

# Taking Attendance: BPS Enrollment Analysis 2022-23

---

December 2022



**1.**

**The Problem:**

Persistent  
Enrollment  
Decline

**2.**

**Why it Matters:**

Impact on  
Children, Schools,  
and the System

**3.**

**What Next:**

Policy  
Recommendations

1.

# The Problem: Persistent Enrollment Decline



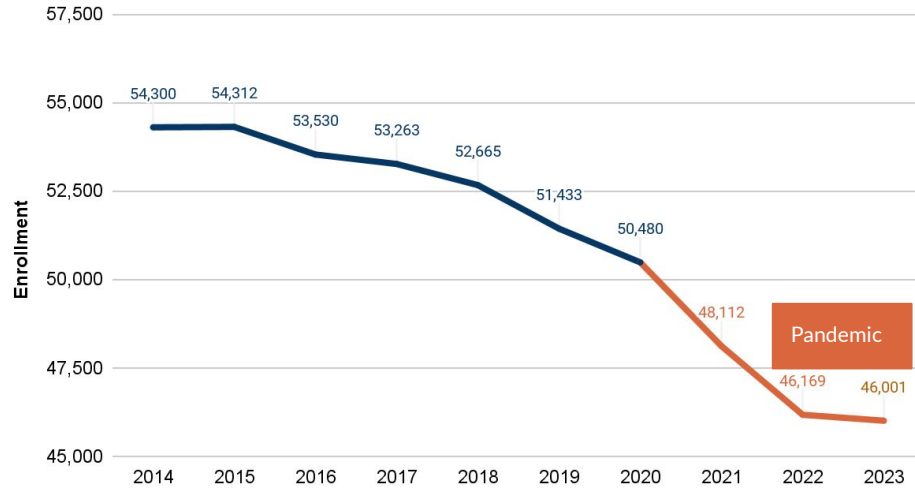
1a.

---

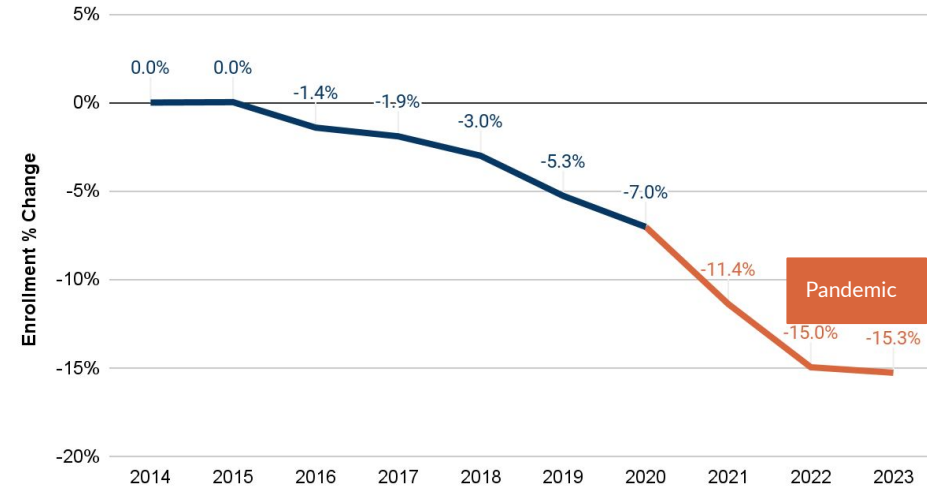
Boston Public Schools (BPS)  
enrollment is declining, and  
has been for a long time

# The pandemic accelerated the enrollment decline that began in 2015

## BPS Enrollment, 2014-2023



## BPS Enrollment % Change Since 2014

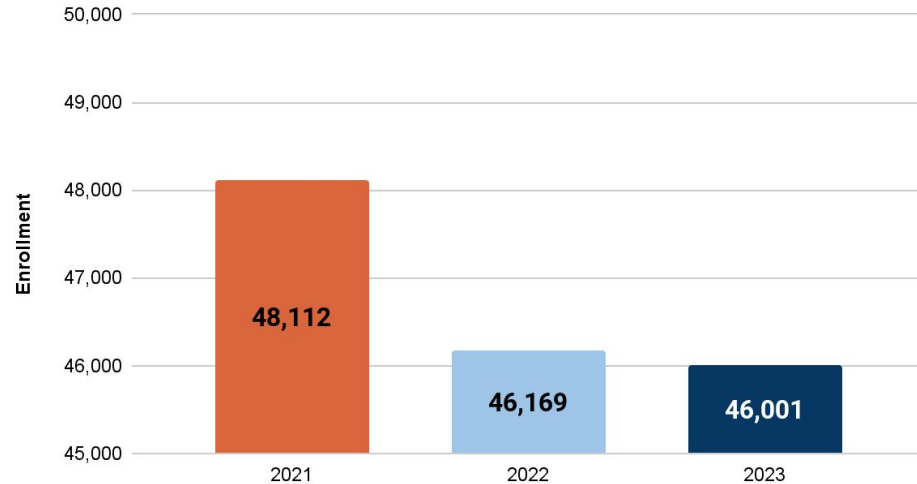


- BPS enrollment has been decreasing steadily since 2015
- The average annual rate of decline more than doubled during the pandemic, from **-1.2%** (2014-20) to **-3.0%** (2021-23)
- BPS enrollment has decreased by **-15.3% (8,299 students)** since 2014, compared to a **-4.4%** decrease statewide. *See Appendix for state data.*

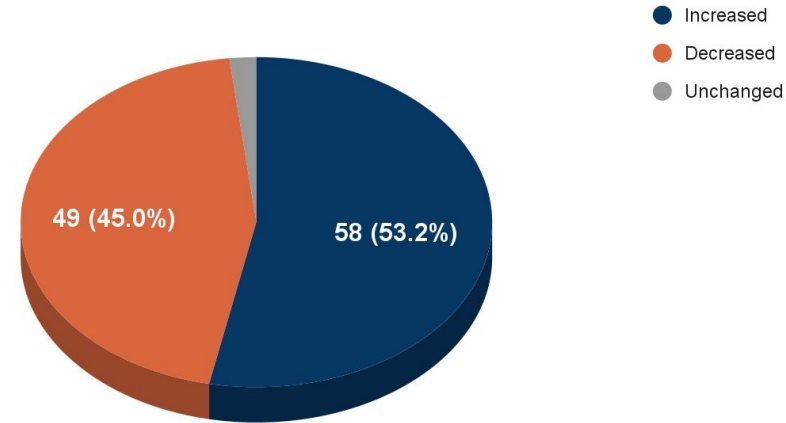
\* All enrollment data in this presentation comes from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Education Education website. For the purposes of this presentation, enrollment is defined as Boston Public School students and does not include the six Horace Mann charters

# Enrollment declined for the 8th straight year, but at a smaller rate than previous years

## BPS Enrollment, 2021-2023



## BPS Enrollment Change, by School, 2022-2023



- BPS enrollment declined by **-0.4% (168 students)** this year, compared to **-4%** last year.
- Almost half (**45%**) of individual BPS schools lost enrollment this year.

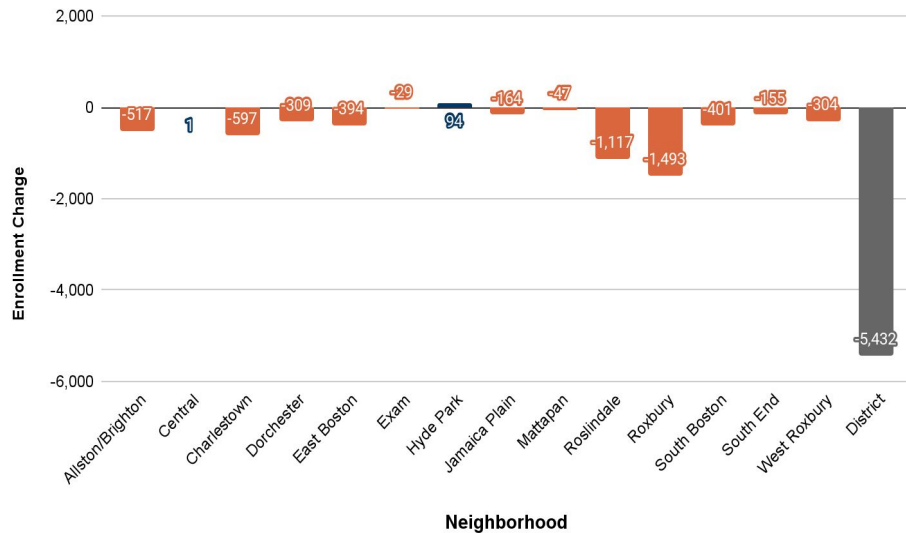
1b.

---

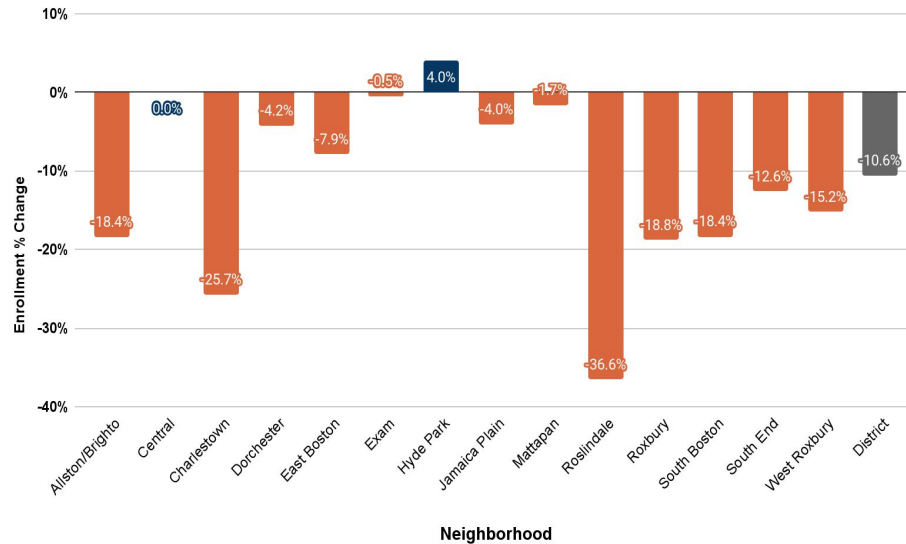
Five-year trends show  
enrollment is declining across  
BPS

# Roslindale, Roxbury, and Charlestown schools experienced the most decline over the last five years

BPS Enrollment Change by Neighborhood, 2019-2023



BPS Enrollment % Change by Neighborhood, 2019-2023



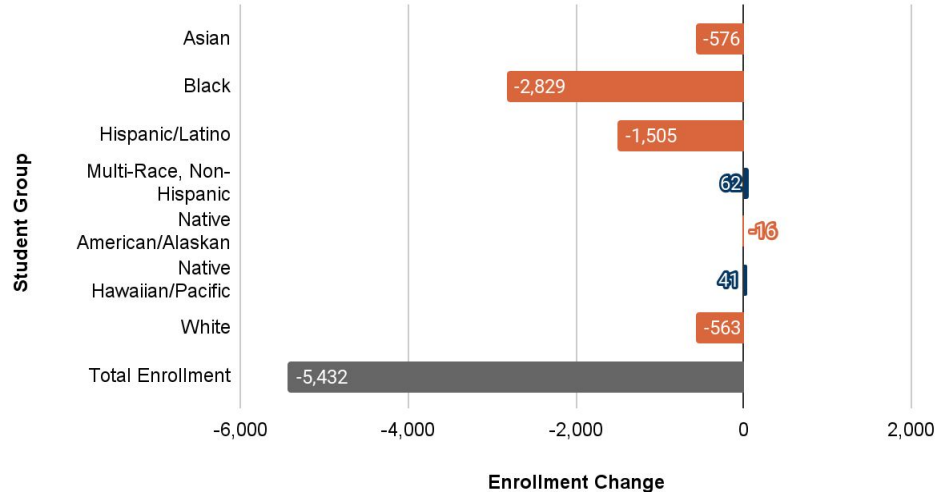
- Over the last five years, enrollment declined in every neighborhood except for Hyde Park and Central.
- Roslindale and Roxbury schools saw the largest drops in the number of enrolled students.
- As a percent of population, schools in Charlestown, Allston/Brighton and South Boston also experienced significant declines.

\*Enrollment decline by neighborhood looks at the change in school enrollments by their neighborhood location.

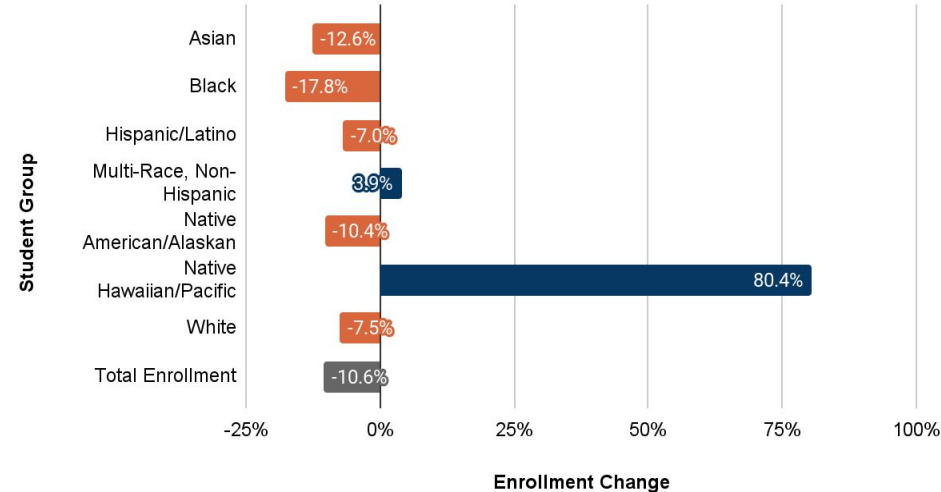


# Black students make up more than half of enrollment decline since 2019

## BPS Enrollment Change by Race/Ethnicity, 2019-2023



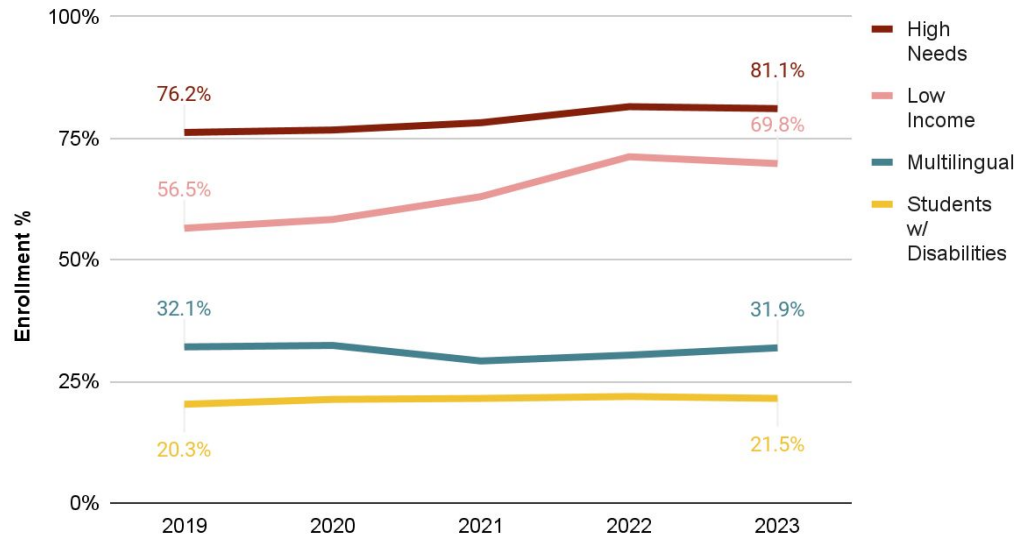
## BPS Enrollment % Change by Race/Ethnicity, 2019-2023



- BPS has **2,829** fewer Black students than it did five years ago, **52.1%** of the total decline.
- The Hispanic/Latino student population declined by **-1,505**, but this represents a smaller rate (**-7.0%**) than the district as a whole (**-10.6%**).
- Asian enrollment declined by **-12.6%**, the highest percent change behind Black students over this time period.

# The concentration of students with high needs in BPS has increased, driven by an increased number of low income students

## BPS Enrollment by Select Population, 2019-2023



As enrollment has declined, the share of high needs students has become more concentrated within BPS.

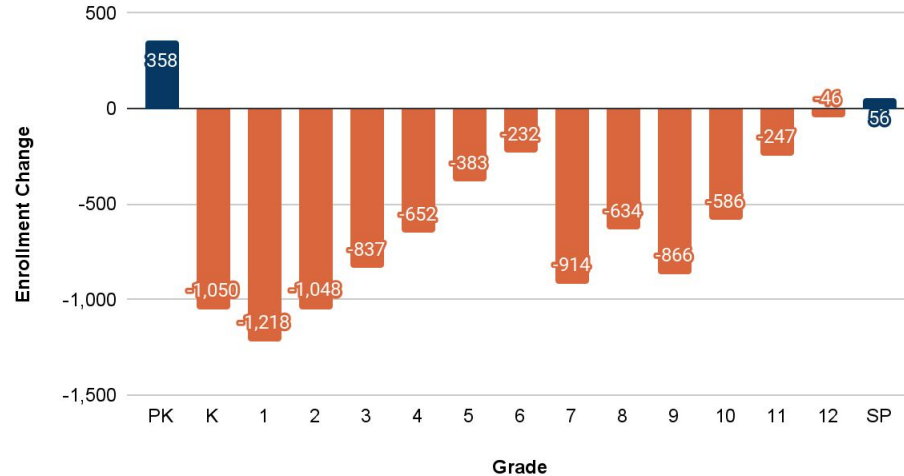
DESE defines “high needs” as a student who is a multilingual learner, from a low income household, or a student with a disability.

There has been a significant increase in the share of students qualifying as low income since 2019, driving the increase in share of high-needs students.\*

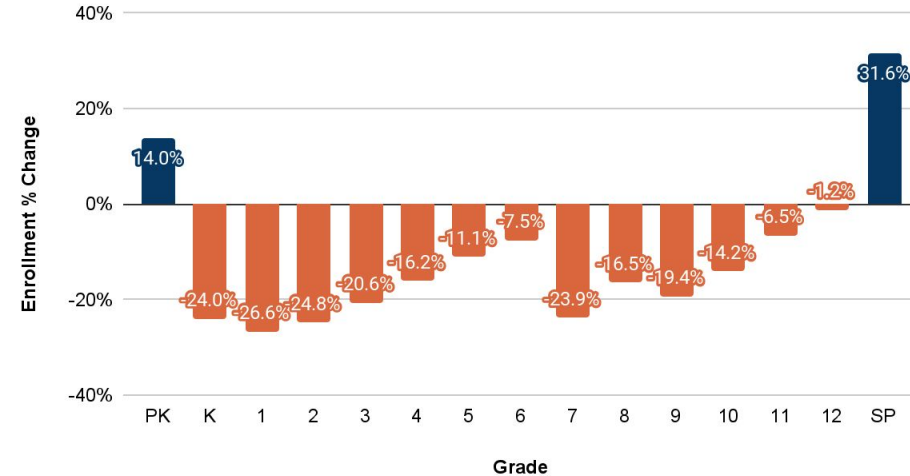
\*In 2021-22, DESE broadened the definition for students being considered “low income” from the prior “Economically Disadvantaged” category.

# Pre-K is the only grade with increased enrollment since 2019

## BPS Enrollment Change by Grade, 2019-2023



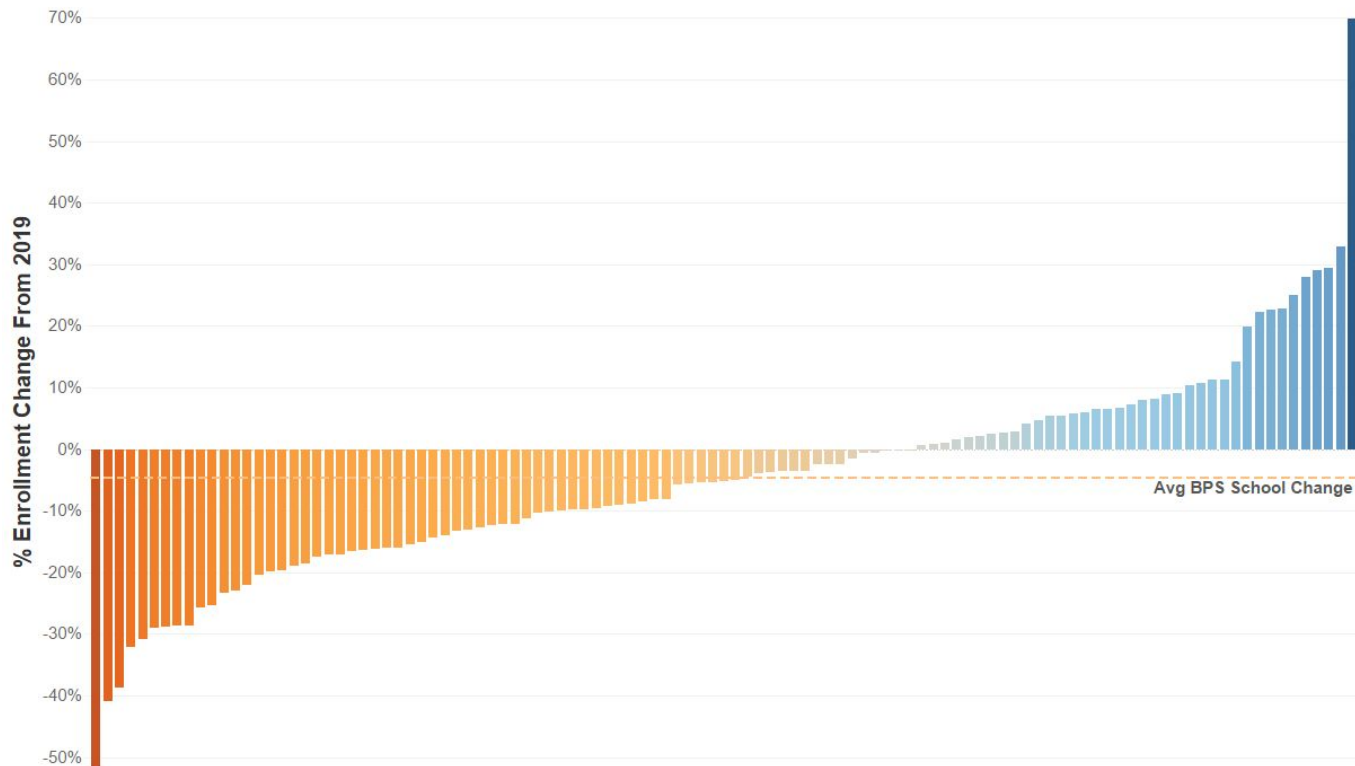
## BPS Enrollment % Change by Grade, 2019-2023



- Grades K-12 all saw an enrollment decline, with only pre-K showing a notable increase
  - Pre-K, which includes both K0 and K1, increased by **14%** (358)
  - Enrollment decline exceeded **-19%** in each early grade and key entry grade (K, 1, 2, 3, 7, 9)
  - By comparison, the largest decline statewide over this time period was only **-8.4%** (5th grade)  
*See appendix for state data.*

# Almost 2/3 of BPS schools have lost enrollment since 2019

## BPS Enrollment Change by School, 2019-2023



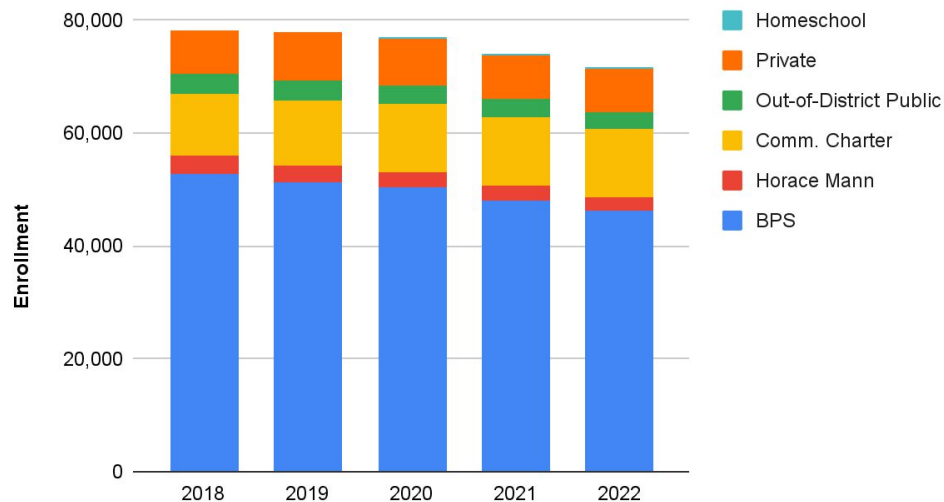
**62.4%** of BPS schools had a decrease in enrollment over the past 5 years.

**34.9%** had an increase in enrollment.

The average BPS school has lost **-4.7%** enrollment.

# Enrollment is down across the city, but is largely experienced by BPS

## Boston School-Age Enrollment, 2018-2022



## 5-year Enrollment Declines\*

- Citywide school-age enrollment: -8.6% (-6,716)
- BPS: -12.3% (-6,495)
- Out-of-District public schools (e.g. METCO): -10% (-339)
- Private school: -0.6% (-48)

## 5-year Enrollment Increases

- Commonwealth Charter: +7.8% (+862)
- Homeschool: +124.2% (+159) *This still represents <1% of total enrollment*

\* [Data on this slide](#) only includes K-12 and is up to 2022, the latest year DESE reports non-public options such as private and homeschool. The school attending children report is collected in January, which may result in discrepancies between this and DESE's November enrollment release which is based on October 1 reporting.

## Takeaways:

- Examining BPS enrollment decline over the last 5 years by neighborhood, student group, grade, and school shows the *pervasiveness of enrollment decline*. Enrollment is declining everywhere, affecting students and communities across Boston.
- Citywide enrollment decline is largely experienced by BPS - other school types have seen less severe decline.
- Black student enrollment decline has been especially severe over the last 5 years (-17.8%).



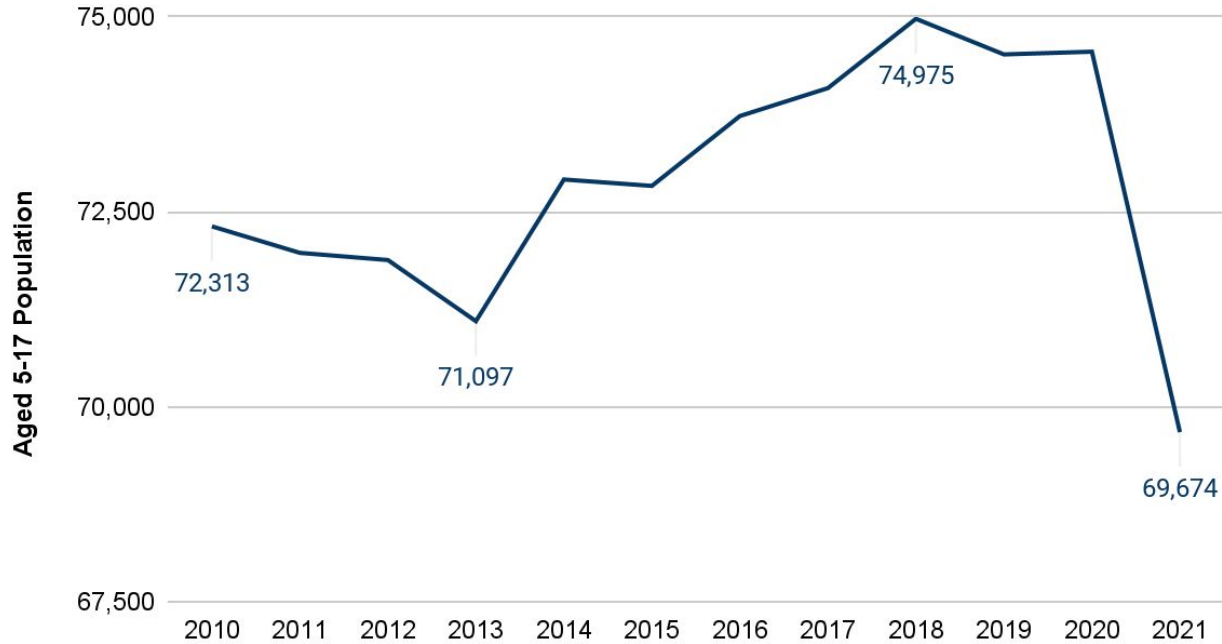
1c.

---

Enrollment decline  
reflects demographic  
shifts in Boston

# Boston's school-aged population hit 10-year low in 2021

## Boston Aged 5-17 Population Estimates, 2010-2021

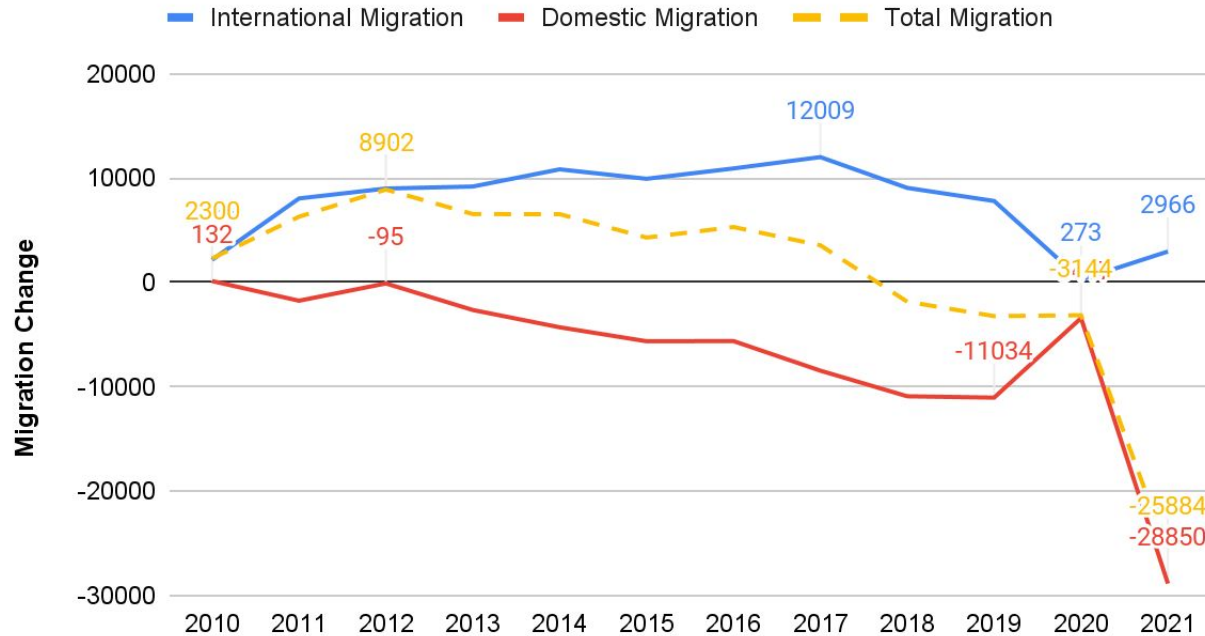


Boston lost almost **5,000** school-aged children since the start of the pandemic, more than the entire 2022-23 enrollment of Somerville Public Schools.



# The school-aged population decline mirrors local migration decline

## Suffolk County Migration, 2010-2021

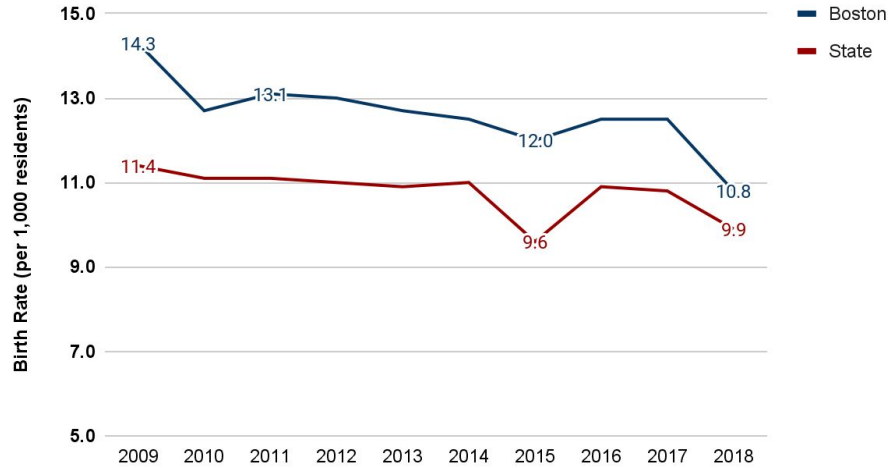


Migration levels in Suffolk County (which Boston makes up about 85% of), also hit a 10-year low in 2021, closely mirroring the decline in Boston's child population.

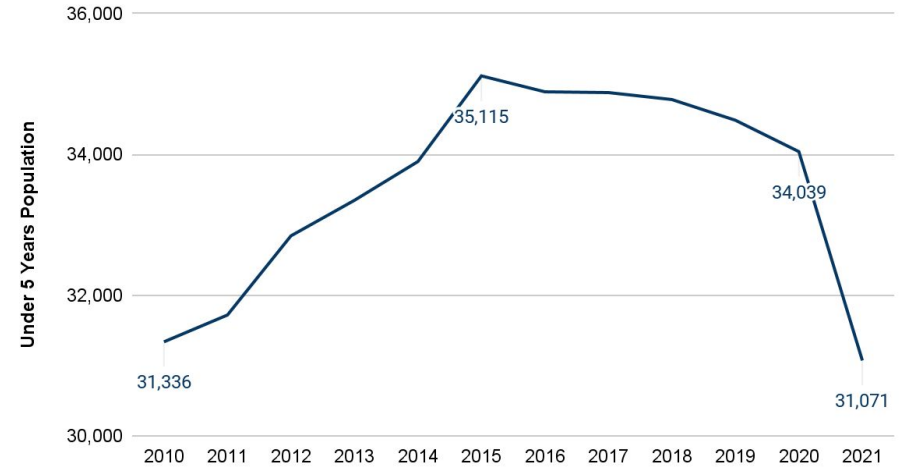
Source: 2010-2019 from Estimates of the Components of Resident Population Change: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019; 2020-2021 from Estimates of the Components of Resident Population Change. U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, March 2022.

# Boston's pipeline of potential students is narrowing

## Boston and Massachusetts Birth Rates, 2009-2018



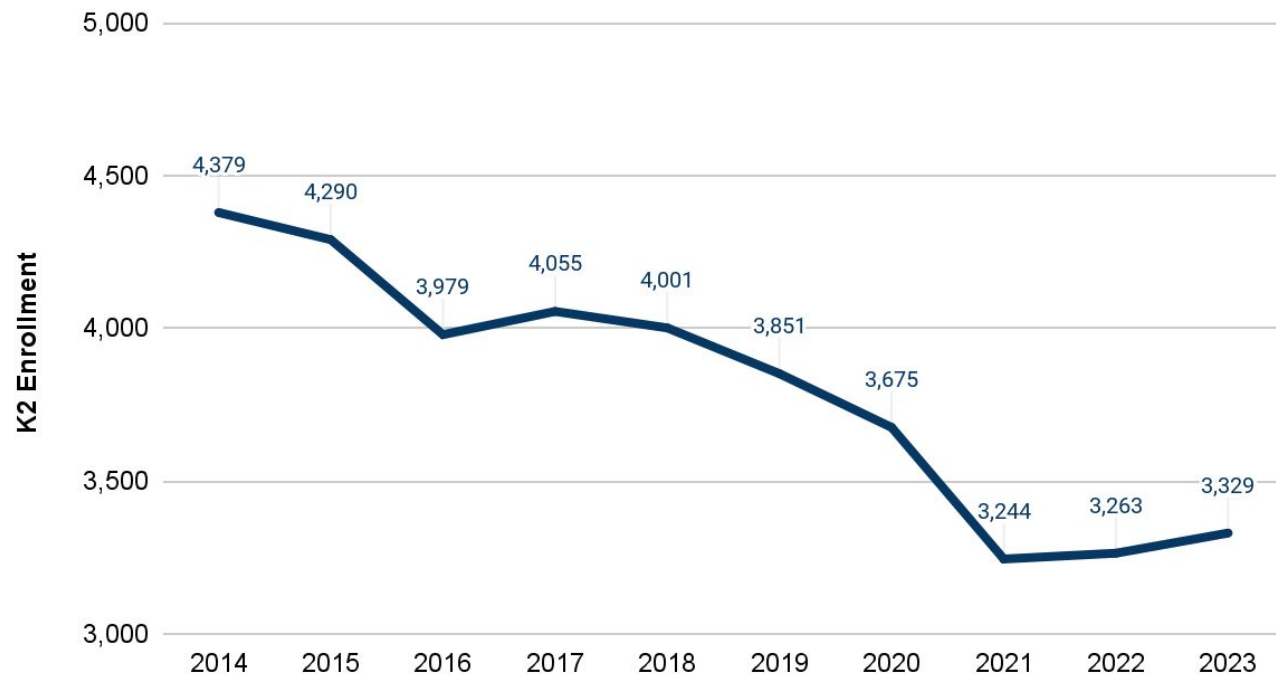
## Boston Under 5 Years Population Estimates, 2010-2021



- Boston birth rates and the under 5 population are at 10-year lows
- Birth rates have fallen by **-24.5%** in the last decade
  - Children born in 2018 (when birth rates were at a decade low) will be in kindergarten next year
- The under 5 population is down **-11.5%** since its peak in 2015
- **As these smaller groups move through BPS, total enrollment will likely continue to decline.**

# These demographic trends lead to smaller Kindergarten cohorts

## BPS Kindergarten Enrollment, 2014-2023

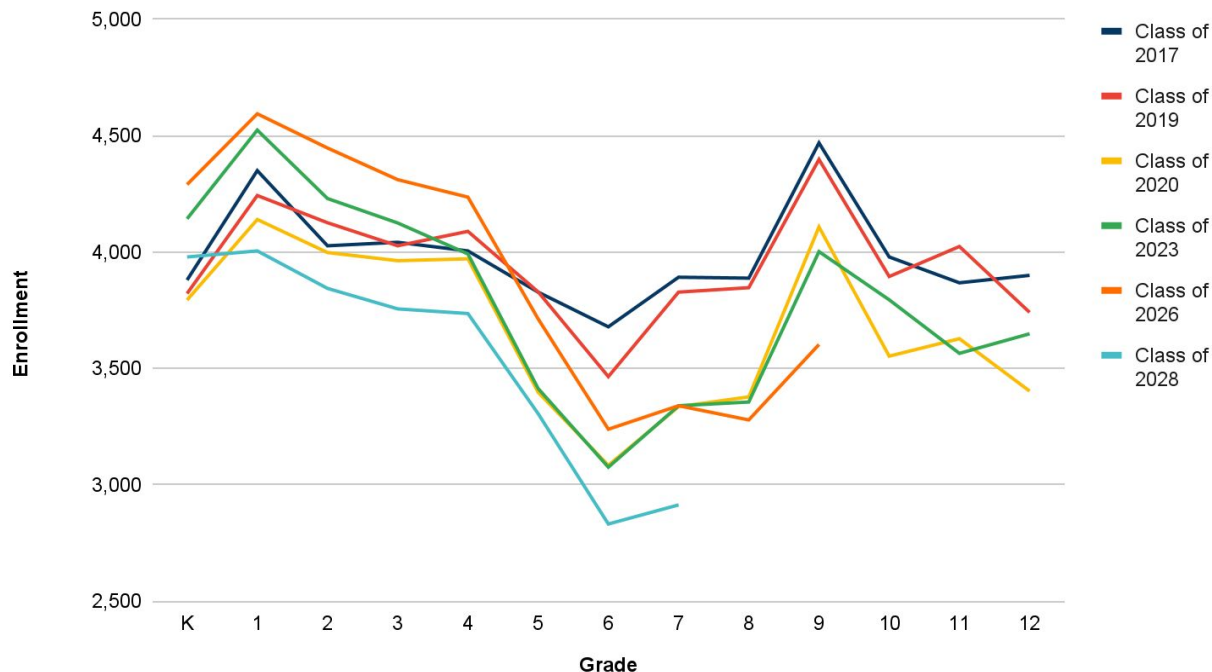


Kindergarten enrollment is the strongest predictor of district-wide enrollment patterns.

Because of falling migration and birth rates, kindergarten enrollment has fallen considerably over the last decade; though it has begun to rise slightly in the last two years, these structural trends will likely result in lower overall enrollment for the foreseeable future.

# Most BPS cohorts lose students between kindergarten and 12th grade

## BPS Cohort Enrollment Trends



Following several cohorts over time illuminates the challenge of attrition in BPS:

- Enrollment decreases for recent cohorts are greater in scale than earlier cohorts.
- The *biggest decreases* happen between 4th-6th grades, when a lot of students shift to charter middle schools.
- The *biggest increases* happen in secondary school entry grades (7th and 9th).
- However, the rate of students returning for 7th grade has *diminished over time*.

## Takeaways:

- Migration and birth rates have fallen considerably in recent years, leaving Boston with far fewer children than it used to have.
- Because there are fewer children, BPS is seeing lower kindergarten enrollment. As the best predictor of district K-12 enrollment, smaller kindergarten cohorts mean a smaller district overall.
- Smaller incoming kindergarten cohorts combined with the loss of students between kindergarten and 12th grade will continue to result in smaller overall BPS enrollment.



2.

---

## What is the Impact on Children, Schools, and the System



# Enrollment decline has left BPS with many underutilized buildings

Based on 2017 facilities reports, BPS schools have the capacity for 55,206 students, **6,938 more** than currently enrolled.\*

This gap equates to **16.5 schools** of average BPS school size



\*Capacity and enrollment numbers on this slide include the six Horace Mann Charter Schools, which operate in BPS school buildings through MOUs with the district. The average BPS school in 2023 has 420 students. Source: BuildBPS Building Reports, 2017.

# At the school level, under-enrollment creates funding gaps

Fewer kids mean less resources for programs, staffing, and instructional/enrichment supports.

## Operating Costs

Under-enrolled and fully-enrolled schools require the same amount of money to keep the lights on and ensure that students have the staffing and supports they need for learning.

*Example: A fully enrolled classroom with 25 students has the same cost as an under-enrolled classroom with 12 students (staffing, utilities, etc.)*

## Less Revenue

But because funding is based on enrollment, under-enrolled schools have less money coming in to cover those same expenses.

*Example: A fully enrolled classroom with 25 students generates \$625,000 in per pupil funding, while an under-enrolled classroom with 12 students generates \$300,000 in funding.*

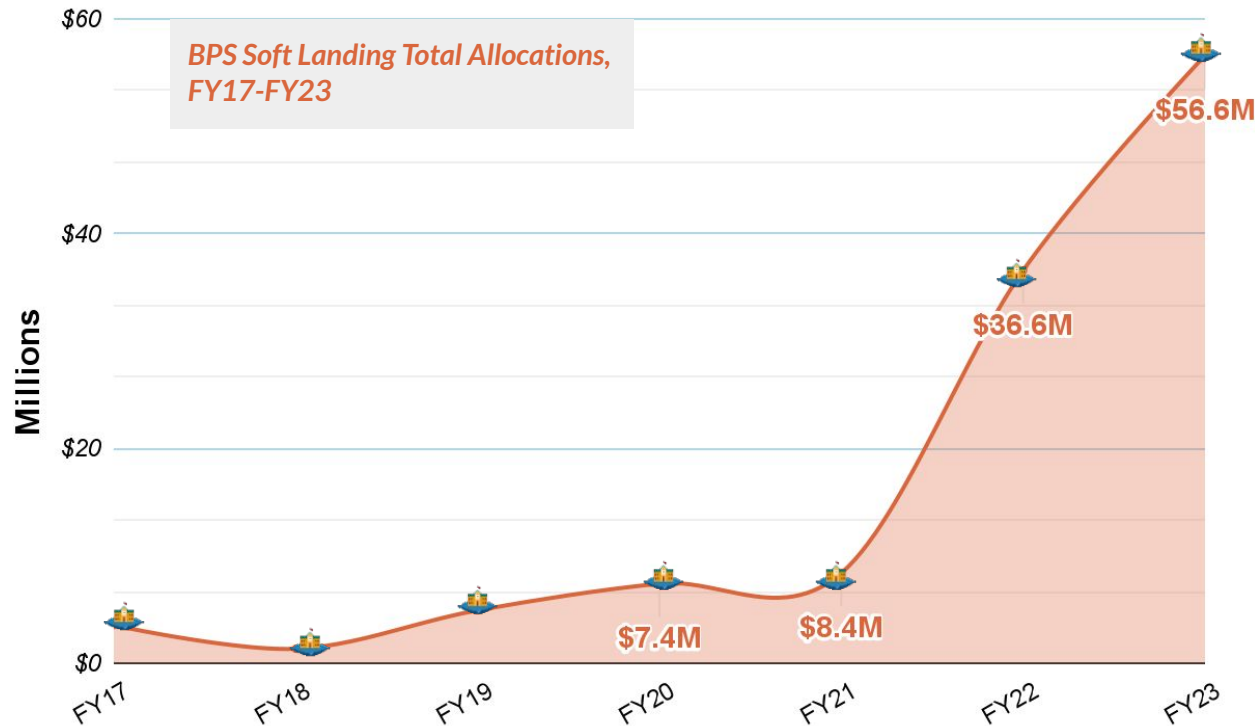
## Funding Gap

Under-enrolled schools face a gap between their expenses and the money they have to pay for them.

*Example: Multiple under-enrolled classrooms in a school result in a lack of funding to pay for school-wide resources, services, and staffing.*



# BPS fills funding gaps with “Soft Landings” for schools, but widespread enrollment decline has dramatically increased the cost



BPS is paying \$56.6M this year for Soft Landings

- This expense is higher than the total budget of ~80% of Massachusetts school districts
- This is **3.7%** of the FY23 BPS Budget
- BPS has spent **\$101M** over the last 3 years on Soft Landings

\*Soft Landings financial data includes BPS & Horace Mann schools  
Source: FY17-FY23 BPS Budget Documents

# While soft landings provide short-term stability to prevent budget cuts, they do not create a more robust educational experience

**Soft landings** fill the financial gap caused by enrollment decline, providing schools with fiscal safety nets to meet their basic needs while shielding them from needing to make staff/programming cuts.

However, they do not bring new resources, staff, or programs to schools:

## Expenses Covered by Soft Landings

- Classroom teacher
- Principal
- Nurse
- Operations costs (e.g. utilities)

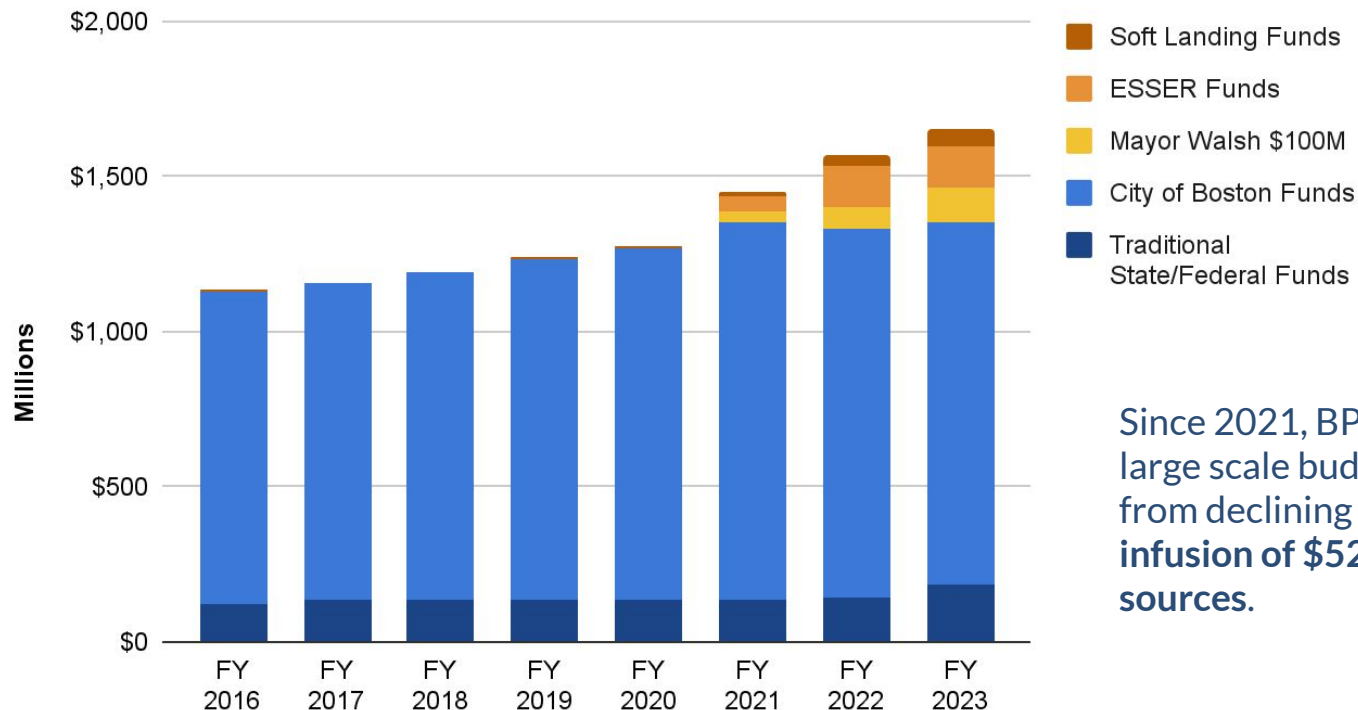
## Expenses NOT Covered by Soft Landings

- Enrichment (e.g. art, music)
- Full-time reading specialist
- New technology or educational supplies
- Staff professional development

When schools are **fully enrolled**, they have enough funding for basic needs *and* discretionary funding to spend on enrichment, specialists, and other supports, enabling them to respond to student needs and improve the educational experience they provide.

# BPS is facing a potential fiscal cliff as enrollment declines, costs increase, and supplemental funding expires

## BPS Budget by Revenue Source FY16-23



Since 2021, BPS has prevented the large scale budget cuts that often result from declining enrollment through an infusion of \$528M in new funding sources.

## Takeaways:

- Too many BPS schools are underutilized and under-enrolled, with significant financial consequences for individual schools and the district as a whole.
- Soft Landings are a short-term solution to mitigate the financial impact on school budgets, but they have minimal impact on educational opportunities available to students and are unsustainable financially.
- If BPS had fewer under-enrolled schools, the increasing money the district spends on empty seats through soft landings *could instead* be spent to improve educational programming and offerings at more fully enrolled schools.



# 3.

---

## What Next: Policy Implications



## Questions for consideration

Data presented in the above slides provides a snapshot of BPS enrollment, but do not fully explain enrollment drops among different groups, grades, and neighborhoods. There are further questions that must be asked:

*What are the primary drivers of enrollment decline in BPS (e.g., birth rates, immigration, perceptions of school quality/safety, housing costs)?*

*Which trends can we expect to continue over time, and which trends might we be able to influence?*

*Which BPS schools have been impacted the most by consistent enrollment decline?*

*Which schools are high-demand?*

*What lessons can we learn about enrollment at the school level to inform future building and design choices?*

*What do Boston families look for in schools?*

*How can we design schools to meet their needs?*

*What is BPS enrollment projected to look like for the next 5, 10, 20 years?*

*How will the Green New Deal incorporate accurate and updated enrollment figures in their school facilities planning process?*

## Continue Soft Landings

---

Use available federal/city funding to continue soft landings for 1-2 years, supporting schools and maintaining services while commencing longer-term planning addressing enrollment decline.

## Discuss Enrollment Decline Publicly

---

Hold public conversations and plan to deal with declining enrollment. Leverage an enrollment study to explain to the public what is happening, the implications for students, and options for managing it.

## Conduct an Enrollment Study

---

As part of the Green New Deal/Master Facilities Planning, conduct an enrollment study to understand current and future enrollment patterns. This study should use accurate, current enrollment data and detailed projections of enrollment by neighborhood, student need, and school.

## Understand Family Choice

---

Utilize surveys and focus groups to better understand families' school choices. What drives their school choices? Why do families leave the city when children are school-age? How do we incorporate what we learn to make options more attractive to families?

## Increase the Volume of School Construction

---

The \$2B Green New Deal commitment provides a significant amount of resources for school facilities, but the pace and volume in Boston needs to be significantly increased. Rather than managing 2-3 school projects simultaneously, the city needs to be able to manage 8-10 annually.

## Community Designed Schools

---

By tapping families, stakeholders, non-profits, and philanthropic institutions, Boston can create new schools and school programs that meet the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of all its students.

## Engagement and Accountability

---

Local leaders have signalled the need to consolidate and close school buildings. The decisions to do so must be grounded in equity and data, with a clear public process and clear authority to manage this process and mitigate impacts on communities.

## Family-Centric Public Policy

---

There are many factors that have driven the decline of families and children in Boston. Policies promoting child care, affordable housing, support for immigrants, and equitable economic development will be critical to reversing these long-term trends.

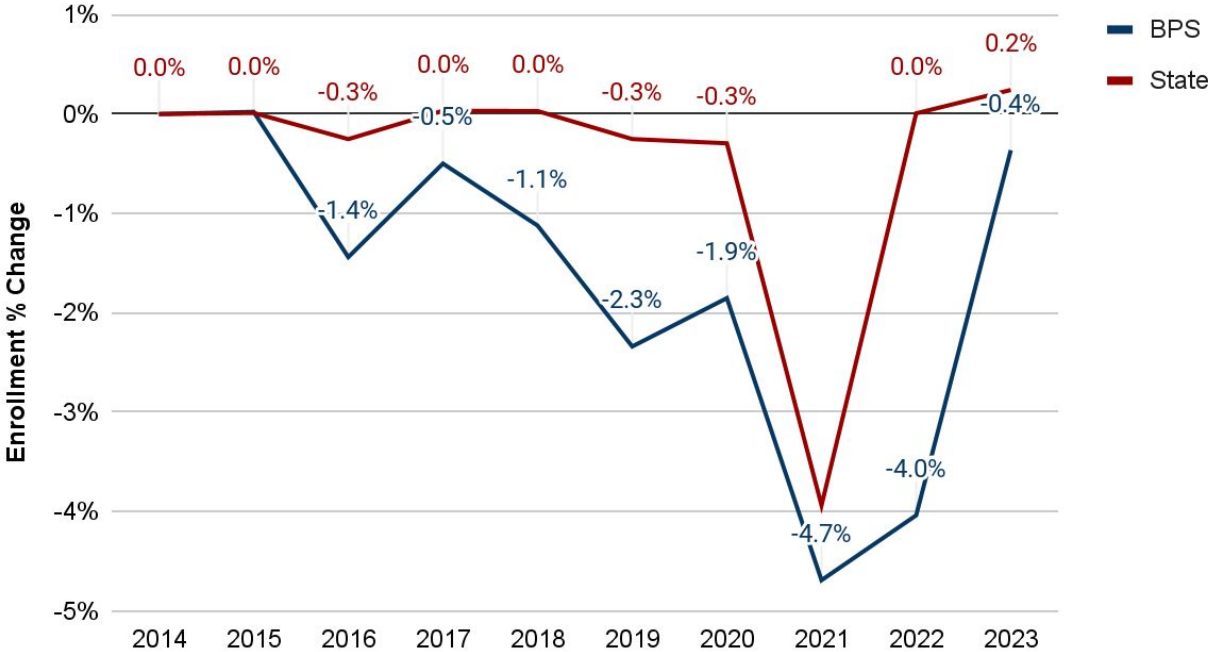


---

# Appendix

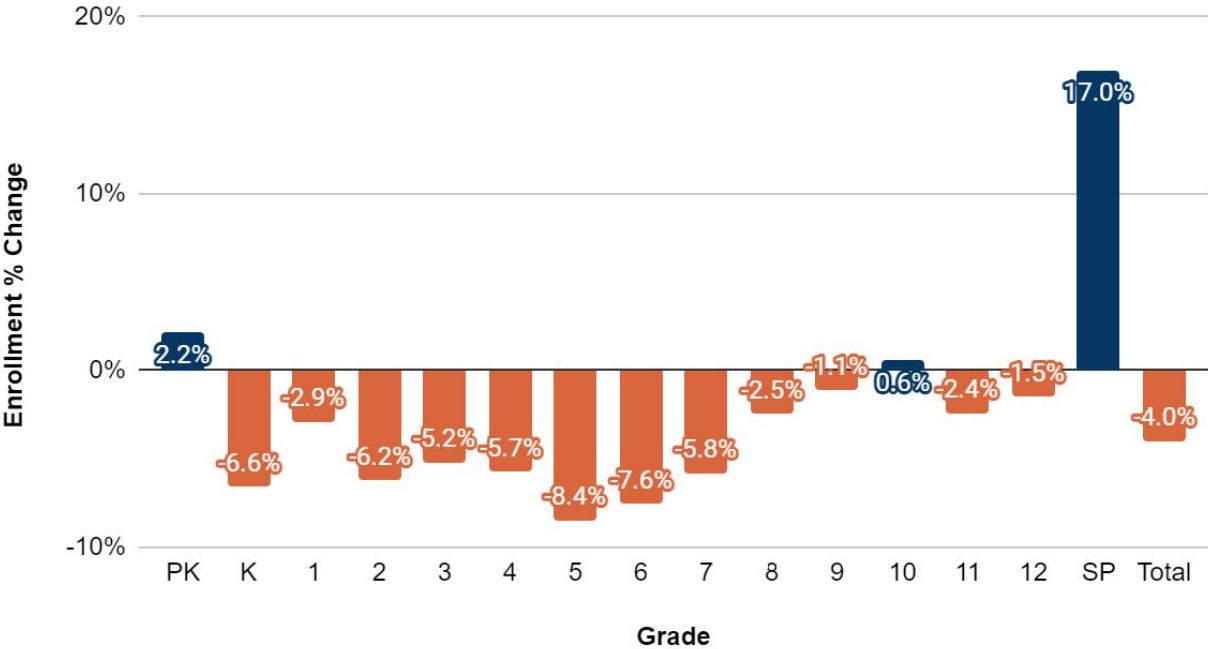
# BPS enrollment has consistently declined at a faster rate than the state

### BPS vs State Rate of Enrollment Change, 2014-2023



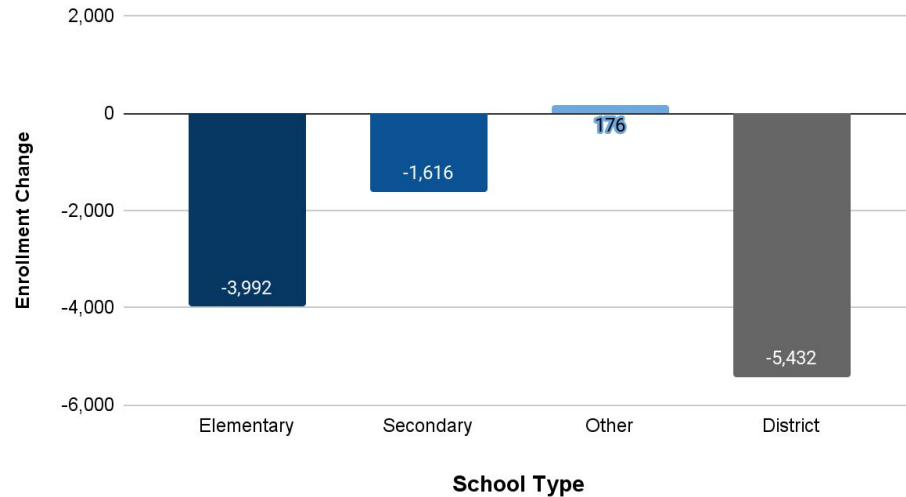
# Massachusetts has also lost enrollment in almost all grades except pre-k over the last five years, but at a smaller rate than BPS

## State Enrollment % Change by Grade, 2019-2023

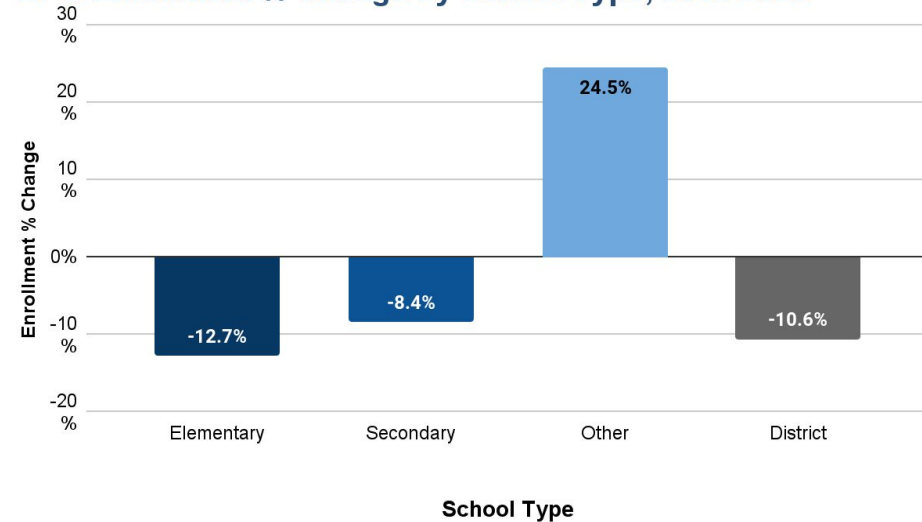


# BPS Enrollment Change by Grade Configuration, 2019-23

## BPS Enrollment Change by School Type, 2019-2023



## BPS Enrollment % Change by School Type, 2019-2023



- Schools primarily serving elementary students (grades K-6) had an enrollment decline of **-12.7%**
- Schools primarily serving high school students (grades 7-12) had an enrollment decline of **-8.4%**

\*Other includes any schools that serve elementary and secondary grades (e.g. K-12)

If you have questions or comments about this report, please reach out to us at [contact@bostonschoolsfund.org](mailto:contact@bostonschoolsfund.org)

---

