

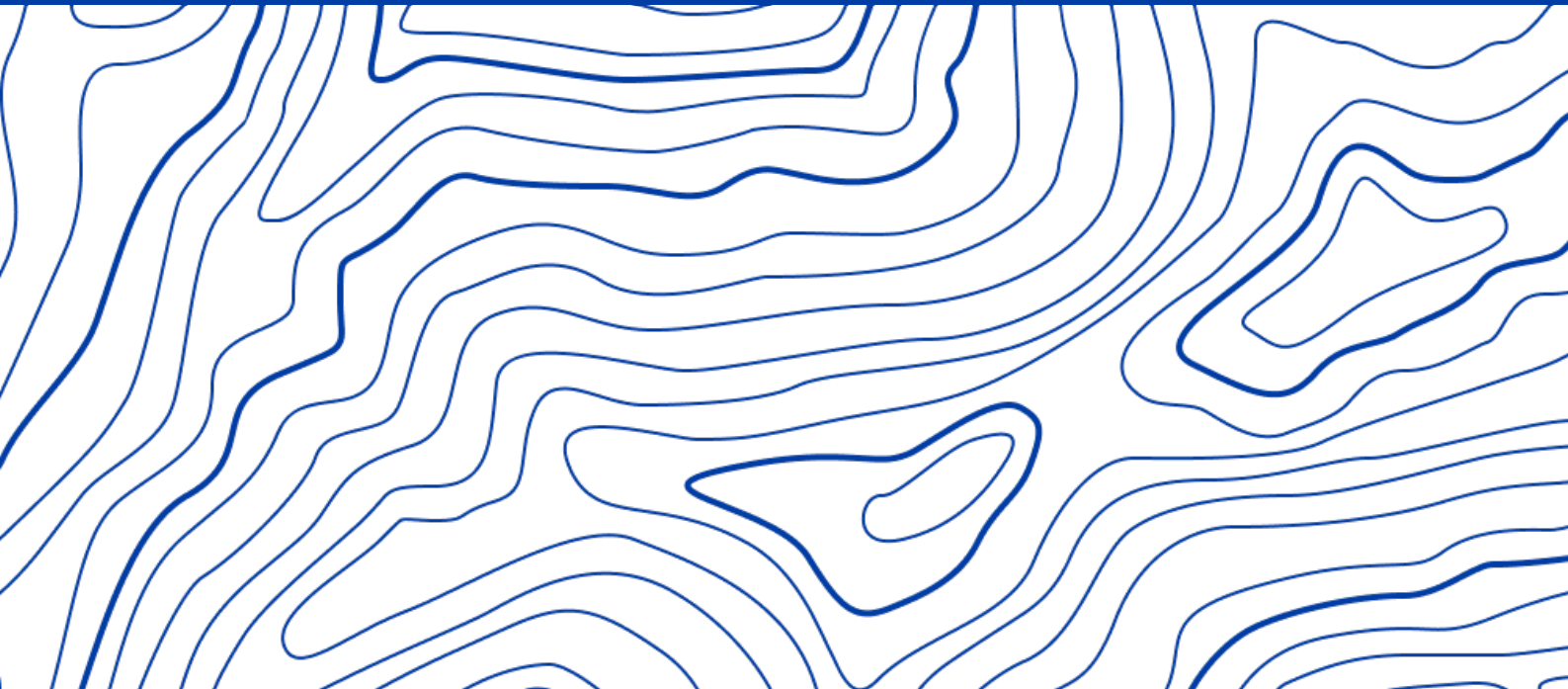


# WHAT HIGH SCHOOL DID YOU GO TO?

## Saint Louis's Rapidly Shifting High School Landscape, 2011-2023

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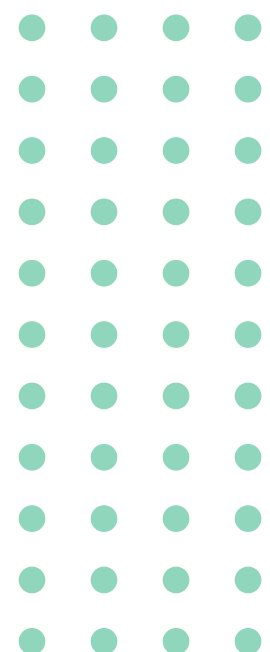


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It's that quintessential St. Louis question, "Where did you go to high school?" And it has gotten much more interesting in recent years. Declining populations in combination with the opening of new schools have created massive change throughout the city's public high school sector.

Consider the period of time since today's high school seniors first started school. Most of those students would have begun school around 2011. This policy brief examines how the high school landscape has shifted over that period of time, exploring school openings and closings in conjunction with substantial population declines.

### **Key Points:**

- Public high school enrollment in St. Louis city declined from 9,428 in 2011 to 7,224 in 2023, a decrease of 23%.
- Between 2011 and 2023, six public high schools opened and six closed, with a total of 29 high schools as of 2023.
- These numbers will continue to change. During the drafting of this report, Hawthorn Leadership School for Girls closed due to low enrollment, while another charter high school was authorized to open, BELIEVE STL Academy.
- Of the 17 public high schools that were open for the entire 2011–2023 period, 10 saw enrollment declines of 25 percent or more, and six have seen declines of more than 50 percent.
- Private school data is less reliable. Missouri does not maintain readily available, official enrollment counts for private schools. Federal enrollment surveys are voluntary on the part of schools, and only four St. Louis private high schools participated in both the 2011 and 2022 Private School Universe Survey administered by the U.S. Department of Education.
- Homeschooling has also increased substantially at the high school level since the COVID-19 pandemic, although precise estimates have yet to be published.

Decades of research now support the idea of small high schools of 300 to 600 students. It is an open research question of whether the significant benefits observed elsewhere have materialized in St. Louis. But virtually none of the scholarly literature would recommend returning to an era where high school enrollments consistently ranged from 1,000 to 2,000 students.

**Table 1: Enrollment at Public High Schools in St. Louis, 2011--2023**

*Six schools opened, six closed, and others shrank significantly. Overall enrollment declined by 15.76%.*

School	2011 Enrollment	2023 Enrollment	% Change
Beaumont CTE High School	714	251	<b>-64.85%</b>
***Big Picture Middle & High @NW	87	--	<b>Closed 2012</b>
Carnahan School of the Future	354	149	<b>-57.91%</b>
Central Visual/Perf. Arts High	522	386	<b>-26.05%</b>
Cleveland NJROTC Academy	257	--	<b>Closed 2021</b>
Collegiate School of Med/Bio	--	334	<b>Opened 2013</b>
Community Access Job Training	131	84	<b>-35.88%</b>
*Confluence Preparatory Academy	425	395	<b>-7.06%</b>
*Construction Careers Center	321	--	<b>Closed 2016</b>
Gateway High	1165	827	<b>-29.01%</b>
*Gateway Science Academy High	--	372	<b>Opened 2012</b>
*Grand Center Arts Academy High	--	418	<b>First senior class 2016</b>
***Griscom Detention Ctr.	32	10	<b>-68.75%</b>
*Hawthorn Leadership School for Girls	--	59	<b>Opened 2015</b>
*Imagine College Prep	746	--	<b>Closed 2013</b>
*Kairos High	--	134	<b>HS Opened 2023</b>
*KIPP St. Louis High	--	518	<b>Opened 2017</b>
*Lift for Life Academy High School	248	344	<b>+38.71%</b>
Mckinley Class. Leadership Ac.	85	252	<b>+196.47%</b>
Metro High	291	343	<b>+17.87%</b>
**Miller Career Academy	703	532	<b>-24.32%</b>
****MO School for the Blind	29	30	<b>+3.45%</b>
Roosevelt High	1003	461	<b>-54.04%</b>
*Shearwater High School	69	--	<b>Closed 2014</b>
Soldan International Studies	676	490	<b>-27.51%</b>
***St. Louis Children's Hospital	8	0	<b>-100.00%</b>
Sumner High	586	264	<b>-54.95%</b>
Transportation And Law	318	--	<b>Closed 2021</b>
Vashon High	658	571	<b>-13.22%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>9428</b>	<b>7224</b>	<b>-23.38%</b>

\*Charter; \*\*Vocational School; \*\*\*Other/Alternative School; \*\*\*\*Special Education School

Source: DESE; School designations defined by NCES. We include all schools whose DESE County-School Code begins with 115, signifying its location within the city of St. Louis.

*High school outcomes - graduation rates, college-going and more - by their very nature take time to observe. The high school landscape in St. Louis is shifting faster than the numbers can roll in.*

Policymakers in Missouri are increasingly focused on post-secondary outcomes. For each public high school, the state now publishes reliable estimates of high school graduation and college attendance, along with additional, partial information on college completion and employment. These numbers have important policy implications.

High school graduation rates, postsecondary attendance, college degree completion: all fall under the term “educational attainment,” which in plain language refers to the highest level of education that a person has completed. These outcomes are now part of state and federal accountability and reporting systems.

In public policy (as in APR scores in Missouri), in the popular press (as in the US News Rankings of U.S. high schools), and in public opinion (as in the question, “What high school did you go to?”) these long-term outcomes are central to dialog about school quality.

In some ways, educational attainment rates are a cumulative measure of progress over the past decade—the sum total of progress students have made since kindergarten. Insofar as policymakers are unsatisfied with student post-secondary outcomes at a given school or in a given district, they may push for change.

But there’s a catch. The high school system serving students today is vastly different from the system of just a decade ago. What are the policy implications of educational attainment rates?

Normally, educational attainment rates are used to heap praise upon—or to argue for change at—the high school level. But what if the schools serving students today quite literally aren’t the same schools as those that were enrolling freshmen five or ten years ago? This is certainly the case in St. Louis, Missouri.

This brief examines enrollment shifts plus school openings and closings in St. Louis since 2011 when most of today's high schoolers were just beginning elementary school. We review data from The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) on schools within the city of St. Louis. Additionally, we include private school data from the Private School Universe Survey, created and dispersed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). For the purposes of this report, we analyze available enrollment and school creation and closure data for public high schools in the SLPS district to understand trends related to the ever-changing high school landscape in St. Louis.

### *Openings, Closings and Enrollment Shifts in St. Louis Public High Schools*

In 2011, 29 public high schools were serving 9,428 students in the city of St. Louis. A little over 3,000 9th graders were enrolled that year in total, and public school enrollment has notably declined in the decade since. Between 2011 and 2023, six high schools have opened and six have closed, making for a total of 29 schools serving 7,224 students, an almost 23% decrease from 2011.

Of the six schools that opened between 2011 and 2023, five were charter schools and one a district-run school. Charter schools are independent public schools and have more autonomy than traditional public schools. They are non-selective in their admission policies and do not charge tuition or fees.<sup>1</sup> Enrollment in charter high schools has increased on average by almost 24%. As of 2023, a majority of all public high school students in St. Louis were enrolled in either a traditional, charter, or other “choice” school. These numbers will continue to change. During the drafting of this report, Hawthorn Leadership School for Girls closed due to low enrollment, while another charter high school, BELIEVE STL Academy, was authorized to open.

Of the 17 public high schools that were open for the entire 2011–2023 period, ten have seen enrollment declines of 25 percent or more, two of which were designated ‘other/alternative’ schools, Griscom Detention Ctr. and St. Louis Children’s Hospital, and the rest of which were traditional public schools or charter schools. Additionally, six schools saw declines of more than 50 percent, including the aforementioned alternative schools, as well as Beaumont CTE, Carnahan School of the Future, Roosevelt High, and Sumner High. Conversely, three schools saw an increase in enrollment by at least 15%, two of which were traditional and one, Lift for Life Academy High School, a charter school. McKinley Classical Leadership Academy High School saw the greatest increase of almost 200%.

In observing enrollment by grade level over the last decade, ninth grade classes saw an average decrease of 32%, 10th grades an average of 20%, 11th grades saw a 26% decrease, and 12th grades saw the smallest decrease in enrollment with an average of 9%. See Table 2 for the results.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhinesmith, Evan. (2019, August). Charter Schools 101. PRiME Center. Saint Louis University. <https://www.sluprime.org/prime-blog/charter101>

**Table 2: Enrollment in SLPS High Schools by Grade Level, 2011–2023**

*Ninth grade saw the greatest decline in enrollment, 32.25 percent*

	9th Grade Total	10th Grade Total	11th Grade Total	12th Grade Total	Total Enrollment
2011	3,073	2,454	2,272	1,617	9,428
2023	2,082	1,975	1,676	1,477	7,224
<b>% Change</b>	<b>-32.25%</b>	<b>-19.52%</b>	<b>-26.23%</b>	<b>-8.66%</b>	<b>-23.38%</b>

Source: [DESE](#), Note: Not all 9–12 data equates to 9–12 totals.

These decreases in enrollment across grade levels are even greater when considering only schools open in both 2011 and 2023, as shown in Table 3. Those schools average an almost 30% decrease across the grade levels and an almost 43% decrease in ninth grade classes. This dramatic decrease can be attributed to a number of causes. The increase in the percentage of students enrolled in charter schools, from 19% in 2011 to 31% in 2023, in addition to the creation of more school of choice options, created an environment where families have more options than ever to consider for their incoming freshman.

**Table 3: Enrollment in SLPS High Schools Across 17 Schools Open in 2011 AND 2023**

*Ninth grade saw the greatest decline in enrollment, 42.94 percent*

	9th Grade Total	10th Grade Total	11th Grade Total	12th Grade Total	Total Enrollment
2011	2,527	1,966	1,853	1,272	7,622
2023	1,442	1,482	1,284	1,167	5,389
<b>% Change</b>	<b>-42.94%</b>	<b>-24.62%</b>	<b>-30.71%</b>	<b>-8.25%</b>	<b>-29.30%</b>

Source: [DESE](#), Note: Not all 9–12 data equates to 9–12 totals.

### **Private School Data**

This report focuses primarily on the public high school sector in St. Louis, but that is not due to a lack of consideration for the changing landscape amongst private high schools. It is instead because Missouri does not officially record or readily report private high school data. The little data we do have is from the Private School Universe Survey (PSS), created and dispersed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This is a single survey completed by the administrative personnel in private schools across the country, and it seeks to collect data regarding religious orientation, level and size of schools, length of school day and year, total enrollment (K–12), graduation rate, whether a school is a coeducational or single-sexed and



enrollment by sex, number of teachers employed, program emphasis, and the existence and type of kindergarten program if applicable ([NCES](#)).

Participation in the PSS is voluntary, however. The 2019–2020 school year is the most recent PSS data available, and only four private high schools in St. Louis City responded to the PSS in both 2011–2012 and 2019–2020. Data regarding enrollment for these four schools can be found in Table 4. Those schools are Bishop DuBourg, Rosati-Kain, SLU High, and St. Mary’s. For this reason, to say the least, we have a less than comprehensive view of the private high school sector, but are still able to see changes over time amongst this selection of schools. Over this eight-year period, all four schools experienced a decline in enrollment, averaging about a 17% decrease. Rosati-Kain saw the greatest decline with about a 32% decrease and SLU High saw the smallest decline, about 12%.

**Table 4: Private High School Enrollment in St. Louis: An Incomplete Picture**

*Only four private high schools with data reported—overall enrollment declined by 17.23 percent*

School	2012 Total Enrollment	2020 Total Enrollment	% Change
Bishop DuBourg High School	510	394	-22.75%
Rosati-Kain High School	408	278	-31.86%
St. Louis University High School	1,094	964	-11.88%
St. Mary's High School	345	315	-8.70%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,357</b>	<b>1,951</b>	<b>-17.23%</b>

*Source: Private School Universe Survey (PSS), 2010–11 & 2019–20*

Not pictured in Table 4 are the St. Louis private high schools who did not elect to participate in the Private School Universe Survey—which is to say, most private high schools in St. Louis since only four responded to the survey. The Private School Universe Survey is a valuable tool for communities, researchers and reporters to understand trends and characteristics of local schools. We recommend that Missouri private schools make greater efforts to participate in the PSS in the future.

As with public schools, a number of private high schools are facing closure. This is particularly pronounced among Catholic schools within city limits. Yet, even so—as with public schools—new

private high schools continue to open. For example, St. John Paul II Preparatory School has recently opened a new campus in south St. Louis. The school uses a blended learning model, and advertises part-time enrollment options for homeschooled students—features that allow a school to operate with a smaller brick-and-mortar footprint. In future iterations of this work, the PRiME Center will seek to build an authoritative publicly available data set on private high school enrollments.

### ***Homeschooling Data***

By virtually every account, homeschooling increased substantially during the pandemic. A PRiME Center poll of Missouri parents suggested that 7–8 percent of Missouri students are currently homeschooled.<sup>2</sup> Analyses of other surveys and Census Bureau data produce similar estimates.<sup>3</sup> However, the extent to which St. Louis families homeschool—particularly at the high school level—is not well known (but will be a topic of future PRiME Center research). As with private schools, the State of Missouri does not collect nor report authoritative data on homeschool enrollments. However, if homeschooling rates and trends for St. Louis high schoolers at all approach the estimates of 7-8 percent for the overall population, the proportion of St. Louis students homeschooling for high school will likely grow significantly in the coming years.

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<sup>2</sup> Burle, Ashley Donaldson; Hall, Rich; Heggie, Claire; Burrola, Abby. (2023, April) Missouri Parent Survey. PRiME Center. Saint Louis University. <https://www.sluprime.org/education-reports-database/missouri-parent-survey>

<sup>3</sup> McShane, M. (2021, April 2). Homeschooling in Missouri nearly doubled in 2020. Show-me Institute. <https://showmeinstitute.org/blog/education/homeschooling-in-missouri-nearly-doubled-in-2020/>;

Bernhard, B. & Renaud, J. (2023, October 23). Pandemic shift to home-schooling goes mainstream in Missouri. St. Louis Post-Dispatch. [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/pandemic-shift-to-home-schooling-goes-mainstream-in-missouri/article\\_0c93d338-6e96-11ee-8690-6f2bdb3ece6d.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/pandemic-shift-to-home-schooling-goes-mainstream-in-missouri/article_0c93d338-6e96-11ee-8690-6f2bdb3ece6d.html)

The high school sector in St. Louis today is much different from a decade ago. And it will likely look much different a decade from now.

One can be certain: in St. Louis, new schools will open, and more will close. Even during the drafting of this report, the Hawthorn Leadership School for Girls announced their immediate closure due to low enrollment. This further emphasizes that the educational landscape is ever-changing. An open question for the future is whether the sector today will produce different outcomes than the sector it has replaced.

There is an ongoing policy debate: given the projected continued population decline, does St. Louis need more high schools? The average public high school enrollment in St. Louis is now just over 300 students. To educators and onlookers used to the concept of 1,500 or 2,000 student high schools, current school enrollments may seem alarmingly low. But there is a countervailing point: small schools may be better for students.

St. Louis is wrestling with big questions. How big should schools be? Does school size impact student outcomes? Decades of research examine this question, and findings clearly favor smaller schools. Indeed, few areas of education research are so consistent. The remainder of this policy brief reviews that evidence.

The size and organization of schools can be a once in a generation decision. Building design, construction and site locations are long-lasting decisions. For decades across the United States, the typical urban or suburban district opted to build relatively large schools—this was certainly true in St. Louis mid-century.

However, in the years between 2000 and 2020, a “small schools” movement has sought to reorganize urban districts into a larger number of relatively small schools. Extremely persuasive and rigorous research shows that this has produced large and lasting benefits for students.

We'll now summarize that research, beginning with a summary of an authoritative meta-analysis covering research published between 1990 and 2009, and followed by our review of the most

recent literature. The overall evidence is conclusive. When it comes to high schools, smaller schools produce better results. This is one of the few truly consistent findings in the scholarly literature in K–12 education.

A 2009 article in the *Review of Educational Research* analyzed findings from 57 separate studies of the relationship between school size and student outcomes: “The weight of evidence provided by this research clearly favors smaller schools<sup>4</sup>” (p.464 ). Most of the studies reviewed focused on high school students. The authors’ recommendations were unequivocal: “Secondary schools serving exclusively or largely diverse and/or disadvantaged students should be limited in size to about 600 students or fewer<sup>5</sup>,” precisely the size of most St. Louis high schools today (p. 26).

The evidence on small schools included in the 2009 RER study has its drawbacks. While compelling in its consistency, much of the research around small schools was descriptive: the research designs used could only make limited claims about cause and effect. That has now changed.

Over the last decade, the most compelling research ever on small high schools has appeared.<sup>6</sup> In the early 2000s, a movement formed to establish new, small high schools on the basis of the research we just outlined. At that same time, districts in New York and Chicago were undertaking major efforts to update their physical infrastructures. Those districts embraced small schools. In a wave of new construction and building renovations, the New York City Department of Education created more than one hundred small high schools that were limited to 400 students apiece—a substantial reduction in size from typical high schools in the city. Likewise in Chicago, dozens of small high schools were constructed over a period of a few short years in the early 2000s. In both cities, the small schools were non-selective—open essentially to any student who applied. Independent, rigorous studies were conducted of both initiatives, leveraging enrollment lotteries

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<sup>4</sup> Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2009). A review of empirical evidence about school size effects: A policy perspective. *Review of educational research*, 79(1), 464-490

<sup>5</sup> Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2009). A review of empirical evidence about school size effects: A policy perspective. *Review of educational research*, 79(1), 464-490

<sup>6</sup> Hitt, C., McShane, M. Q., & Wolf, P. J. (2018). Do impacts on test scores even matter? Lessons from long-run outcomes in school choice research. American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.aei.org/publication/do-impacts-on-test-scores-evenmatterlessons-from-long-run-outcomes-in-school-choice-research>

and other natural experiments to make strong causal claims on the effects of attending a small high school.

In both cities, small schools were shown to substantially increase high school graduation rates. The impacts were remarkably similar in size: in Chicago, on-time graduation rates increased by 8.9 percentage points; in New York, by 9.5 percentage points.<sup>7</sup> These impacts are large, akin to the highly-publicized long-term impacts of high-quality early childhood programs<sup>8</sup>.

In New York, researchers continue to follow students who attended new, small high schools. The impacts of attending a small high school persist later into adulthood. Four years after high school graduation, students who attended small schools are 4.6 percentage points more likely to be enrolled in college and/or employed.<sup>9</sup>

As with the current churn in St. Louis, the move towards new and smaller high schools in Chicago and New York City was disruptive and controversial. But the move appears to have paid off. According to recent rigorous and highly persuasive research, the move produced positive impacts in both cities. An open research question is whether the shift towards new, small high schools in St. Louis will produce similar results. Indeed, this may be one of the most important research questions in education policy today.

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<sup>7</sup> Barrow, L., Schanzenbach, D. W., & Claessens, A. (2015). The impact of Chicago's small high school initiative. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 87, 100-113; Bloom, H. S., & Unterman, R. (2014). Can small high schools of choice improve educational prospects for disadvantaged students?. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 33(2), 290-319.

<sup>8</sup> McCoy, D. C., Yoshikawa, H., Ziol-Guest, K. M., Duncan, G. J., Schindler, H. S., Magnuson, K., ... & Shonkoff, J. P. (2017). Impacts of early childhood education on medium-and long-term educational outcomes. *Educational Researcher*, 46(8), 474-487.

<sup>9</sup> Unterman, R., & Haider, Z. (2019). *New York City's Small Schools of Choice: A First Look at Effects on Postsecondary Persistence and Labor Market Outcomes*. Policy Brief. MDRC.

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