

Latest Facts about Wisconsin Public Schools

Per the June 2024 report of *Wisconsin Public Education Network* (WPEN), here are some key facts you might want to know about our 421 public school districts: We have 971,843 identified school-age students in our state. Of that group, 84% attend public school, 3% are homeschooled, fewer than 1% attend non-public charter schools, and 13% attend private school.

Of the 128,988 Wisconsin children who attend private school, 43% of them received vouchers to help offset the cost of private education last school year. That will grow to 60% this fall; in 2026, enrollment caps will come off the program. The voucher program in Wisconsin has grown from one district in 2009 to 82% of all districts in 2022. Each voucher *decreases* the funding provided to the local *public* school district through property taxes and state aid.

Wisconsin allocates 36.6% of its general fund toward K-12 school aids, which might sound like a lot until you consider that it's 5.2% below the national average. Just ten years ago, our state allocated 43% of its general fund to public education. Twenty years ago Wisconsin ranked eleventh in the nation for robust funding for public schools; now we rank twenty-fifth. School taxes in our state are lower than they used to be – and among the lowest in the region. Whereas in 1985 Wisconsinites paid for education at the rate of 2.5% of their personal income in taxes, today that is down to 1.5%.

For 16 consecutive years school funding in our state has failed to keep pace with inflation. Remember the “historic increase” in school funding promised in the 2023-25 biennial budget? That \$325 per-pupil increase would have had to be more than ten times that amount to keep up with inflation. In 2009, our combined revenue limits and per-pupil aid lagged inflation by \$75. Four years later the lag was \$1856 per pupil. And now combined resources lag behind inflation \$3235 per pupil. In addition, our Special Ed reimbursement of 33% is the lowest in the nation! Statewide, public school enrollment has dropped over 52,000 students since Act 10 in 2011.

Eighty percent of our Wisconsin public school students attend urban or suburban schools, although more than half of our schools are in rural communities. These are the demographics of our public school students statewide:

- 41% live in poverty
- 15% have disabilities
- 6% are English language learners
- 67% are white
- 14% are Hispanic
- 9% are Black
- 4% are Asian
- 1% are American Indian
- Less than 1% are Pacific Islander

While the nation's report card (NAEP) cites our state's 90% graduation rate as among the nation's highest, we also have one of the widest black/white achievement gaps.

Finally, public schools must guarantee six fundamental student rights that private schools may ignore:

- Accept and educate *all* students: Public schools, yes; Private schools, no
- Follow nondiscrimination laws: Public schools, yes; Private schools, no
- Employ only licensed/certified teachers: Public schools, yes; Private schools, no
- Account to *elected* school board: Public schools, yes; Private schools, no
- May not impose religious curriculum: Public schools, yes; Private schools, no
- Must serve disabled and English learners: Public schools, yes; Private schools, no

So, what do *you* think about the trajectory of public education in our state? Clearly we cannot ignore it or assume this sinking ship will right itself. Please continue to inform yourself on the state of public education in Wisconsin. [Learn more about WPEN here.](#)