



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LA CROSSE

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TO: School Board
FROM: Aaron Engel
DATE: November 16, 2023
SUBJECT: 2023 Enrollment Report

District enrollment declined by 174 students from the 3rd Friday count in 2022 to 2023. The following is an analysis of the enrollment data in our student information system and the information available in the open enrollment portal.

Causes of Declining Enrollment

There are a number of potential reasons for declining enrollment in the district. Declining birth rates in the area, the state, and the country is one of the primary causes of declining enrollment for which there has been much [documentation](#) and [research](#). The “[baby busts](#)” that occurred during the 2008 recession and the 2020 pandemic contribute further to falling birth rates.

The [birth rate](#) in the State of Wisconsin and in La Crosse County dropped by 30% between 1990 and 2020. While movement from cities to suburbs may be another cause of declining enrollment in city school districts, the school district total population has remained relatively unchanged between 1990 and 2020, growing 1.3% (Table 1). There has not been a net population move out of the boundaries of the School District of La Crosse but the percentage of the population that is school-aged children has dropped substantially.

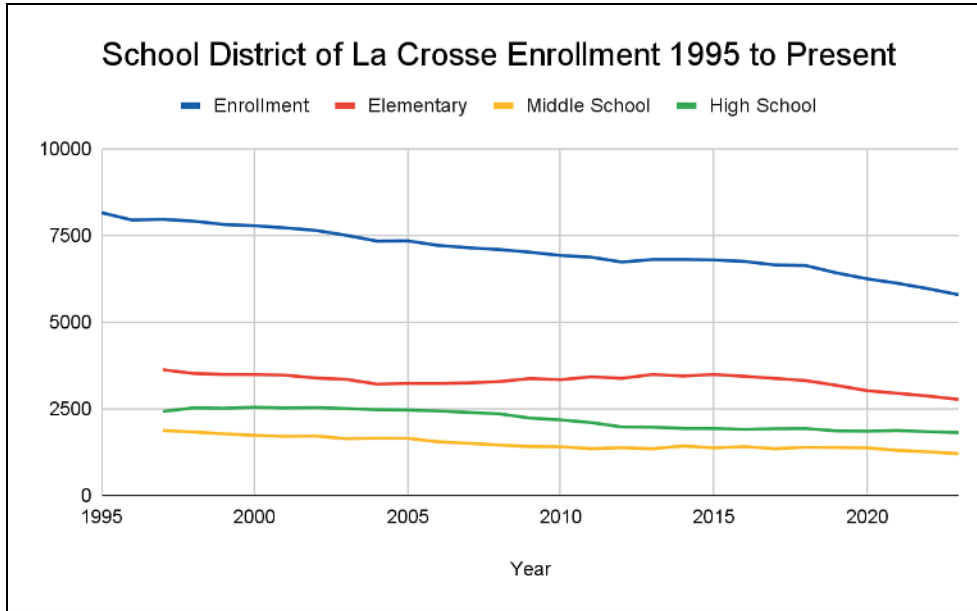
City and Township Population		
City/Town	1990 Population	2020 Population
La Crosse	51,544	52,185
Shelby	4,872	4,797
Medary	1,304	1,607
Campbell	4,321	4,283
Total Population	62,041	62,872

Table 1. City and township population within the school district.

For many years both Holmen and Onalaska, the primary suburbs where La Crosse County’s population is growing, experienced rising enrollments. Now, due to declining birth rates, in recent years, Holmen (-2.9% declining enrollment since 2018) and Onalaska (-4.0% since 2018) are also experiencing regular declining enrollment.

Long-Term Historical Trends in Enrollment

Enrollment has been consistently declining in the School District of La Crosse for three decades. In 1995 enrollment in the School District of La Crosse was 8,152. Enrollment is now at 5,786, a 29% reduction (Graph 1).



Graph 1. School District of La Crosse enrollment from 1995 to present.

Private School Enrollments

Private school enrollments in the area have fallen more than public school enrollments over the last three decades. Since 1994, private school enrollment in the district dropped by 44%, from 2,173 to 1,218 students. In the same timeframe, the School District of La Crosse enrollment dropped 29%. Since 1994, enrollment at Aquinas Catholic Schools located in the School District of La Crosse, dropped 47%, from 1,548 to 822 students.

At Aquinas, enrollments have stabilized since 2013, coinciding with the Wisconsin Public Choice Program allowing state-funded vouchers for students to attend private schools. Between 2013 and 2023, enrollment at all Aquinas Catholic schools remained stable but the percent of students who use a voucher increased to 15% of total enrollment (Table 2).

Aquinas Enrollment Over Ten Years of Vouchers		
Aquinas	2013	2023
Total Enrollment	975	983
WPCP	21	146
% of Enrollment	2.2%	15%

Table 2. Ten years of voucher growth at Aquinas Catholic Schools in La Crosse.

The faster rate of declining private school enrollment has resulted in a smaller share of total students attending private schools in the School District of La Crosse: 21% in 1994 and 17% in 2022. If vouchers had not been in place and private school enrollment continued to decline at the same pace as public school enrollments (-1%), an estimated additional 122 students may still be enrolled in public schools. If 75% of those students attended the School District of La Crosse, then about 9% of enrollment loss since 2013 could be attributed to private school transfers.

Impact of Lower Birth Rates

The impact of declining birth rates can partially be seen in the difference between the size of the district’s exiting senior class and incoming kindergarten class. The exiting senior class of 2023 had 459 students and the incoming kindergarten class for 2023 has 376 students, a difference of -83 students (Table 3).

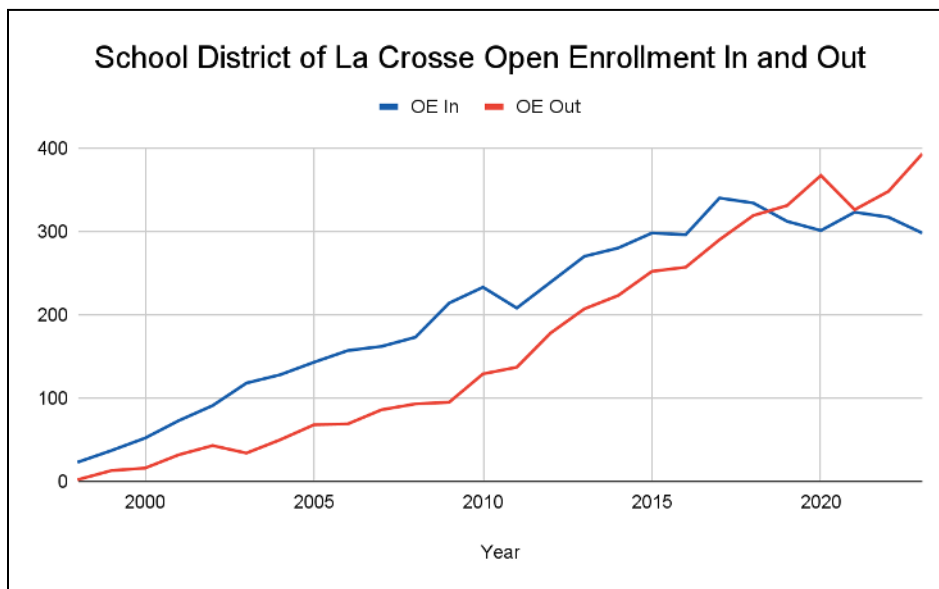
Year	Kindergarten	12th Grade	Difference	Year	Kindergarten	12th Grade	Difference
2010-11	485	594	-109	2017-18	480	481	-1
2011-12	498	590	-92	2018-19	449	533	-84
2012-13	547	503	44	2019-20	454	459	-5
2013-14	515	551	-36	2020-21	421	512	-91
2014-15	510	507	3	2021-22	428	472	-44
2015-16	529	489	40	2022-23	410	459	-49
2016-17	486	509	-23	2023-24	376	441	-65

Table 3. Difference between Kindergarten and 12th grade classes in the School District of La Crosse.

Declining birth rates, as seen in the difference between exiting seniors and incoming kindergarteners, resulted in a reduction of 512 students since 2010. This difference makes up 45% of declining enrollment since 2010.

Open Enrollment

Open enrollment in the School District of La Crosse has consistently risen since its implementation in 1998. Until 2018, open enrollment in exceeded open enrollment out. Currently, 393 students open enroll out and 298 students open enroll in (Graph 2).



Graph 2. School District of La Crosse open enrollment in and out over time.

An analysis of our database for open enrollment provided by the DPI finds the following statistics. Of the 393 students who open enroll out:

- 49% live north of the La Crosse River (28% of district students live in the same area)
- They primarily attend three other school districts: Onalaska (200 students, 51% of open enrollment out); West Salem (83, 21%); and Holmen (39, 10%).
- 75% never attended a school in the School District of La Crosse.
 - 45% attended another school district starting in 4K or kindergarten.
 - 30% moved into the School District of La Crosse and chose to keep their child in their prior school district.
- Of those students who open enroll out that previously attended in the School District of La Crosse, 46% of students last attended one of the three northernmost elementary schools - North Woods (25 students), Summit (15), or Northside (12)

Of the 298 students who open enroll in:

- They primarily attend from four other school districts: Onalaska (77 students, 26% of open enrollment in); West Salem (71, 24%); Holmen (63, 21%); and De Soto (34, 11%).
- 46% of students started attending in pre-kindergarten (PK), 4K, or kindergarten.
- 30 students attend the district's virtual school, CRVA.

A net -98 students lost through open enrollment in 2023 represents 4.6% of total declining enrollment since the advent of open enrollment in 1998. Open enrollment in the School District of La Crosse plateaued in 2017, after which there has been a net -145 loss of students through open enrollment. Since 2017, net open enrollment accounts for 17% of declining enrollment.

Physical Moves

Of the 728 new enrollments between the 2022 and 2023 third Friday counts, 267 were not in PK, 4K, kindergarten, or a student enrolling after senior year to attend Western Technical College to complete graduation requirements. Of the 267 new enrollments described above, 95% of students (253) physically moved into the district. We can estimate another 35 4K and kindergarten students moved into the district just prior to enrollment based on the rate of move-ins (5%) for first through twelfth grade students.

Of the 1,094 withdrawals between the 2022 and 2023 third Friday counts, 639 were not graduating seniors. Of the withdrawals, 78% of students (497) physically moved out of the school district to attend in another school district.

There were 455 non-senior withdrawals that reported the school district they moved to:

- 154 (34%) students transferred out of state
- 151 (33%) students moved to a surrounding school district: Onalaska (48 students); Holmen (46); West Salem (17); Sparta (15); Bangor (14); De Soto (6); Viroqua (4); Westby (2)

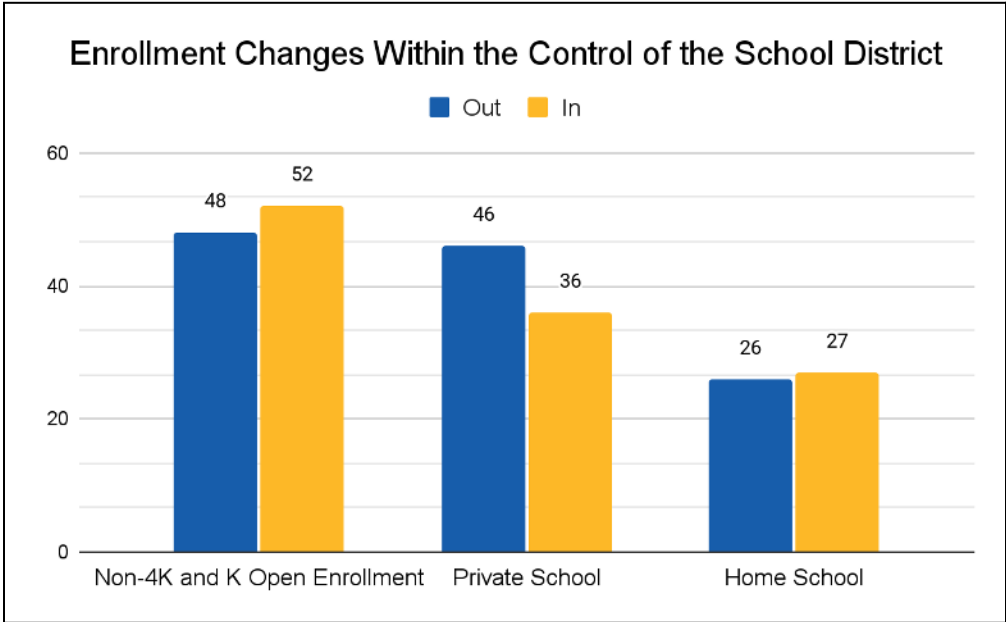
Between 2022 and 2023, there was an estimated net physical movement of students out of the school district of 110 students.

Enrollments Within the Control of the School District

Some losses in enrollment the school district has greater control over. These include transitions to private schools and home school, non-4k and Kindergarten open enrollment out, as well as returns to home districts after attendance in the district through open enrollment in. For the period of time between the 2022 and 2023 third Friday counts, this represents 145 students or 23% of 639 non-senior withdrawals: 48 students open enrolled out; 46 students attended a private school; 26 attended home school; and 25 withdrew after open enrolling in.

On the other hand, some of the district gains in enrollment were also within the district’s control. These include transitions from private schools and home school, and open enrollments in (unlike withdrawals, we cannot track open enrollment outs that return to the school district). For the period of time between the 2022 and 2023 third Friday counts, this represents 115 students or 16% of the 728 enrollments: 52 open enrolled in; 36 students enrolled from private school; and 27 enrolled from home school.

Subtracting withdrawals after open enrollment in to create comparable data, the School District of La Crosse had 120 withdrawals within its control and 115 enrollments within its control for a net change of -5 students (Graph 3).



Graph 3. Enrollment changes within the school districts control between 2022 and 2023.

Explanation for 2023 Change in Enrollment

The net change in enrollment between the third Friday count in 2022 and 2023 can be attributed to the declining birth rate, an increase in net open enrollment out, and net physical movement out of the school district.

The exiting senior class of 2023 had 459 students and the incoming kindergarten class for 2023 has 376 students, a difference of -83 students. An additional change from 2022 to 2023 was 21 fewer students enrolled in early childhood and 4K. This change could also be attributed to declining birth rates. These 104 students represent 60% of total declining enrollment from 2022 to 2023.

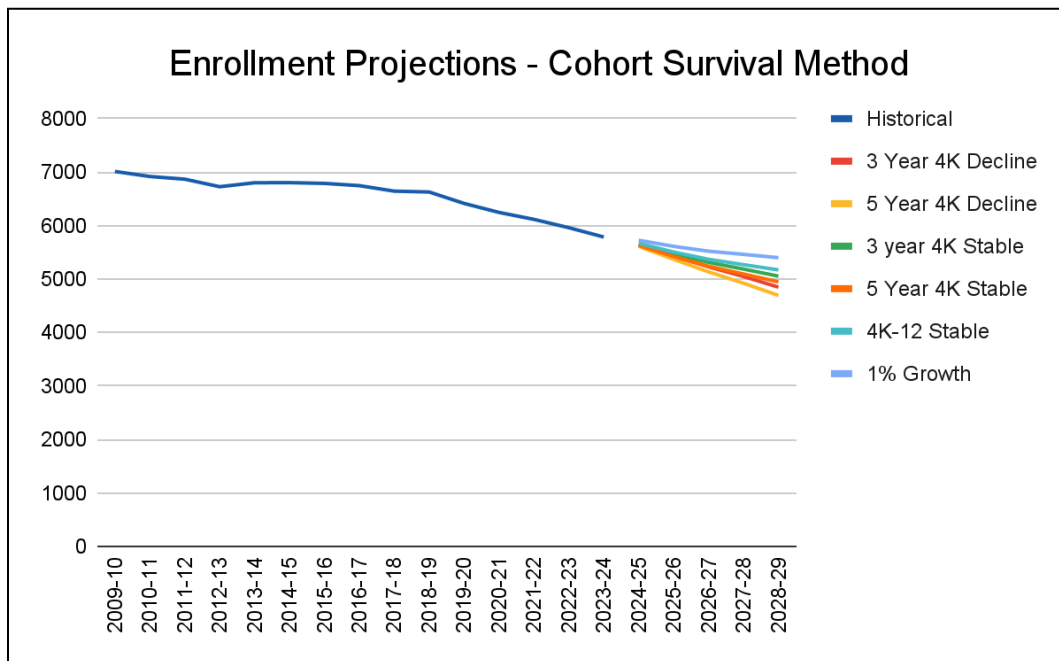
The district's net open enrollment change from 2022 to 2023 can account for another set of students. From 2022 to 2023, there was a net -64 students enrolling in the district (-31 in 2022 to -95 in 2023). This declining net change is attributed to the following:

- -14 graduating seniors (-20 Out, 34 In)
- -31 new open enrollments (-120 Out, 89 In)
- -25 open enrollments in did not return to the district from 2022 to 2023 (14 were in 4K/K and didn't return for K/1st, 3 moved out of state)

Finally, students physically moved out of the school district at a higher rate than moved in, on the order of -110 students, contributing to declining enrollment.

Enrollment Projections

Enrollment projections were developed using the cohort survival method based on the class sizes in the [2023 District Budget Plan](#). This is the same primary method used by the UW-Madison Applied Population Lab. Six different models were used to create five year enrollment projections: 3 year average with a 4K decline; 5 year average with a 4K decline; 3 year average with stable 4K enrollment; 5 year average with stable 4K enrollment; stable enrollment across grade levels; and, a 1% increase in enrollment across grade levels (Graph 4).



Graph 4. Enrollment projections for the School District of La Crosse using six different models.

All six models show declining enrollment over the next five years with enrollments in 2028-29 ranging from 5,400 to 4,694 students. The median projection shows an enrollment in five years of 5,040 students, a decline of 746 students from the current enrollment. A formal population study will be conducted by the UW-Madison Applied Population Lab in the next year to a comprehensive update to our projections post-COVID.

Next Steps

Based on this data, we can estimate the impact of the various causes of declining enrollment. Over the last ten years, we can estimate that private school transfers due to vouchers may account for about 9% of enrollment loss and a change in net open enrollment, primarily in grades 4K and kindergarten, may account for 17% of enrollment loss. In the same timeframe, lower birth rates likely account for at least 45% of enrollment loss with net migration of students likely accounting for the remaining change in enrollment.

There are numerous factors that impact enrollment beyond the district's control: birth rates; affordable, family-friendly housing; economic opportunity; availability of day care; and perceptions of safety in various communities. As one example, new types and locations of new housing developments are outside the control of the School District. The housing developments at Farnam Flats, 5th Ward Residences, and the new pocket neighborhood on Green Bay St. have resulted in 190 apartments, 14 townhomes and 10 houses. Despite this much needed increase in housing opportunities, they may not be conducive to families with children as there is only one student that lives in those three developments.

However, there are some factors that are within the school district's control. One factor the school district has in its control that impacts where families choose to live and send their children to school is the district's reputation for providing a high quality education. The district should continue to take steps to maintain its positive reputation regarding world class educational opportunities and a welcoming school environment. The district should also ensure district facilities remain attractive and inviting so that when families are considering where their child will attend school, they are more likely to choose the School District of La Crosse.

A more specific effort should be made regarding attracting and retaining resident 4K and kindergarten students. Almost half of students who open enroll do so in 4K or kindergarten and remain with their new school district for the remainder of their 4K-12 career. Retaining students at this critical time has the greatest ability to maximize resident enrollment in the district. A deeper evaluation of the factors causing parents to open enroll at 4K and kindergarten should be undertaken with the development of commensurate strategies to attract and retain students at these grades.