

Enrollment Changes in St. Louis' Catholic Schools

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Key Points

St. Louis City has experienced sharp population declines over the past five decades. As a result, both public and private school enrollment has been impacted. This brief examines changes to enrollment in schools under the Archdiocese of St. Louis, describing research on enrollment changes over the last ten years from the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and using data from the Private School Universe Survey (PSS) from the U.S. Department of Education over the last 20 years. In doing so, we are able to describe trends in St. Louis and other major archdioceses. We conclude with highlights of the current strategic planning processes for the Archdiocese of St. Louis and other large archdioceses. We find:

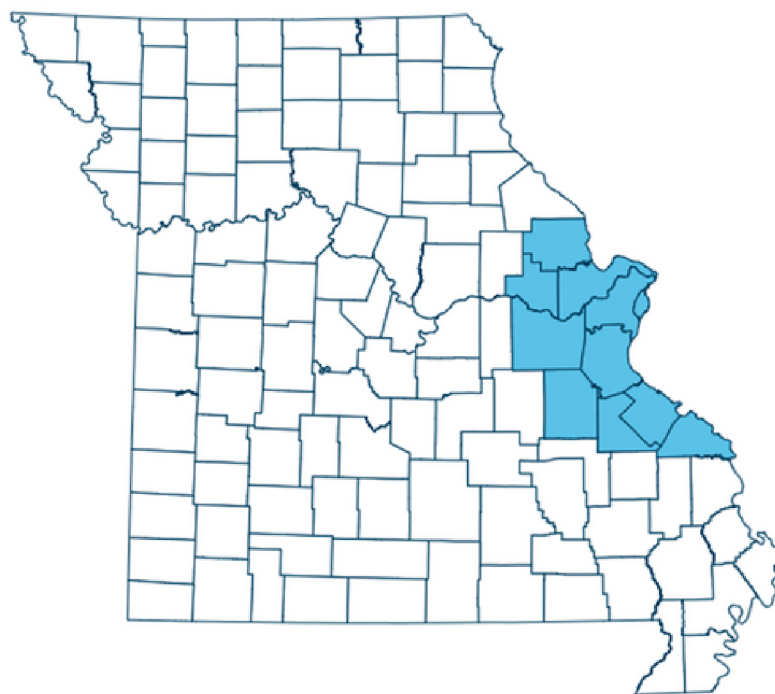
- Overall enrollment in Catholic schools within the entirety of the Archdiocese of St. Louis has decreased by 38% in the last ten years and roughly 50% since 2001-02, forcing school closures and consolidation.
- Catholic schools in St. Louis City and county experienced a significant enrollment drop (57.5%) between 2001-02 and 2019-20, with a 43.9% drop occurring between 2009-10 and 2019-20.
- Catholic school enrollment nationally has followed a downward trend over the last twenty years, decreasing 19% from 2001-2010 and 18% from 2010 to 2020, shrinking nearly 34% in total.
- While Catholic school enrollment has declined nationally (3.8%), there are more pronounced declines in the 10 largest archdioceses (5.8%), including St. Louis.
- Within the Archdiocese of St. Louis, declining enrollment in Catholic schools has been identified as a key component leading to the strategic planning initiative, “All Things New,” which has moved from the feedback to the planning phase; additional school consolidation and closures may be recommended, further shrinking school choice options.



Introduction

Over the past five decades, St. Louis has experienced sharp population declines. In 1950, the city boasted a population of over 850,000 residents.¹ While the 2020 U.S. Census estimates the city's population to have been 301,000, estimates from July of 2021 put the population at roughly 293,000 (a decline of approximately 16% since 2000).² In a prior brief, we highlighted how the declining city population has impacted enrollment in the city's lone traditional public school district, St. Louis Public Schools.³ In this brief, we explore the enrollment in the city's private school sector, focusing on the Catholic school sector under the Archdiocese of St. Louis, and compare local trends to those nationally and in other large archdioceses across the country. We also describe the ongoing strategic planning process within the Archdiocese of St. Louis, the "All Things New" initiative, and strategic planning processes in other large archdioceses.

Figure 1: Archdiocese of St. Louis



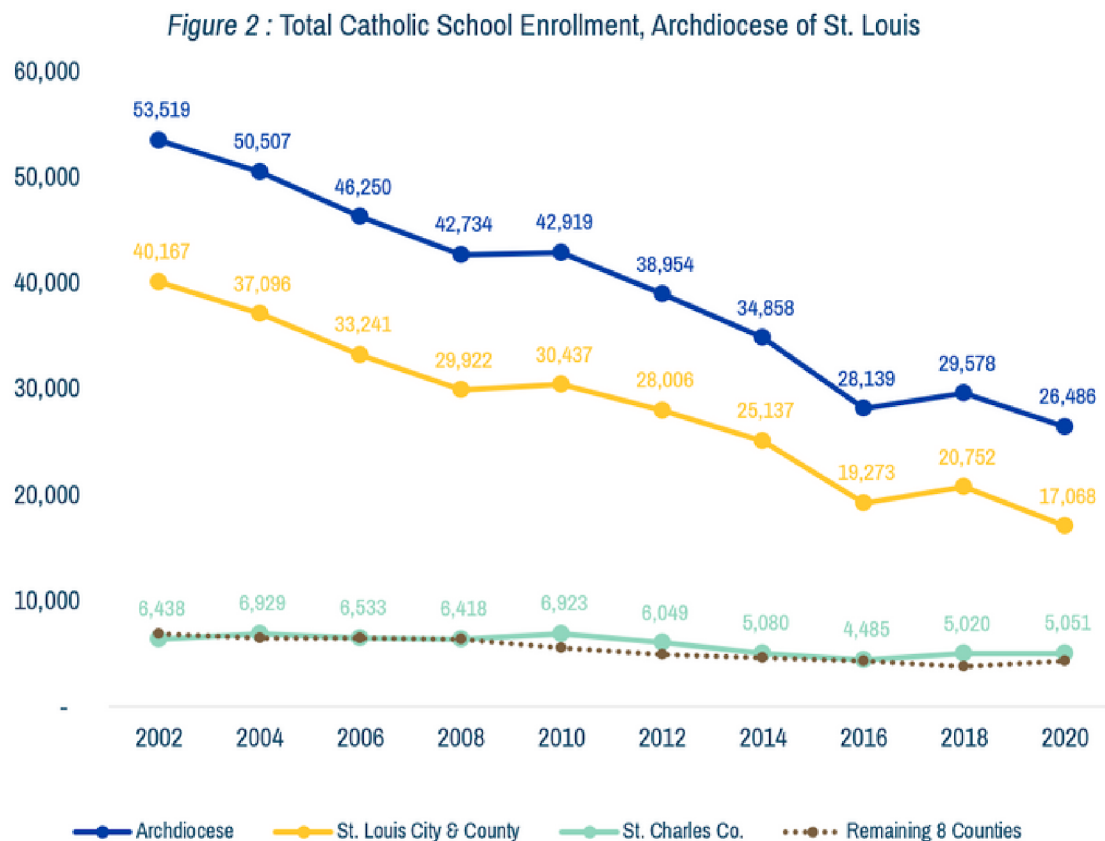
Counties in blue represent areas served by Archdiocese

Changes in Catholic School Enrollment in St. Louis

Historically, St. Louis has been home to one of the most robust private school markets in the country, with a large number of religious (mainly Catholic and Lutheran) and independent private schools dotting the city. However, much like the city's public schools, enrollments in the city's private schools have steadily declined. During the 2001-02 academic year, over 53,000 students enrolled in one of the Catholic schools of the Archdiocese of St. Louis^a, which includes the city and county of St. Louis, St. Charles county, and eight other counties in

^aThroughout this brief, we focus on all Catholic schools that have operated within the geographic boundaries of the Archdioceses. Therefore, we are including those Catholic schools that may not be directly associated or governed by the Archdioceses in which they operate.

Missouri.⁴ Figure 2 below highlights overall changes in enrollment in the Archdiocese of St. Louis schools and delineates enrollment changes in Catholic schools in St. Louis City and county, St. Charles county, and the other eight counties over the past 18 years. Notably, all locations have experienced a downward trend in enrollment.



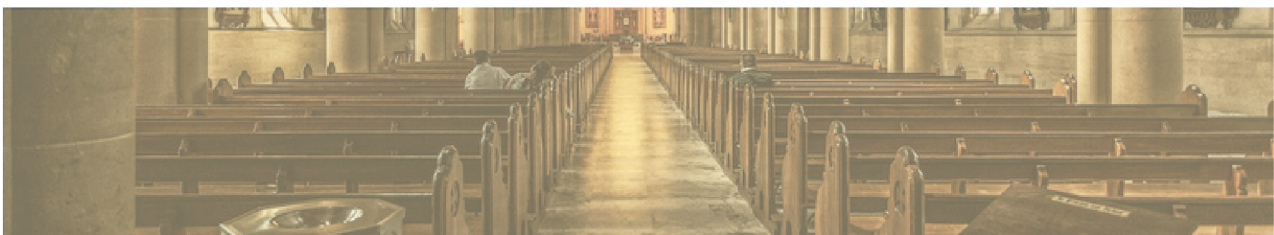
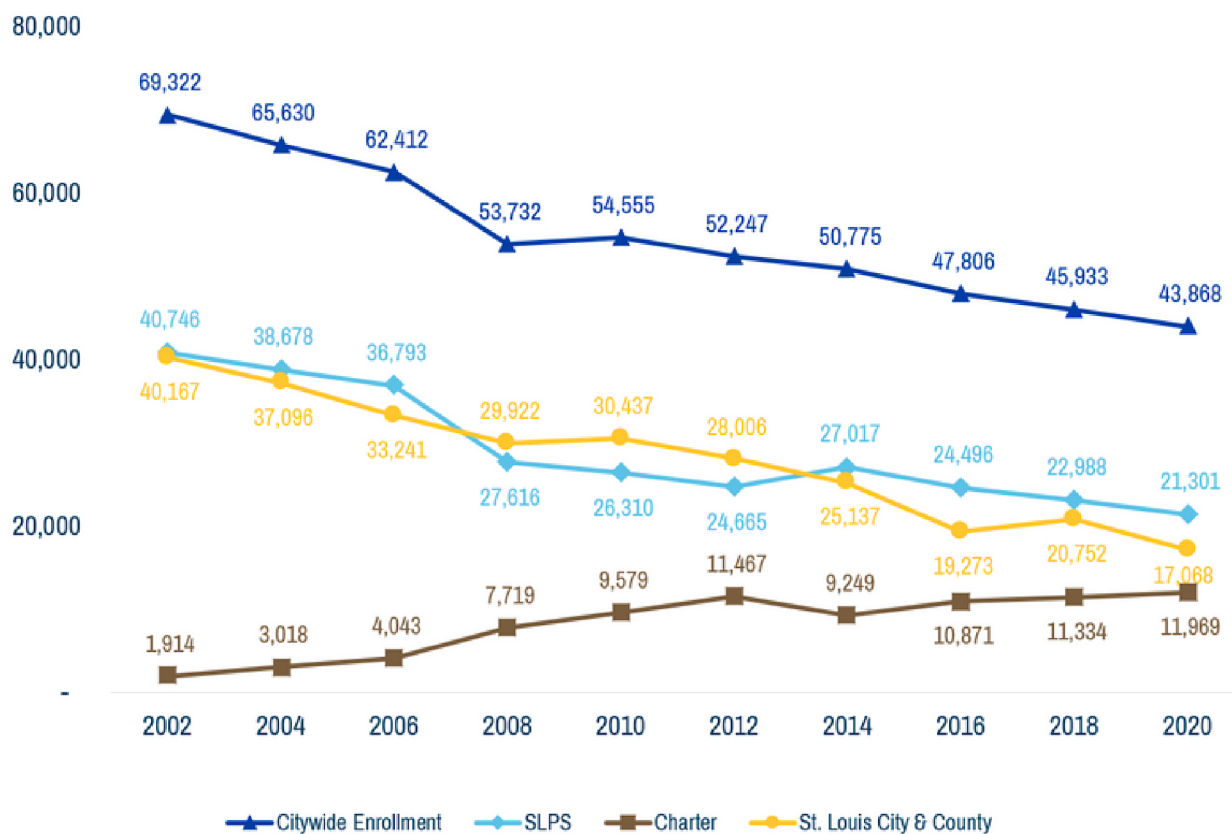
The most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Education puts Catholic school enrollment within the Archdiocese of St. Louis at 26,486 students, a loss of roughly 50% since 2001-02.⁵ This decline has been heavily concentrated in St. Louis City and county, as enrollment has fallen 57.5% from 40,167 during the 2001-02 school year to 17,068 students in 2019-20.⁶ During the last ten years, enrollment decreased in St. Louis City and county by 43.9%, a loss higher than all other counties in the Archdiocese of St. Louis (Table 1).⁷ In response, the Archdiocese has closed its doors at five elementary schools in St. Louis City within the past five years, leaving just ten remaining open. Three elementary schools in St. Louis County were closed in the same time frame, though 90 schools still remain open. A significant number of these closures were located in North St. Louis City and North County, an area where 73% of residents are Black and more than one in four people (26.6%) live below the poverty line (about twice the average rate in Missouri), meaning these closure and consolidation decisions largely impact low-income students and students of color.⁸

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County	Enrollment 2010	Enrollment 2020	Percent Change
St. Louis City & County	30,437	17,068	-43.92%
St. Charles	6,923	5,051	-27.00%
Franklin	2,045	1,672	-18.20%
Jefferson	1,368	1,058	-22.70%
Lincoln	525	252	-52.00%
Perry	605	485	-19.80%
St. Francois	145	109	-24.80%
Ste. Genevieve	590	492	-16.60%
Warren	247	240	-2.80%
Washington	34	59	73.50%
Archdiocese Total	42,919	26,486	-38.30%

Enrollment declines in St. Louis City and county Catholic schools are similar to those in SLPS and the city overall (Figure 3). Only public charter schools have experienced an increase in enrollment since 2001-02. The first charter school opened in St. Louis City in 2000⁹, while 32 charter schools exist in the city today, along with one school operating in St. Louis County.¹⁰ As we show next, declining enrollments in Catholic schools is not unique to St. Louis.

Figure 3 : Total St. Louis City Public & Catholic School Enrollment



St. Louis Catholic Schools: How Enrollment Has Changed & the "All Things New" Initiative

Declining Enrollment in Catholic Schools Nationwide and in the Ten Largest Archdioceses

Nationally, Catholic school enrollment numbers were at their peak in the 1960s and began to fall in the 1970s, with the number of both schools and students declining. Between 2001-02 and 2019-20, the number of students enrolled in Catholic schools nationally has decreased by 879,033 students, decreasing 19% from 2001-2010 and 18% from 2010 to 2020, shrinking nearly 34% in total¹¹ (as compared to the 50% drop seen in all Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis and 54% drop in St. Louis City exclusively). It is also worth noting that this decrease is more concentrated in elementary schools than secondary schools (39.6% vs 16.9%).¹²

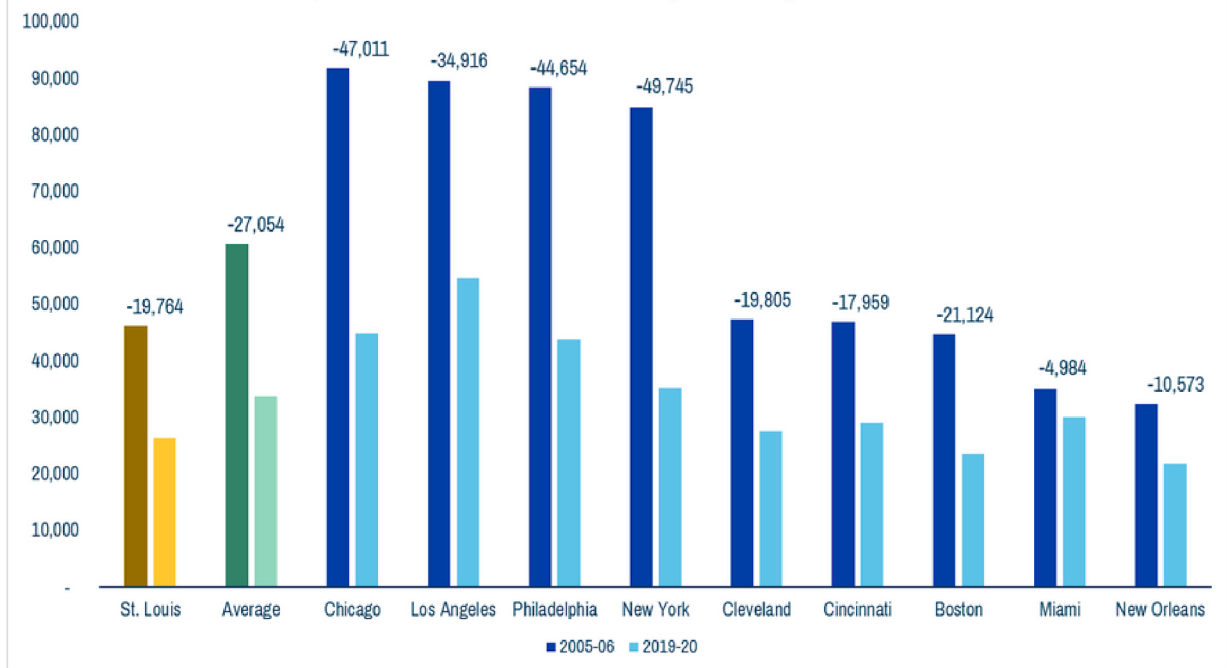
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused differing effects on Catholic school enrollment at the national level. According to the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), the 2020-2021 academic year saw the steepest yearly drop in enrollment in almost 50 years (6.4%).¹³ While the 2021-2022 school year enrollment saw enrollment recover some with the first national increase in two decades (overall enrollment increased by 3.8%), Catholic school enrollment nationwide is still 2.8% lower than it was during the 2019-2020 academic year.¹⁴

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The NCEA distinguishes enrollment data from the ten largest archdioceses, which includes the Archdiocese of St. Louis. This collective, some of which enroll historically underserved students in urban areas, experienced an average decline that was 3.3 percentage points greater than the national average of the other 165 archdioceses (5.3% vs. 2.0%) between the 2019-20 and 2021-22 school year.¹⁵ In 2019-2020, these schools lost a total of 36,000 students (an average decrease of 6.9%)—St. Louis specifically lost 1,356 students (a 3.8% decrease).¹⁶ St. Louis ranked 8th in percentage of enrollment decline and the 10th in the number of enrolled students (out of the ten largest archdioceses).¹⁷ Figure 5 highlights the declining enrollment in each of the ten largest archdioceses between 2005-06 and 2019-20. With populations across the U.S. moving outward from larger cities, archdioceses like St. Louis will need to establish plans for serving their communities and improving their enrollment numbers.

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Figure 4: Catholic School Enrollment Change in Ten Largest Archdioceses



Strategic Planning in St. Louis: *All Things New*

Declining enrollments and decreased membership in Catholic parishes have led the Archdiocese of St. Louis to implement a strategic plan to inform decision making called “All Things New.” This strategic planning, currently in its second year, is meant to reimagine the Archdiocese in a more sustainable and viable way, which will likely include closing and consolidating parishes and schools. The diocese has recently finished the feedback phase of the initiative and is moving into the planning phase. The final results are expected to be announced in May 2023.

In anticipation of potential school consolidation or closures, it may be helpful to look at how the Archdiocese has handled school consolidation in the past. Two such examples are Holy Cross Academy and South City Catholic Academy. Holy Cross Academy was formed in 2012 as a merger between three separate parish schools, which has now grown to five schools, and has four campuses that split pre-kindergarten, elementary and middle school students.¹⁸ Our Lady of Sorrows and St. Joan of Arc merged in 2017 to form South City Catholic Academy, which is hosted on St. Joan of Arc’s campus and is also home to South City Catholic Academy Learning Center, one of Archdiocese’s few special education programs.¹⁹

As additional consolidation continues to be a possibility, it is important to consider how stakeholders respond. Data from the “All Things New Education Survey,” conducted during the feedback phase of the strategic planning process, were recently released. When parents were asked their response to the possibility of fewer Catholic parishes and schools as a result of the initiative, over half (65%) responded they need more information before choosing to enroll their children.²⁰ This indicates parents plan to be selective about where

their children attend school, and may not stay within the Archdiocese. Other survey questions were designed to solicit information from various stakeholders about their views of Catholic schools. One key group surveyed was alumni of Catholic schools, as they are typically seen as the future of the Archdiocese. Notable results include responses to the statement ‘Catholic schools have a diverse student body and welcoming atmosphere’, where 50% of alumni disagreed. Another contentious statement was ‘Catholic schools support students with different learning styles and needs’—82% of faculty and staff agreed with this statement in contrast to only 37% of alumni.²¹ These responses indicate that alumni are critical of the current Catholic education model, a result consistent with the Archdiocese’s decrease in young adult participation in parishes.²²

How the above feedback will guide future plans remains to be seen. Specific plans will not be announced for several months, but the Archdiocese has indicated that immediate needs will be addressed as they arise and anticipate a significant impact to the current blueprint of schools and parishes.²³

Strategic Planning in Other Large Archdioceses

Many other archdioceses experiencing sustained enrollment declines are also turning to a strategic planning process. In comparable cities, archdiocesan leadership has worked to both fortify their mission and increase enrollment. The Archdioceses of Boston (MA), Cincinnati (OH), and Cleveland (OH) are also part of the 10 largest archdioceses in the U.S. experiencing a more significant enrollment decline than the national average for Catholic schools. The majority of these ten cities have implemented strategic planning initiatives since 2019, with many other smaller archdioceses across the nation doing the same. While each of their revitalization and strategic planning programs bears a different name and follows a different time table, each seems to center around a similar mission and broad redesigning of parishes and schools.

The Boston Archdiocese

- Strategic Planning Launched in 2020
- Focus of the Plan: The priorities of their mission center around academic changes, religious mission, financial planning, and diversity/inclusion.
- Updates provided: In February of 2020, they published the first draft of their vision statement along with a list of recommendations as a companion to these priorities and intentions. The recommendations are specific and applicable including things like teacher education platforms, professional development for religious education teachers, financial training for the school board, and diversity training for all district faculty/staff.²⁴

The Cincinnati Archdiocese - "Beacons of Light"

- Launched in 2020
- Focus of the Plan: "Beacons of Light" takes a broad approach to reorganization, characterized by parish/school consolidation into "Families of Parishes." They define this concept as "a grouping of parishes led by a common pastor and characterized by collaboration and shared resources."
- Updates provided: Letters from the archbishop imply that schools will be implicated in this resource consolidation process on a parish by parish basis. According to their website, the plan is finalized and beginning its implementation stages as of July 1st, 2022.²⁵

The Cleveland Archdiocese - "Keeping the Faith"

- Launched in 2021
- Focus of the Plan: "Keeping the Faith" looks to enhance enrollment, finances, as well as their Catholic mission, specifically implementing this strategic planning at the elementary school level.
- Updates provided: Updates are notably available in the form of podcasts. At present, the archdiocese is revising their plan after receiving community feedback with the intention of developing a finished plan in August of 2022 and presenting it to the bishop this fall.²⁶

Conclusion

This brief focuses on the enrollment decline in Catholic schools over the last decade, both in the St. Louis area and nationwide. In response, the St. Louis Archdiocese, and many other comparable archdioceses, have implemented strategic planning processes that aim to strengthen the number of students enrolling in Catholic education, as well as revitalize their schools and parishes.

Shrinking enrollment numbers have a substantial impact on the greater St. Louis community, one beyond Catholic school stakeholders. Plans like "All Things New" aspire to consolidate resources and create a more sustainable Catholic school community but may also exacerbate a growing scarcity of school choice. Additionally, past Catholic school closures and consolidations have disproportionately affected lower income students and Black students in North St. Louis City and North St. Louis County. In combination with public school closures in St. Louis Public Schools, students' schooling options in these areas have become increasingly limited, forcing students to travel further outside their neighborhoods. As the strategic plan is finalized, future Catholic school consolidation and closures may be recommended, further shrinking school options for students in underserved groups.

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Data Sources

NCES Private School Enrollment Survey

NCES Digest of Education Statistics 2020

Data publicly available via the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. See: <https://apps.dese.mo.gov/NonPublicReg/Reports.aspx>