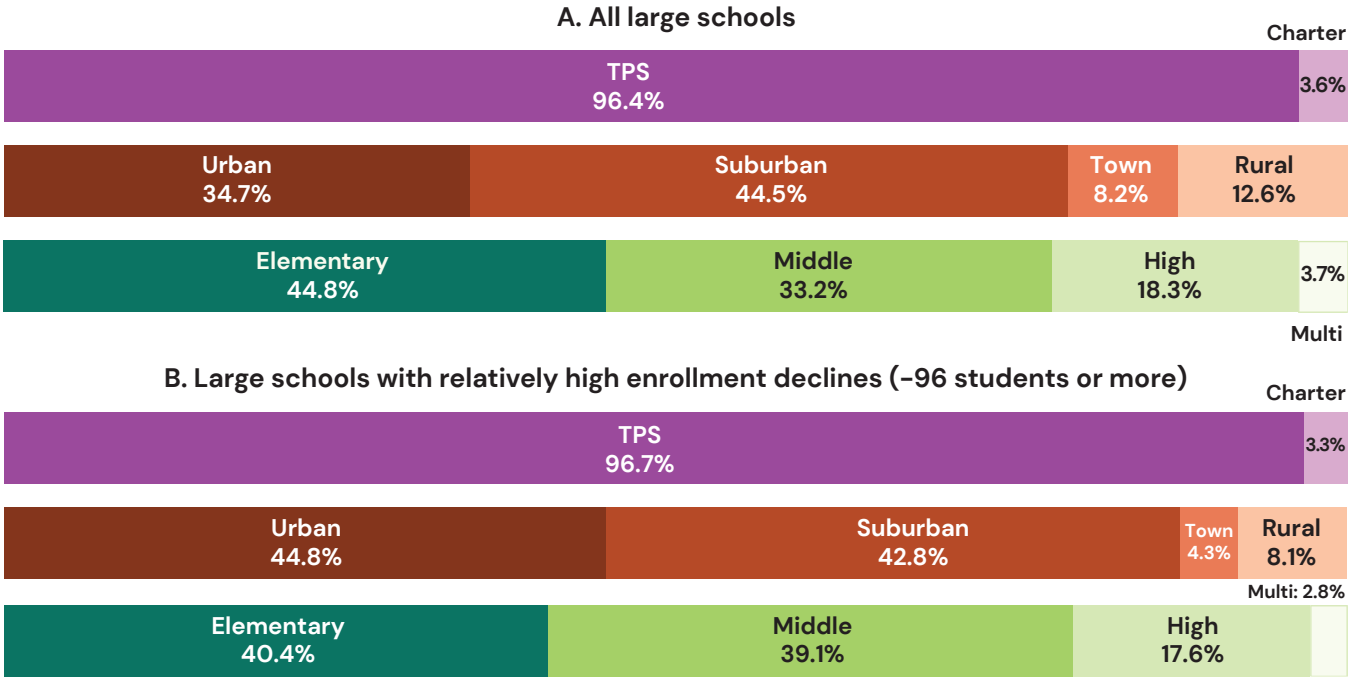
the share of school-age children in traditional public schools gained back one out of 5 percentage points it lost between 2019–20 and 2021–22. Between 2021–22 and 2022–23, 52 percent of schools either held steady or saw enrollment gains. At the same time, many public schools continue to show pandemic-related declines in school enrollment in the most recently released data. Declining school enrollment is important for two reasons. First, the results suggest a substantial departure of school-age children in urban communities from public schools. It is possible that some of these children may have dropped out or are educated at home. With minimal reporting, oversight, and testing requirements, it is uncertain whether homeschooling will produce academic and career outcomes on par with those achieved through the public school system.

Second, because federal and state financial aid to public schools is typically proportional to student enrollment while costs are rather fixed, enrollment declines may threaten some schools' financial and operational sustainability. Schools with declining enrollment may have to lay off teachers or close. School closures may disrupt students' learning journey and cause distress to families (Han et al. 2017; Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles 2019). Even before school closure though, weak student enrollment may require operational and instructional adjustments as schools might have personnel redundancies and tight fiscal room after teachers are paid.

The dwindling student counts in some schools signal opportunities to strengthen community and school supports. This study documents the wide variation in enrollment declines across schools and their distributional shift during COVID-19 relative to prior benchmarks. As the composition of factors driving enrollment declines may differ across communities, these declines cannot be addressed by one-size-fits-all policies.

FIGURE 7

Comparison of characteristics of all large schools and characteristics of large schools with relatively high enrollment declines



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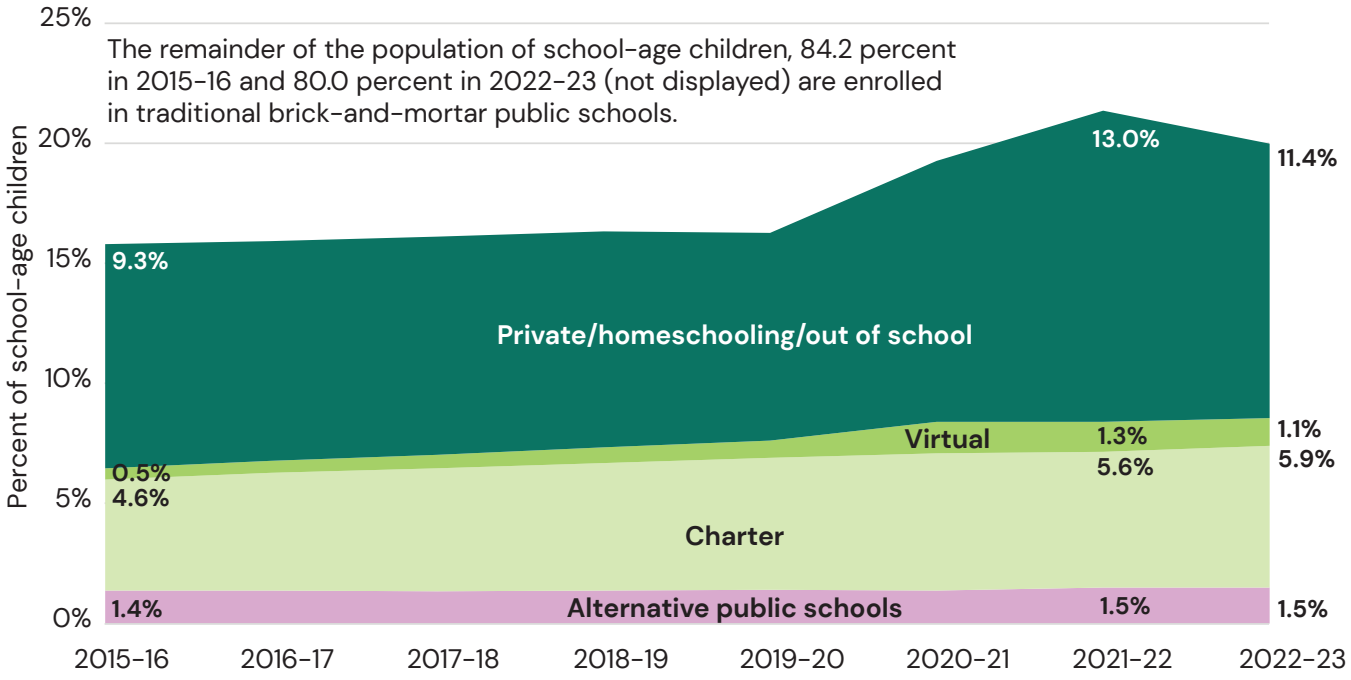
Evolution of the share of students out of traditional public schools, 2015-16 to 2022–23



Source: Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics n.d.; Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau 2015–23; author's calculations.

Note: The remainder of the population of school-age children not displayed in this figure are enrolled in traditional brick- and-mortar public schools (84.2 percent in 2015–16 and 80.0 percent in 2022–23). For 2022–23, our dataset captures 81,357 brick-and-mortar traditional public schools (TPS), 6,892 brick-and-mortar charter schools, 1,159 virtual public schools, and 5,890 alternative brick-and-mortar public schools. Schools classified in the Common Core of Data as full, primarily, or exclusively virtual were identified as virtual.

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