

New York public school enrollment: back to early 1990s, and still falling

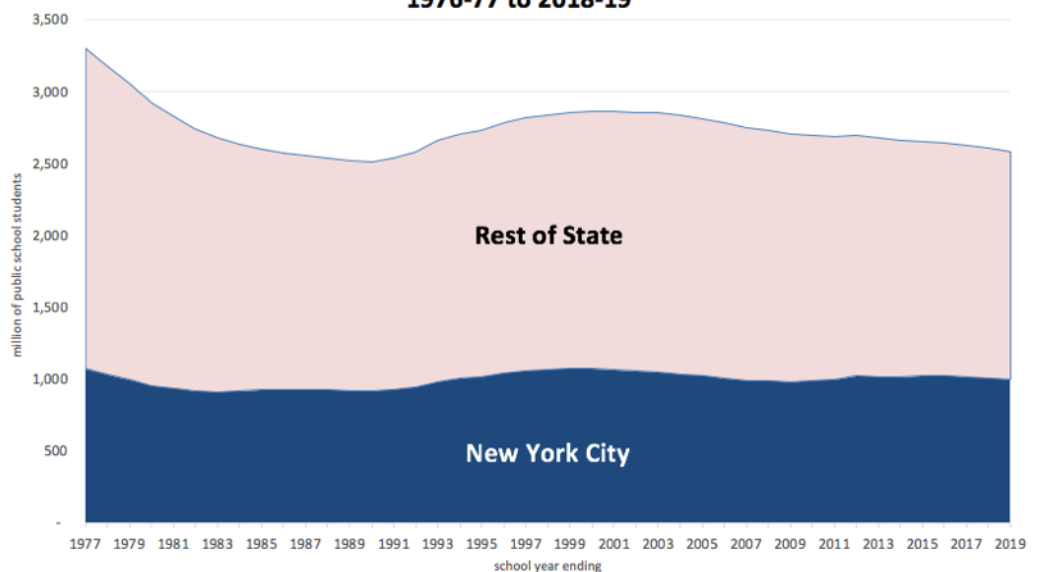
When public schools across the Empire State open their doors for school year 2019-20, pupil enrollment will be at its lowest level in at least 30 years—continuing a long-term decline that has increasing relevance to Albany’s perennial legislative battles over school funding and education policy.

Including charter schools and pre-kindergarten programs, New York public school enrollment in 2018-19 was estimated at 2,578,135, down 30,338 pupils from 2017-18 and at its lowest level since the 1990-91 count of 2,540,944, according to the State Education Department.¹ The latest U.S. Census data, which show a continued decline in New York’s statewide population of school-age children in 2018, points to continuing enrollment decreases in years ahead.

New York public school enrollment reached an all-time high of 3.5 million in 1970-71, then declined by one million in the post-baby boom era of the 1970s and ‘80s. After rebounding through the 1990s, enrollment partially recovered to its most recent peak of nearly 2.9 million in 1999-2000. However, it has dropped every year since, by an annual average of 0.5 percent, for a total decrease of nearly 280,000 in the last 19 years.²

At this rate, enrollment in New York schools will soon dip to levels last seen in the late 1950s.

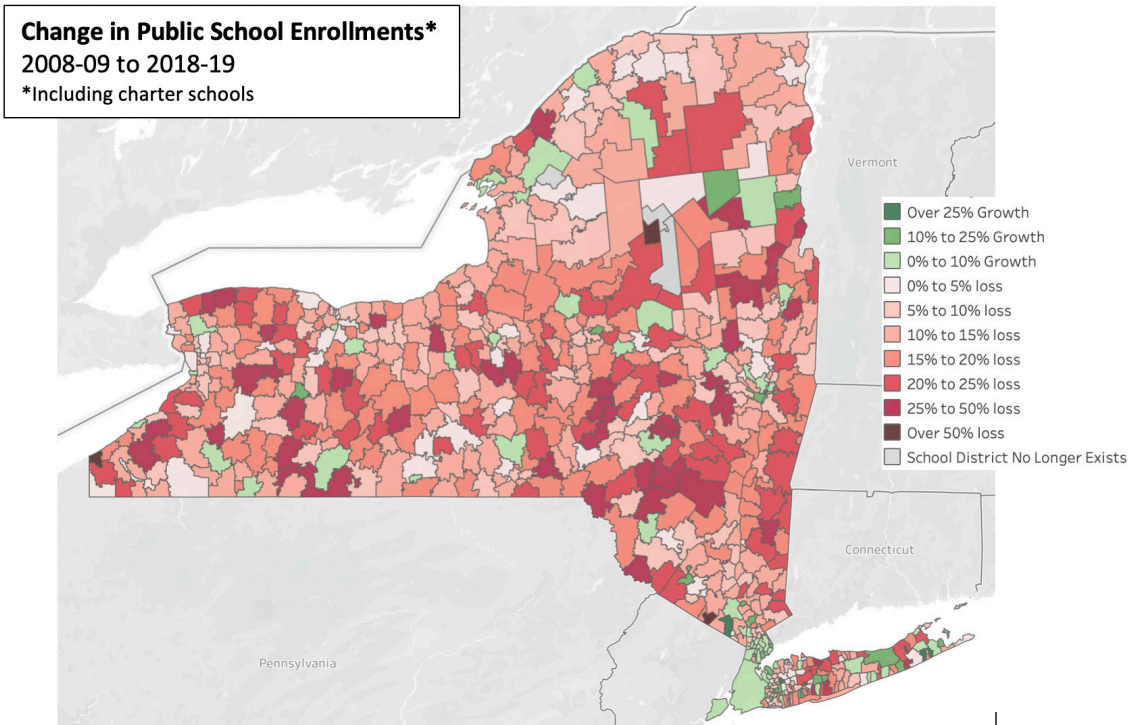
**New York State Public School Pre-K-12 Enrollment
1976-77 to 2018-19**



Source: New York State Education Department. Includes full- and part-time PreK and charter schools

The more than 10 percent decrease in New York school enrollment since the turn of the century contrasts with a national enrollment *increase* of 7 percent during the same period.³ The difference reflects underlying demographic trends, including upstate New York’s continuing population decline and out-migration losses to other states.

As shown by the map below of New York school districts, over the past 10 years, school enrollments have been shrinking fastest in upstate rural counties, with increases most common downstate.



Only 100 of the state’s nearly 700 districts have experienced net enrollment growth since 2008-09. Pockets of growth tend to be concentrated at socio-economic extremes, ranging from wealthy districts in lower Westchester, to struggling upstate cities such as Albany and Syracuse, and poorer inner suburbs such as Roosevelt in Nassau County.

These enrollment trends highlight the need for the kind of innovative reforms that New York’s governor, Legislature and union-dominated education establishment have resisted. For example, rural districts need more regulatory freedom to experiment with distance learning and regional high school programs. Relief from state mandates – especially those affecting the hiring, assignment and compensation of teachers – would give all districts the greater flexibility they need to deal effectively with the biggest demographic changes they have experienced in a generation.

–E.J. McMahon

¹ Data posted at <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/statistics/enroll-n-staff/home.html>

² Statewide nonpublic school enrollment has been decreasing faster than public school enrollment in New York. As of 2018-19, SED estimated there were 442,594 pre-K through 12th grade nonpublic school pupils. This was 43 percent below the 1970-71 level, compared to a 25 percent drop in public schools in the same period. Nonpublic enrollment is down nearly 8 percent since 2007-08, compared to a 5 percent decrease for public schools statewide.

³ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=65>