



NAVIGATING DECLINING ENROLLMENT

How smarter state policies can help
schools thrive

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schools thrive**

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Introduction

Declining student enrollment poses unique challenges for school districts. It increases budget pressures in our already-underfunded public schools. As pressures from declining enrollments grow, districts will increasingly face difficult decisions whether to close schools, which may harm local communities.

Despite North Carolina's growing population, most school districts are experiencing enrollment loss. These trends—and the associated challenges—are partly due to demographic shifts. But they are also the product of state-level policy decisions. Both factors indicate that declining enrollment will be an increasingly significant issue facing our public schools over the coming years.

This report seeks to explore the causes of declining enrollment in North Carolina's traditional public schools. It documents which counties are facing the greatest challenges due to declining enrollment. It provides state leaders with policy recommendations to help stem the tide of declining enrollment and to better assist school districts. Finally, the report seeks to help local school leaders navigate how to minimize the harm from school closures.

Declining enrollment will never be easy to navigate. However, many of the challenges we are facing are the result of deliberate policy choices. With better investments and policies, we can help reverse these trends, or at the very least, minimize their negative impacts on students.



How declining enrollment challenges school districts

Declining enrollment is one of the more difficult challenges facing public schools. Across the country, public school enrollment has declined by 1 million students (2 percent) between fall 2014 and fall 2023.¹

North Carolina's traditional public schools have also faced declining enrollment in recent years, even though the state's population continues to grow. Public school enrollment peaked in the 2020-21 school year with 1,560,710 students. Since then, enrollment has dropped by 2.5 percent.² The decline has been even greater in traditional public schools (i.e., excluding charter and lab schools[◇]). In traditional public schools, enrollment has fallen nearly 6 percent from its peak in the 2014-15 school year.³ There is no indication that these trends will change anytime soon.

There are two ways in which declining enrollment raises the per-student cost of running a school district. The first is due to schools' **fixed costs**—those expenditures that remain constant even when enrollment changes. The second way is through **cropping and creaming**—the tendency for public schools to see relatively advantaged students leave the public school sector, leaving behind a student body with greater challenges and, therefore, greater costs.

- **Fixed costs:** When a student leaves a school, the school loses the state funding associated with that student. That funding includes per-student amounts for fixed costs such as central office support and building maintenance. Even personnel costs such as principals, librarians, nurses, and teachers are essentially “fixed costs” when just a handful of students leave a school.
- **Cropping and creaming:** Declining enrollment can put further pressure on school finances if the students who leave are more advantaged than the typical student. Many “schools of choice” such as private schools and charter schools lack the capacity (or willingness) to enroll the most disadvantaged students. When such schools enroll students with disabilities, or students from families with low incomes, the students enrolled are generally those who are just on the cusp of qualifying for these categories. These phenomena, known as **cropping and creaming**, leaves the public schools with higher per-student costs and less funding with which to address their needs.⁴

Additionally, budget pressures might be heightened if schools respond to increased competition by **increasing expenditures on marketing**. Every dollar spent on marketing is one less dollar spent on students. Marketing campaigns often provide families with biased or dishonest information that undermines the market-based arguments for school choice that allow parents to make decisions based on sound information.

Declining enrollment can **also undermine community and harm student achievement**. When declining enrollment leads to school closures, communities can lose a sense of identity and an important local asset. Property values may decline. Abandoned schools can contribute to local blight, if left unused. Student performance generally falls.

Finally, declining enrollment can **undermine public support for public schools**. As the number of students attending public schools declines, fewer voters are directly connected to public schools

◇ Lab schools are schools operated by a university partner and operated with the flexibility granted to charter schools.

and therefore might be less likely to support using tax dollars to support public schools. This can be especially true if declining enrollment in public schools is a result of students exiting the public school system for charter schools, private schools, or home schools.

The negative impacts of declining enrollment make it vital that policymakers avoid policies that increase the likelihood of enrollment declines. Students and communities are more likely to thrive when strong public schools attract a growing share of the school-aged population.

Enrollment trends

Unfortunately, North Carolina General Assembly policies are actively driving declining public school enrollments. These policies are creating budget pressures and contributing to school closures across the state.

As shown in **Figure 1**, enrollment in North Carolina’s public schools—as measured by average daily membership (ADM)—increased steadily from the 1990s through the late 2000s. Over this period, public school enrollment grew by 1.8 percent per year.

ADM dipped during the 2009-10 school year, coinciding with the Great Recession. Growth returned, but at a slower rate, increasing just 0.6 percent per year through the 2010s. After total public school enrollment peaked in the 2020-21 school year, public school ADM has fallen 2.5 percent.

While total public school enrollment increased through the 2010s, the increases in the latter half of the decade were largely driven by the charter school sector.

Enrollment in traditional public schools peaked in the 2015-16 school year. Since then, enrollment in North Carolina’s traditional public schools has declined by 85,453 students (5.9 percent). Most of our traditional public school districts have been managing the challenges associated with declining enrollment for almost a decade.

In contrast, charter school enrollment grew rapidly in the latter half of the 2010s. Since the 2015-16 school year, charter enrollment grew

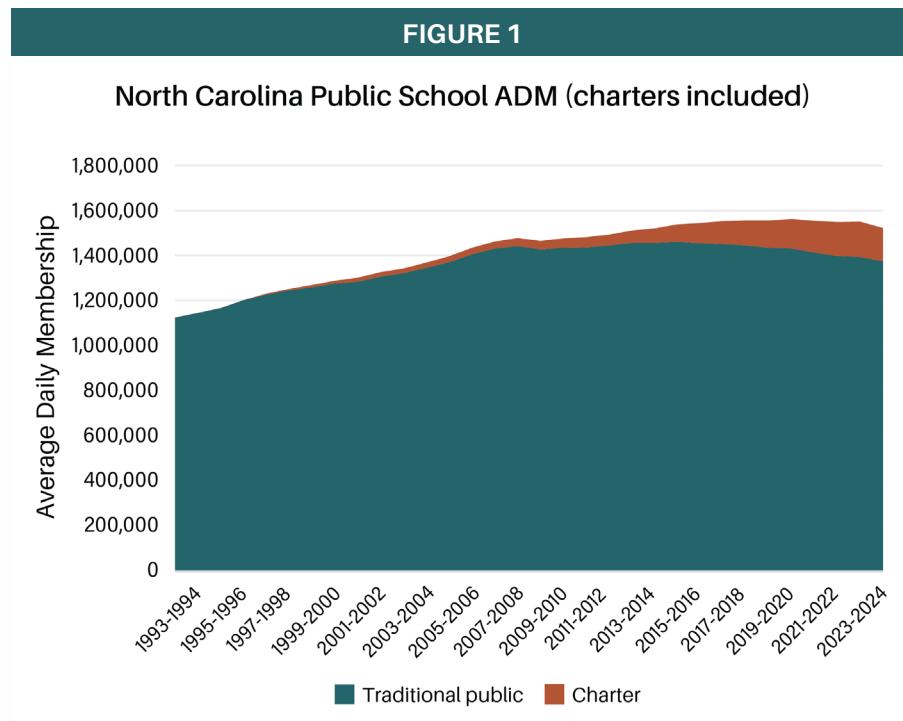
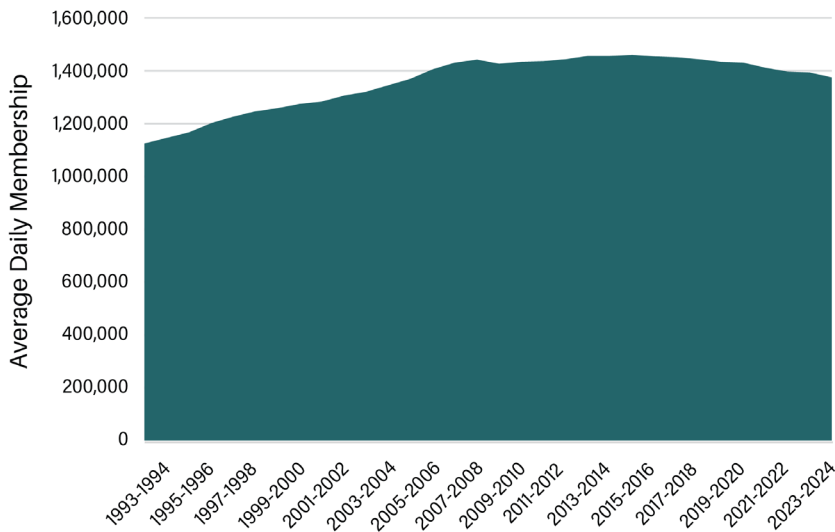


FIGURE 2

North Carolina Traditional Public School ADM



by 69,818 students (89.8 percent). North Carolina's charter sector experienced its first year-over-year enrollment decline in this most recent 2024-25 school year.

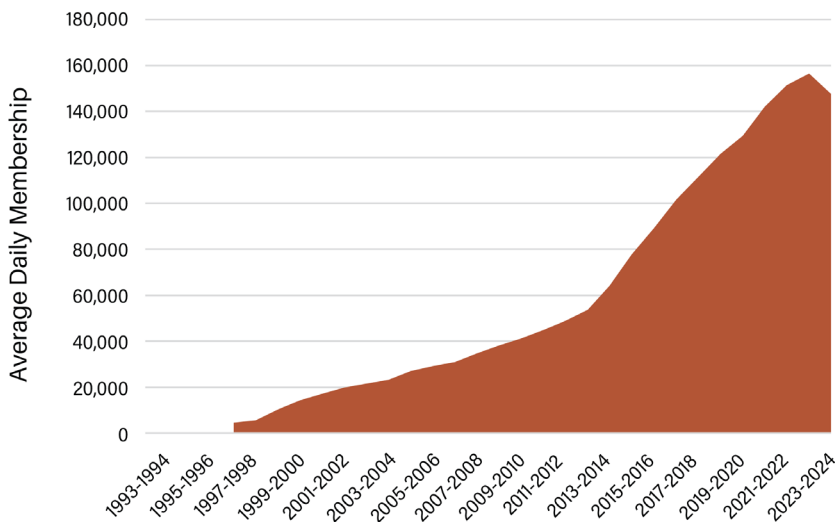
Of course, public schools aren't the only schooling option. Students might enroll in a private school or they might be homeschooled. The data on these sectors is far less reliable than public school data. However, the data indicates large increases in the non-public schooling sector. Over the past 10 years for which data is available, reported enrollment in the non-public schooling sector has increased by nearly 95,000 students, an increase of 49 percent. Over this same period, public school enrollment increased just 2.6 percent.

Overall, the number of students in North Carolina in all sectors has generally grown through the 1990s and 2000s. The pace of growth slowed in the 2010s. And overall school enrollment has fallen since the COVID pandemic.

Over this same period, the share of students in our traditional public schools

FIGURE 3

North Carolina Charter School ADM



has fallen. Over the 30-year period since 1993-94, the share of North Carolina students attending traditional, inclusive public schools has fallen from 94 percent to 76 percent.

NC General Assembly policies are contributing to declining enrollment

Declining enrollment in traditional, inclusive public schools is a result of intentional policy decisions from NC General Assembly lawmakers and demographic trends.

■ Lack of support for pro-family policies

First, North Carolinians are having fewer children. Since 2007, the number of births per 1,000 residents has fallen from 14.4 births to 11.4 births. This decrease in the birth rate means that without in-migration North Carolina's population will begin to decline. While this decrease in North Carolina has largely mirrored national trends, there are many policies North Carolina lawmakers could adopt to help increase birthrates.⁵ For example, more generous family leave policies can help parents balance the responsibilities of work and family. Other policies can reduce the costs of childbearing and childrearing such as child tax credits or grants, and subsidies for childcare.⁶ General Assembly leaders have almost entirely ignored such policies, thereby contributing to declining public school enrollment.

FIGURE 4

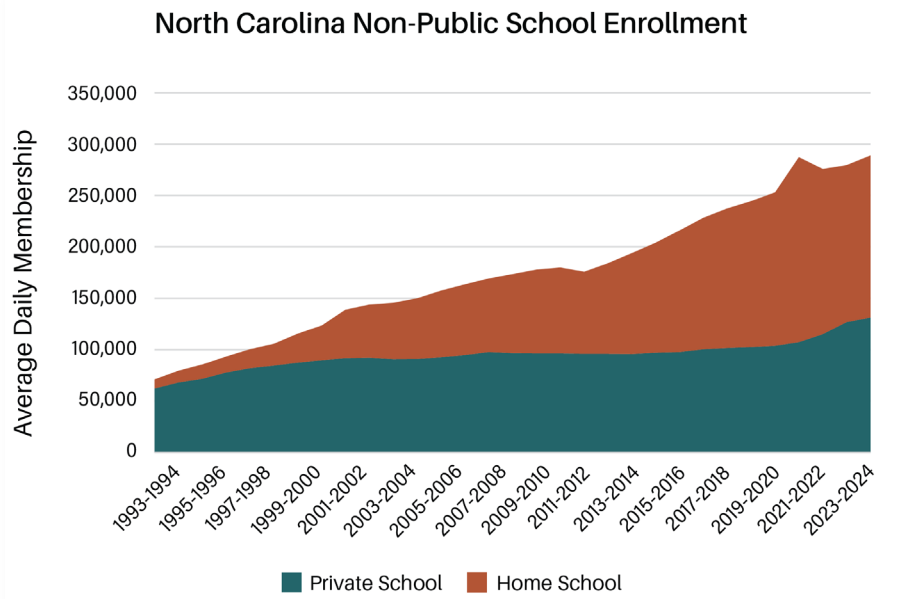
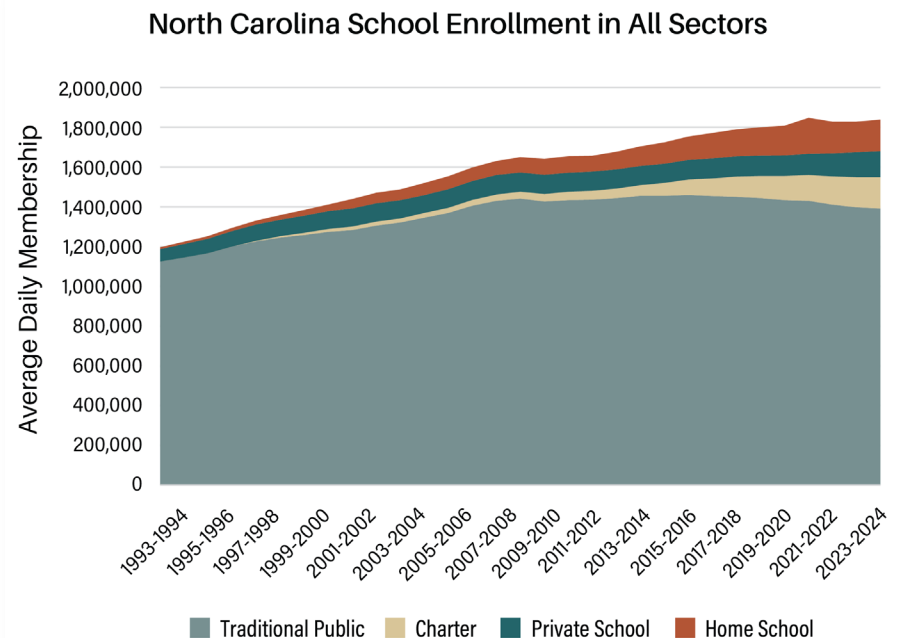


FIGURE 5



■ Rapid expansion of charter schools and vouchers

General Assembly leaders have contributed to declining public school enrollment more directly through their embrace of so-called school choice policies. The rapid expansion of charter schools and private school vouchers has directly reduced enrollment in traditional public schools.

Since traditional public school enrollment peaked in the 2015-16 school year, enrollment has fallen by 66,541 students. Over this same period, enrollment in charter, private, and home schools rose by 151,573 students.

■ Charter Schools:

Prior to 2011, North Carolina limited the number of charter schools to 100, since charter schools were originally

conceived as laboratories for innovation. Innovative learning models were intended to create models that could then be adopted and scaled up by the traditional public school system. In 2011, legislative leaders abandoned this concept, hoping instead that increased competition between the traditional and charter sectors would spur improved performance.⁷ However, the nearly four-fold increase in charter enrollment has coincided with a period of stagnating test scores, partly driven by the underperformance of charter schools. As **Figure 7** shows, traditional public schools have been more likely to meet academic growth goals than schools in the charter sector over the past several years.

North Carolina lawmakers generally refuse to consider how approval of new charter schools will impact traditional public schools. At one point, school districts were permitted to submit impact statements that the State Board could consider when determining whether to permit the opening of a new charter school. Now, authority to approve new charter schools has been given to a more charter-friendly Charter School Review Board. Legislators have precluded the Review Board from considering charter schools' impact on traditional public schools.⁸ Without such guardrails, charter schools are often approved in areas of declining population and play a large role in contributing to harmful public school closures.⁹

- **Private school vouchers:** Beginning with the 2014-15 school year, North Carolina began providing students qualifying for the federal free or reduced lunch program with vouchers

FIGURE 6

Enrollment Changes by Sector 2015-16 to 2023-24

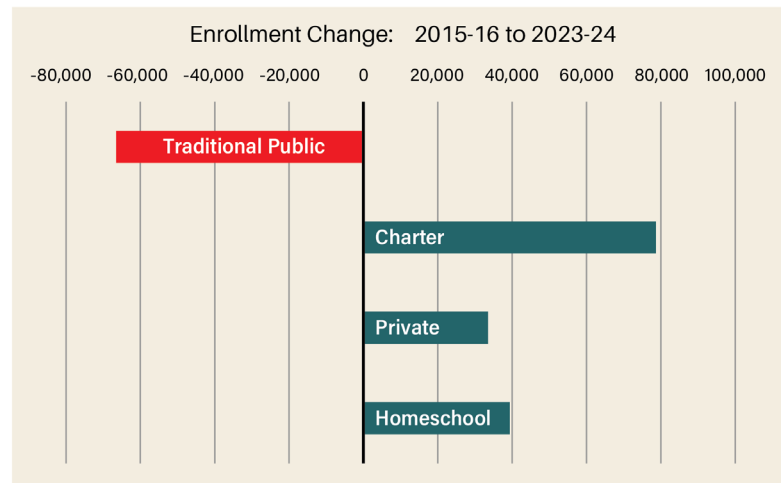


FIGURE 7

Percentage of NC schools meeting or exceeding expected annual growth

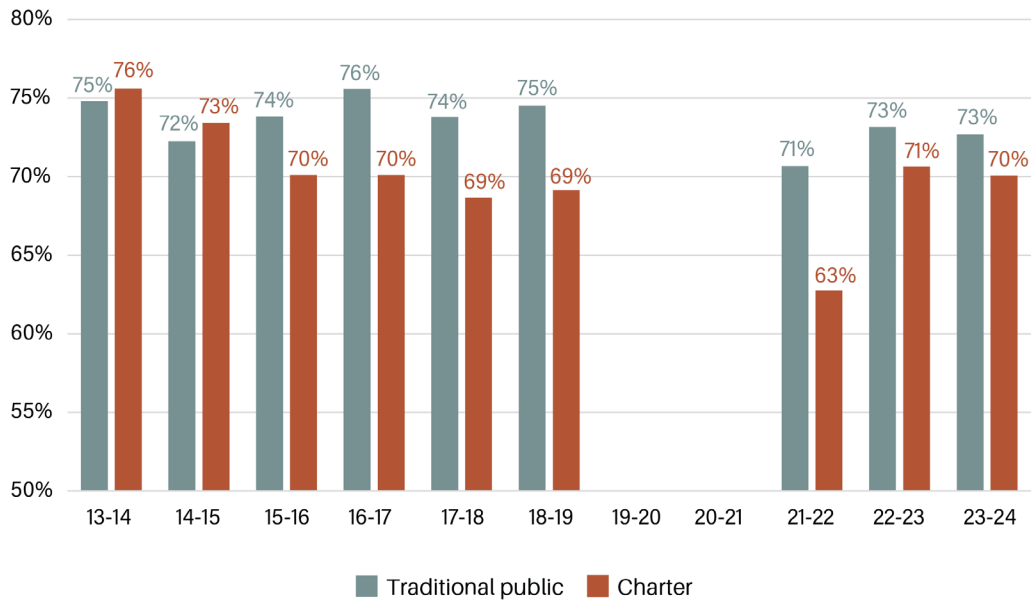
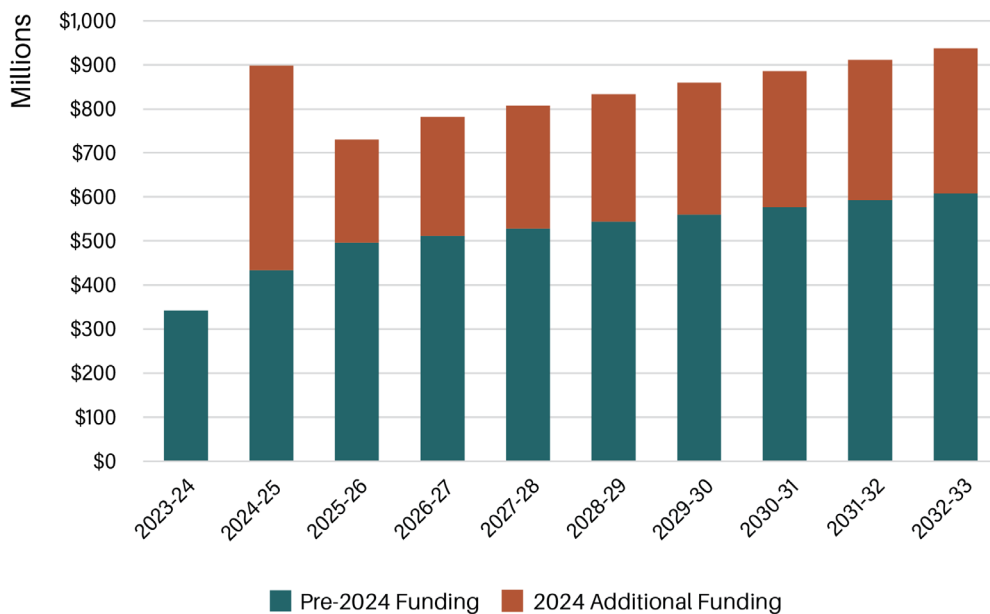


FIGURE 8

Voucher appropriations



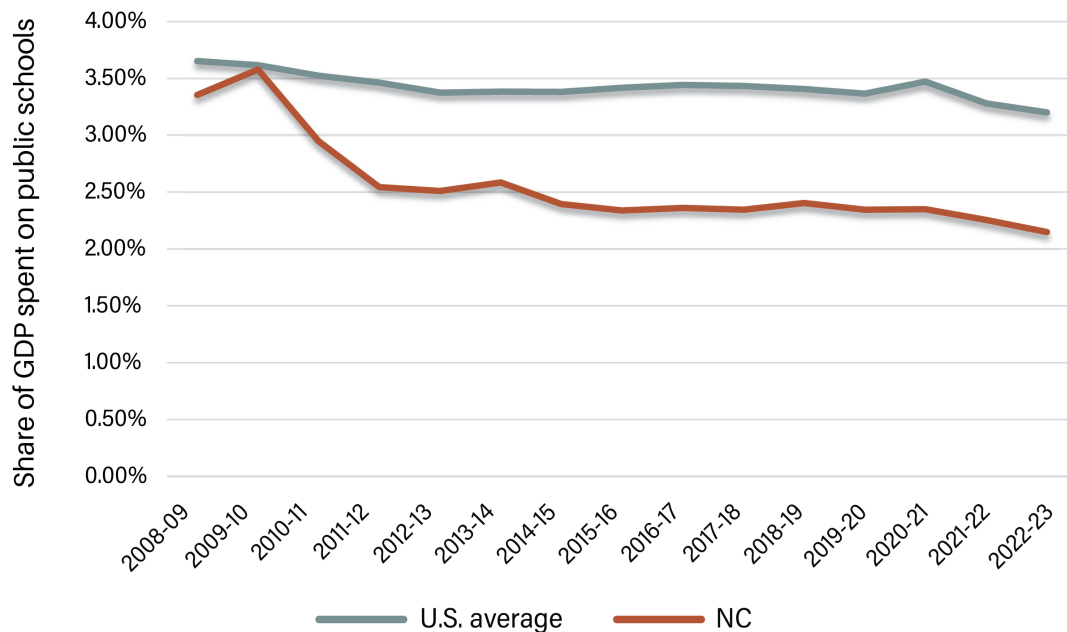
to attend private schools. By the 2024 school year, private school enrollment had grown by 35,462 students. The state provided 36,115 private school vouchers that year.[◆] In 2023, the General Assembly ramped up its commitment to subsidizing the private school sector by opening eligibility for the Opportunity Scholarship voucher program to high-wealth families who are already enrolled in private schools. Additionally, the state's two voucher programs are the only educational programs with guaranteed funding increases over the coming years. Appropriations for North Carolina's voucher programs are projected to increase to \$938 million per year by the 2032-33 fiscal year. Voucher programs' contribution to declining enrollment is just one way that these programs harm traditional, inclusive public schools. For more information on the harms created by voucher programs, see the NC Justice Center report, "[How Voucher Programs Undermine the Education Landscape in North Carolina](#)."¹⁰

■ Unconstitutionally low school spending

Thirty one years ago, students in five school districts sued the state for failing to meet its constitutional obligations to ensure that all students have access to "a sound basic education" as part of the Leandro court case. Over the ensuing three decades, the courts have consistently found that state lawmakers

FIGURE 9

North Carolina's school funding effort vs national average, 2008-09 to 2022-23



◆ North Carolina has two voucher programs. In 2023-24, the state issued Opportunity Scholarships to 32,549 students and the ESA+ to 3,566 students. Following the elimination of income limits, awards grew to 80,472 and 4,911, respectively. Students can qualify for both scholarships, the total number of students receiving scholarships may be smaller than the total number of vouchers awarded.

are failing to meet this constitutional obligation. State lawmakers are refusing to provide students with the educational resources that they are guaranteed under our state constitution. Despite these rulings, lawmakers continue to pass austerity budgets that move us further away from meeting their constitutional obligations to students.

The statistics clearly show the inadequacy of North Carolina's public school funding:

- When adjusting for school inflation, per-student state funding is down 3.8 percent from 2008-09.
- In 2008-09, North Carolina's average teacher salary was 11 percent below the U.S. average. For the 2024-25 school year, average teacher pay is 19 percent below the national average.¹¹
- In 2008-09 national average per-pupil spending was 18 percent higher than per-pupil spending in North Carolina; in the 2024-25 school year, it's 20 percent higher.¹²
- North Carolina's school funding effort (total education spending as a share of the state economy) has fallen from 42nd in 2008 to 50th in 2023.¹³
- If North Carolina had increased its funding effort to the national average, FY 2021-23 spending would have been \$7.7 billion (49 percent) above actual levels.¹⁴
- 96 percent of North Carolina public school students attend inadequately funded districts, the third-worst percentage in the nation.¹⁵
- State-funded school personnel per student has fallen 6 percent since 2008-09. This includes a 5 percent decrease in teacher staffing levels and a 29 percent decrease in staffing for teacher assistants.¹⁶

These statistics helped leading national researchers conclude that legislative actions through the 2010s left our state “further away from meeting its constitutional obligation to provide every child with the opportunity for a sound basic education than it was when the Supreme Court of North Carolina issued the Leandro decision more than 20 years ago.”¹⁷

The intentional and unconstitutional underfunding of North Carolina's public schools makes it more difficult to ensure that all schools can provide safe, welcoming, and engaging learning environments. The lack of investment is undoubtedly playing a role in parental decisions to explore alternative schooling options and driving down enrollment.

■ Negligence on students' mental health

Surveys indicate that student mental health and academic performance are the leading reasons for families exiting the traditional public school sector.¹⁸

Legislative leaders have left mental health professionals dramatically underfunded in North Carolina's public schools. As part of the Leandro case, the courts determined that the state needed to nearly triple its investment in support staff such as school psychologists, counselors, and social workers to meet recommended staffing levels. Despite having ample revenue to make such investments, legislators have largely neglected much needed investments to support student mental health.

Declining academic performance

Current legislative leadership has also overseen a decline in North Carolina's academic performance. Prior to the 2011 change in legislative leadership, North Carolina students achieved scores above the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading tests. By 2022, North Carolina's scores had fallen at or below the national average. These results are consistent with the robust literature documenting how disinvestment leads to declining academic outcomes.¹⁹

Intentional campaigns to undermine trust in schools

State leaders have also contributed to declining enrollments by participating in campaigns to intentionally undermine public support for public schools. These efforts have taken two forms. First, state leaders have used A-F school performance grades (SPGs) to intentionally stigmatize schools; particularly those serving students of color and students from families with low incomes. Second, state leaders have fanned the flames of fabricated moral panics designed to undermine support for public schools.

The A-F SPGs were introduced in the 2013-14 school year, using a formula where 80 percent of each school's grade is based on achievement (the percentage of students passing state exams) and 20 percent on growth (a complex statistical measure that attempts to quantify how much a student has learned in a year, given a student's prior test scores). Both of these measures, but especially

FIGURE 10a

4th Grade Math

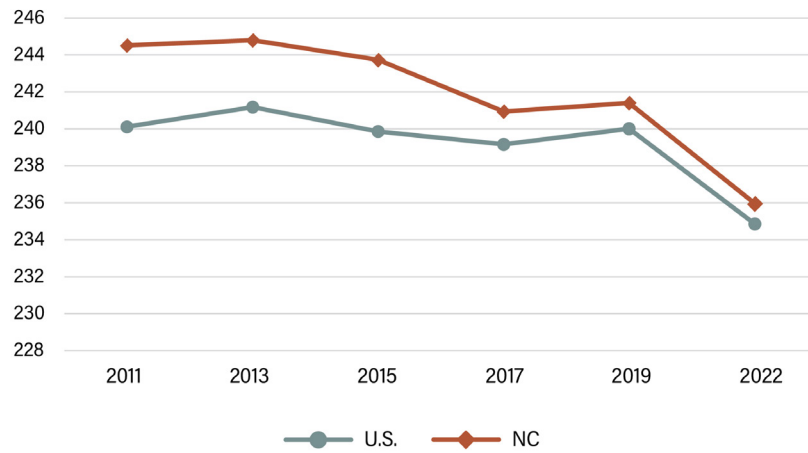


FIGURE 10b

4th Grade Reading

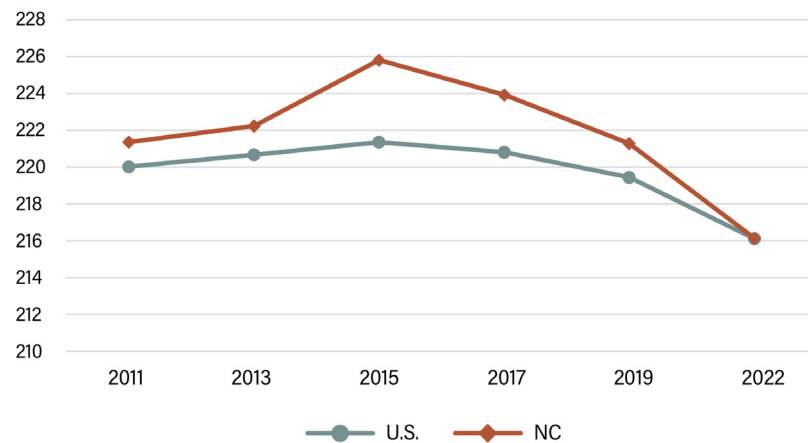
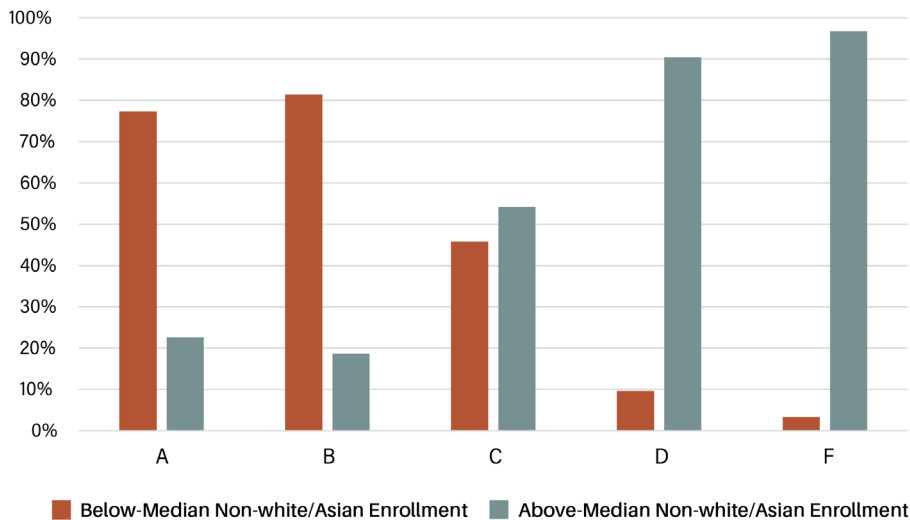


FIGURE 11

School Performance Grades by non-White, non-Asian Enrollment



achievement, are highly correlated with student demographics. As a result, schools with larger populations of students of color or students from families with low incomes are overwhelmingly the schools receiving D or F grades.

Since the inception of North Carolina's A-F SPG system, lawmakers have been aware of the relationship between SPGs and student demographics. Nevertheless,

lawmakers have made no efforts to use SPGs to target resources or implement school improvement strategies that would meaningfully benefit students of color or students from families with low incomes. At the same time, lawmakers have resisted any reforms to the system that they know stigmatizes schools based on student demographics.

North Carolina lawmakers have also participated in moral panics targeting public schools. Reactionary activists such as Chris Rufo of the Manhattan Institute and Chaya Raichik (owner of the social media account "Libs of Tik Tok") have led moral panics about the teaching of racial issues and sexual identity with the expressed purpose of undermining freedom of speech and inclusive public schools.²⁰

Rufo admitted that he intentionally twisted and misrepresented critical race theory (CRT) to sow distrust in public institutions, notably public schools.²¹ In 2021, Rufo told a New York Times columnist that he planned to exploit the antipathy he created by misrepresenting CRT to implement "a strategy of laying siege to the institutions," most notably public schools.²² As he later explained "to get universal school choice you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust."²³

Raichik, has used her large social media following to direct harassment campaigns against LGBTQ+ educators and their allies, particularly on issues related to transgender students. National antigovernment extremist group, Moms for Liberty, has created chapters across the country to carry both of these moral panics into local school board meetings and elections.²⁴

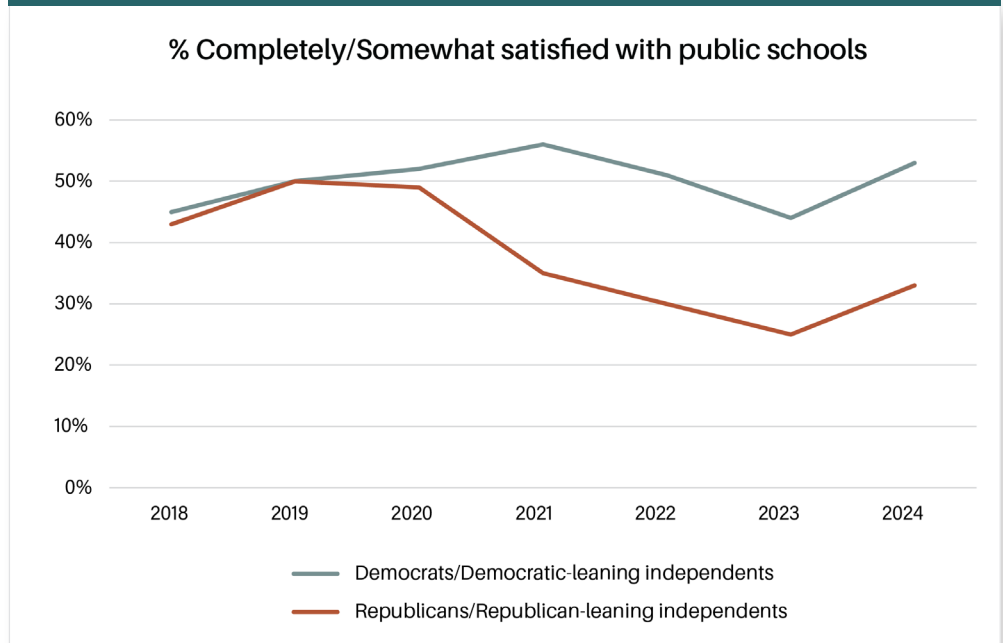
One recent study estimated that these racist and transphobic moral panics have cost school boards \$3.2 billion in the 2023-24 school year alone.²⁵

North Carolina lawmakers have hopped aboard these divisive efforts. Lt. Governor Mark Robinson

created what he called the FACTS Commission, creating a tip line for evidence of teachers “indoctrinating” their students. It failed to gather any credible evidence. NC Representatives Torbett, Blackwell, Willis, and Wheatley sponsored HB 187 to bar teachers from promoting certain poorly-defined concepts associated with the racist CRT moral panic. NC Senators Galey, Lee, and Barnes sponsored SB 49, targeting transgender students. Superintendent of Public Schools, Catherine Truitt engaged in both moral panics, telling Republicans that eliminating CRT was her “number one priority” and campaigning on prohibiting transgender girls from participating in school sports.

These efforts have led to sharp partisan divides in reported satisfaction with public schools.²⁶

FIGURE 12



The harms of school closures

Frequently, declining enrollment requires districts to consider closing schools that have become under-enrolled. Closing a school is always a fraught decision. On one hand, the increasing per-student cost of operating an under-enrolled school can strain district budgets. On the other hand, school closures can harm students and the greater community. District leaders must weigh these conflicting factors when determining how best to manage limited resources in an environment of declining student enrollment.

■ Student academics

The impact of school closures on academic achievement is mixed, at best. ♦

Some studies have shown improvements in student test results when the displaced students leave a low-performing school and are reassigned to a high-performing school.²⁷ Even in cases where test scores improve among students from the closed school, the arrival of these new students might lower

♦ A special thank you to Mary Eddins, Maja Pehrson, and Kevin Burgess of Research for Action and Pennsylvania Clearinghouse for Education Research. Their invaluable research brief “Revisiting Research on School Closings: Key Learnings for District and Community Leaders” largely informs this section, and can be found here: <https://www.researchforaction.org/research-resources/k-12/revisiting-research-on-school-closings-key-learnings-for-district-and-community-leaders/>

overall test scores in the receiving school.²⁸ One study of nearly 250 school closures in Michigan found that the negative spillover effects persist for multiple years.²⁹

Positive outcomes for displaced students rely on being transferred to high-performing schools, which is a challenge in districts that lack space in high-performing schools. An examination of school closures in Chicago found few effects on displaced students since most students who transferred out of closing schools reenrolled in schools that were academically weak.³⁰ Studies



that show few effects on overall test scores might obscure how school closures can create inequitable impacts for low- and high-achieving students. One study of school closures in New York City found that scores increased for already high-achieving students but fell for already low-achieving students after a school closure.³¹

The majority of studies have found declining test scores, graduation rates, and attendance for

students displaced by school closures.³² For example, one study examining the closure of five North Carolina middle schools found that closure had a negative effect on tests, even for students who attended a higher achieving school.³³ In some studies, test scores might rebound, but in Chicago, researchers observed test score gaps persisting for at least four years post-closing.³⁴ These effects can resound into adulthood. One study of school closures in Texas found decreases in college attainment, employment, and earnings at ages 25–27.³⁵

■ School climate

A handful of studies have looked beyond the impact school closures have on academic achievement and school attendance. These studies, that tend to focus more on qualitative analysis, help shed light on why school closures create harm, and which students are most likely to experience these negative effects.

Positive relationships are the foundation of a great education.³⁶ Yet school closures tend to disrupt student relationships with adults and peers. Students displaced by school closures report a loss of trust in teachers and a sense of not fitting in at their new school.³⁷ Building positive relationships is more difficult because the receiving schools tend to feature larger class sizes and less one-on-one student teacher interaction.

Teachers from closed schools are more likely to leave their districts or the profession entirely. Black

teachers are more likely to leave, worsening the underrepresentation of Black teachers.³⁸ Displaced teachers that stick around report difficulties forming positive relationships at a new school.³⁹

School closures often also increase travel times for displaced students. This leaves these students with less time for homework, extracurricular activities, employment, or free time with friends and family.

The displacement can be extremely dangerous for students exposed to gang violence. In Chicago, school closures forced displaced students to traverse rival gang territory, just to make it to school. Many experienced increases in fights and bullying.⁴⁰

Ultimately, school closures add stressors to students already struggling to manage the challenges associated with poverty.⁴¹

■ Negative effects of school closures disproportionately fall on students of color and students with disabilities

The research overwhelmingly shows that the negative impacts of school closures fall disproportionately on students of color, particularly Black and Latino students.

In one of the most comprehensive looks at school closures, researchers from Stanford looked at school closures in 26 states between 2007 and 2013. They found that low-performing schools predominantly serving Black and Latino students were more likely to be closed than similarly performing schools with more white students.⁴²

Updated analysis covering the 2000-2018 time period confirms these results, finding that the excuses for school closure decisions, such as declining enrollment and poor achievement, fail to account for the racial disparity in closures. This newer analysis found that **majority-Black schools were about three times as likely to close as schools with smaller enrollments of Black students, even when accounting for enrollment trends and academic performance.**⁴³ These results have been replicated by researchers from Tulane University in a separate analysis covering the 2014-2018 period that also found that race is a significant predictor of closures in the private school sector.⁴⁴

Consistent with the national research on school closures, school closures in North Carolina appear to disproportionately impact students of color. Since 2011, in 134 of the 184 school closures in traditional public schools, the closed school has had a smaller share of white students than the district average. In other words, 73 percent of school closures since 2011 have disproportionately impacted students of color.

School closures can also disproportionately harm students with disabilities. One common factor used in school closure decisions is the school's utilization—the number of students given the school's size. Schools serving students with disabilities may appear underutilized because students with disabilities may require smaller class sizes. A study of Chicago's 2013 closures found a significant positive correlation between schools that closed and those with large shares of students with disabilities.⁴⁵

■ How school closures harm the larger community

Public schools are community assets. They often serve as community centers and gathering places, fostering community and providing identity to neighborhoods. When a school closes, the

students and educators aren't the only ones negatively affected. School closures undermine larger communities.

School closures can create a negative feedback loop that destroys neighborhoods. First, the local school is closed, depressing property values that once benefitted from proximity to a school.⁴⁶ If the

Charters and Vouchers

The proliferation of charter schools and voucher schools has created a double whammy: these schools draw enrollment away from traditional public schools, but they also close at much higher rates, sending students back to traditional schools without proper planning or funding.

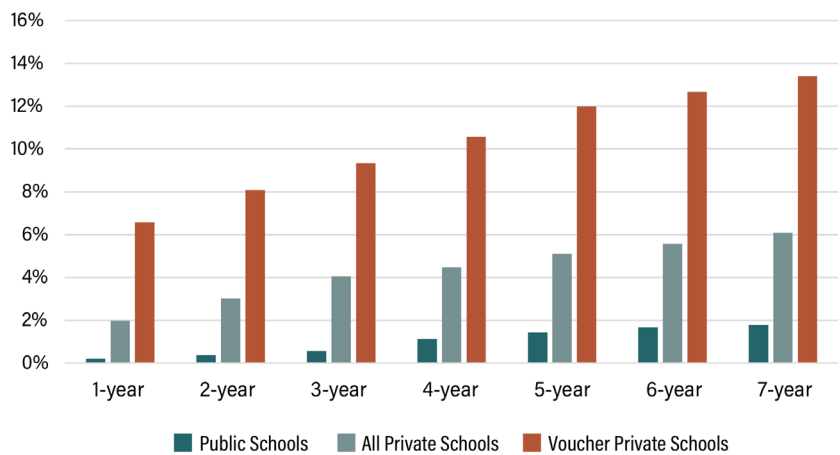
The growth of charter schools and universal voucher programs for private schools explains declining enrollment in one-fifth of all counties since 2011 (see **"The NC communities being hit hardest by declining enrollment"** on page 19). As enrollment declines, traditional inclusive public schools face budget pressures that might result in school closures.

An additional problem: Charter schools and private schools receiving public subsidy from vouchers close at much higher rates than traditional public schools. Nationally, a quarter of all charter schools close by their fifth year. By year 10, nearly 40 percent of charters have shut their doors.⁴⁸ Here in North Carolina, private schools serving Opportunity Scholarship voucher students have closed at nearly 7.5 times the rate of traditional public schools (see **Figure 13** above).⁴⁹

These closures are often sudden, giving the receiving schools no time to plan how to meet the (often substantial) needs of the displaced students. Displaced families must scramble to find new schools. Receiving schools must alter plans and further spread their limited resources. Such churn creates unnecessary challenges for the displaced students, as well as the students in the receiving school.

FIGURE 13

2015 Cohorts - Chances of School Closure



school sits empty, it can contribute to blight, further hurting the neighborhood. These conditions can hasten further population decline or pave the way for gentrification.⁴⁷

This exact scenario played out in several Chicago neighborhoods after the city closed 50 schools in 2013. Schools sat empty, blighting already underserved neighborhoods. According to an NPR analysis, “Census tracts with a majority Black population that included closed schools lost 9.2 percent of their residents between 2013 and 2018. Black census tracts with schools that did not close only saw a 3.2 percent population decline.”⁵⁰

Such treatment undermines faith in government. School closures often are targeted in already underserved communities. That neglect is often what underlies enrollment declines. When a school is closed, many in the community feel a sense of abandonment. That abandonment is compounded when local leaders fail to make good on promises that the district will be saving money and that students will be moved to flourishing schools. As a result, school closures lower impacted families’ faith in government.⁵¹

Additionally, Hurricane Helene has shown how public schools can serve as vital hubs of resilience during a crisis. School buildings across western North Carolina served as community shelters and resource distribution centers.⁵² They provided health care and fed their communities.⁵³

■ The false promises of school closures

While pitched as a measure to close budget gaps, school closures rarely deliver the cost savings predicted by district leaders and consultants. Generally, school closures provide budget savings when paired with substantial layoffs. But when staffing remains relatively constant, school closures fail to meaningfully address budget challenges.

The political fallout from school closures is substantial, so districts often conduct public outreach campaigns before making any closures. Districts might also engage with consultants to help them navigate the school closure process. Both efforts require spending that eats into potential cost savings.

The process of closing a school and preparing other schools to receive new students is also costly. Districts must clean out the shuttered school, remove and warehouse unused furniture, and prepare the new school to accept students. In Chicago, the logistics contractor hired to manage shuttered buildings saw their contract eventually double from \$8.9 million to \$18.9 million.⁵⁴

It is also difficult to find alternative uses for school buildings. Chicago closed 50 schools in 2013. A decade later, more than half of those buildings remained vacant, blighting their surrounding neighborhoods.⁵⁵ Other cities have similarly faced difficulties in selling old school buildings. An analysis of school closures in Detroit, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh and Washington found that none reaped significant profits from selling buildings. The study found 92 vacant buildings blighting Detroit, alone. When districts do make sales, they often sell below valuation. Often, the purchasers are charter schools which continue to exacerbate enrollment declines in the traditional school district.⁵⁶

As noted above, school closures tend to harm students academically, ultimately raising a district’s costs as additional services are required to bring student achievement back to pre-closure levels.

Declining enrollment and school closures in North Carolina

Since 2011, 212 public schools in North Carolina have shut their doors.⁵⁷ Of these, 184 have been traditional public schools and 28 have been charter schools. Overall, charters have closed at a higher rate than traditional public schools.

FIGURE 14

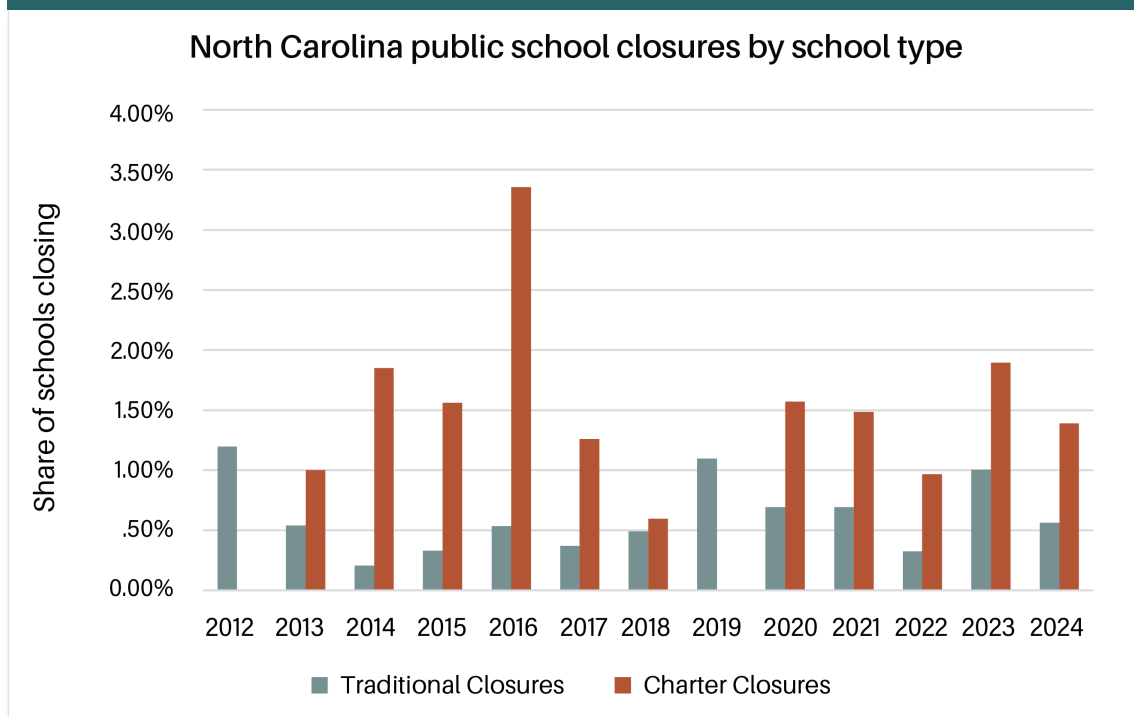


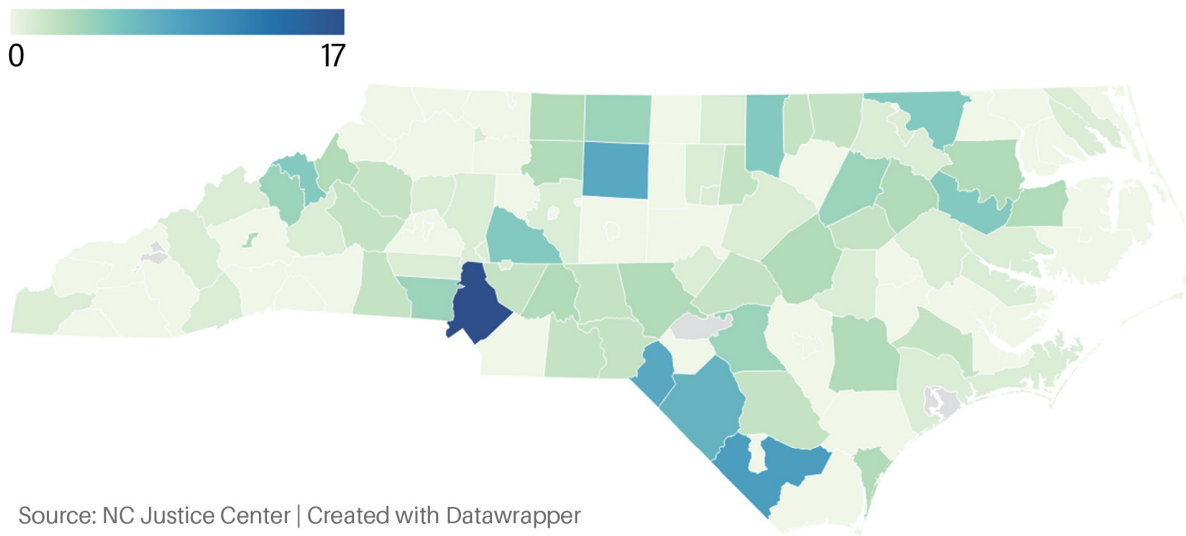
FIGURE 15a

School closures since 2011

| DISTRICT | CLOSURES |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG COUNTY SCHOOLS | 17 |
| COLUMBUS COUNTY SCHOOLS | 9 |
| GUILFORD COUNTY SCHOOLS | 8 |
| SCOTLAND COUNTY SCHOOLS | 8 |
| ROBESON COUNTY SCHOOLS | 7 |
| GRANVILLE COUNTY SCHOOLS | 5 |
| MARTIN COUNTY SCHOOLS | 5 |
| MITCHELL COUNTY SCHOOLS | 5 |
| NORTHAMPTON COUNTY SCHOOLS | 5 |
| ROWAN-SALISBURY COUNTY SCHOOLS | 5 |

FIGURE 15b

District school closures 2011 to 2025



Within traditional public schools, it appears that the pace of school closures is increasing. While the year-to-year changes are erratic, the number of closures have more than doubled in the past six years (119) versus the prior six-year period (47).

Figure 15b shows the districts that have had the highest number of school closings since 2011.

Another way to examine school closures is to look at the change in number of schools in each district over time. Between 2011 and 2024, 28 of North Carolina's 115 districts have experienced a decrease in the number of schools (see Figures 15c and 15d).

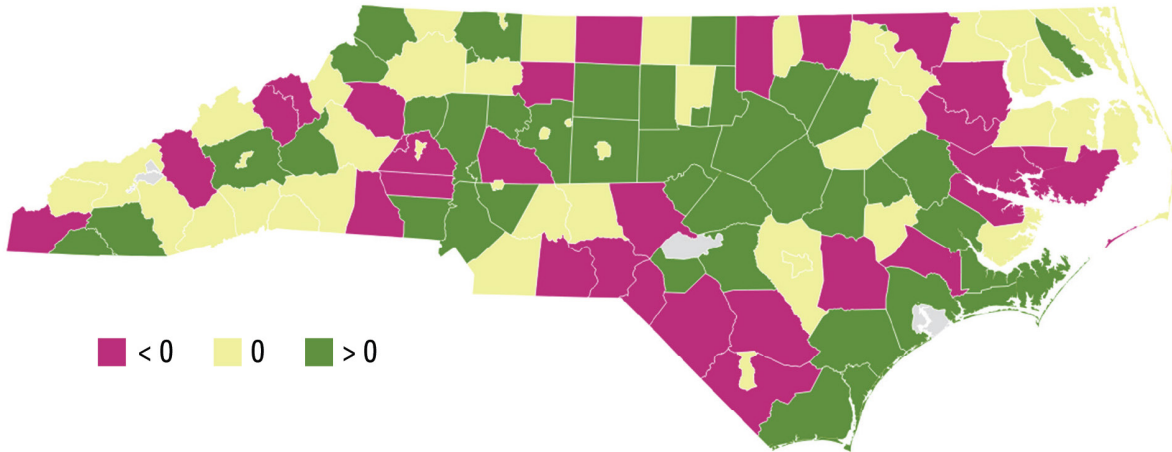
FIGURE 15c

District net change in number of schools since 2011



FIGURE 15d

Net Change Number of Schools by District



Source: NC Justice Center | Created with Datawrapper

The NC communities being hit hardest by declining enrollment

In general, low-wealth, rural communities are being hit hardest by declining enrollment. However, even some of North Carolina's urban counties have faced difficult school closure decisions in recent years. An examination of data trends can help policymakers identify where declining enrollment is creating the greatest challenges.

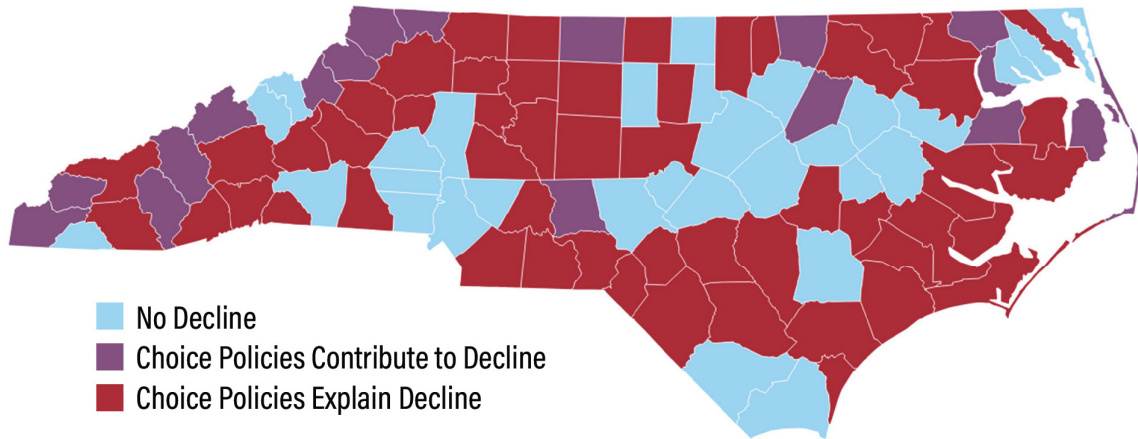
In the most recent year, traditional public school enrollment declined in 70 of North Carolina's 100 counties.[◆] In every one of these counties, the expansion of school choice policies has contributed to enrollment declines. In 53 counties, declining enrollment can be attributed to increases in school choice programs. In these counties, the increased enrollment in charter and voucher programs was greater than the decrease in traditional public school enrollment. In other words, these counties would have likely experienced enrollment increases if it weren't for expansion of charters and vouchers.

The same analysis can be applied to enrollment trends since the General Assembly began pursuing rapid expansion of charter schools and vouchers in 2011. Since 2011, 82 counties have seen enrollments fall in their traditional public schools. The expansion of charter schools and vouchers has contributed to enrollment declines in all of these counties. But in 20 of these counties, the declines can be fully attributed to increases in charter schools and voucher programs. Enrollments

◆ These calculations must be done at the county level since voucher data is reported at the county, not district, level.

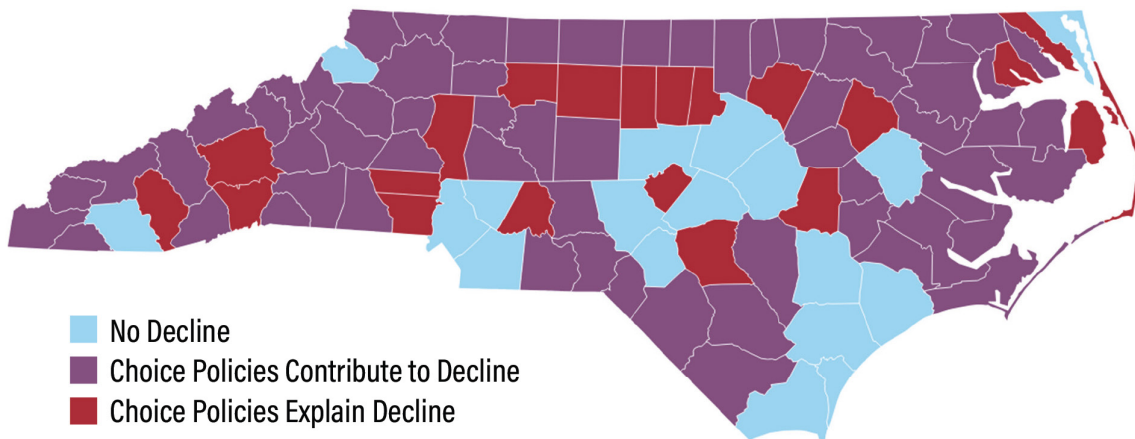
would have likely grown in these counties over this time period had the General Assembly not pursued a policy of unrestricted growth of charter schools and vouchers.

County Enrollment Change 2024 to 2025



Source: NC Justice Center | Created with Datawrapper

County Enrollment Change 2011 to 2025



Source: NC Justice Center | Created with Datawrapper

■ The added cost of school segregation

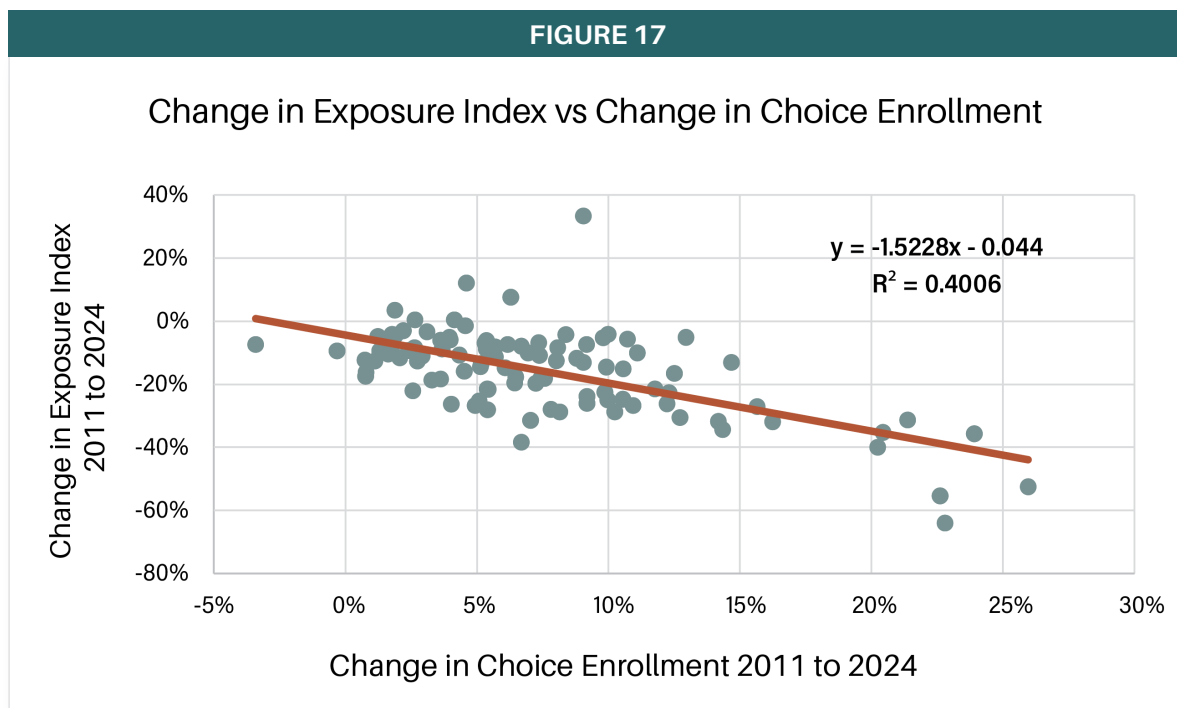
Counties where choice programs are most contributing to declining enrollment face dual challenges.

First, they must cover fixed costs of school operations with less funding. That is, costs such as central office support, building maintenance, and utilities must be covered with school funding from fewer students.

These districts must also contend with schools that are increasingly segregated. School segregation is associated with lower academic performance and widened opportunity gaps.⁵⁸ Counteracting these effects to maintain academic outcomes in a segregated school requires additional resources. This is an additional way in which unfettered choice programs harm schools.

Figure 17 shows the relationship between changes in school segregation and enrollment in charter and voucher programs. The exposure index is a common measure of school segregation.⁵⁹ Figure 17 looks at students of color exposure to white students. Between 2011 and 2024, in most counties, students of color have become less likely to interact with white students. However, the change is much greater in counties that have experienced the largest growth in voucher and charter enrollment. In fact, 40 percent of the change in the exposure index can be explained by increased enrollment in choice programs.

These findings are consistent with research showing that North Carolina's charter schools and voucher programs both serve as vehicles for white flight.⁶⁰ Both programs disproportionately draw white students out of the traditional, inclusive public school system.



Policy options for mitigating the negative impacts of declining enrollment

The challenges posed by declining enrollment are largely the result of policy decisions by federal, state, and local lawmakers. The good news is that smarter policy decisions can help reverse enrollment trends or mitigate the negative impacts of continued enrollment declines.

■ Reversing demographic trends

Policymakers can try to reverse demographic trends by making it less expensive to have and raise children. Among the quarter of adults who say they had fewer children than they wanted, 44 percent cite waiting too long because of financial instability.⁶¹ Example policies to remedy this include:

- Expand health coverage and lower costs to ensure that more North Carolinians have health insurance and that residents face lower costs when accessing care.
- Provide material support to new parents such as publicly funded savings accounts for children (i.e., baby bonds) and essential supplies like clothes, diapers, and wipes.
- Paid parental leave allowing parents to bond with their newborn without sacrificing income
- Low or no-cost childcare allowing parents to return to work if they choose.
- Child tax credits and other subsidies to help alleviate many of the expenses of child-rearing.

Lawmakers might also consider focusing state investment on communities experiencing population decline. Lawmakers could tie corporate incentives to willingness to locate in areas with population declines. They could also improve school funding equity so that schools can attract and retain families.

■ End unfettered expansion of charter schools and unregulated voucher programs

Lawmakers can more directly and immediately provide relief to school districts by ending the unfettered expansion of charter schools and unregulated voucher programs. These programs are contributing to declining enrollments in the majority of North Carolina school districts and are fully responsible for enrollment declines in many districts.

Specifically, legislators should:

- **Eliminate voucher programs:** In addition to contributing to budget pressures in public schools, voucher programs deliver subpar results for students, exacerbate segregation, and are rife with fraud.⁶²

- **Cap expansion of charter schools:** Charter schools were intended to be laboratories of innovation, developing strategies that could be scaled up in traditional public schools. There have been few, if any, examples of successful lessons learned from charters. Instead, the state has pursued growth of this sector with the hope that competition would inspire improved student performance. Yet performance has stagnated or fallen under this strategy, with charter schools underperforming relative to traditional public schools.⁶³ At a minimum, lawmakers could ban the expansion of charters in districts experiencing declining enrollment.

■ Strengthen traditional public schools

Lawmakers can also reverse enrollment trends by dramatically improving our traditional public schools. Fewer families will depart public schools when public schools offer safe, welcoming, and well-resourced environments for all students. When such schools provide rigorous, culturally-affirming coursework and align advanced coursework to postsecondary and local career expectations, all students can thrive and our schools become vital hubs for our communities.

Legislators' failure to ensure adequate and equitable resources for schools across the state is at the heart of the long-running *Leandro* court case. The case has spurred a detailed, research-based, multi-year plan to increase investments in educators and students to provide the basic level of schooling promised under our state constitution. The *Leandro* Plan would:

- Dramatically expand early learning opportunities such as NC Pre-K to ensure that all students enter kindergarten ready to learn
- Expand and improve educator preparation programs to ensure North Carolina has a strong, diverse pipeline of teachers and principals
- Provide educators with competitive salaries, mentorships, and professional development opportunities to improve performance and retention
- Provide adequate staffing of nurses, counselors, social workers, and other support staff at recommended levels to help address student health and allow teachers to focus on academics
- Improve supports and staffing for students with disabilities, English learners, and students from families with low incomes
- Create a network of “community schools” serving as centers of community life, fostering collaboration between educators, families, and local partners to support student well-being and academic success
- Improve the equity of school funding so that low-wealth and rural communities can offer their students the same opportunities as students in wealthy communities
- Issue a statewide school construction bond to address our schools' \$13 billion shortfall in school capital needs, helping make our schools healthier and safer for students

The reforms and investments proposed by the Leandro Plan represent the bare minimum of what North Carolina students are owed. Lawmakers could certainly go much further to create a system ensuring that every student can thrive.⁶⁴

Navigating school closures

Absent additional public pressure, there is little evidence that legislators are interested in pursuing the above recommendations to stem the factors exacerbating declining enrollment. As a result, North Carolina school leaders will increasingly face difficult decisions on how to manage school budgets in an environment of austerity and declining enrollment. Many will face difficult decisions on whether to shutter schools.

■ Alternatives to school closures

The preponderance of evidence shows that school closures harm students, educators, and the larger community. Closures also fail to deliver expected budget savings. Meanwhile, the burdens of school closure too often fall on the backs of Black and Hispanic students. School closures should be avoided, if possible.

To that end, school leaders should first **examine alternatives to school closures**. The following are potential alternatives that could help districts avoid unnecessary and harmful closures:

- **Revenue increases:** North Carolina has enacted a series of tax cuts benefitting corporations and wealthy North Carolinians.⁶⁵ As a result, our school funding effort—the amount we spend relative to our economy—now ranks 49th in the nation.⁶⁶ This indicates that we can readily afford tax increases to support school budgets.
- **Cut nonproductive expenditures:** As noted, school closures rarely result in substantial budget savings. Districts should consider eliminating other expenditures that have no positive impact on student performance, happiness, or safety. For example, research shows that school resource officers frequently negatively impact students' school experiences.⁶⁷
- **Create magnet schools:** Magnet schools can attract families to schools with excess capacity by offering high-demand themes such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); performing arts; or language immersion.
- **Alternative uses for unused space:** Leaders should ask the local community for ideas on how unused space might be repurposed to serve local community needs. In some instances, unused school space has been repurposed for childcare centers, career education programs, or nonprofit hubs.⁶⁸ Leaders should avoid turning over space to charter schools that would simply exacerbate enrollment decreases.

■ Guidelines for minimizing harm of school closures

If a school closure is unavoidable, there are steps districts can take to minimize harm. If school leaders approach school closure decisions with a focus on equity, school closures may offer an opportunity to improve outcomes for students.

School leaders seeking to **minimize the harms** of school closures should consider the following factors:

1. **Historical underinvestment:** Closures should not be inflicted upon communities that have suffered from historical under-investment.
2. **Integration by the advantaged:** Leaders should ensure that schools become more integrated following closure; however, it is important that any additional burdens such as increased travel time be borne by more socioeconomically advantaged students.
3. **Investment in transitions:** Budget additional time and resources to ease the transition of displaced students and staff and build relationships in the receiving school.
4. **Expanded opportunities:** Schools receiving displaced students and staff should seek to expand opportunities for students in terms of advanced coursework, elective classes, and extracurricular activities.
5. **Fair utilization measures:** Many schools have relied on simplistic measures of school utilization such as enrollment per square foot. Such measures unfairly disadvantage schools housing programs that require additional space. For example, special education programs and community schools rely on extra space in school buildings to deliver social services and enrichment activities to students and families.

Why standardized test results shouldn't be used to inform school closures

One factor that school leaders should avoid using in school closure decisions is student achievement on standardized tests. Many leaders and community members mistakenly believe that low scores on standardized tests are a reflection of a “bad school” that might merit closure.

However, standardized test scores are highly correlated with students' race and family income levels. Low test scores often reflect insufficient public investment in these specific students and their surrounding community. If schools with low test scores

are targeted for closure, these students are then paying twice for bad policy decisions of local and state lawmakers.

To the extent that test measures inform such decisions, leaders should focus solely on academic growth measures. Growth measures do a better (though still imperfect) job of isolating the school's impact on student learning. There is some evidence that when schools with exceptionally low growth scores are closed, the displaced students will have better academic results in the long run in their new schools.⁶⁹

6. **Meaningful public outreach:** Community hearings on school closures should be given sufficient notice, be held outside of working hours, offer translation services, and provide sufficient information and time for parental and community feedback.
7. **Will community's alternatives make things worse:** If a neighborhood school is closed, and that neighborhood's closest alternative is a charter school, the closure could exacerbate declining enrollment trends.

■ Guidance from other states and cities

North Carolina lawmakers might benefit from examining laws and policies in other states and cities to help limit the potential damage from school closures.

For instance, California state law requires school districts to perform an “equity impact analysis” before making any decisions on school closures.⁷⁰ Illinois law seeks to be more proactive, requiring local school boards to develop policies to address under-enrolled schools to limit school closures.⁷¹

North Carolina's current law (G.S. 115C-72) requires districts to study any closure or consolidation decisions and to conduct a public hearing. However, the law puts no meaningful requirements on the content of the closure study or the hearings. This law could be strengthened considerably to help ensure that closure or consolidation decisions are made with an eye on student equity.

Conclusion

Despite our state's growing population, most school districts are having to manage the challenges created by declining public school enrollment. This trend is partly due to larger demographic shifts of populations from rural to urban or suburban areas, and partly by intentional state policies to undermine traditional public schools and expand so-called school choice options such as charter schools and vouchers. This agenda has undermined academic performance and further divided our communities across class and race.

This report highlights which North Carolina communities are suffering the most harm from this agenda. There's no reason for these communities to continue to struggle. North Carolina can be a state where every child in every community has an opportunity to thrive. Hopefully, students, families, and community leaders can use this report's information and policy recommendations to fight for the future they deserve.

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NAVIGATING DECLINING ENROLLMENT

How smarter state policies can help schools thrive

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