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Ending the Status Quo: Kentucky Parents Increasingly Choose Nonpublic Education Options

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Western Kentucky University

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August 10, 2022

Ending the Status Quo: Kentucky Parents Increasingly Choose Nonpublic Education Options

Gary Houchens, *Western Kentucky University*



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ENDING THE STATUS QUO

Kentucky Parents
Increasingly Choose
Nonpublic Education
Options



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Introduction

Data from the Kentucky Department Education show that the number of Kentucky families choosing private schools or deciding to homeschool their children has skyrocketed in the last five years, and accelerated dramatically in the last school year (2021-2022).

These trends show a strong demand for education alternatives in Kentucky, and lawmakers should adopt policies that help all families, regardless of income or county of residence, to have a broad array of schooling options.

20,000+

**New Kentucky students in nonpublic schools
since 2017**



More (and more) families choose nonpublic education options



In the last five years, the number of Kentucky's students participating in nonpublic education has grown by more than 20,000 children, a percentage increase of 26%, to a total of 97,966 students. These students represent about 15% of the total number of school-aged children in Kentucky (with public school enrollment figures based on numbers reported by the Kentucky Department of Education in 2020, the latest school year for which such data are available²).

In the 2021-2022 school year alone, Kentucky nonpublic school participation increased 8.16%.

Student participation in homeschooling in Kentucky has more than doubled since 2018, rising from 19,634 to 39,535 in 2021-2022. Last year, the first full school year after the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, homeschooling participation increased by 11% in Kentucky.

In the 2021-2022 school year alone, Kentucky nonpublic school participation increased 8.16%.

Kentucky private school enrollment increased 10% in the last five years, rising to 58,383. The 2021-2022 school year saw a 6.3% increase in overall private school enrollment.

Table 1. Kentucky Nonpublic School Enrollment Trends, 2017-2022

	Total Membership	Total Private School Membership	Total Home School Membership	Total Catholic Membership	Total Title II A	Total IDEA-B	Total Title III EL	Total Title III Immigrant	Total Title IV
FY 2023 Totals:	97,922	58,383	39,539	36,183	38,828	25,075	1,419	408	37,093
FY 2022 Totals:	90,529	54,913	35,616	33,836	36,960	21,450	477	79	35,947
FY 2018	77,598	53,028	19,634	32,960	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Change From FY 2022-2023:	7,393	3,470	3,923	2,347	1,868	3,625	942	329	1,146
Percentage Change 22-23:	8.16%	6.31%	11.00%	6.93%	5.00%	16.89%	197.00%	416.00%	3.18%
Change from FY 18-23:	20,324	5,355	19,905	3,223					
Percent Change 18-23:	26.19%	10.10%	101.38%	9.78%					

Kentucky has also seen a dramatic rise in the number of students with disabilities, English language learners, and students identified as immigrants participating in nonpublic education. Data are not available from 2018, but KDE's numbers show that in 2021-2022, 25,075 students with identified special learning needs were being educated in nonpublic settings, a rise of almost 17% since the year before.

The number of students identified as English language learners in nonpublic settings tripled last year and the number of immigrant students quadrupled (See Table 1).

Of Kentucky's 171 districts, 121 reported increases in nonpublic school participation in 2021-2022. The size of these increases varied but affected small, large, urban, and rural districts.

Three of Kentucky's largest districts illustrate the variability of these changes. Fayette County, for example, reported a decline of 13%, or 918 fewer students participating in nonpublic education last year compared with 2020-2021. Jefferson County, however, experienced a 12% increase, with the families of 3,246 more students choosing homeschooling or private school options. Meanwhile Boone County experienced a 49% surge in nonpublic school participation in 2021-2022, up to 4,182 students, an increase of 1,380 students from the previous year (See Appendix A).

121

of Kentucky's 171 school districts reported Nonpublic School Participation Increase

12%

Growth of Nonpublic School Students in Jefferson County

49%

Growth of Nonpublic School Students in Boone County

Background and limitations

These data come from the Declaration of Participation Report generated by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) annually, as required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act. By April 15 each year, local school districts must submit to KDE a list of all private schools, their enrollments, and the number of students participating in homeschooling within the geographic boundaries of their district.

Districts also report the number of nonpublic school students who are eligible for various federal education funds, such as students with learning disabilities and students who are identified as English language learners.

These data are aggregated into a single spreadsheet available from the Kentucky Department of Education upon request. Each year's report is labeled for the following fiscal year. Thus, the most recent Declaration of Participation Report, which includes data for school year 2021-2022, is labeled for Fiscal Year 2023.³



To track the one-year change in nonpublic school participation, the researcher compared data from the FY2022 Declaration of Participation Report with the newest report for FY2023. To track five-year changes, data from FY2023 were compared with information from the FY2018 report (which includes nonpublic school participation from the 2016-2017 school year). All these reports were obtained by request from KDE.

The 2016–2017 school year was chosen for comparison for two reasons. First, that year provides enrollment data points prior to the COVID–19 pandemic of 2020, which likely fueled part of these enrollment trends, although that relationship cannot be established from these data alone.

Secondly, 2017 was a significant year for public policy debates in Kentucky, with widespread protests by members of the education establishment over pension reform and school choice legislation erupting in 2018. In some ways, 2017 represented an historical display of the establishment’s political power since it preceded the intense debates over education policy in the years that followed, including protests that shut down public schools for several weeks in the years prior to the pandemic.

Even before the school districts’ COVID response made education a front-page issue, the education establishment had declared its absolute allegiance to the status quo. Examining enrollment trends in the years that followed may provide a rough, if limited, way to assess how many parents have responded to that new political landscape.

Data from the KDE Declaration of Participation Report must be interpreted with some caution, however. These data are based strictly on reports from the local district; it is possible students in nonpublic schools could have been undercounted or overcounted in some communities.

**In some ways,
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Additionally, private schools may serve students who reside in multiple school districts. This happens especially when an independent district is located within larger county districts. In some cases, private school enrollments are reported only for the district in which the school is geographically located.

For example, Warren County reported zero students in Catholic education for FY2023, while Bowling Green Independent, located within Warren County, and the location of a Catholic school, reported 273 students. In reality, many of the students attending the Catholic school in Bowling Green actually reside in the Warren County school district but show up as students from Bowling Green Independent in the report. This particular limitation does not affect the overall numbers of students statewide participating in nonpublic education but can possibly misrepresent the districts in which those students geographically reside.

Finally, data on 2021-2022 public school enrollment in Kentucky are not yet available.⁴ The latest statewide public school enrollment data available on the KDE website are from the 2019-2020 school year.⁵ The lack of up-to-date public school enrollment data prevents a comparison of how nonpublic enrollment trends compare with public school enrollment trends and what percentage of the overall school-age student population the nonpublic school population represents in each year for which data were collected.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Nationwide, public school enrollment has plummeted in recent years. In an analysis for the American Enterprise Institute, Nat Malkus reports that in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years a combined 1.3 million American students left public schools. This loss of almost 3% of the national student body represents the largest decline of public school enrollment in U.S. history.⁶

Alex Spurrier, associate partner with Bellwether Education Partners, analyzed NCES data and found that Kentucky public schools saw a decline of more than 33,000 students between 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.⁷

Data are not available to know for sure, but some of these enrollment losses may have been from families that chose not to send their pre-kindergarten students to school who otherwise would have. Likewise, it is impossible to know if these enrollment trends will continue, or if families will return their children to public school as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic dissipate.

Long-term nonpublic school trends from Kentucky, especially considering the 2021-2022 school year, suggest that these changes may be long-lasting.

Long-term nonpublic school trends from Kentucky, especially considering the 2021-2022 school year, suggest that these changes may be long-lasting.

Record numbers of Kentucky families are choosing to homeschool their children or selecting a private school. This includes an increasing number of students who have special learning needs and who are immigrants or English language learners. Kentucky's Declaration of Participation report does not disaggregate nonpublic school data by race/ethnicity or income level, but it stands to reason that based on these trends, nonpublic school students are likely more diverse than ever before.

There are significant policy implications of these trends. Based on last year's state education funding formula of \$4,000 per pupil, the 97,922 students served in nonpublic settings last year will represent a cost savings to the Commonwealth of roughly \$391,688,000.⁸ When considering that the Kentucky Department of Education estimates that \$14,331 is spent per pupil on average, the total impact of nonpublic schooling amounts to billions of dollars every year.

Families are already exercising school choice in large numbers to the extent they are able. Lawmakers should ensure that every family should have similar options. HB 563, passed in 2021 by the Kentucky General Assembly, encourages donations to privately-funded educational choice programs that allow eligible families to offset some or all of the costs of private school tuition, textbooks, technology, education-related therapies, and other costs associated with non-public education and home schooling.

When considering that the Kentucky Department of Education estimates that \$14,331 is spent per pupil on average, the total impact of nonpublic schooling amounts to billions of dollars every year.

Public school students are included to the extent their families incur educational costs not currently covered by their district school.

Unfortunately, the private school tuition component of HB 563 is only available to families who live in the state's eight largest counties. Yet, at least 70 of Kentucky's counties have traditional non-public schools and many of those schools serve students in multiple counties. Lawmakers should pass legislation next year to expand eligibility for this important program, which already exists in over 30 states, to make it available for families in all counties. Future analyses of nonpublic school enrollment trends by EdChoice Kentucky will examine how families in smaller and rural communities are already demonstrating a demand for new education options. These families should not be denied the chance to attend a school that best meets their child's needs because of a lack of resources.

At least since 2018 and in rapidly increasing numbers, Kentucky parents have challenged the status quo that dictates children have no education options other than what the local public school district provides. Massive surges in homeschooling and private education demonstrate there is a clear demand for school choice, and Kentucky's leaders should respond accordingly.

**These families should not be denied
the chance to attend a school that
best meets their child's needs
because of a lack of resources.**



Endnotes

1. University affiliation listed for identification purposes only. The conclusions and opinions expressed in this report are the author's alone and do not represent the views of Western Kentucky University or, necessarily, any of its employees.

2. <https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20?year=2021>

3. <https://education.ky.gov/districts/fin/pages/additional-federal-grant-information.aspx>

4. Malkus, N. (2022, July). Pandemic enrollment fallout: School district enrollment changes across COVID-19 response. American Enterprise Institute. https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/pandemic-enrollment-fallout-school-district-enrollment-changes-across-covid-19-response/?mkt_tok=NDc1LVBCUS05NzEAAAGF6X9Z9K1AAOUj6dHz7Q2pD8qpe4wsBhl8nG8iuuvkW4k77gcNDFORgCnK2CBJc46DyDIIVOa4H6Hy5x-appaHOghE8Ot1NZm8jjFAZSg7elFo0Q

5. KDE reports that in in 2019-2020, 638,236 students were enrolled in Kentucky's public schools in grades preschool through 12th.

<https://www.kyschoolreportcard.com/organization/20?year=2021>

6. Malkus, N. (2022, July). Pandemic enrollment fallout: School district enrollment changes across COVID-19 response. American Enterprise Institute.

7. <https://twitter.com/alspur/status/1409914295018831872?s=21&t=lwJcY-6JFsmXPBekNyKLkA>

8. Actual per pupil allotment varies based on individual student demographics, but the average SEEK amount is a good general estimate of how much it would cost the state - not including local districts and their contribution to education spending - if these students were educated in public schools.

Declaration of Participation Summary

Fiscal Year: 2023 compared with 2022

Plan Status: Current

District Name and #	Total Membership FY23	Total Membership FY 22	Total Membership change	Total Membership % change
Adair County (001)	354	302	52	17%
Allen County (005)	361	373	(12)	-3%
Anchorage Independent (006)	5	13	(8)	-62%
Anderson County (011)	427	394	33	8%
Ashland Independent (012)	127	104	23	22%
Augusta Independent (013)	8	0	8	
Ballard County (015)	137	128	9	7%
Barbourville Independent (016)	19	12	7	58%
Bardstown Independent (017)	725	621	104	17%
Barren County (021)	547	461	86	19%
Bath County (025)	193	92	101	110%
Beechwood Independent (026)	523	523	0	0%
Bell County (031)	104	103	1	1%
Bellevue Independent (032)	114	127	(13)	-10%
Berea Independent (034)	42	41	1	2%
Boone County (035)	4,182	2,802	1,380	49%
Bourbon County (041)	294	286	8	3%
Bowling Green Independent (042)	474	417	57	14%
Boyd County (045)	350	321	29	9%
Boyle County (051)	410	350	60	17%
Bracken County (055)	103	71	32	45%
Breathitt County (061)	171	157	14	9%
Breckinridge County (065)	396	432	(36)	-8%
Bullitt County (071)	924	1,003	(79)	-8%
Burgin Independent (072)	26	20	6	30%

Declaration of Participation Summary

Fiscal Year: 2023 compared with 2022

Plan Status: Current

District Name and #	Total Membership FY23	Total Membership FY 22	Total Membership change	Total Membership % change
Butler County (075)	252	214	38	18%
Caldwell County (081)	158	121	37	31%
Calloway County (085)	284	157	127	81%
Campbell County (091)	1,747	1,612	135	8%
Campbellsville Independent (092)	42	8	34	425%
Carlisle County (095)	9	29	(20)	-69%
Carroll County (101)	201	130	71	55%
Carter County (105)	422	250	172	69%
Casey County (111)	535	385	150	39%
Caverna Independent (113)	64	24	40	167%
Christian County (115)	1,970	1,901	69	4%
Clark County (121)	849	751	98	13%
Clay County (125)	556	601	(45)	-7%
Clinton County (131)	179	107	72	67%
Cloverport Independent (132)	9	17	(8)	-47%
Corbin Independent (133)	86	106	(20)	-19%
Covington Independent (134)	1,091	1,089	2	0%
Crittenden County (135)	158	159	(1)	-1%
Cumberland County (141)	95	72	23	32%
Danville Independent (143)	124	201	(77)	-38%
Daviess County (145)	1,738	2,076	(338)	-16%
Dawson Springs Independent (146)	29	17	12	71%
Dayton Independent (147)	25	14	11	79%
East Bernstadt Independent (149)	10	8	2	25%
Edmonson County (151)	133	118	15	13%

Declaration of Participation Summary

Fiscal Year: 2023 compared with 2022

Plan Status: Current

District Name and #	Total Membership FY23	Total Membership FY 22	Total Membership change	Total Membership % change
Elizabethtown Independent (152)	89	82	7	9%
Elliott County (155)	113	49	64	131%
Eminence Independent (156)	64	29	35	121%
Erlanger-Elsmere Independent (157)	564	535	29	5%
Estill County (161)	327	171	156	91%
Fairview Independent (162)	32	21	11	52%
Fayette County (165)	6,021	6,939	(918)	-13%
Fleming County (171)	400	540	(140)	-26%
Floyd County (175)	496	212	284	134%
Fort Thomas Independent (176)	322	358	(36)	-10%
Frankfort Independent (177)	16	14	2	14%
Franklin County (181)	522	811	(289)	-36%
Fulton County (185)	27	21	6	29%
Fulton Independent (186)	17	9	8	89%
Gallatin County (191)	115	96	19	20%
Garrard County (195)	238	258	(20)	-8%
Glasgow Independent (197)	195	124	71	57%
Grant County (201)	39	336	(297)	-88%
Graves County (205)	256	228	28	12%
Grayson County (211)	412	271	141	52%
Green County (215)	86	92	(6)	-7%
Greenup County (221)	212	103	109	106%
Hancock County (225)	117	109	8	7%
Hardin County (231)	1,776	1,798	(22)	-1%
Harlan County (235)	539	346	193	56%

Declaration of Participation Summary

Fiscal Year: 2023 compared with 2022

Plan Status: Current

District Name and #	Total Membership FY23	Total Membership FY 22	Total Membership change	Total Membership % change
Harlan Independent (236)	63	27	36	133%
Harrison County (241)	269	220	49	22%
Hart County (245)	706	634	72	11%
Hazard Independent (246)	37	15	22	147%
Henderson County (251)	872	739	133	18%
Henry County (255)	158	150	8	5%
Hickman County (261)	59	48	11	23%
Hopkins County (265)	618	497	121	24%
Jackson County (271)	273	246	27	11%
Jackson Independent (272)	2	1	1	100%
Jefferson County (275)	30,564	27,318	3,246	12%
Jenkins Independent (276)	15	3	12	400%
Jessamine County (281)	945	855	90	11%
Johnson County (285)	117	80	37	46%
Kenton County (291)	3,251	4,447	(1,196)	-27%
Knott County (295)	227	215	12	6%
Knox County (301)	565	465	100	22%
LaRue County (305)	305	281	24	9%
Laurel County (311)	871	611	260	43%
Lawrence County (315)	200	162	38	23%
Lee County (321)	113	61	52	85%
Leslie County (325)	72	61	11	18%
Letcher County (331)	211	96	115	120%
Lewis County (335)	218	117	101	86%
Lincoln County (341)	582	383	199	52%

Declaration of Participation Summary

Fiscal Year: 2023 compared with 2022

Plan Status: Current

District Name and #	Total Membership FY23	Total Membership FY 22	Total Membership change	Total Membership % change
Livingston County (345)	136	117	19	16%
Logan County (351)	230	245	(15)	-6%
Ludlow Independent (354)	17	9	8	89%
Lyon County (361)	46	55	(9)	-16%
Madison County (365)	921	825	96	12%
Magoffin County (371)	48	83	(35)	-42%
Marion County (375)	247	219	28	13%
Marshall County (381)	637	701	(64)	-9%
Martin County (385)	89	71	18	25%
Mason County (391)	245	217	28	13%
Mayfield Independent (392)	82	72	10	14%
McCracken County (395)	919	780	139	18%
McCreary County (401)	507	264	243	92%
McLean County (405)	98	84	14	17%
Meade County (411)	284	217	67	31%
Menifee County (415)	89	40	49	123%
Mercer County (421)	210	213	(3)	-1%
Metcalfe County (425)	132	171	(39)	-23%
Middlesboro Independent (426)	100	69	31	45%
Monroe County (431)	83	69	14	20%
Montgomery County (435)	518	412	106	26%
Morgan County (441)	259	155	104	67%
Muhlenberg County (445)	644	498	146	29%
Murray Independent (446)	64	60	4	7%
Nelson County (451)	789	610	179	29%

Declaration of Participation Summary

Fiscal Year: 2023 compared with 2022

Plan Status: Current

District Name and #	Total Membership FY23	Total Membership FY 22	Total Membership change	Total Membership % change
Newport Independent (452)	246	275	(29)	-11%
Nicholas County (455)	50	122	(72)	-59%
Ohio County (461)	382	313	69	22%
Oldham County (465)	1,386	1,488	(102)	-7%
Owen County (471)	264	180	84	47%
Owensboro Independent (472)	1,072	1,065	7	1%
Owsley County (475)	67	39	28	72%
Paducah Independent (476)	301	299	2	1%
Paintsville Independent (477)	18	20	(2)	-10%
Paris Independent (478)	71	67	4	6%
Pendleton County (481)	148	148	0	0%
Perry County (485)	343	227	116	51%
Pike County (491)	411	254	157	62%
Pikeville Independent (492)	15	28	(13)	-46%
Pineville Independent (493)	0	0	0	
Powell County (495)	174	144	30	21%
Pulaski County (501)	1,422	1,099	323	29%
Raceland-Worthington Independent (502)	23	25	(2)	-8%
Robertson County (505)	2	6	(4)	-67%
Rockcastle County (511)	169	142	27	19%
Rowan County (515)	472	439	33	8%
Russell County (521)	320	209	111	53%
Russell Independent (522)	121	99	22	22%
Russellville Independent (523)	51	34	17	50%

Declaration of Participation Summary

Fiscal Year: 2023 compared with 2022

Plan Status: Current

District Name and #	Total Membership FY23	Total Membership FY 22	Total Membership change	Total Membership % change
Science Hill Independent (524)	11	10	1	10%
Scott County (525)	949	1,075	(126)	-12%
Shelby County (531)	340	574	(234)	-41%
Simpson County (535)	217	178	39	22%
Somerset Independent (536)	92	68	24	35%
Southgate Independent (537)	133	138	(5)	-4%
Spencer County (541)	421	346	75	22%
Taylor County (545)	269	268	1	0%
Todd County (551)	274	286	(12)	-4%
Trigg County (555)	419	425	(6)	-1%
Trimble County (561)	89	87	2	2%
Union County (565)	310	315	(5)	-2%
Walton-Verona Independent (567)	231	243	(12)	-5%
Warren County (571)	1,469	1,411	58	4%
Washington County (575)	267	260	7	3%
Wayne County (581)	261	271	(10)	-4%
Webster County (585)	198	191	7	4%
Whitley County (591)	371	262	109	42%
Williamsburg Independent (592)	19	9	10	111%
Williamstown Independent (593)	28	34	(6)	-18%
Wolfe County (595)	18	103	(85)	-83%
Woodford County (601)	524	393	131	33%
FY2023 Totals:	97,922	90,529	7,393	8%
FY2022 Totals:	90,529			
Change from FY2022-2023:	7,393			
Percentage change:	8.16%			