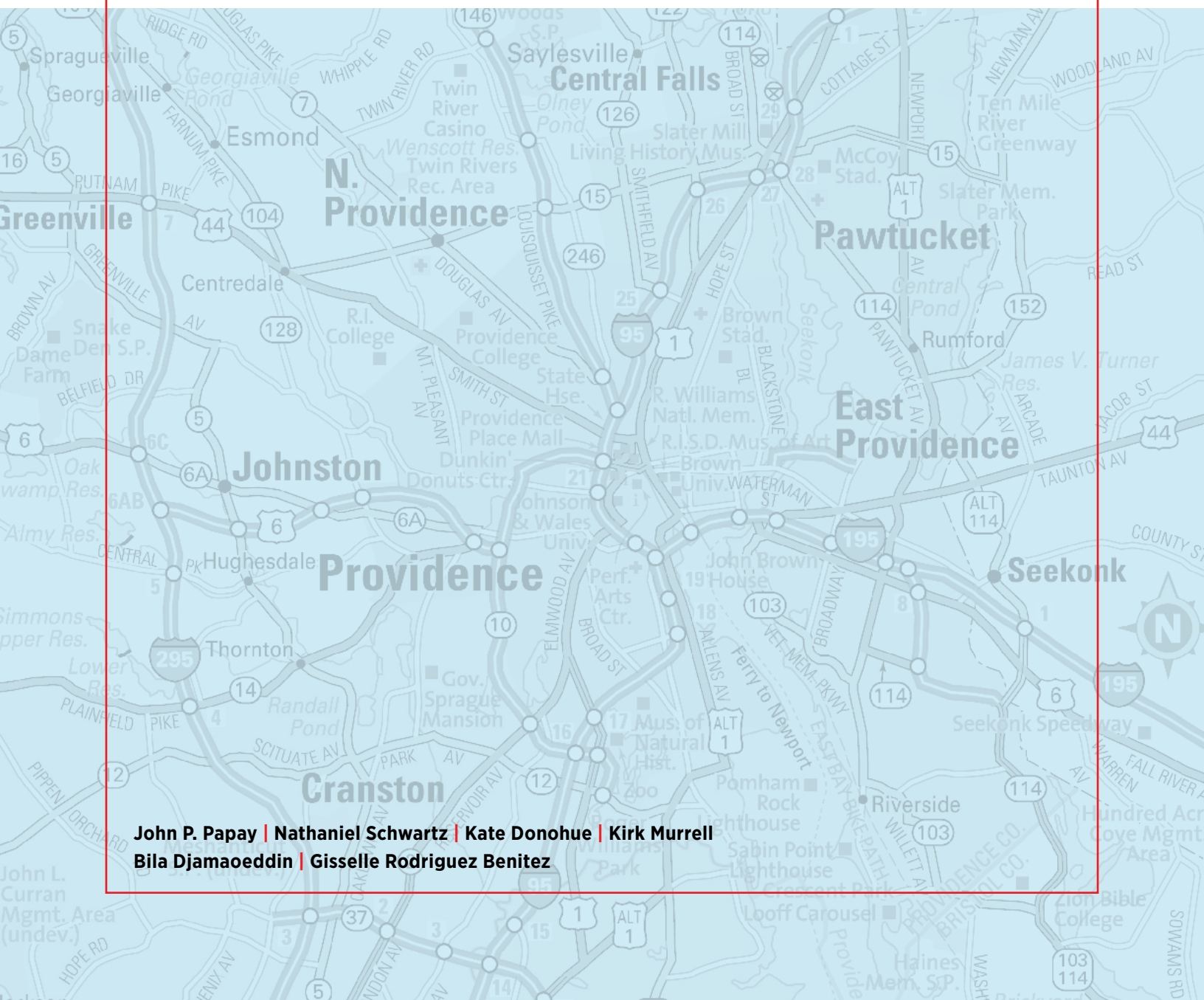




# THE STATE OF RECOVERY: RHODE ISLAND'S POST-PANDEMIC PUBLIC SCHOOL LANDSCAPE



John P. Papay | Nathaniel Schwartz | Kate Donohue | Kirk Murrell  
Bila Djamaoeddin | Gisselle Rodriguez Benitez

# INTRODUCTION

## THE PAST FIVE YEARS HAVE BROUGHT TREMENDOUS UPHEAVAL TO RHODE ISLAND SCHOOLS.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically disrupted and reshaped education across the state and the nation. Long-standing issues of racial inequality were brought to the fore by the national racial reckoning that followed George Floyd's murder. And the Johns Hopkins report laid bare the dire state of public education in Providence, and the resulting state intervention has dominated the state's education discourse.<sup>1</sup>

As we emerge from the pandemic, schools face numerous challenges – pervasive concerns about student mental health and well-being, substantial learning recovery needs, tight educator labor markets and attendant staff shortages, and a changing economy that increasingly relies on skills and advanced credentials for labor market success.

However, despite these headwinds, the state has tremendous opportunity. School districts across the state have millions of dollars in ESSER relief funds at their disposal. Most districts have completed the hard work of introducing and adopting high-quality instructional materials designed to support high expectations for all students. Public education has received increased public attention, with growing understanding that schools need to do better to support the learning and development of all students, particularly students from historically marginalized groups.

Capitalizing on these opportunities requires a detailed understanding of where the state is and where it has been over the past decade.<sup>2</sup>

**As we emerge from the pandemic, schools face numerous challenges – pervasive concerns about student mental health and well-being, substantial learning recovery needs, tight educator labor markets and attendant staff shortages, and a changing economy that increasingly relies on skills and advanced credentials for labor market success.**

## OUR ANALYSIS REVEALS 5 KEY FINDINGS:

- ① **Traditional public school enrollments have declined** substantially over the past decade, largely reflecting drops in Rhode Island's school-age population.
- ② Rhode Island's public schools are **more diverse than ever**, and the number of multi-lingual learners has nearly doubled.
- ③ **Chronic absenteeism has risen to all-time highs**, following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ④ **Rhode Island schools substantially trail their Massachusetts peers** in both mathematics and ELA performance, even when we compare schools that serve similar student populations.
- ⑤ **College enrollment declined** during the pandemic, particularly in community colleges, reversing an increase in college-going that followed the RI Promise.

# THE STUDENT POPULATION

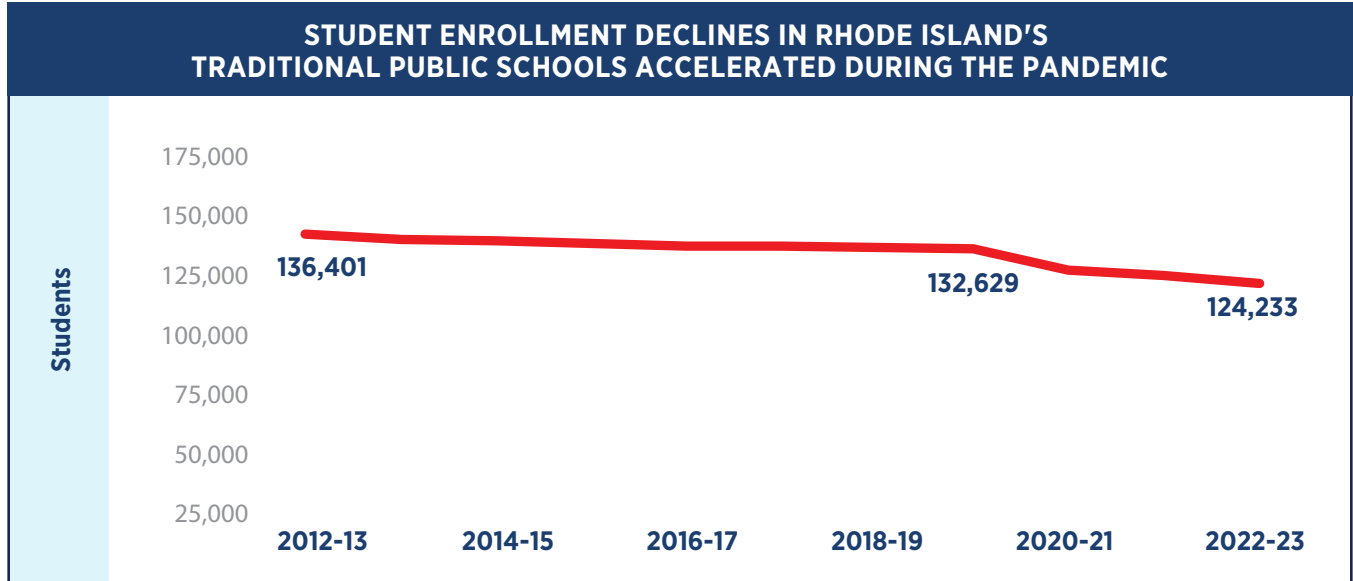
The pandemic accelerated a decade-long trend of declining traditional public school enrollment, as many students left the traditional public school system. During this same time, student bodies across the state have become much more diverse. In particular, the number of multi-lingual learners (MLLs) has more than doubled. These patterns are not only seen in the RI urban core but in systems across the state. In addition to these sharp enrollment declines, chronic absenteeism has reached unprecedented levels: students are much less likely to attend school regularly since the pandemic.

## STUDENT ENROLLMENT

**Traditional public school enrollments have declined substantially over the past decade, largely reflecting drops in Rhode Island’s school-age population.**

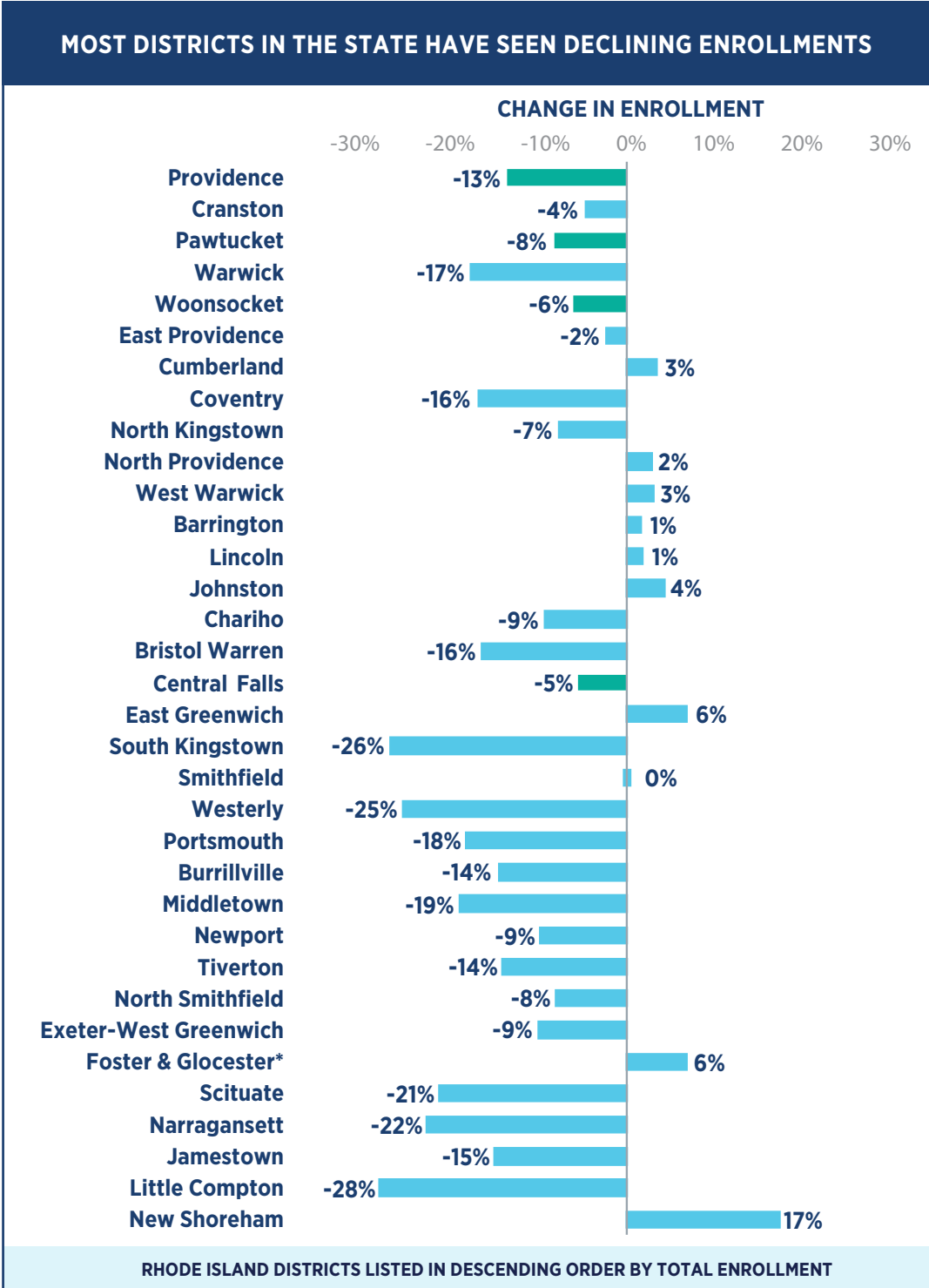
Rhode Island is experiencing long-term structural declines in traditional public school enrollment. Over the eight years before the start of the pandemic, traditional public schools lost approximately 3,000 students (Figure 1). Since the pandemic, student enrollment has dropped precipitously, with traditional public schools losing another 8,000 students. These declines were sharpest in 2020-21, during the brunt of the pandemic, and have not rebounded. All told, the number of traditional public school students in the state has fallen by 9% over the past decade. This drop in public school enrollment is not unique to Rhode Island; nationally, over one million students have left public schools since 2020.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1 — RI TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, 2012-13 TO 2022-23**



While enrollment declines have been steepest in Providence and the urban core (identified by **green bars** below), the trend is similar statewide. Most districts in the state have seen declining enrollments, particularly during the pandemic, and very few have seen substantial growth. As seen in Figure 2, some small districts like Little Compton, Narragansett, South Kingstown, and Westerly have seen their enrollments shrink by 25%, while only East Greenwich, Foster/Glocester, and New Shoreham have seen enrollments increase by more than 5% over the decade.

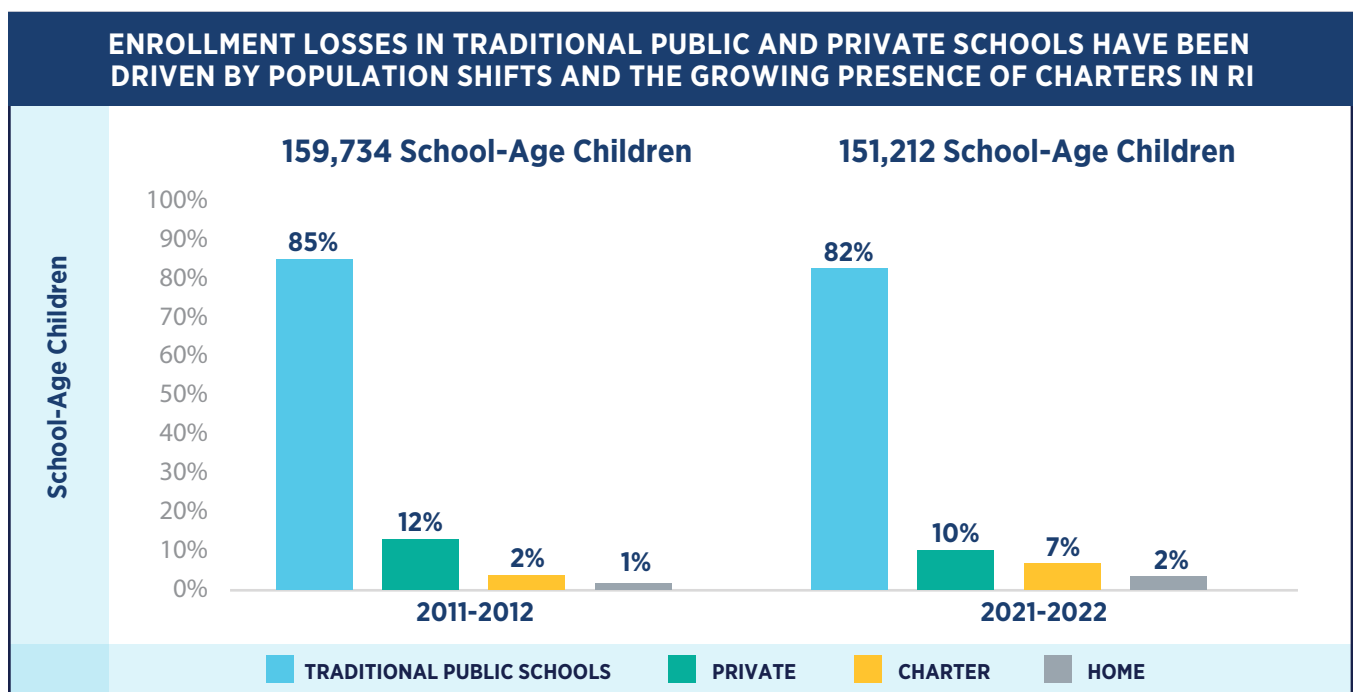
**FIGURE 2 — ENROLLMENT CHANGE BY DISTRICT, 2012-13 TO 2022-23 (ORDERED BY DISTRICT SIZE IN 2022-23)**



\*We combine Foster and Glocester elementary districts and the Foster-Glocester secondary district.

What has driven these long-term declines in the number of traditional public school students? Contrary to popular narrative, we do not see evidence of a substantial substitution from public to private schools.<sup>4</sup> While private school enrollments are more difficult to track than public school numbers, long-term trends suggest that the percentage of school-age students enrolled in private schools is actually substantially lower than a decade ago, with a corresponding increase in the percentage of students enrolled in charter schools. Instead, the biggest driver of change appears to be long-term decline in the total number of school-age children within the state. Between 2012 and 2022, Rhode Island’s school-age population fell from nearly 160,000 school-age children to 151,000, closely tracking the overall decline in public school enrollment. The share of students enrolled in traditional public schools fell only slightly, from 85% in 2012 to 82% in 2022.

**FIGURE 3 — ENROLLMENT OF RI SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN\* IN DIFFERENT SCHOOL SETTINGS, 2011-12 TO 2021-22**



\*We rely on annual population and housing estimates from the Census Bureau to make year-to-year population comparisons.

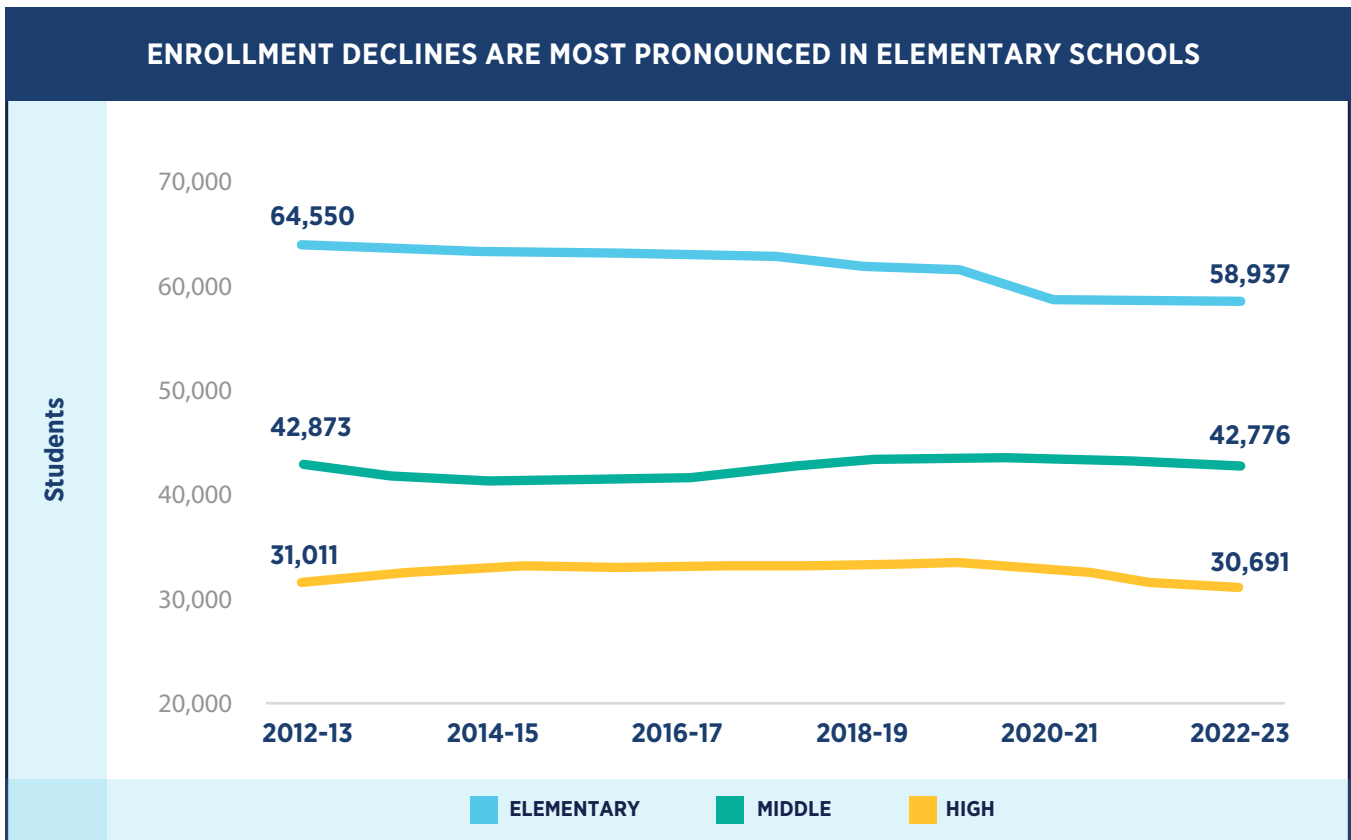
At the same time, two key shifts have taken place in the last several years, corresponding directly with the pandemic. First, the number of home-school students doubled. Nearly all of the growth in home-schooling has occurred in the past three years. While total numbers of these students are low, the increase from 1,500 homeschool students pre-pandemic to over 3,000 students post-pandemic is significant.

Second, unlike the longer-term trends, the outflow from traditional public schools did jump meaningfully during the pandemic, above and beyond the decline in school age population. This has resulted in somewhat higher levels of substitution to both private and charter schools. It remains to be seen whether this will become a new longer-term pattern or was merely a temporary response to the pandemic.

### Drops in student enrollment are especially pronounced among younger students.

There is some cause for concern that enrollment declines might continue to accelerate. Total enrollments obscure important dynamics, as most students who enroll in a school district continue in that district. Thus, high school enrollments have remained relatively flat over the past decade, even through the pandemic. At the same time, the number of elementary school enrollments fell by 9% (Figure 4). Again, these losses are most pronounced in the RI urban core, which has lost nearly 5,000 students, or almost one quarter of its elementary school enrollment, in the past decade. With falling birth rates and the pandemic-induced decline in elementary enrollment in the past few years, we are likely to see further declines at the middle and high school levels as these smaller elementary cohorts move through the public school system.

FIGURE 4 — RI PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT BY SCHOOL LEVEL, 2012-13 TO 2022-23



# STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

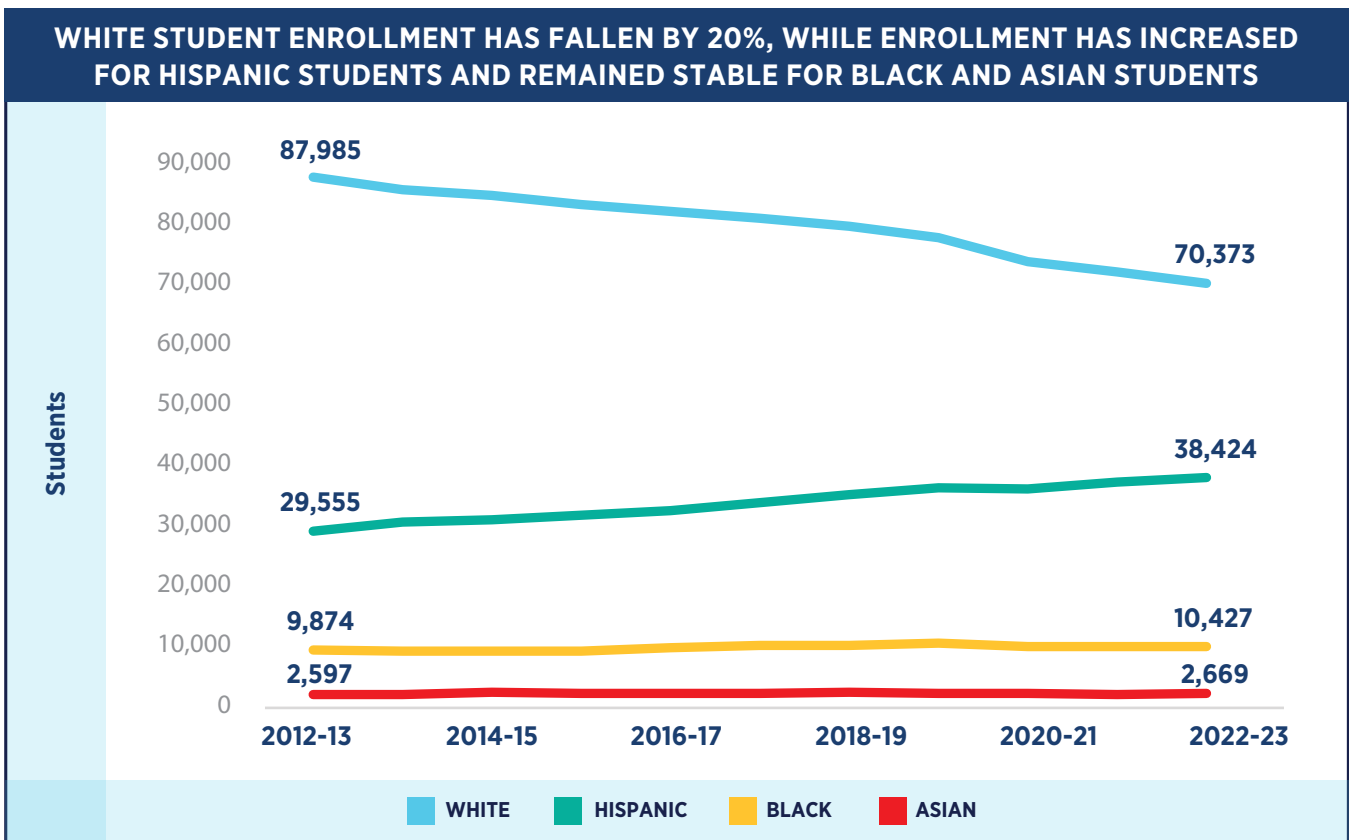
## Rhode Island’s public schools are more diverse than ever.

While public school enrollments have fallen overall, the patterns differ substantially by student race/ethnicity and by sector. In traditional public schools, White student enrollment has dropped by 18,000 (or 21%), from 87,000 students in 2012-13 to under 70,000 in 2022-23. All but two districts saw declines in their White student population, and pandemic declines were steepest among White students. Over the past decade in traditional public schools, despite the pandemic, Hispanic student enrollment has risen by about 4,000 students (+14%), Black student enrollment fell by 700 (-7%), and Asian student enrollment increased by about 75 (+3%).

These enrollment trends differ considerably for charter schools. The increases in charter enrollment have been driven primarily by students of color. Indeed, both Black and Hispanic student enrollment in charters has more than tripled (from 500 to 1,750 and from 1,875 to 6,800, respectively).

As a result of the demographic shifts across both traditional and charter schools, the composition of the student body in the state’s public schools has changed dramatically (Figure 5). In 2012-13, 63% of students were White, 21% Hispanic, 7% Black and 2% Asian. Today, 52% of students are White, 28% Hispanic, 8% Black, and 2% Asian.

FIGURE 5 — RI PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT BY RACE/ETHNICITY

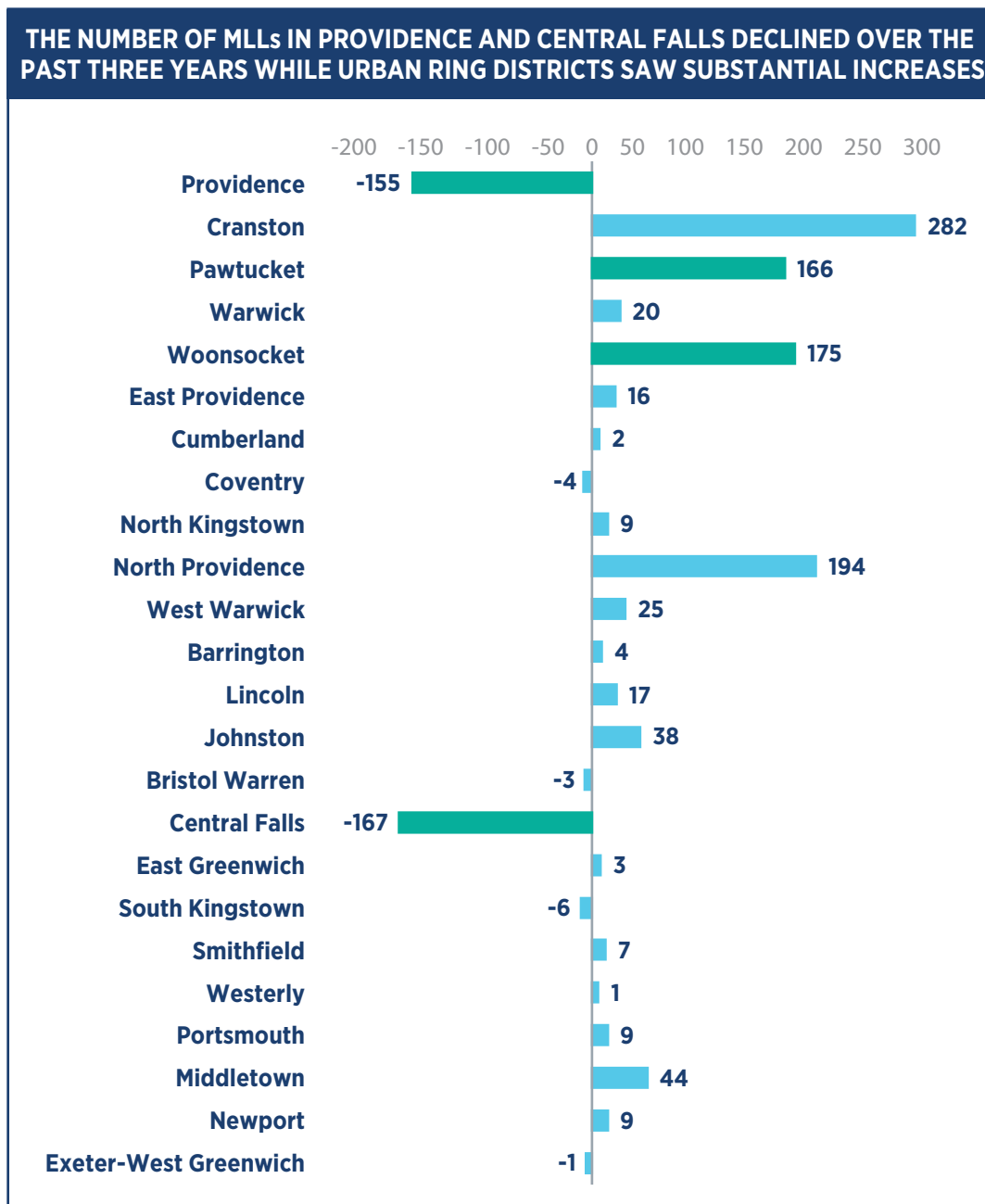


**In the past decade, the number of multi-lingual learners has nearly doubled.**

Echoing trends across the country, RI schools are now serving many more multi-lingual learners (MLLs) than ever before. In 2012-13, nearly 9,000 MLLs were enrolled in the state’s public schools. By 2022-23, despite declining enrollments, that number had increased to over 17,000 students, or nearly 13% of all students.

While the majority of MLLs continue to live in urban core districts, much of the post-pandemic influx has been into urban ring districts (Figure 6). Specifically, over the past three years, Providence has seen a declining number of MLLs, even steeper than the district’s overall enrollment drops. But, districts like North Providence – where the number of MLLs has doubled – Pawtucket, Middletown, and Cranston are seeing quite large increases in the share of students requiring MLL services.

**FIGURE 6 — CHANGE IN NUMBER OF MLL STUDENTS BY DISTRICT\*, FROM 2019-20 TO 2022-23**



\*Districts not displayed could not be calculated, as their count of MLL students in either 2019-20, 2022-23, or both years was too low to report.



# CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

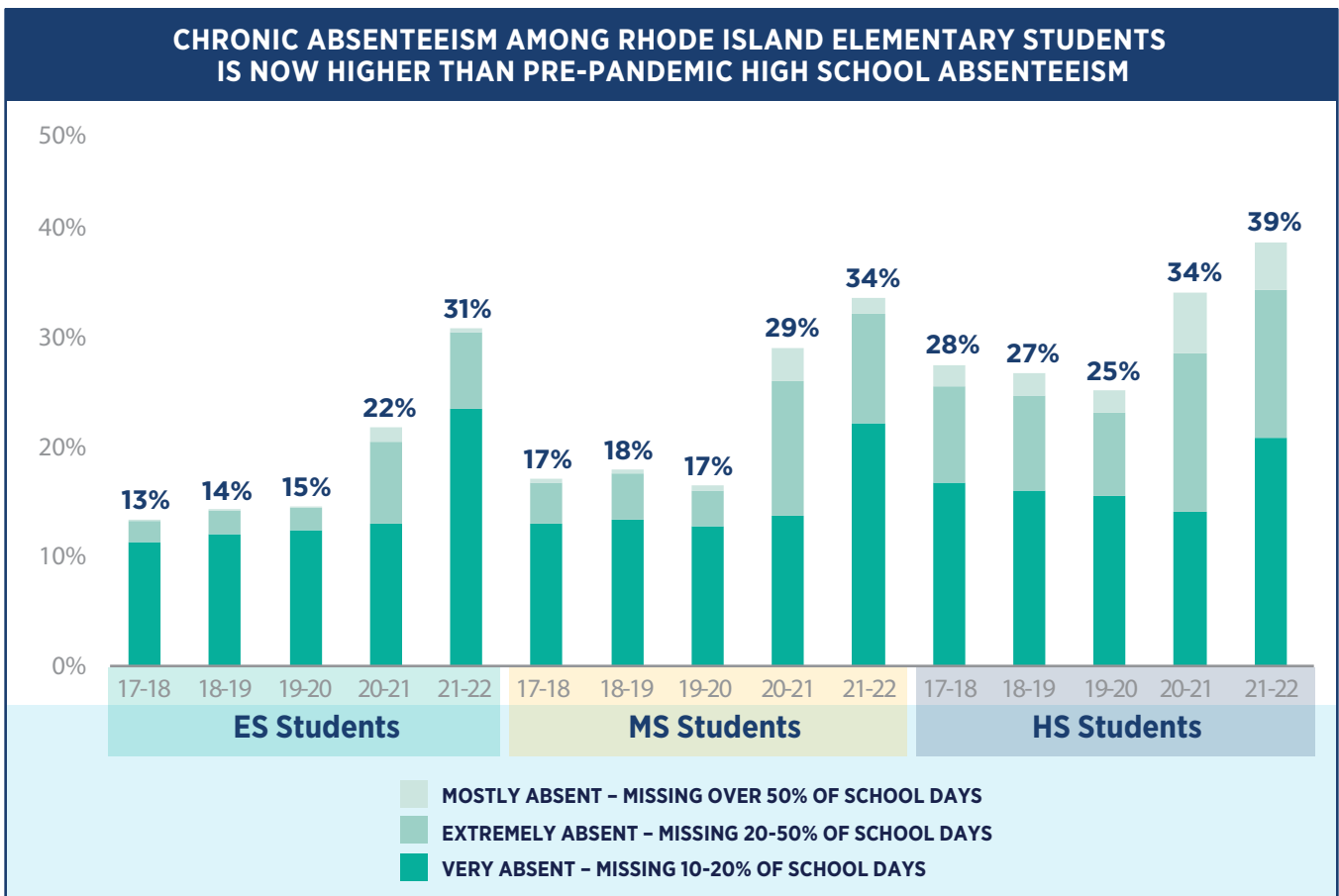
## Chronic absenteeism has risen to all-time highs following the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to large changes in the number and types of students RI public schools are serving, those students are attending school less than ever before. Absenteeism increased dramatically during the pandemic and has not abated since. These challenges reflect the substantial and long-lasting impact of the pandemic on students' well-being and their relationship to schooling. This pattern of historically high levels of chronic absenteeism is seen across all 50 states. Nationally, chronic absenteeism rose by 13.5 percentage points, with states seeing anywhere from a 4 percentage point to a 22 percentage point increase.<sup>5</sup>

Attendance declines have been particularly dramatic for RI elementary schoolers — the share of chronically absent elementary school students more than doubled (Figure 7). Indeed, elementary school students now have absenteeism rates on par with high school students a few years ago. We see similar patterns across lines of difference, with absenteeism rates increasing for students from all racial/ethnic backgrounds.

In 2021-22, more than 46,000 public school students in Rhode Island were chronically absent, missing more than 10% of the school year. This represents more than 1 in 3 students in the state, a staggering level of absenteeism that has serious implications for learning recovery. Absenteeism rates surged during the pandemic – in 2018-19, 20% of students (or 25,000 students) were chronically absent, and that climbed to 25% in 2020-21 and then again to 34% in 2021-22. Absenteeism rates have continued to climb, and early results from the 2022-23 school year suggest that this trend has continued. Thus, changes in student attendance do not seem to be a temporary pandemic-induced blip but a new normal.

**FIGURE 7 — CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN RHODE ISLAND BY ABSENTEEISM LEVEL AND SCHOOL LEVEL, 2017-18 TO 2021-22**

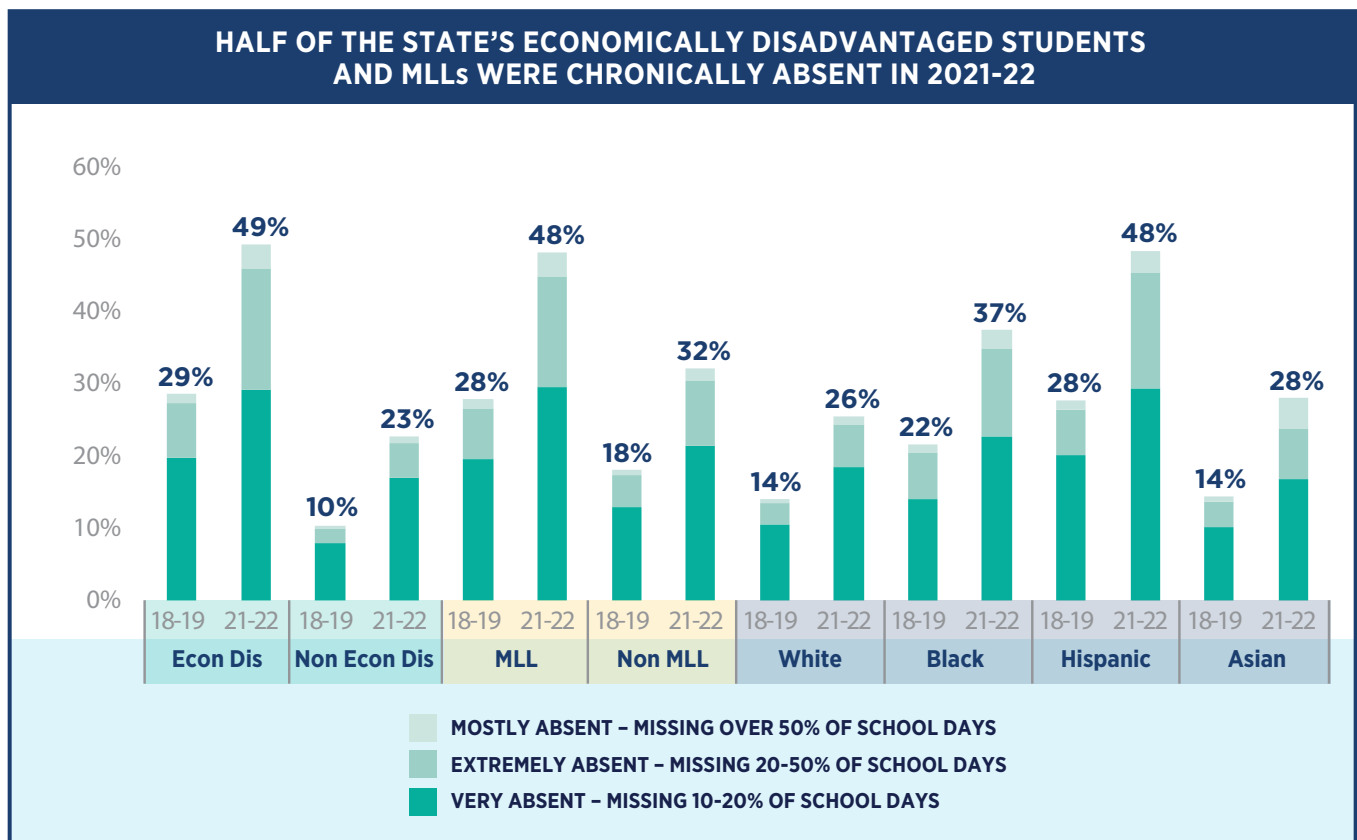


### Students who were chronically absent pre-pandemic are missing even more school now.

Chronic absenteeism rates only tell part of the story – even more troubling, many more students are exhibiting extreme absenteeism patterns. In 2018-19, of the 25,000 chronically absent students, nearly one-third (~7,300) missed more than 36 days, over seven weeks of school. In 2021-22, that number had more than doubled to 16,000 students. In other words, more than 13% of RI public school students were absent for nearly two months of the school year. Such high rates of absenteeism lead to substantial instability within classrooms and present clear instructional challenges for teachers.

Concerningly, students who are MLLs and those who are economically disadvantaged have among the highest overall levels and the largest increases in absenteeism. In 2021-22, fully half of the state’s economically disadvantaged students and MLLs were chronically absent (Figure 8) and one in five of these students were excessively absent. While we see increases in chronic and excessive absenteeism across all student groups, some fared better than others. Dramatically improving students’ academic outcomes – the subject of our next section – will be particularly challenging without supporting students’ regular attendance at school.

**FIGURE 8 – ABSENTEEISM CATEGORY, PRE- AND POST-PANDEMIC BY STUDENT GROUP**



# STANDARDIZED TEST PERFORMANCE

During the pandemic, student RICAS scores fell in both mathematics and ELA, although mathematics performance rebounded in 2021-22. Encouragingly, the performance gaps between students from different backgrounds have not widened in the state, despite the pandemic’s disproportionate impacts on students of color and students living in poverty.

However, student academic performance in Rhode Island remains soberingly low. The state sits below national averages in mathematics NAEP performance and has not improved its ranking substantially over time. Closer to home, we compare RI schools to demographically similar schools in Massachusetts and see quite large performance gaps across all types of schools – higher-income RI schools lag well behind similarly-resourced schools in Massachusetts.

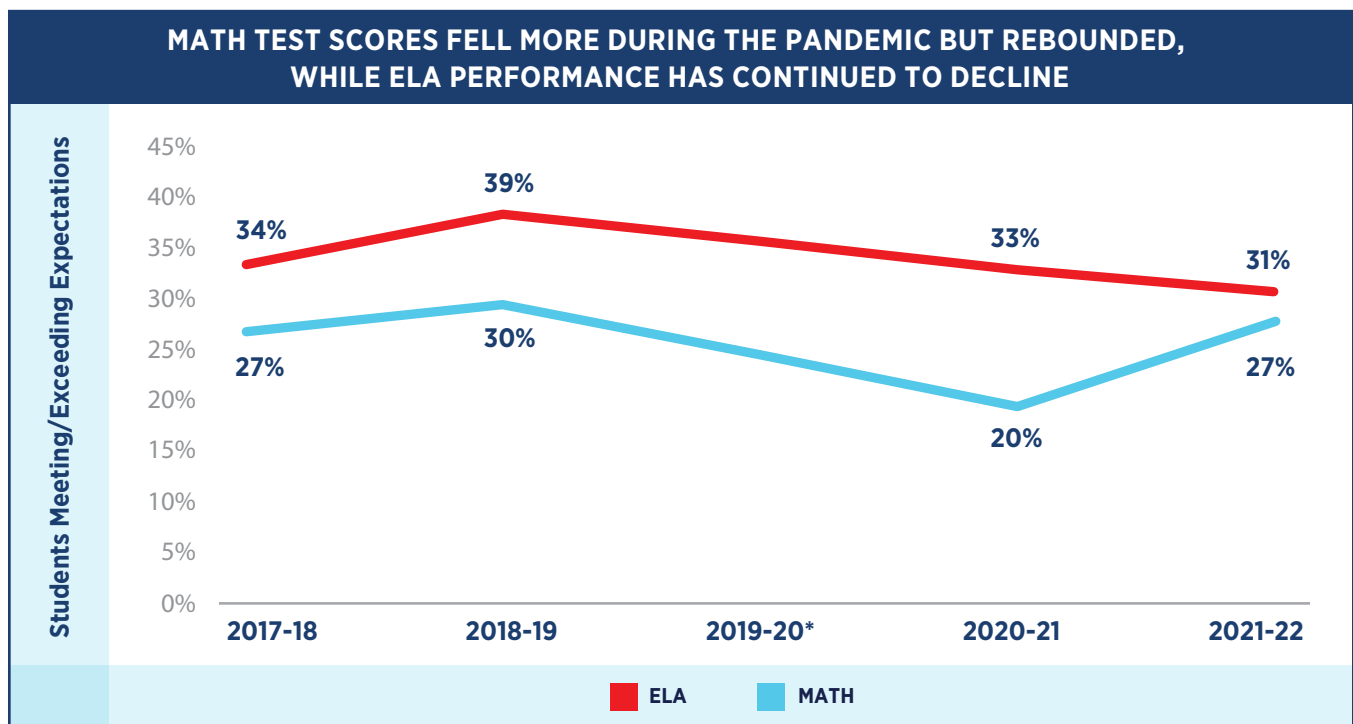
The pandemic significantly disrupted academic learning for students in Rhode Island and across the country. Recent evidence from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggest that students nationwide are performing at their lowest levels in 20 years and that declines were steepest among the lowest-performing students. While test performance certainly does not reflect everything we want schools to do and is not a perfect measure of student learning, it does provide an important window into how school systems are performing and how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted instruction. Given that Rhode Island’s new standardized assessment, the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS), was introduced in 2017-18, we cannot provide a detailed historical analysis of test-score trends. Instead, we focus on current performance and COVID-induced changes.

## RICAS TRENDS

**Math and ELA scores have dropped since the onset of the pandemic, but gaps between student groups did not increase.**

Mathematics performance declined substantially in 2020-21 and rebounded in 2021-22 close to pre-pandemic levels. By contrast, the share of students meeting or exceeding expectations on in ELA fell from 39% in 2018-19 to 33% in 2020-21, with a continued decline in 2021-22.

FIGURE 9 — RICAS PERFORMANCE, 2017-18 TO 2021-22

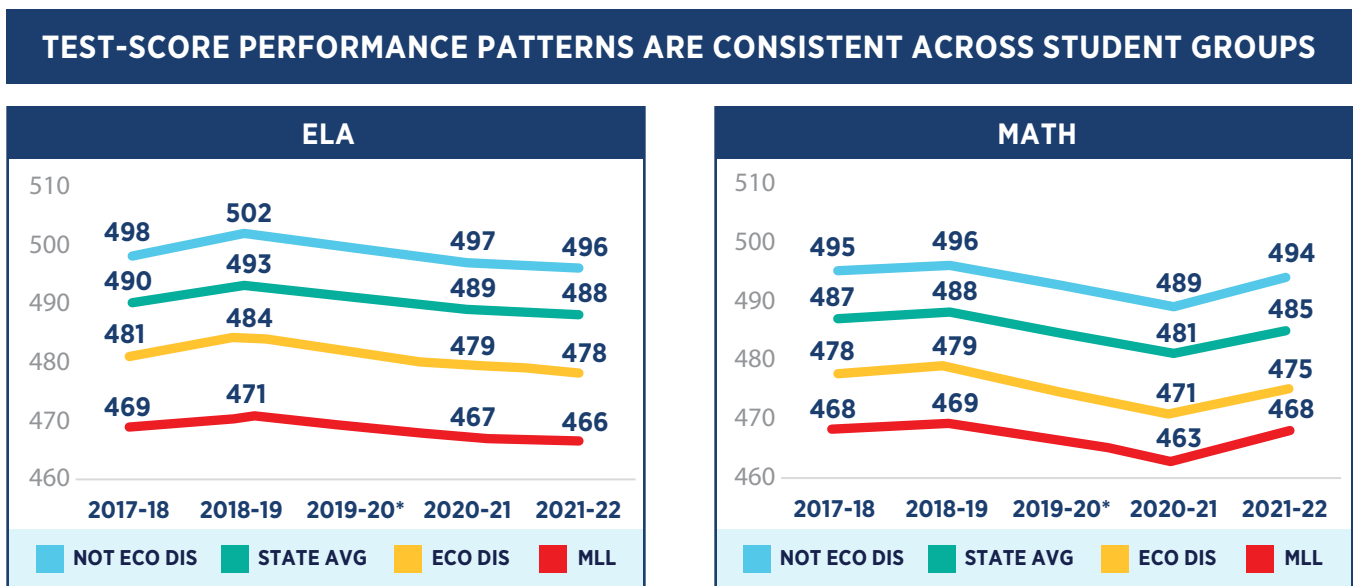


\*No RICAS testing in 2019-20

Of course, these comparisons over time are somewhat fraught because the composition of students in public schools in the state has also changed over time. For example, we don't know whether the students who moved out of state or into private or homeschools performed better or worse. Similarly, we don't know the relative performance of students who entered Rhode Island public schools. As a result, a complete analysis of the pandemic's effects on student achievement in Rhode Island requires longitudinal data that can track individual students over time. However, we can compare performance of different subgroups of students to get a better sense of performance trends and to gain some insight into how well the state's traditional public schools are reducing educational inequalities. Doing so requires us to look at average scaled scores on the test rather than proficiency rates.

Statewide, average scaled scores fell by 5 scaled score points in ELA and 3 points in mathematics between 2018-19 and 2021-22. As seen in Figure 10, these declines were quite similar for economically disadvantaged students, higher-income students, and multi-lingual learners. We also see similar patterns by student race. As a result, the income-based performance gap in Rhode Island has not grown in ELA and grown only modestly in mathematics. This pattern is distinct from national trends, where students of color and students living in poverty saw more substantial performance declines. Research suggests that, in part, growing inequality during the pandemic arose from remote learning – students living in poverty spent more weeks in remote instruction, which was associated with larger learning losses.<sup>6</sup> Although there was variability across districts, Rhode Island students overall spent more time in in-school instruction in 2020-21 than students in many other states, potentially contributing to the state's more rapid recovery.<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 10 – RICAS AVERAGE SCALED SCORES BY STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS, 2017-18 TO 2021-22**



\*No RICAS testing in 2019-20

## STATE AND NATIONAL COMPARISON

Rhode Island student test scores on the 2022 National Assessment of Education Progress (the “nation’s report card”) place the state in a tie for 34th in the nation in 8th grade mathematics and 38th in 8th grade ELA. These performance levels are fairly consistent for all student groups. For example, on the 8th grade mathematics test, both low-income students (tied for 42nd) and higher-income students (tied for 34th) performed well below national averages. At the same time, RI ranked 8th nationally in terms of per pupil expenditure, performing at the bottom in both 8th grade math and reading of any state in the top 10 for spending.

Closer to home, Massachusetts provides an apt comparison. The two states share a border and are part of the same regional economy. The public school systems also share important commonalities – both are among the highest spending states in terms of per pupil expenditures and both states have seen dramatic changes in their student populations over time.<sup>9</sup> In 1993, when Massachusetts passed its landmark education reform act, 79% of the state’s public school students were White (vs. 81% in RI), 8% were Black (vs. 7% in RI), 9% were Hispanic (9% in RI), and 4% were Asian (3% in RI). Today, in both states, just over half of students are White and the share of Hispanic students has tripled.

Of course, the Massachusetts comparison is also relevant given that Governor Dan McKee has recently set the ambitious goal for Rhode Island schools to match Massachusetts test-score performance by 2030.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Rhode Island designed the RICAS to offer education leaders a “true apples-to-apples comparison of how we perform compared to Massachusetts,”<sup>10</sup> making scores on Rhode Island’s assessments directly comparable to those of the Massachusetts assessment, the MCAS.

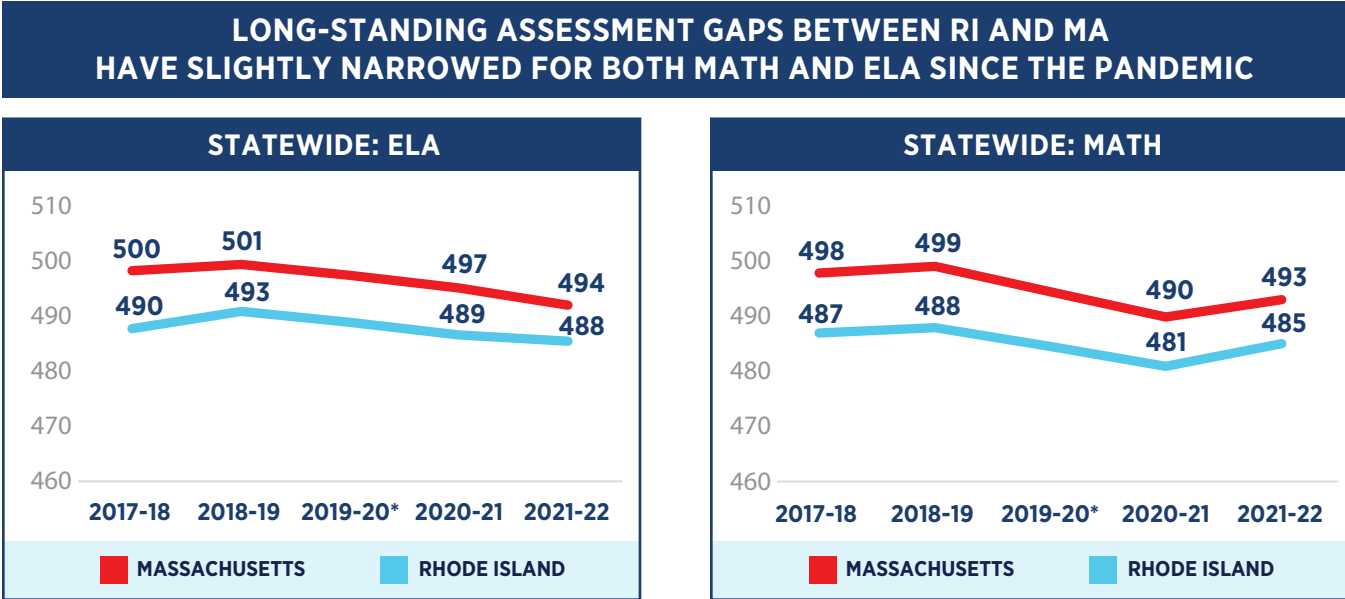
Nevertheless, Massachusetts is not a perfect match for Rhode Island – RI has no equivalent to Boston or some of its wealthiest suburbs. As a result, to benchmark Rhode Island performance, we not only look at the state overall but also look to a matched comparison set of 193 Massachusetts schools that serve demographically similar students to those in Rhode Island. More details of our matching methods and differences in samples can be found in Appendix B.

**Rhode Island schools substantially trail their Massachusetts peers in both mathematics and ELA performance, even when we compare schools that serve similar student populations.**

Massachusetts has been a leader in NAEP test performance for the last 20 years, performing at or near the top in both reading and math for both 4th and 8th grades. By contrast, Rhode Island students tend to score at or below the national average. On the state tests, 39% of Massachusetts students were proficient in Math and 41% in ELA, compared to just 27% of RI students in Math and 31% in ELA.

We focus our test-score analysis on the last five years because the state transitioned to RICAS testing in 2018. Over this time period, the gap between Massachusetts and Rhode Island has narrowed modestly, particularly in ELA (Figure 11). The shift appears to be the result of Massachusetts schools seeing considerably larger test-score declines during the pandemic than Rhode Island schools. We see similar patterns across a range of student groups. Gaps between the states have narrowed modestly for students who are MLLs or who are economically disadvantaged. But, Massachusetts continues to outperform Rhode Island across all tested student groups.

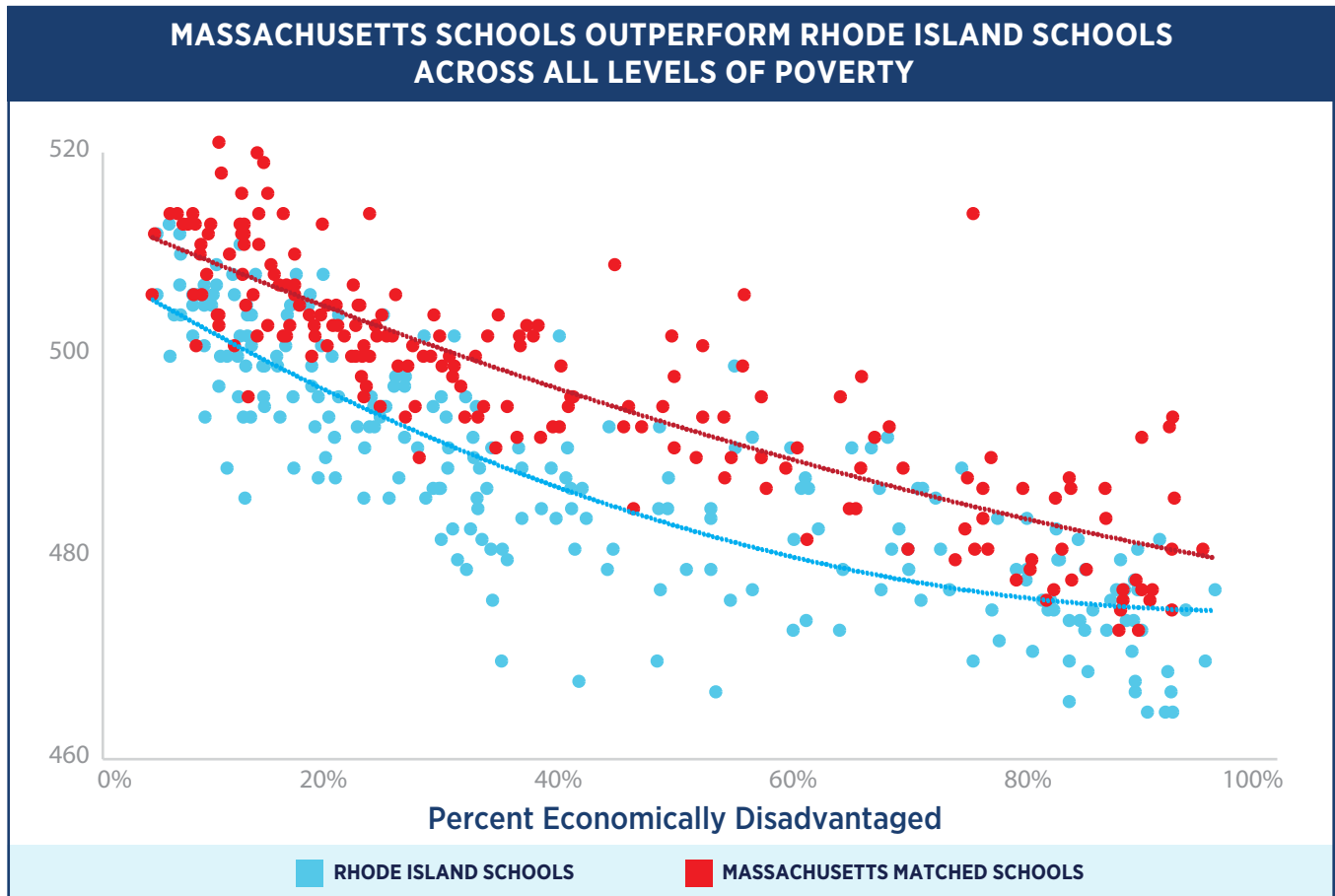
**FIGURE 11 – MCAS/RICAS AVERAGE SCALED SCORES, 2017-18 TO 2021-22, ALL SCHOOLS**



\*No RICAS testing in 2019-20

We see that RI schools underperform their Massachusetts counterparts across a wide range of schools. In Figure 12, we plot school test performance by the share of students in the school who are economically disadvantaged, focusing on Massachusetts schools that are matched comparisons to RI schools. The **blue dots (RI schools)** fall below the **red dots (MA schools)** at all levels of student poverty. In other words, the difference in achievement between the states is not easily attributable to differences in student populations.

**FIGURE 12 — SCHOOL-LEVEL RICAS AND MCAS MATH PERFORMANCE BY PROPORTION OF LOW-INCOME STUDENTS, 2022**



Notably, this underperformance is clear across a wide range of districts, including those that are in the top performance ranges for Rhode Island. Schools in East Greenwich, Barrington and Westerly are similar distances behind their counterparts in Massachusetts as schools identified as needing improvement by the state’s accountability system in Providence, Central Falls, and Woonsocket.

The average gap in test scores between Rhode Island schools and Massachusetts comparison schools is 10 points in math and 8 points in ELA. This is a substantial difference. National estimates suggest that this gap reflects approximately two years of learning. By this metric, for RI students to match their MA peers by 2030, the average Rhode Islander would need to improve about 20% more each year than the average Massachusetts student. By a different metric, these differences represent approximately 0.75 standard deviations on the state test or about half of the gap between RI’s economically disadvantaged students and their wealthier peers.

# POSTSECONDARY PARTICIPATION

Test scores are important markers about the quality of a school system. But, the central goal of any system is to support the learning and development of students to thrive long-term. Here, postsecondary education is a critical pathway to opportunity. To meet the workforce needs of the modernizing economy, Rhode Island set a goal of 70% of the working-age population achieving a postsecondary credential by 2025. That goal will not be met - the state was at 53.3% in 2021, in line with the national average. The economic security of Rhode Island's workforce and its future economy will depend in large part on the state's continued efforts to enable its workers to complete postsecondary credentials going forward. Furthermore, reducing persistent inequalities in life outcomes for students from historically marginalized groups will require particular emphasis on closing equity gaps in postsecondary attainments.

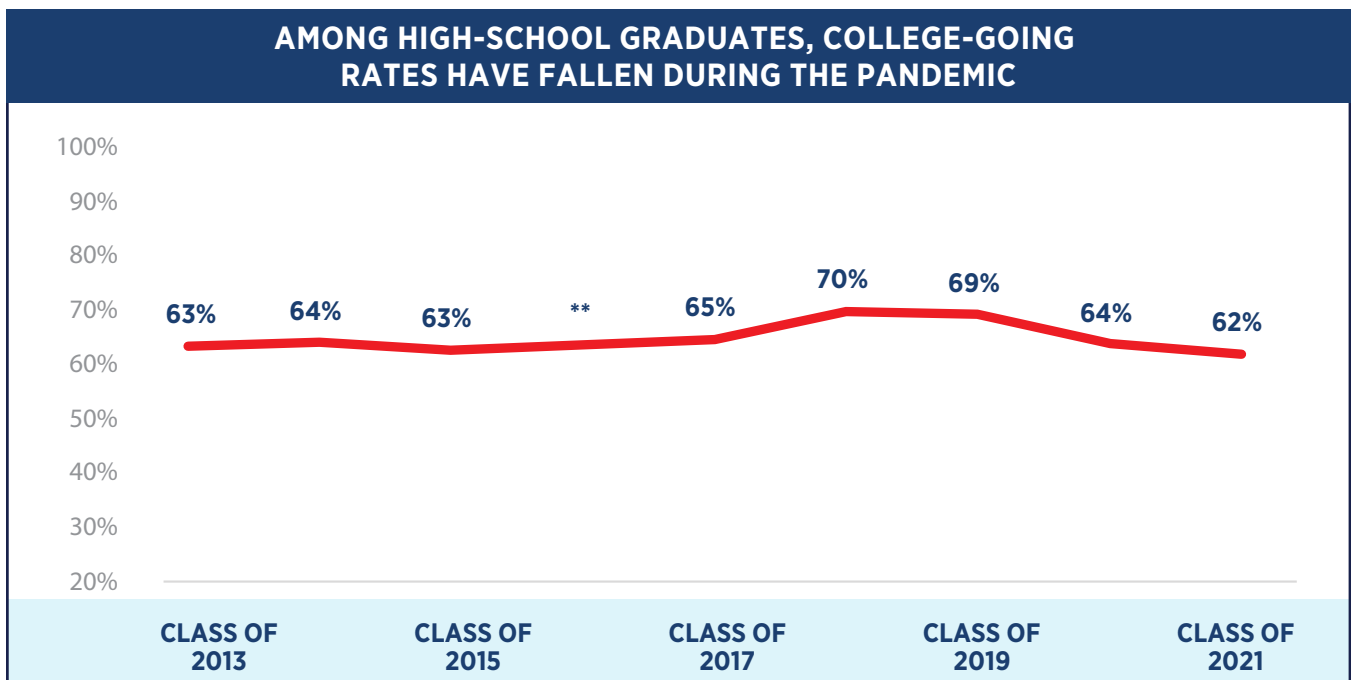
Across the country, college-going was severely disrupted by the pandemic. Nationwide, college enrollment in fall 2022 was 7 percent lower than in fall 2019. Rhode Island was no different, as enrollment rates dropped substantially despite steady high school graduation rates (at 84%) throughout the pandemic. Declines were particularly large for students of color and students living in poverty.

## COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

**College enrollment declined during the pandemic, particularly in community colleges, reversing an increase in college-going that followed the RI Promise.**

Immediate postsecondary matriculation for RI high-school graduates peaked at 70% with the graduating class of 2018 and has declined each year since, falling to 62% for the class of 2021. This echoes patterns in other states, including Massachusetts, which also saw modest pre-pandemic declines followed by a large drop during the pandemic. Enrollment declines for the Class of 2020, whose senior year was disrupted by the pandemic and who faced the prospect of online higher education in fall 2020, are understandable. But, college enrollment did not rebound and, in fact, continued to decline for the class of 2021.

**FIGURE 13 — IMMEDIATE COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATE FOR RI HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, 2013 – 2021**

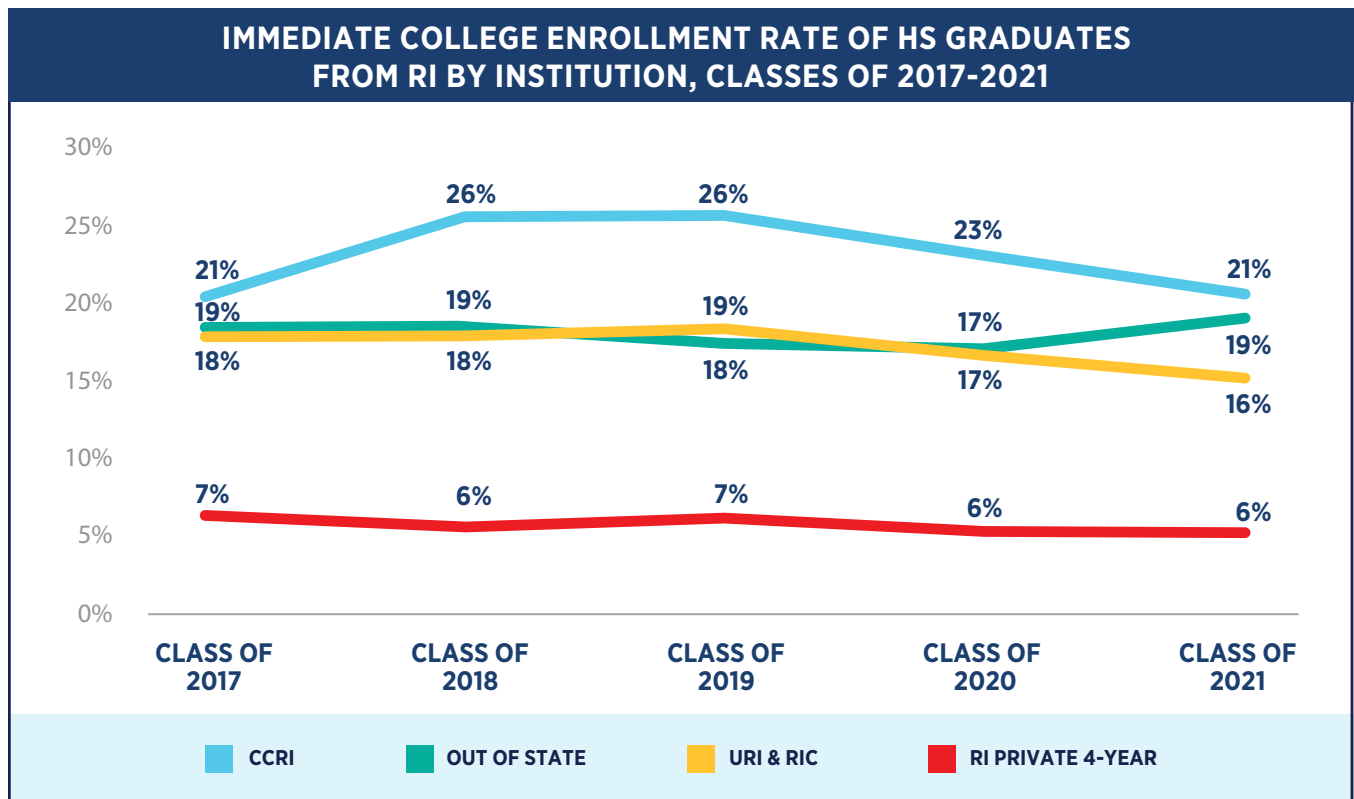


\*\* 2016 recent high school graduates' matriculation rate was unavailable. This is an average of the two adjoining years.

**Rhode Island public institutions, particularly two-year colleges, have experienced drops in enrollment of recent high school graduates.**

Despite the state’s substantial investments in making two-year college affordable, pandemic-induced declines were steepest at two-year colleges, echoing patterns across the country. In the class of 2019, 26% of high school graduates enrolled in a two-year college; this fell to 21% in the class of 2021. By contrast, a relatively stable share of students enrolled in private colleges or out-of-state public institutions, suggesting that pandemic impacts were concentrated among students who rely on the state’s higher education system.

**FIGURE 14 — COLLEGE ENROLLMENT INSTITUTIONS OF HS GRADUATES FROM RI, CLASSES OF 2017 - 2021**



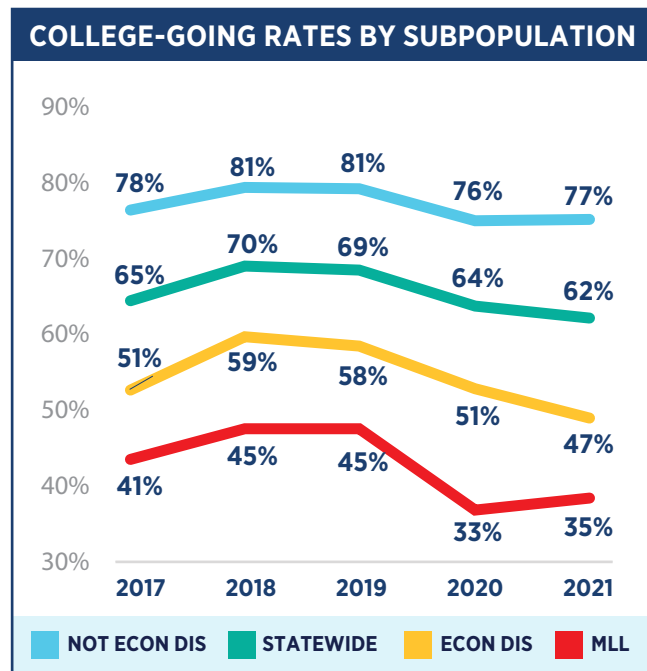
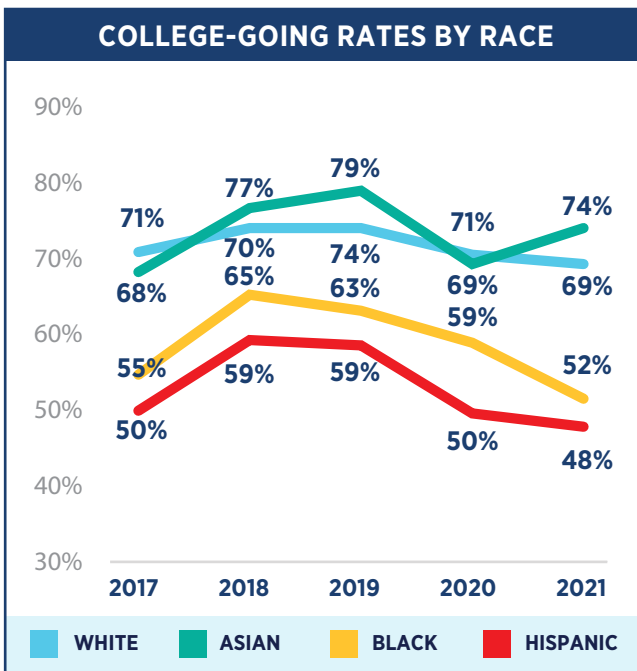


**Equity gaps in college-going have expanded since the pandemic.**

The patterns described above suggest growing inequality in college outcomes. Indeed, we see much larger declines in college-going for Black and Hispanic students and for students with low family income, all of which have dropped by more than 10 percentage points since before the pandemic. As a result, inequality in college-going increased for students from historically marginalized groups who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

**FIGURE 15 — COLLEGE-GOING RATES OF RHODE ISLAND HS GRADUATES, BY RACE & SUBPOPULATION**

**INEQUALITY IN COLLEGE-GOING INCREASED FOR STUDENTS FROM HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED GROUPS WHO ARE TRADITIONALLY UNDERREPRESENTED IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

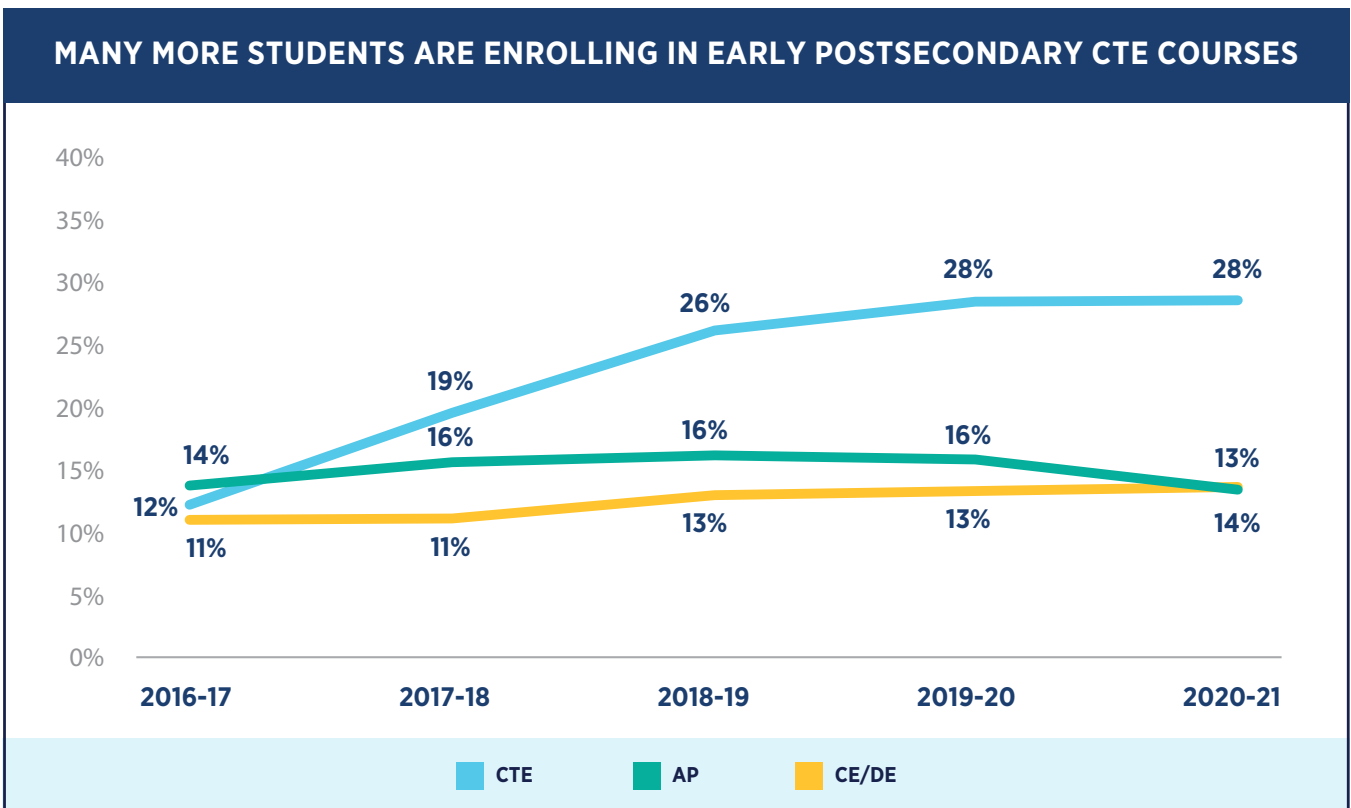


# POSTSECONDARY COURSEWORK IN HIGH SCHOOL

## Take-up of postsecondary coursework in K-12 schools increased leading up to the pandemic.

While college-going has declined substantially and not bounced back after the pandemic, there are positive signs for the future as more RI students are engaging with early postsecondary opportunities (EPSO) in recent years. As of the 2020-21 school year, over a third of 12th grade students had at one point taken a dual enrollment or concurrent enrollment course, experiencing a postsecondary environment before leaving the K-12 system. The number of students enrolling in concurrent coursework increased from ~3,800 in 2016-17 to over 4,700 students in 2020-21 (Figure 17), and has grown since. By contrast, fewer students are enrolling in Advanced Placement courses after the pandemic.

FIGURE 17 – EARLY POSTSECONDARY PARTICIPATION OF RHODE ISLAND HS STUDENTS



There has been an even more significant rise in CTE course-taking, from just under 8,000 high school students in 2017-18 to 12,000 in 2021-22. Now, more than one in four RI high school students takes a CTE course each year. This echoes a substantial expansion in CTE course offerings. In 2021-22, 40 high schools in 30 districts offered CTE courses, up from 21 high schools in 15 districts in 2016-17.

## CONCLUSION



**ACROSS THIS REPORT, THREE THEMES STAND OUT.** First, while the past few years have been devastating for our country and for US public education as a whole, Rhode Island has in some ways weathered the pandemic and its attendant challenges to public education better than other states. Many of the broader patterns that we track in Rhode Island are reflected across the country, but Rhode Island has also seen a modest bounce-back in student academic outcomes and a small but meaningful narrowing of the gap with Massachusetts schools.

At the same time, there is substantial room for improvement in our state's education system. Such dramatic improvement is critical to meet the needs of all students well. Rhode Island students have tremendous and untapped potential to succeed and flourish, but institutions across the state have not yet risen to this challenge. Our schools are struggling in several key areas, from bringing students regularly into school and responding to the needs of the changing student body, to being competitive with comparable schools in neighboring states and narrowing gaps in college going.

Finally, and of critical concern, many of the challenges surfaced during the pandemic appear to be calcifying. Defying expectations by some educational leaders, rates of chronic absenteeism have continued to climb and college-going has continued to fall. We are facing the growing reality that these patterns reflect not simply an immediate reaction to the pandemic but a "new normal" that must be disrupted.

These three themes, echoed throughout the report, reflect both tremendous optimism about the potential of our system to transform the lives of youth, but also another critical call to action for substantially more urgency across the state. Moving forward, we have many assets at our disposal. Compared to its peers across the nation, Rhode Island's education system is relatively well-resourced and recovery funds have provided substantial new investments in key areas such as high-quality curriculum, technology, teacher professional learning, and school facilities. There are about 3% more classroom teachers working in Rhode Island today than there were in 2012-13 and the workforce is quite experienced, providing needed expertise to serve the academic and socio-emotional development needs of all students. However, if we are to heed the calls to raise the bar for all students and promote more equitable outcomes, we need rapid and substantial improvement.

**Rhode Island students have tremendous and untapped potential to succeed and flourish, but institutions across the state have not yet risen to this challenge.**

# APPENDIX A – ABOUT THE DATA

We use multiple sources of publicly available data in this report that we outline below. Where applicable, we note data decisions and limitations.

## ENROLLMENT DATA

In our enrollment analysis we rely on Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) enrollment reports (accessed via the RIDE Datacenter & eRIDE statistical reports). Specifically, we use annual October enrollment reports (including charter schools), Homeschool reports, and Non-Public (Catholic and Independent) enrollment reports. Private school enrollment differs somewhat based on source. NCES reported private school enrollment in RI and Big Local News reported private school enrollment were higher.

To disaggregate how much of the enrollment decline comes from a drop in the student age population or migration to other options (private, homeschool, charter), we rely on annual population and housing census estimates. We opt to use the annual estimates derived from the decennial census because they are packaged as a time series and updated each year as counts, allowing us to work with the estimates as counts. The story changes somewhat if we use the Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey.

## ABSENTEEISM DATA

To analyze changes in absenteeism data, we again rely on RIDE reports. There is likely variation across districts in the reporting of attendance, particularly for students who were in quarantine, that are reflected in these reports. As of September 2023, the annual absenteeism report for the 22-23 academic year had not yet been released preventing us from reporting on trends in the most recent year.

## ACHIEVEMENT DATA

We use both RIDE and the Massachusetts Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) aggregated reports on 3-8 student achievement on the RICAS and MCAS respectively when analyzing changes in student achievement.

We opt to use scaled scores rather than changes in percent proficient where we can. Comparing changes over time using the percent of students meeting or exceeding expectations (or any other standard) is not technically accurate given the distribution of scores over time.

## POSTSECONDARY DATA

In our postsecondary analysis we use reports from RIDE and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). We use a common definition of postsecondary matriculation rate as the percentage of students who enroll in a credit-earning postsecondary program within 12 months of high school graduation. We characterize Career-Technical Education (CTE) courses as Early Postsecondary Course-taking Opportunities (EPSO) as many (though not all) of the CTE courses offered at Rhode Island high schools award students credits toward postsecondary or industry credentials.

## GENERAL NOTES

Throughout this report, we refer to Rhode Island students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) status and Massachusetts students who are English language learner (ELL) status as multilingual learners (MLLs).

We refer to Rhode Island students who qualify for Free/Reduced Price Lunch as economically disadvantaged students. In Massachusetts data, we rely on DESE's categorization of economically disadvantaged students (from 2015-2021). Following the passage of the Student Opportunity Act in Massachusetts, DESE changed its identification of students living in poverty from economically disadvantaged students to low-income students, which we use as a proxy for economically disadvantaged students from 2022 on.

We use an existing and generally accepted breakdown of Rhode Island school districts by urbanicity, originally introduced by the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council. The districts are organized into four categories: urban core (Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket), urban ring (Cranston, East Providence, Newport, North Providence, Warwick, and West Warwick), suburban (Barrington, Bristol-Warren, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Jamestown, Johnston, Lincoln, Middletown, Narragansett, North Kingstown, Portsmouth, Smithfield, and Westerly), and rural (Burrillville, Chariho, Coventry, Exeter-West Greenwich, Foster, Foster-Glocester, Glocester, Little Compton, New Shoreham, North Smithfield, Scituate, South Kingstown, and Tiverton).



## APPENDIX B – MATCHING APPROACH

To make a true apples-to-apples comparison between Rhode Island and Massachusetts, we matched Rhode Island schools to Massachusetts schools that were similar in terms of district size and key demographics. We did this by predicting what test score each Rhode Island school would have if they were in Massachusetts based on the composition of the student body. We then restricted each match to schools that were in a similarly sized district to find the most similar school. We limited matches based on school type (traditional public schools in RI matched to traditional public schools in MA and charter schools in RI matched to charter schools in MA). We also allowed for the same school in Massachusetts to match to multiple Rhode Island schools if it was the best match. This resulted in 193 Massachusetts schools matching to 229 Rhode Island schools. We explored alternative approaches to matching that didn't restrict to district size or school type and found very similar results.

- 1 Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy. 2019. *Providence Public School District: A Review*
- 2 We build on other efforts captured in the following reports: *Improving Rhode Island's K-12 Schools: Where Do We Go From Here?* By RIPEC (2022), RI Kids Count's Annual Factbooks, and *Stay(ing) the Course, Stay the Course: An Update on Rhode Island's Path to a World Class Public Education System by RI Foundation* (2022)
- 3 Big Local News et al. (2023) Missing kids: Exploring the pandemic plunge in public school enrollment through homeschooling, private school and population change data." Stanford Digital Repository. Available at: <http://purl.stanford.edu/sb152xr1685>
- 4 Harden, John D. and Johnson, Steven. "Why Are Americans Fleeing Public Schools?". Washington Post, November 30, 2022. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/3RrYqrU>
- 5 Dee, Thomas. (2023). Higher Chronic Absenteeism Threatens Academic Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3EAW0EC>; see also Chang, Hedy, Balfanz, Robert, & Byrnes, Vaughan. "Pandemic Causes Alarming Increase in Chronic Absence and Reveals Need for Better Data". September 27, 2022. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3r94j2L>
- 6 Goldhaber, D., Kane, T., McEachin, A., Morton E., Patterson, T., Staiger, D., (2022) The Consequences of Remote and Hybrid Instruction During the Pandemic. Research Report. Cambridge, MA: Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3PhBn0z>
- 7 Dominus, Susan. "Rhode Island Kept Its Schools Open. This is What Happened." NY Times, February 10, 2021. Retrieved: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/magazine/school-reopenings-rhode-island.html>. See the following report for more detail on the variation in school reopening in Rhode Island: RIPEC. "Elementary and Secondary Education in the Pandemic: An Analysis of School Reopening and Distance Learning in Rhode Island" October 2020. Retrieved from: [https://ripec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020-Pandemic\\_Education.pdf](https://ripec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020-Pandemic_Education.pdf)
- 8 COE Per Pupil Expenditures table
- 9 McGowan, Dan. "R.I. Governor McKee's big education plan over-promises and underwhelms". April 13, 2023. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3ZekmZJ>
- 10 Rhode Island Department of Education. Rhode Island Department of Education Releases 2021 Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) Test Results. October 28, 2021. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3rbwJJs>
- 11 Lumina Foundation. (2022). *A Stronger Nation Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/>
- 12 National Student Clearinghouse. "New Research: Fall Undergraduate Enrollment Stabilized in 2022". Feb 2, 2023. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/48aXhvl>



### FOR MORE INFO

John Papay, Director of the Annenberg Institute at Brown University  
[John\\_Papay@brown.edu](mailto:John_Papay@brown.edu)