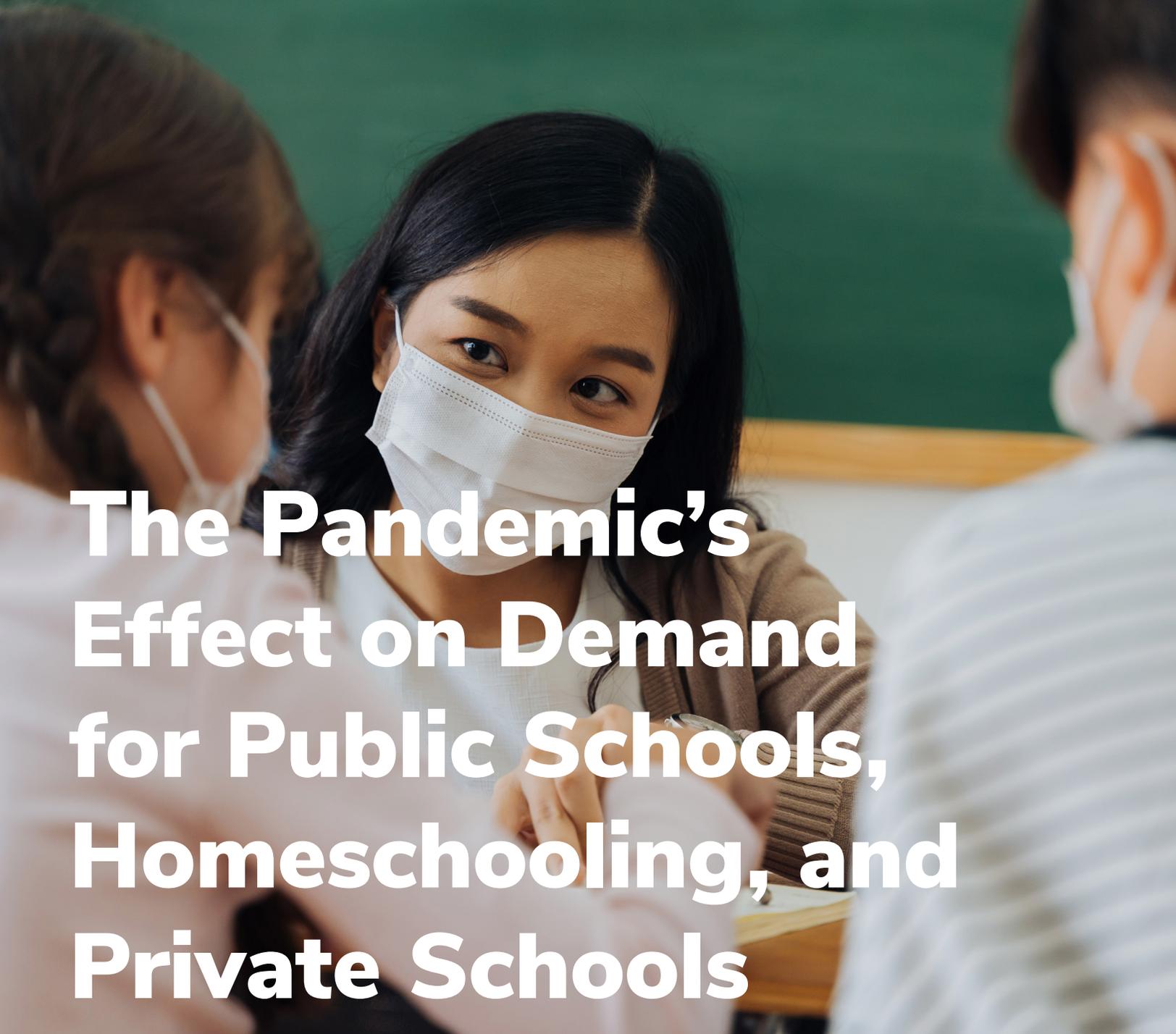




GERALD R. FORD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY  
EDUCATION POLICY INITIATIVE  
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WEPC  
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A photograph of three students in a classroom setting. They are all wearing white surgical face masks. The student in the center is a young woman with dark hair, looking towards the camera with a slight smile. She is wearing a brown cardigan over a white shirt. The other two students are partially visible on either side, also wearing masks. The background is a green chalkboard.

# The Pandemic's Effect on Demand for Public Schools, Homeschooling, and Private Schools

**Policy Brief September 2021**



# The Pandemic's Effect on Demand for Public Schools, Homeschooling, and Private Schools

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## Policy Issue

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The COVID-19 pandemic drastically disrupted the functioning of U.S. public schools, potentially changing the relative appeal of alternatives such as homeschooling and private schools. Using student-level administrative data from Michigan and nationally representative data from the Census Household Pulse Survey, the authors show how the pandemic affected families' choices of school sector. Through this analysis, *The Pandemic's Effect on Demand for Public Schools, Homeschooling, and Private Schools* adds to a growing base of research around the impact of COVID-19 and student enrollment patterns. This includes the first analysis of how remote or in-person learning relates to parents choosing homeschooling or private schools, as well as the first evidence on national variation in homeschooling choice by household income and age. Together, the findings shed light on how families make schooling decisions and may imply potential longer-run disruptions to public schools.

# Key Findings

Report authors Musaddiq, Stange, Bacher-Hicks, and Goodman use student-level longitudinal data from Michigan and national data from the Census Household Pulse Survey in order to observe families making other schooling choices, such as homeschooling or private schooling. Together, the two data sets paint a largely consistent picture of the pandemic's impact on public school enrollment and the appeal of alternatives to public schooling. The study finds four central facts:



- 1 Public school enrollment declined noticeably in fall 2020.** In Michigan, enrollment dropped by 3% among K-12 students and 10% among kindergartners. There is a strong age gradient to this enrollment pattern; so much so that more students returned to Michigan public high schools during the pandemic than they had in years prior. These patterns in Michigan are consistent with national figures.
- 2 Homeschooling rates jumped substantially in the fall of 2020,** driven largely by families with children in elementary school. Movement to homeschooling accounts for the majority of Michigan's students who did not return to the public system, with movement to private schools largely explaining the rest. Again, national trends in homeschooling follow a similar pattern.
- 3 Homeschooling increased more where schools provided in-person instruction while private schooling increased more where instruction was remote,** suggesting important differences across families in their concerns about children's physical health and instructional quality. These divergent patterns highlight how either learning modality was likely to motivate a shift of substantial numbers of would-be public sector students to alternative educational sectors.
- 4 Kindergarten enrollment declines were concentrated among low income and Black students,** while the smaller declines in other grades and for incumbent students were disproportionately among higher income and White students.

# Policy Implications

As the nation mobilizes for a return to school amidst the continuing pandemic, the findings from this study have several critical implications.



First, these results add an additional layer to the accumulating evidence that not only did households have differential exposure to in-person educational options by race and income (Camp & Zamarro, 2020), but that they respond differently even when provided the same options. This suggests schools and districts supporting more families in this context may need to do additional outreach and engagement to facilitate a return to the public school sector.

Second, these findings imply longer-run disruptions to public schools in the form of shifts in cohort size, composition, and school funding. We won't fully understand the impact of these shifts for another couple of years. It is likely, however, that school and district leaders, particularly at the elementary level, are already having to adjust to a considerable shift in student enrollment trajectories and funds they have available to address student needs.

Finally, and most immediate to the re-opening conversation in the Fall of 2021, is the consideration of this research on decisions state and local leaders are making to offer only in-person instruction, especially in the face of continuing public health concerns and resurgence of the COVID-19 virus in places all over the country. The study found that when families did not have an option for remote instruction in the public sector, they were more likely to pursue homeschooling. On the other hand, when families did not have access to in-person instruction, they were more likely to shift to the private sector. As education officials weigh the costs and benefits of re-opening schools, it is critical to consider the impact these options have on providing public access to education for families with different needs.



Readers who would like to dive deeper into trends and changes in student enrollment as a result of COVID-19 should refer to the recently released working paper, found on both EPI and WEPC's websites.

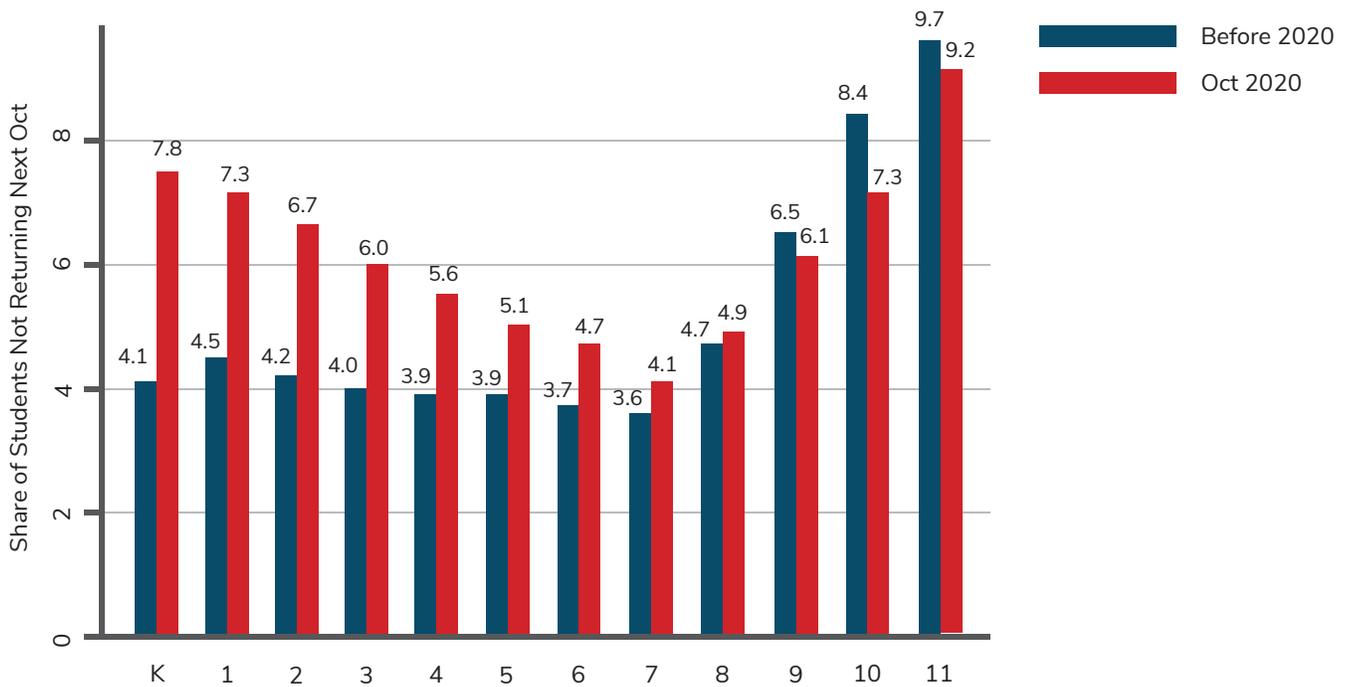
# Data Figures

## Total Enrollment at Michigan Public Schools by Year and Grade

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2020-21 Change	
						Number	Percent
Total	1,475,570	1,467,424	1,452,331	1,443,553	1,397,670	-45,883	-3.2%
Kindergarten	115,780	116,696	117,755	120,138	106,546	-13,592	-11.3%
Grades 1-5	541,175	535,169	526,431	523,028	506,086	-16,942	-3.2%
Middle	339,037	338,495	336,925	334,283	323,622	-10,661	-3.2%
High	479,578	477,064	471,220	466,104	461,416	-4,688	-1.0%

Notes: Please refer to the full working paper to find information regarding enrollment changes by race and income.

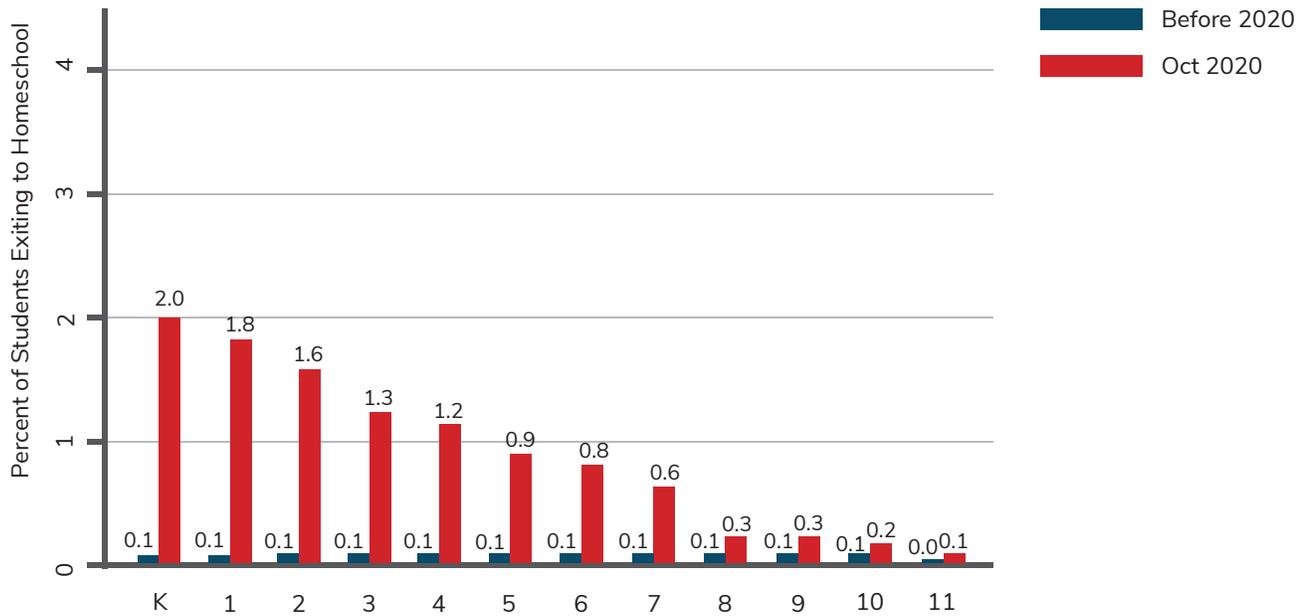
## Exit Rate from Michigan Public Schools by Grade



Notes: Figure plots the share of students that were enrolled in a Michigan public school in October that were not enrolled in a Michigan public school the following October. Grade refers to base year. Sample include all K-11 students enrolled in Michigan public schools Fall 2014 to 2019, excluding students in transitional kindergarten and early childhood education.

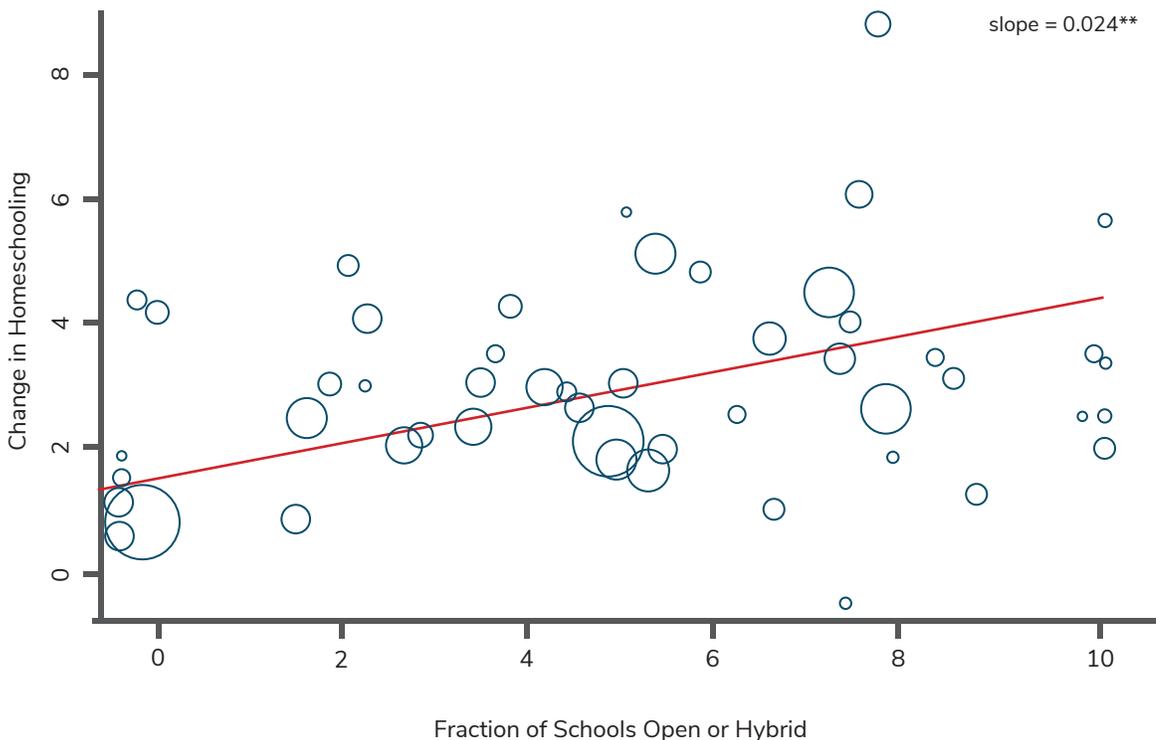
# Data Figures

## Exit Rate to Homeschool from Michigan Public Schools by Grade



**Notes:** Figure plots the share of students that were enrolled in a Michigan public school in October that were not enrolled in a Michigan public school the following October (and for whom the exit status was marked as "homeschool". Grade refers to base year. Sample include all K-11 students enrolled in Michigan public schools Fall 2014 to 2019, excluding students in transitional kindergarten and early childhood education.

## State-Level Homeschooling Rate Changes by Fall 2020 Learning Modality



**Notes:** Homeschooling data come from the U.S. Census, Household Pulse Survey. The change in homeschooling compares the fall homeschooling rates (September through October 2020) to pre-pandemic rates (February 2020). Homeschooling rates are defined as the fraction of households with school-aged children who are homeschooling at least one of those children. School re-opening status comes from Burbio and is defined as of September 2020. Each state is weighted by population.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ,  
\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

# Related Resources

This project represents a collaboration between researchers from the [Education Policy Initiative](#) at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy and Boston University Wheelock College of Education and Human Development: [Wheelock Education Policy Center](#). Please reference the related resources below to learn more about the patterns described in this brief.

"Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey Shows Significant Increase in Homeschooling Rates in Fall 2020." Casey Eggleston and Jason Fields. United States Census Bureau, March 22, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>

"The Kindergarten Exodus." Dana Goldstein and Alicia Parlapiano. New York Times, August 7, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/07/us/covid-kindergarten-enrollment.html>

"New Federal Data Confirms Pandemic's Blow to K-12 Enrollment, With Drop of 1.5 Million Students; Pre-K Experiences 22 Percent Decline." Kevin Mahnken. The 74 Million, June 29, 2021. <https://www.the74million.org/article/public-school-enrollment-down-3-percent-worst-century>

Much of the data used for this project was structured and maintained by the MERI-Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC). MEDC data is modified for analysis purposes using rules governed by MEDC and are not identical to those data collected and maintained by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and/or Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Results, information, and opinions solely represent the analysis, information and opinions of the authors and are not endorsed by, or reflect the views or positions of, grantors, MDE and CEPI or any employee thereof.

## EPI Mission Statement

The central mission of the initiative is to engage in applied education policy research. The Education Policy Initiative is a program within the Ford School that brings together nationally-recognized education policy scholars focused on the generation and dissemination of policy-relevant education research. The primary goals of the initiative are to:

- Conduct rigorous research to inform education policy debates in Michigan and nationwide
- Disseminate best practices in education reform to local, state, and national policymakers, as well as to educational practitioners, parents, and students
- Train graduate students and others to conduct cutting-edge research in education
- Facilitate interactions between students and faculty from different schools and/ or departments who share an interest in education reform.

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