

One sector is flourishing during the pandemic: K-12 private schools

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been a tremendous challenge for America's K-12 education system. Schools have struggled to balance the health needs of their communities with the educational needs of their students. But one corner of the K-12 education landscape has shown resilience and, in many cases, has actually managed to thrive — America's independent, or private, school sector.

Each day we hear the news about the increasing number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths from COVID-19. Not only is there a terrible health crisis, but a terrible

economic crisis as well. Over 22 million Americans lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic and, compared to February, we are still down about 10 million jobs.

In previous economic recessions, enrollment declined in the private school sector. For example, from 2007 to 2011, during the Great Recession, enrollment in K-12 independent schools declined by 642,000 students, an 11 percent decrease. During this time, the number of school-aged children was increasing. Using the most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Education, independent school enrollment today remains below where they were in 2007.

Declining enrollment in independent schools means a decrease in the diversity of educational, religious and social offerings in K-12 education — and it means a fiscal hit to taxpayers who must pay to educate more students in public schools.

Given the severity of the pandemic-related recession, many expected a decline in independent school enrollment. But this time was different.

In a survey of 160 independent schools over 15 states and the District of Columbia, almost half of schools (78) surveyed report they have experienced higher enrollment in the current school year, relative to the prior year. Forty-eight schools experienced a decrease in enrollment, while the remaining 34 schools had enrollments “stay about the same.” Of schools where enrollment essentially was unchanged, the reason that enrollment did not increase at 14 of them was because they were at capacity.

These schools are members of MISBO, a nonprofit association supporting the K-12 independent school sector. The majority of the schools in the survey are located in five states: Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

Why did 70 percent of independent schools surveyed see their enrollment increase or stay the same, despite the severe recession?

Families make school decisions for their children based on many factors, but the economic hit that most households have taken should have led to fewer families being able to afford a private school education for their children. Based on our survey results, one reason independent schools may have gained enrollment during these tough economic times is that these schools have been more likely to remain open, having created detailed protocols based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other guidelines to maintain student and teacher safety.

Of the 160 independent schools in our survey, 121 are currently open full time, for face-to-face learning. The remaining 39 are on some sort of hybrid schedule, in which students learn in classrooms for part of the week and virtually for the rest of the week. None of the independent schools in our survey was on a fully virtual schedule when it was conducted (Nov. 18-20).

Qualtrics and Brown University economist Emily Oster have been receiving data from large numbers of public and private schools. Their latest data, from Oct. 26 through Nov. 8, found that COVID-19 infection rates among both students, teachers, and staff are over 40 percent lower in private and parochial independent schools, compared to the public schools in their sampling.

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Thus, it seems like the independent school sector is having success balancing the goals of keeping students and teachers safe while providing a quality education during these challenging times. And, despite the economic challenges faced by many families, more American families are making the increasingly difficult financial sacrifice to entrust private, independent schools with the education and care of their children.

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