

Suburban enrollment recovers from slump

It is a different story for the Rochester City School District

CORONAVIRUS IN NY SCHOOLS

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A year after seeing kindergarten enrollment plummet due to COVID-19, Rochester-area suburban schools have mostly regained their losses.

Kindergarten enrollment fell 10% in the fall of 2020 but then gained 10% in the fall of 2021. Across the Monroe County suburbs, there are just 56 fewer kindergarteners this year than there were in 2019.

It also appears that many of those missing kindergarteners in 2020 have made their way back to public school districts for first grade in 2021. This year's first grade class has nearly 700 more students than last year's kindergarten class, a jump of 10% across the county.

The news is worse in the Rochester City School District. There, kindergarten enrollment fell by 36% last year and increased by only 9% this year, representing a decrease of nearly 600 students in the cohort since 2019.

The data comes from a Democrat and Chronicle analysis of enrollment data for the first week of school, obtained in 2020 and 2021 from all Rochester-area districts via a Freedom of Information request.

Broadly, K-12 enrollment in suburban schools has continued a gradual decline, mirroring the decline in the county birth rate. Overall, though, the data represent a disaster averted. Some school leaders feared last year that the drop in student enrollment would prove permanent.

Suburban differences

The trends differ in some specifics across districts. East Irondequoit and Greece, for instance, have seen kindergarten enrollment remain low in 2021, while

Gates Chili and Pittsford saw double-digit percent gains from 2019 to 2021.

The most jarring change came in Brighton, where kindergarten enrollment dropped from 187 in 2019 to 132 in 2020, only to rebound to 200 in 2021. That was driven not only by the pandemic but also by the district introducing full-day kindergarten for the first time this year; one of the last districts in the state to do so.

Dalit Havis Spindel was one of many Brighton parents to send their 5-year-



Kamora Porchea, first grader, walks into School 45 in Rochester with her father, Jermi, on Sept. 9. It was the first day for the city as well as a few other area school districts. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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Lesli Myers-Small RCSD superintendent

old elsewhere last year, only to return to Brighton for first grade in 2021. In her case, the combination of half-day kindergarten and hybrid learning due to COVID-19 was untenable.

“It was going to be half a day, half a week (in person) and the rest remote,” she said. “How can a student who is learning how to learn, be able to do that?”

Instead she enrolled her daughter in the JCC’s full-day kindergarten program, as she had done for her older son before.

This year her daughter is in first grade at Council Rock Primary School.

“One of the reasons I moved to Brighton was the school district — so as long as they’re back full-time in person — that was the right decision for us,” Havis Spindel said.

RCSD, meanwhile, has seen steady enrollment declines since the 1970s — but now faces a much steeper descent, at least in the lower grades.

Overall the district reported 21,257 students in September 2021, down more than 4,000 from 2019.

RCSD Superintendent Lesli Myers-Small is working on plans to simultaneously address falling enrollment, inefficient transportation and lagging student achievement in many buildings.

“They’re interdependent on one another, so we have to talk about them all at once,” Myers-Small said.

“It’s a lot at times ... but if we’re going to do this well, we have to take it all into consideration.”

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