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# **PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT and CLOSURES in SAINT LOUIS CITY**

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Over the past three decades, the public education system in the City of St. Louis has undergone rapid change. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the historical trends of the city's public education system including enrollment, building size, and number of schools in the context of the city's geography.

- St. Louis City's system of public schools is highly unstable. Over the past 32 years (1991 to 2023), 85 schools have opened while 104 schools have closed. There is only one instance where the number of schools stayed the same from one year to the next (1998-99); the net year-over-year change often masks substantial churn.
- The phenomena of decreasing public school enrollment and population decline are intertwined; it would be in the city's best interest to develop policy solutions that address these issues together. Careful analysis of historic and geographic trends may inform the difficult process of school closure with the hope of lessening trauma for students, families, employees, and other stakeholders.
- Historical enrollment trends vary across the city's geography and by grade range. Some wards have experienced large increases in enrollment while others have witnessed steep declines. Ward 5 experienced the highest increase in enrollment (48%) while Ward 13 saw the sharpest decline (82%). There was a 38% decline in K-8 enrollment while high schools only experienced a 25% decline.
- Currently, neither enrollment nor number of schools is consistent across the city's 14 wards. For example, Ward 14's schools educate 4,510 students in 13 schools, relative to only 792 students in three Ward 6 schools. Even distribution would give each ward approximately 2,000 students and 7 schools.
- Researchers should treat DESE records with considerable caution; numerous LEA and school name changes and changes to punctuation and abbreviations may make it appear that there are more schools than actually exist.



The City of St. Louis is a drastically different city than it was three decades ago. At its peak, the city was home to 856,000 residents;<sup>1</sup> however, the population has declined steadily since the 1950s. City voters acknowledged this fact in 2012 with the passage of Proposition R- an amendment to the city’s charter which mandated the reduction of wards from 28 to 14 following the release of 2020 census population figures.<sup>2</sup> By 2022, the population fell below 300,000,<sup>3</sup> renewing concerns over the fate of the city.

Upon closer inspection, the decline is even more troubling due to its potential widespread impact on the city’s system of public education. The child (ages 0 to 17) population has dropped 40% since 2000,<sup>4</sup> primarily as a result of young children and their families moving away from North City.<sup>5</sup>

Amid these changing demographics, city families saw their public education options expand with the opening of new schools and contract with the closure of others. Saint Louis Public Schools (SLPS) expanded special programming and magnet options while charter schools offered new alternatives altogether.

The purpose of this report is to highlight how St. Louis City’s public education system has changed over the past thirty years and how the historical trends have evolved unevenly across the city’s geography. This presents an important learning opportunity for educators, policy makers, and researchers as they consider how to best adapt the public education system to an ever-shrinking city.



This report uses the term public education system to collectively refer to all publicly funded schools — traditional district and charter. Given the city’s high rates of student mobility<sup>6</sup>, district and charter schools do not exist as separate systems or in isolation. This report intentionally does not distinguish between district and charter schools to reveal trends across the entire system.

Permanent school closures have plagued the city for decades, yet rarely have they been quantified with any specificity. Inconsistencies in the way Missouri’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reports data make it difficult to compare schools from one year to the next. For example, schools that change names or locations may appear to have closed. In addition, DESE assigns a school code to general, special, and alternative education programs, but not all of these programs constitute what is commonly considered a school. Schools may also co-locate within one building while remaining individual schools (e.g., Collegiate School of Medicine and Bioscience and Central Visual and Performing Arts have co-located since 2021 yet have different DESE school codes).

The topic of vacant buildings is closely related to that of school closure. Many instances of school closure result in a vacant building, however, this is not always the case. There are many examples of both district and charter schools closing only to be replaced by a different school shortly thereafter. In other words, a school may permanently cease operations, but the school building may not become vacant or may only be vacant a short time. Alternatively, a school may stay open and continuously enroll students, yet change locations and leave a vacant building behind (e.g., When Cleveland NJROTC Academy moved to the Central Visual and Performing Arts campus in 2007 the school stayed open but the building in Ward 3 was closed).

The examples below are intended to provide clarification for the school closure determinations made in this report:

<b>Example 1</b>	<b>Closure</b>	Scruggs Elementary (SLPS) closed in 2009. Other schools in the SLPS local education agency (LEA) remained open.
<b>Example 2</b>	<b>Closure</b>	Preclarus Mastery Academy closed in 2018. It was the LEA's only school.
<b>Example 3</b>	<b>Closure</b>	The State Board of Education closed six schools across three LEA's operated by Imagine Academy in 2012.
<b>Example 4</b>	<b>Not Closure</b>	The charter school Paideia Academy originally began as part of the SLPS LEA, operating two locations. It later became its own LEA and, as a result, the schools received new DESE school codes.
<b>Example 5</b>	<b>Not Closure</b>	The SLPS school Wilkinson moved to the previously closed Roe School beginning with the 2008-09 school year. While the building Wilkinson Elementary closed, the school continued to operate at its new location.
<b>Example 6</b>	<b>Not Closure</b>	St. Louis Language Immersion schools originally had several schools (French School, Spanish School, Chinese School) at various locations. These schools were all combined into one location under one name.

# 4

## Methods and Data Sources



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This report is a descriptive analysis of the public education system in the City of St. Louis using publicly available data from the U.S. Census Bureau and DESE. Building-level data for student enrollment includes the years 1991 to 2023, all the years for which data is publicly accessible on DESE’s website. Population data is drawn from the decennial census beginning in 1990, the year closest to the study time period.

The City of St. Louis Address and Property Information Search website<sup>7</sup> was used to identify the ward in which each school is or was located. For some schools, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch newspaper archives (accessed through the St. Louis Post-Dispatch website<sup>8</sup> and the St. Louis Public Library<sup>9</sup>) and the St. Louis Public Schools website<sup>10</sup> were used to obtain the school address and dates of school opening and/or closure.

Some analyses consider the entire system of public schools, including those that are specialized programs like alternative schools and special education facilities (Appendix A), while others only include schools that use a general curriculum. Figures and tables which depict the city as a whole (Table 1 and Figures 2 through 5) include all schools and programs to provide a complete picture of the system over time. The remaining tables and figures (Tables 2 and 3 and Figures 6 through 9) detail trends in building size and across the city’s geography so they exclude the schools and programs listed in Appendix A. These specialized programs target a very specific student population of student and are less connected to their geographical location. Additionally, these specialized programs are, by their nature, often small and may bias the findings of the building size analysis.

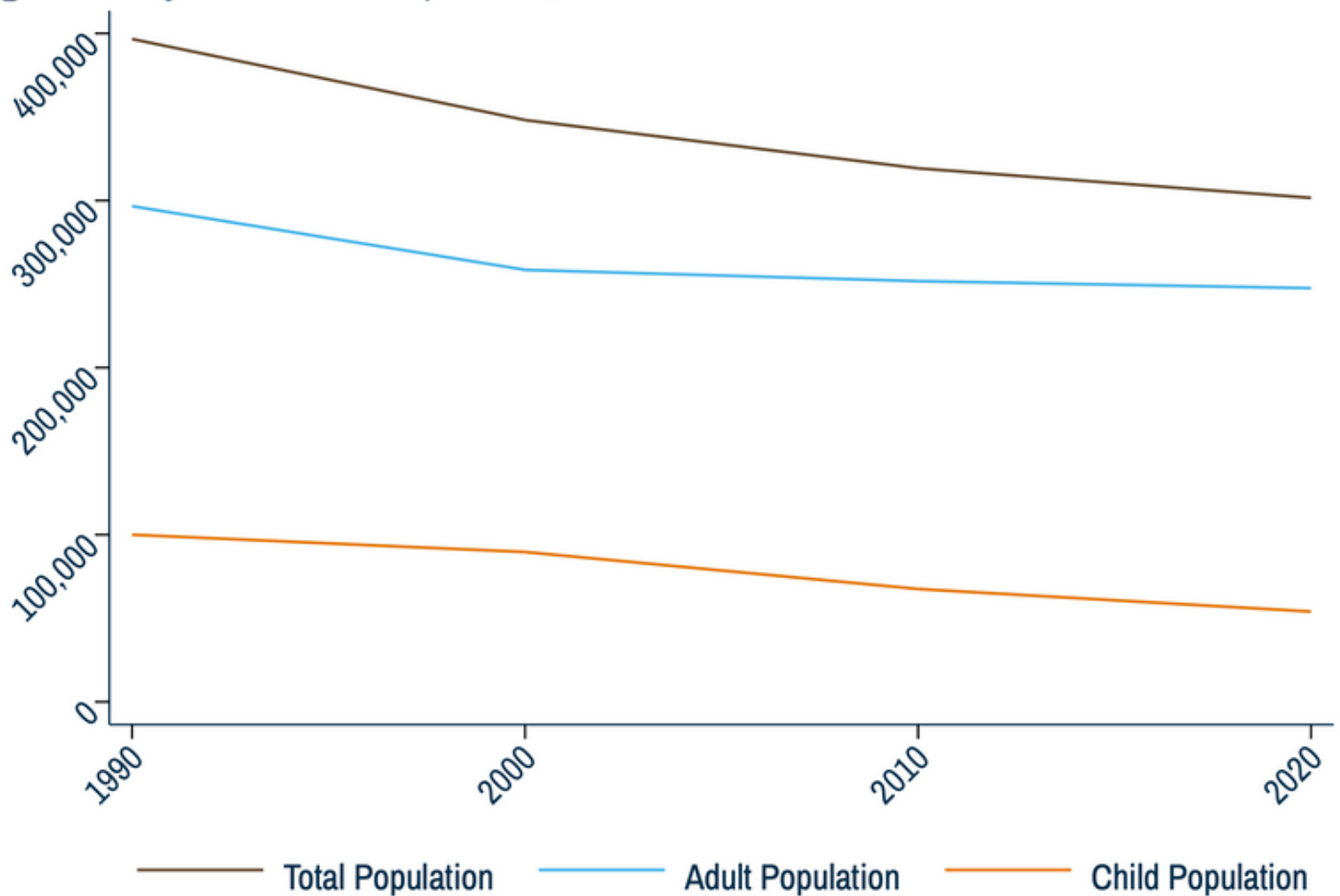
# 5

## Population and Enrollment



In the years between the 1990 and 2020 census, the city's population fell from just under 400,000 residents to barely 300,000. However, the decline was not shared equally by the adult and child (ages 0 to 17) populations. As shown below in Figure 1, the sharpest decline in adult population happened between 1990 to 2000, while the sharpest child population decline, of at least 20%, occurred in the following two decades.

Figure 1. City of St. Louis Population, 1990-2020



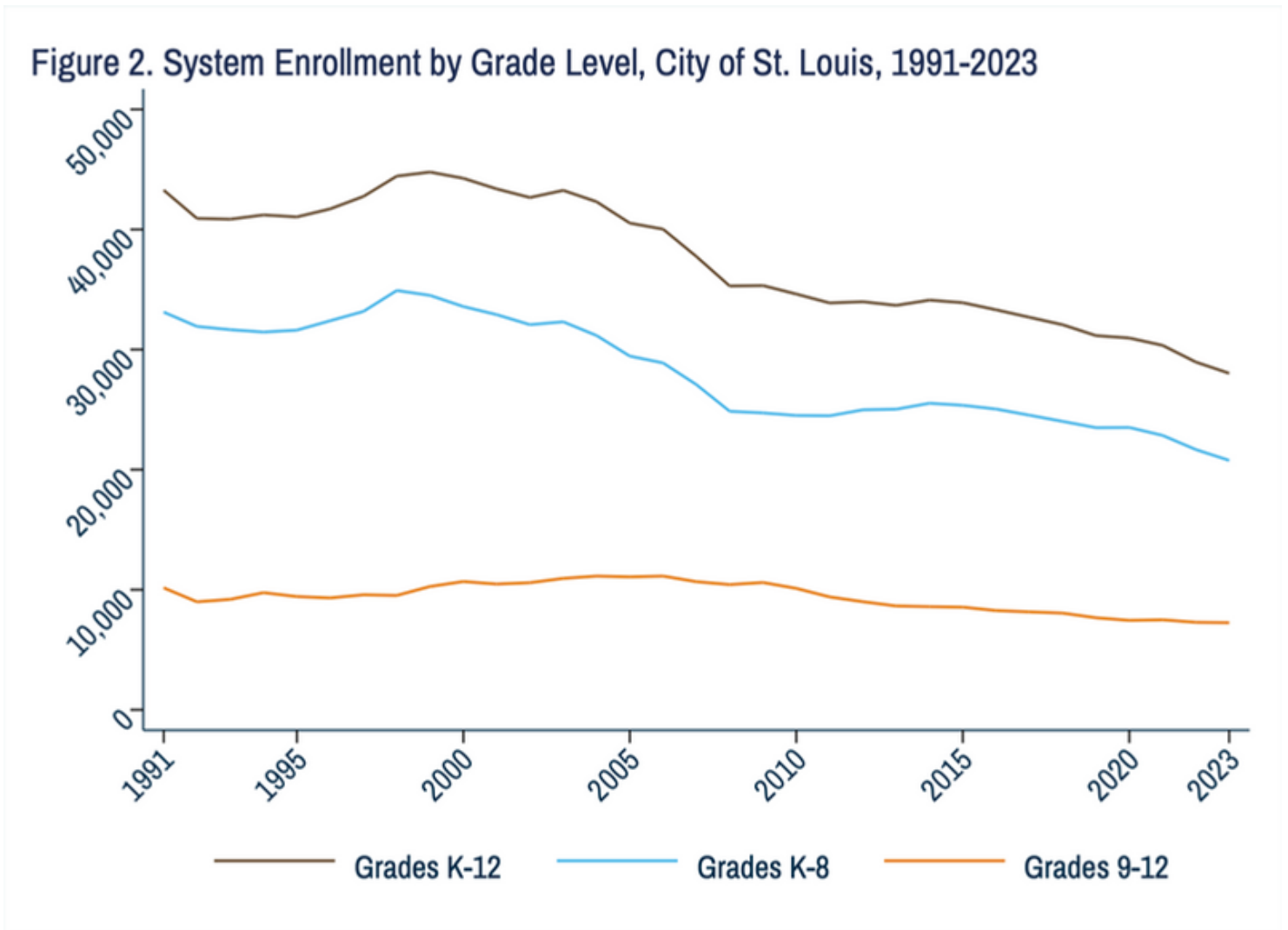


Overall, the child population has been reduced by nearly 50% and public school enrollment by almost 30% (Table 1). However, the share of children enrolled in public schools has increased over time, suggesting the demographic shifts affected public schools and private schools differently.

**Table 1.** City of St. Louis public school enrollment and child population by Census year.

	Public School Enrollment	Enrollment % Change	Child Population	Child Population % Change	Enrollment as % of Child Population
1990	43,281 (1991 enrollment)	--	100,040	--	43.3%
2000	44,264	+2.3%	89,657	-10.4%	49.4%
2010	34,624	-21.8%	67,539	-24.7%	51.3%
2020	30,961	-10.6%	54,031	-20.0%	57.3%
Overall		-28.5%	--	-46.0%	--

Enrollment, number of schools, and average building size have fluctuated significantly over the past three decades, though differently across school and grade levels. For example, the K-8 and 9-12 grade spans did not experience uniform enrollment change (Figure 2).



Historical trends also vary for enrollment in individual grades. Figures 3, 4, and 5 depict the number of students enrolled in each grade for every year since 1991. In particular, kindergarten and 9th grade have seen larger changes than other grades within their same school levels.

Figure 3. K-5 Enrollment by Grade, City of St. Louis, 1991-2023

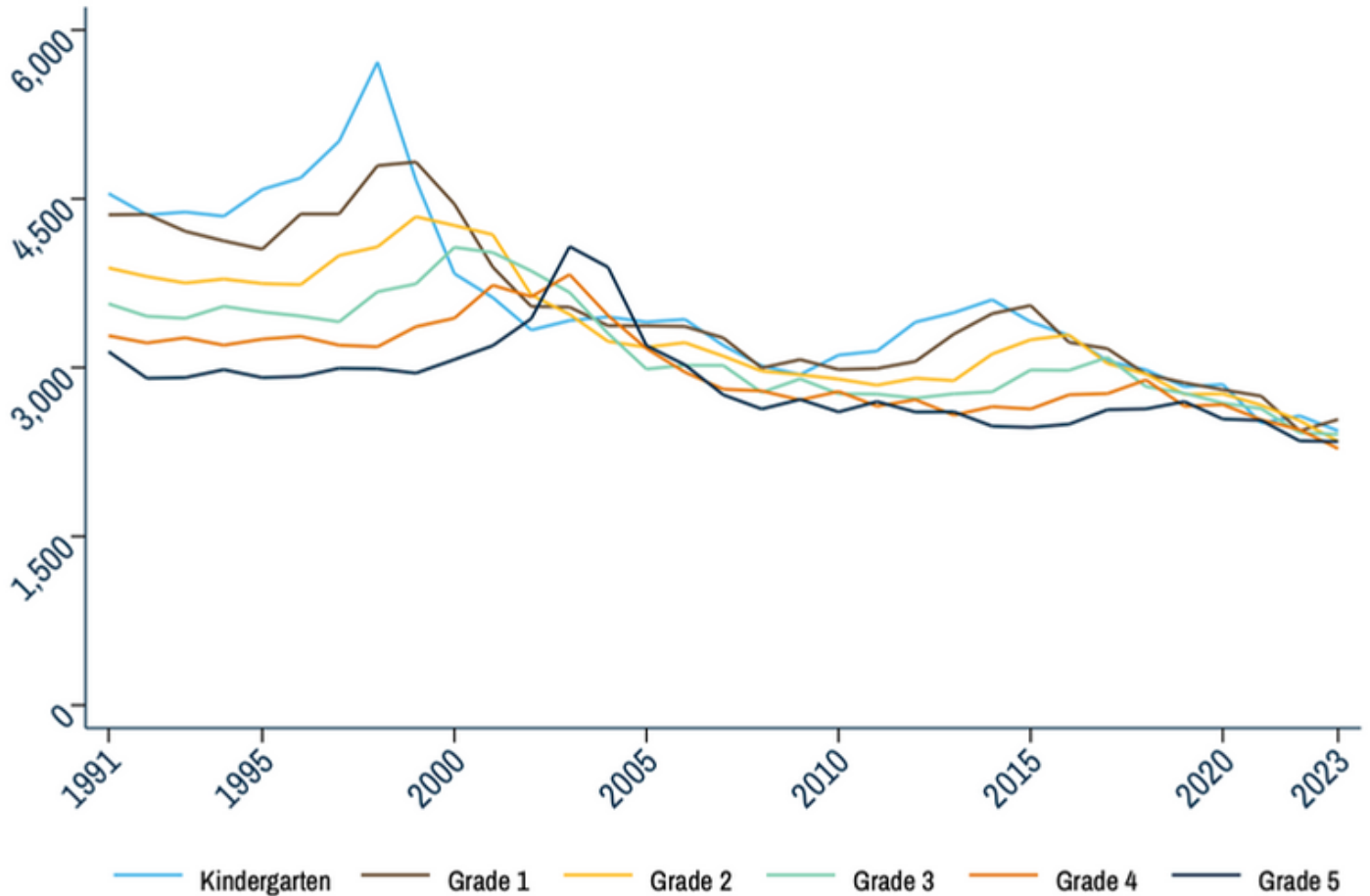


Figure 4. 6-8 Enrollment by Grade, City of St. Louis, 1991-2023

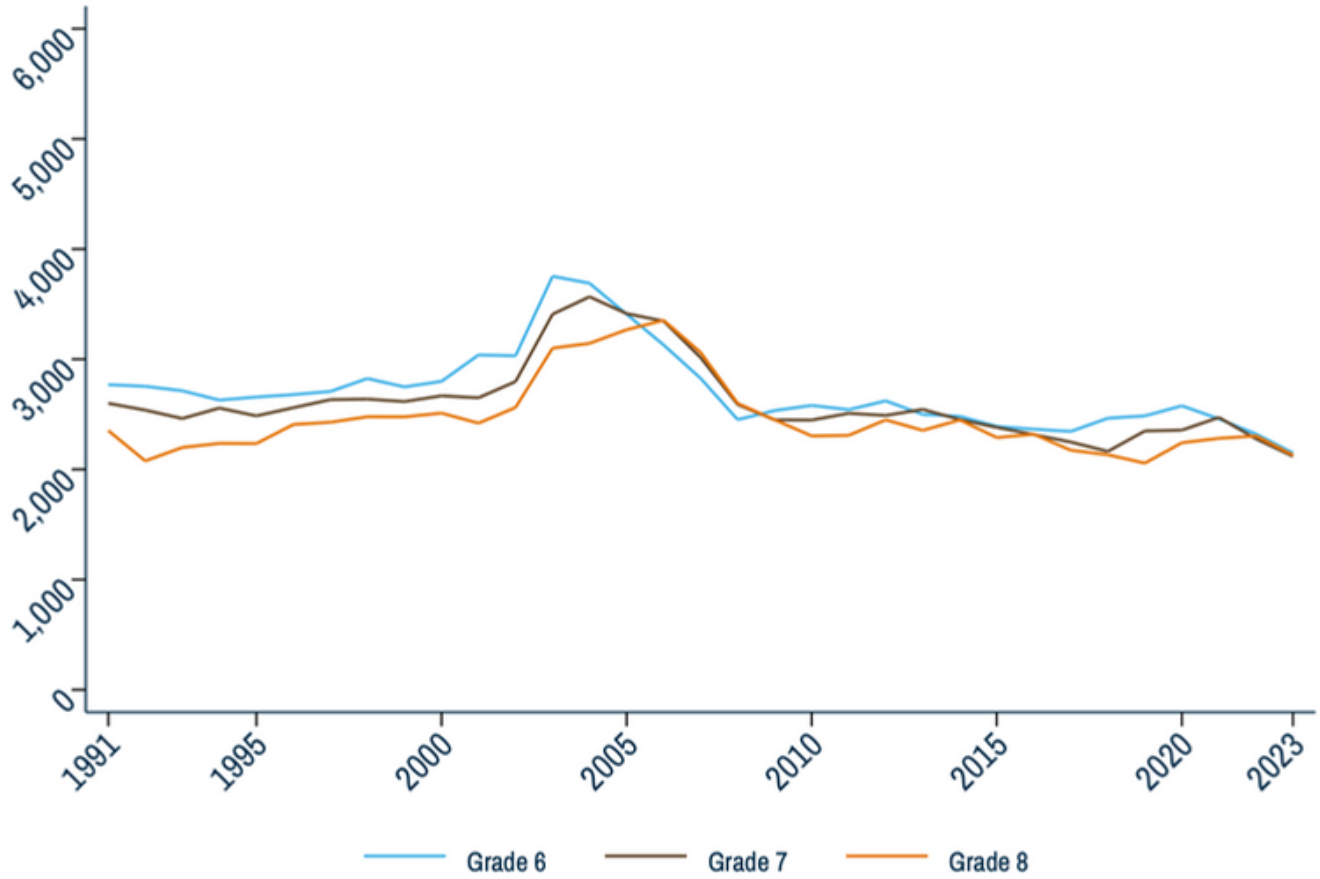
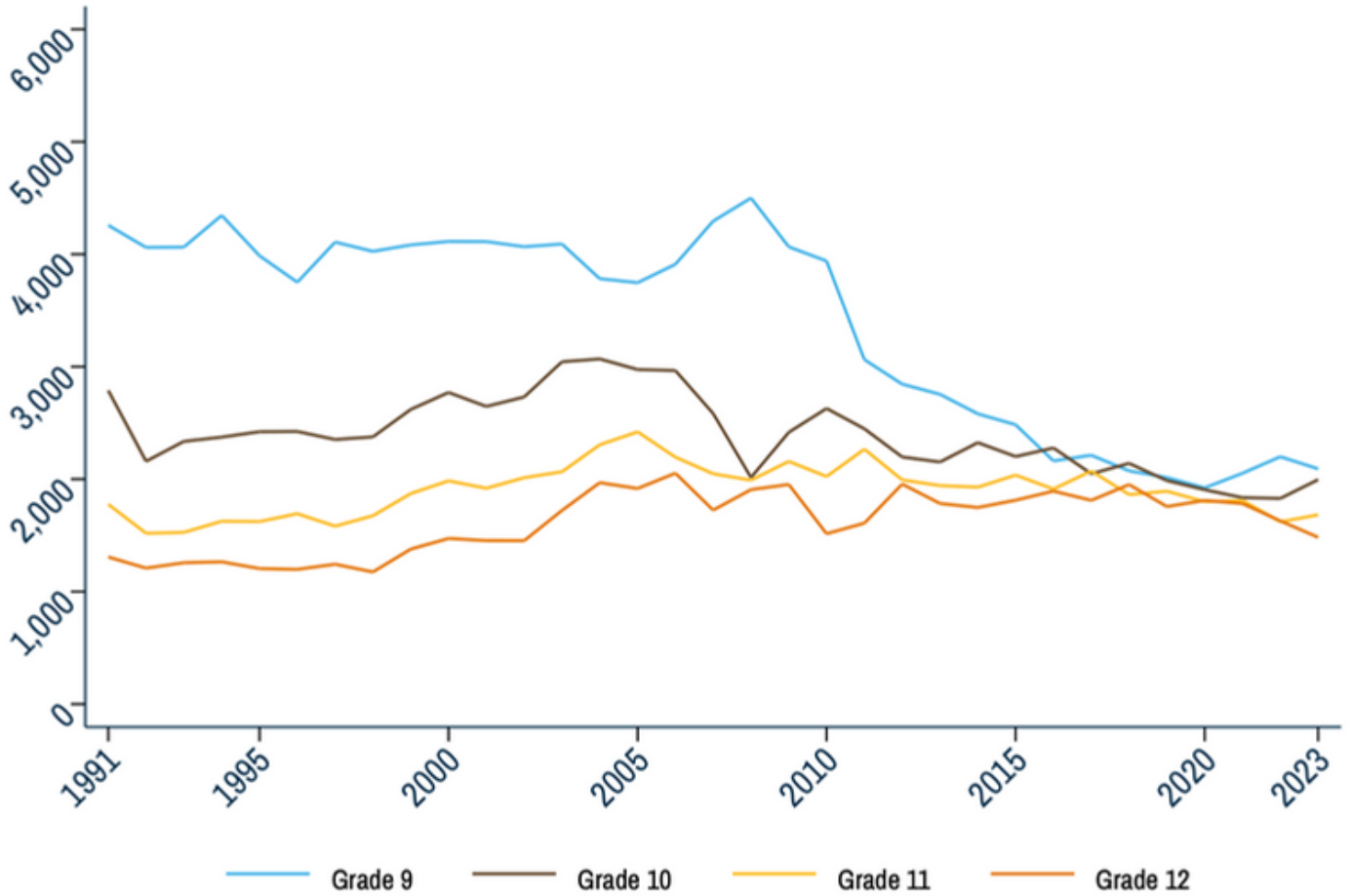


Figure 5. 9-12 Enrollment by Grade, City of St. Louis, 1991-2023



Overall, average building size has decreased by almost 80 students. This decrease, however, is primarily due to changes in high schools.

While average high school enrollment was 712 students in 1991, it is now only 392 students, a decrease of 45%. Perhaps surprisingly this is because in 2023 five more high schools operated than in 1991 even though the total number of students enrolled in grades nine through 12 decreased by approximately one-quarter. On the other hand, average elementary building enrollment declined by less than 20% and there was a net decrease of 26 schools.

Figure 6. Number of Schools by Grade Level, City of St. Louis, 1991-2023

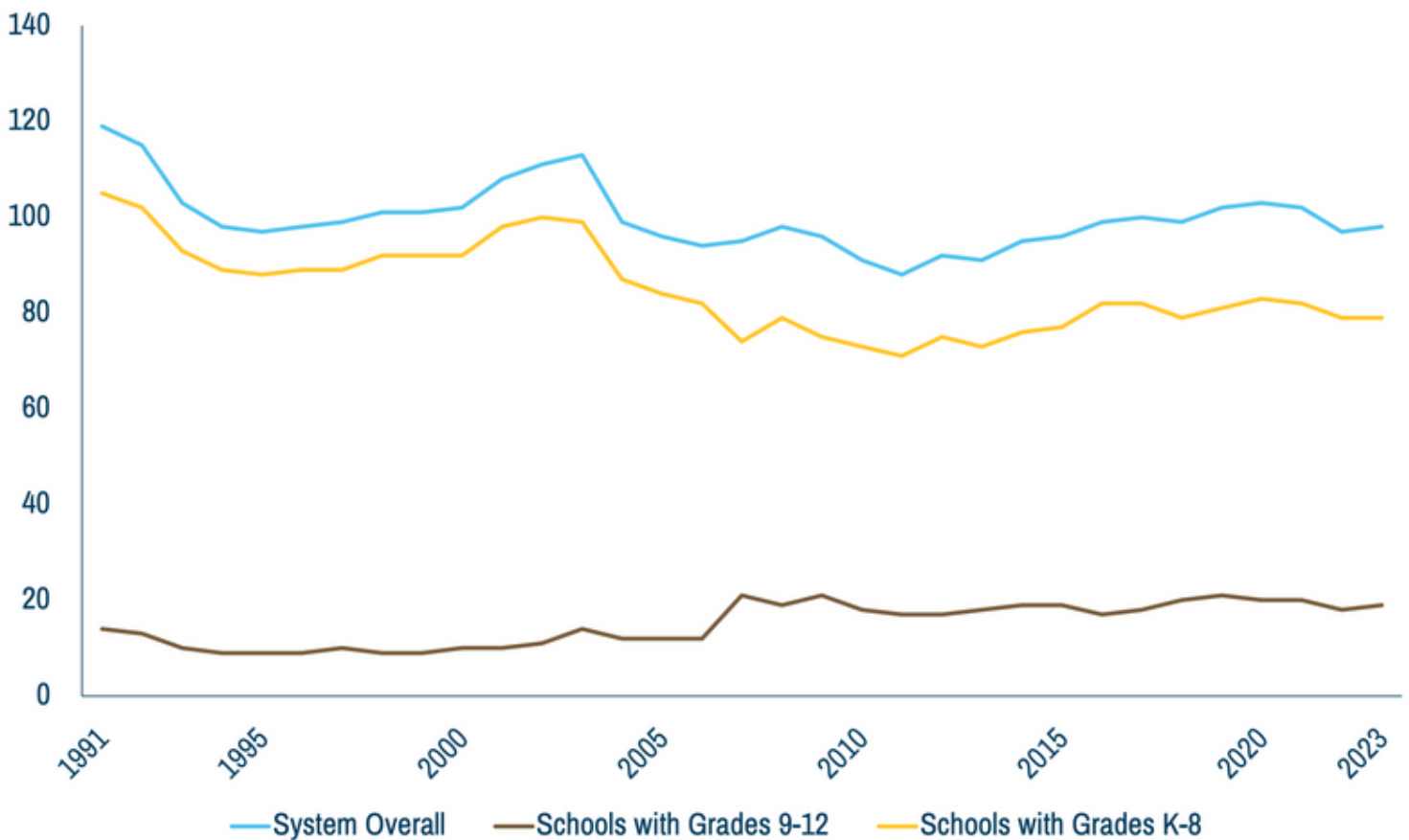
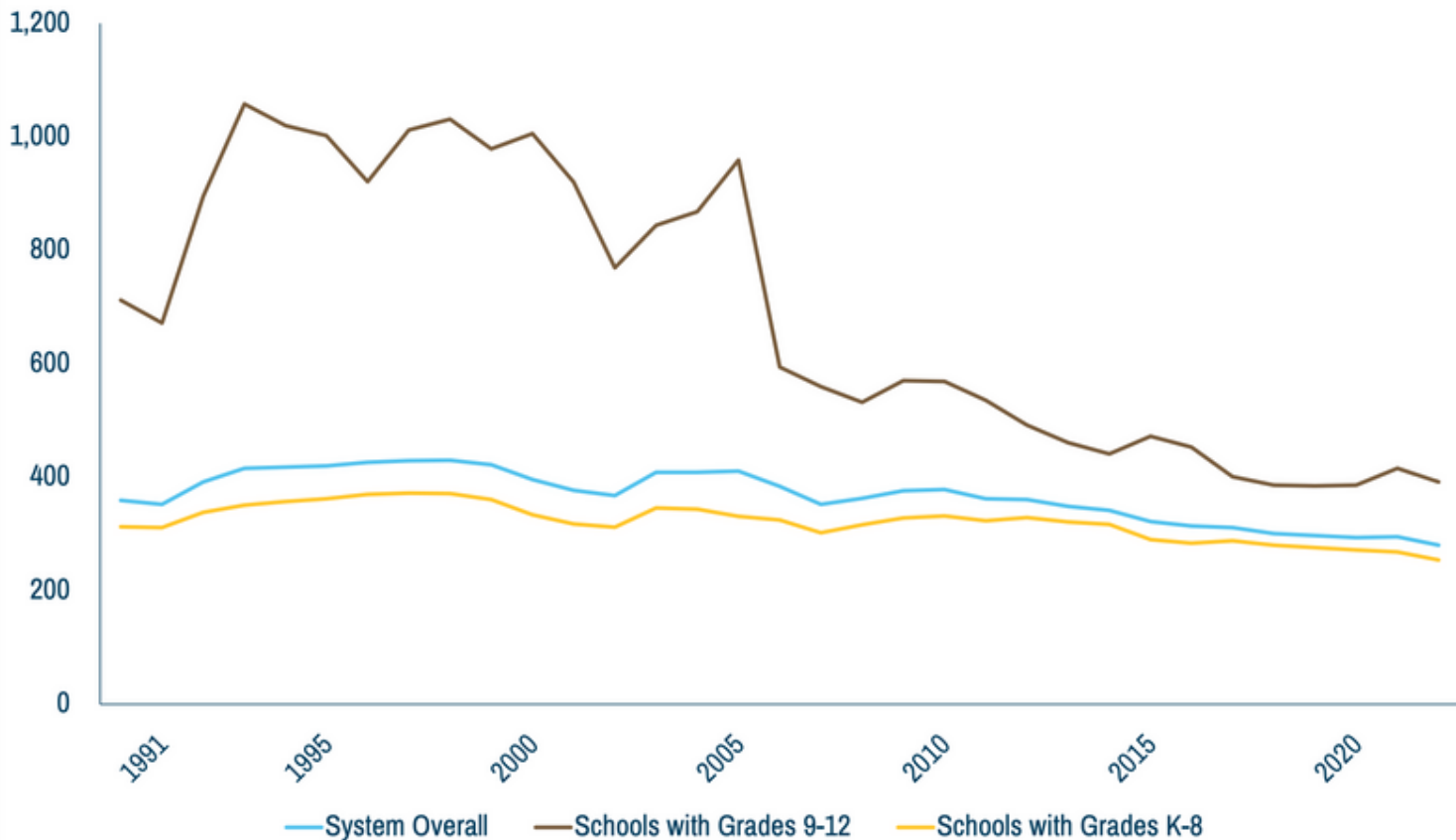


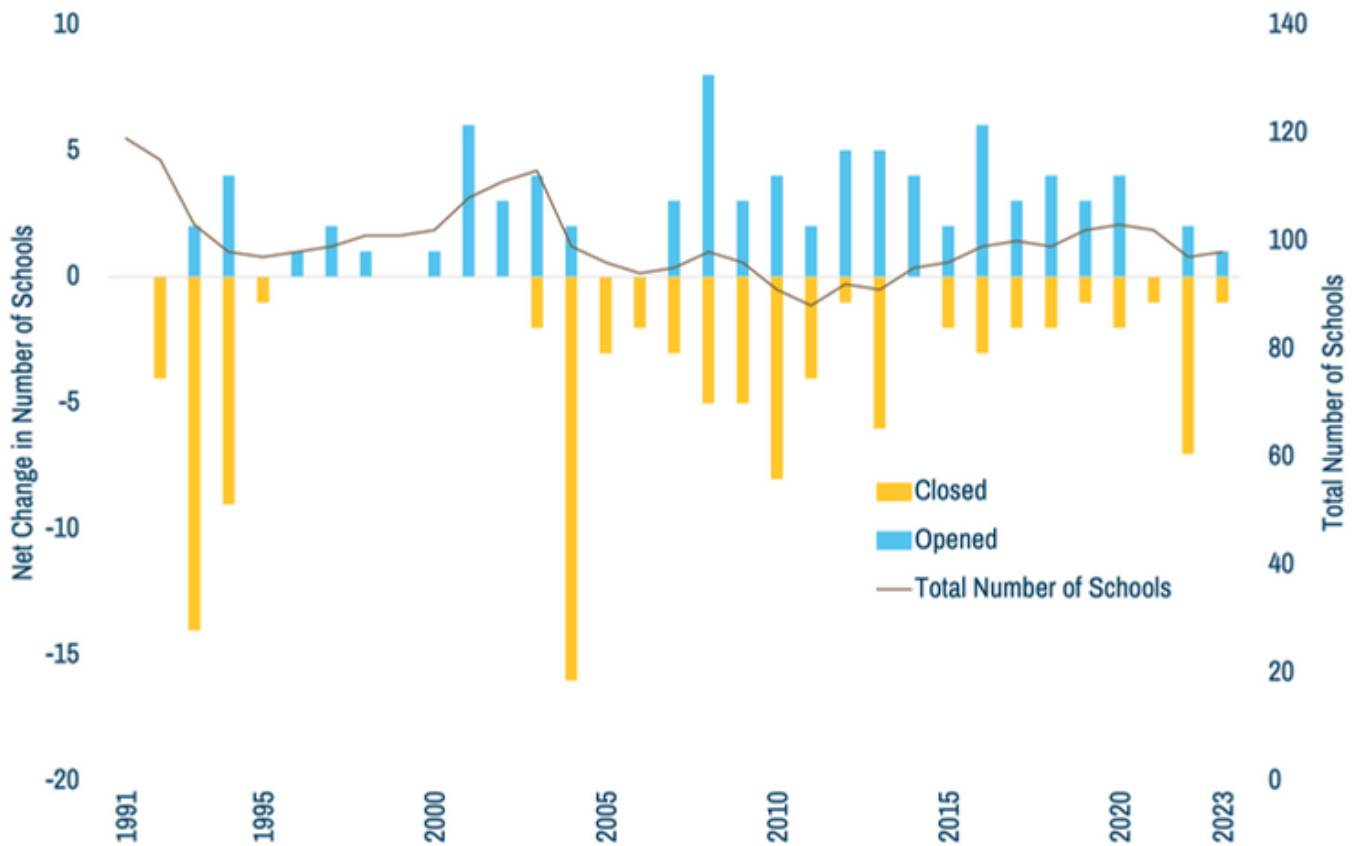
Figure 7. Average Building Enrollment by Grade Level, City of St. Louis, 1991-2023



In Appendix D, enrollment data, number of schools, and mean building size are listed for each year since 1991. This data is differentiated between school level (K-12, K-8, and 9-12) to show the changing public education system more clearly.

Permanent school closure has been a frequently implemented policy decision in the City of St. Louis. Since 1991, the number of schools operating in the city has decreased by 21. However, that number belies the turmoil hiding behind the net change (Figure 8). Over the 30 years covered by this study, 104 schools have closed while 85 have opened; in only one instance (1998 to 1999) did the number of schools stay the same from one year to the next.

Figure 8. Public School Openings and Closings, City of St. Louis by Year, 1991-2023

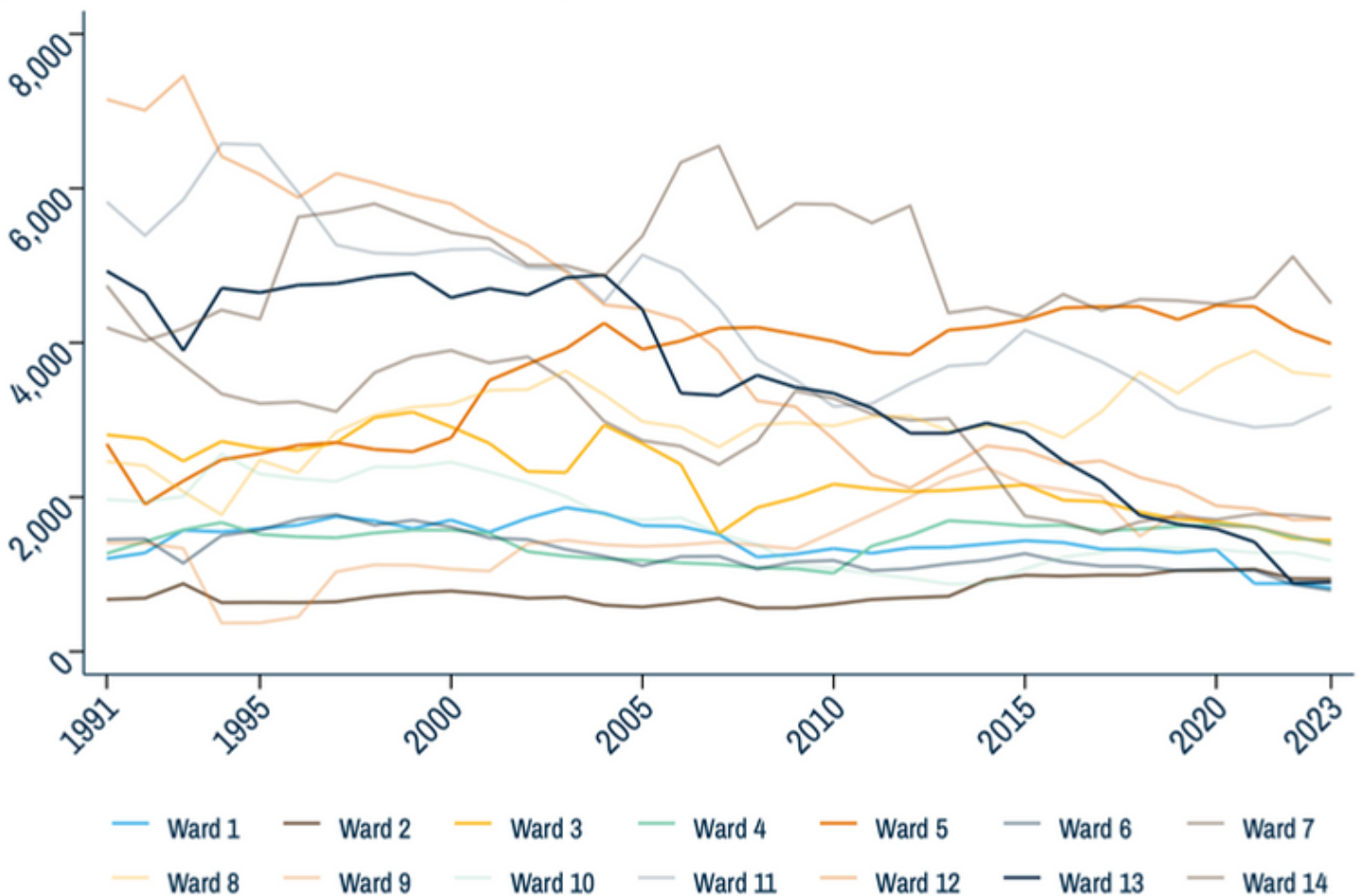




## Geographic Trends

Public school buildings and student enrollment are not evenly distributed across the city's newly adopted ward geography. Figure 9 depicts enrollment trends for each ward from 1991 to 2023. In 2023, there were 98 public schools, equating to 7 schools per ward. Instead, as shown in Table 2, schools per ward ranges from three (Wards 1, 2, 6, and 10) to 14 (Ward 8) and total enrollment ranges from 792 students in Ward 6 to 4,510 students in Ward 14. All wards have at least one school serving students in the K-8 grade spans, though the count ranges from two schools in Ward 10 to 11 schools apiece in Ward 8 and Ward 14.

Figure 9. K-12 Enrollment by Ward, City of St. Louis, 1991-2023



The discrepancies across wards with regard to enrollment and number of schools is not a new phenomenon. In 1991, Ward 2 had the fewest K-8 students and fewest K-8 schools while Ward 12 had the most of each.

In fact, there were 10 times as many K-8 schools in Ward 12 as in Ward 2 contributing to a more than nine-fold difference in K-8 student enrollment. Today, the range in K-8 enrollment is not nearly as vast — the ward with the highest enrollment (Ward 14) is only five times greater than the ward with the lowest enrollment (Ward 10).

High schools, however, have been more stable. In 1991 and 2023, high schools were distributed across nine wards. Wards 1, 2, 4, and 6 did not have a high school in either year.

**Table 2. Enrollment and Schools by Ward, City of St. Louis, 1991 vs. 2023**

1991						2023					
K-8			9-12			K-8			9-12		
Enrollment	Number of Schools	Mean Building Enrollment (Standard Deviation)	Enrollment	Number of Schools	Mean Building Enrollment	Enrollment	Number of Schools	Mean Building Enrollment	Enrollment	Number of Schools	Mean Building Enrollment
Ward 1	1,204	301 (66)	n/a	0	n/a	828	3	276 (41)	n/a	0	n/a
Ward 2	676	338 (110)	n/a	0	n/a	942	3	314 (101)	n/a	0	n/a
Ward 3	1,886	472 (95)	922	1	922	1,291	5	258 (268)	150	1	150
Ward 4	1,270	212 (151)	n/a	0	n/a	1,400	5	280 (86)	n/a	0	n/a
Ward 5	1,384	346 (80)	1,305	2	653 (327)	2,074	5	415 (271)	1,914	4	479 (232)
Ward 6	1,452	363 (61)	n/a	0	n/a	792	3	264 (101)	n/a	0	n/a
Ward 7	2,277	380 (131)	2,463	2	1,232 (1,193)	1,281	8	160 (64)	444	1	444
Ward 8	2,445	306 (121)	17	1	17	2,526	11	230 (109)	1,041	3	347 (212)
Ward 9	1,183	296 (57)	224	1	224	1,033	4	258 (120)	343	1	343
Ward 10	1,970	219 (127)	n/a	0	n/a	687	2	344 (203)	489	1	489
Ward 11	2,577	368 (168)	3,248	4	812 (56)	1,341	7	192 (62)	1,829	4	457 (105)
Ward 12	6,245	284 (117)	907	1	907	1,394	7	199 (77)	317	2	159 (141)
Ward 13	4,335	333 (116)	594	1	594	898	5	180 (84)	n/a	0	n/a
Ward 14	3,913	326 (92)	282	1	282	3,597	11	327 (164)	913	2	457 (87)
Total	32,817	313 (123)	9,962	14	712 (491)	20,084	79	254 (144)	7,440	19	392 (176)

There was a nearly 40% overall decrease in K-8 students across the study time period ranging from an almost 80% decline in Ward 12 and Ward 13 to a 50% increase in Ward 5. Enrollment in these grades increased only in Ward 2, Ward 4, Ward 5, and Ward 8.

**Table 3. City of St. Louis K-8, 9-12 Change in Enrollment, 1991 vs. 2023**

	K-8 Enrollment		9-12 Enrollment		Total Enrollment	
	Raw Change	% Change	Raw Change	% Change	Raw Change	% Change
Ward 1	-376	-31.2%	0	-	-376	-31.2%
Ward 2	266	39.3%	0	-	266	39.3%
Ward 3	-595	-31.5%	-772	-83.7%	-1,367	-48.7%
Ward 4	130	10.2%	0	-	130	10.2%
Ward 5	690	49.9%	609	46.7%	1,299	48.3%
Ward 6	-660	-45.5%	0	-	-660	-45.5%
Ward 7	-996	-43.7%	-2019	-82.0%	-3,015	-63.6%
Ward 8	81	3.3%	1024	6,023.5%	1,105	44.9%
Ward 9	-150	-12.7%	119	53.1%	-31	-2.2%
Ward 10	-1,283	-65.1%	489	-	-794	-40.3%
Ward 11	-1,236	-48.0%	-1419	-43.7%	-2,655	-45.6%
Ward 12	-4,851	-77.7%	-590	-65.0%	-5,441	-76.1%
Ward 13	-3,437	-79.3%	-594	-100.0%	-4,031	-81.8%
Ward 14	-316	-8.1%	631	223.8%	315	7.5%
Total	-12,733	-38.8%	-2522	-25.3%	-15,255	-35.7%

# 7

## Policy Implications and Future Research



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It is reasonable to believe that education policy makers, including administrators and board members, are influenced by the economic, demographic, and political dynamics in their surrounding communities. These same leaders, through the policies they enact, have as much of an influence on St. Louis as St. Louis has on them. As the phenomena of decreasing public school enrollment and population decline are intertwined, it would be in the city's best interest to develop policy solutions that consider these issues together.

In addition to local trends, national education policy decisions also serve an important role. Cities across the country face the prospect of permanent school closure,<sup>11</sup> in part due to the expiration of federal pandemic relief funding<sup>12</sup> and historic declines in enrollment.<sup>13</sup> St. Louis is likely no exception.

Policy makers are urged to recognize that permanent school closures are policy decisions that exert ramifications beyond school walls as they have the power to permanently transform neighborhoods.<sup>14</sup> Recent efforts to create and implement a strategic plan for education in the City of St. Louis have been met with varied success,<sup>15</sup> even as policy makers, both elected and unelected, and education leaders are poised to embark on significant change, in part to address the city's declining student population and enrollment. For example, SLPS is planning how to allocate a \$160 million bond issue<sup>16</sup> to make capital improvements to address deferred capital maintenance costs, which total more than \$330 million across nearly 70 buildings with an average age of 87 years.<sup>17</sup>

If the child population in the City of St. Louis continues to decline, it is reasonable to believe that more schools will close permanently. Previous closure decisions have been met with political outcry, emotional appeals, and media coverage, all of which, while appropriate responses, often ignore the years- or decades- long demographic phenomena which necessitate their consideration. Careful analysis of historic and geographic trends can inform this difficult process with the hope of lessening trauma for students, families, employees, and other stakeholders. Policy makers have a moral and ethical decision to reverse, or at least not perpetuate, historical injustices.<sup>18</sup>

## Future Research Directions

The stark differences in enrollment and number of schools across the city's wards suggests policies, those related to education as well as others, have not been applied equally or equitably across the city. Likewise, school closures and openings vary across geography and time. As such, there are many opportunities to build upon the descriptive analysis in this brief to produce a more complete picture of public education in St. Louis over time. For example, mapping historical Census data onto the new boundaries of the city's 14 wards and/or modeling population projections specific to city wards could identify trends in where children live and how that does (or does not) correspond to where children attend school. Further, a ward-by-ward analysis of school closures and openings could help determine if these policy decisions have been made equitably across the city and the extent to which they are connected to enrollment and/or population data. These analyses could ensure that future decisions about where to close or open schools are based on data rather than real estate matters or other private concerns. Additional quantitative and qualitative historical analyses of the local policy decisions around school choice, school segregation and integration, and school closure would also provide important context to how the city arrived at its current system of public education.

**Appendix A: Alternative, Therapeutic, and Special Programs excluded from analysis.**  
(School names may have different spellings or abbreviations depending on the year.)

Annie Malone Children's Home  
Big Picture Elem. Alt.  
Big Picture Middle Alt.  
Big Picture High School Alt.  
Big Picture Middle & High @ NW  
The Can! Academies Of St Louis  
Cardinal Glennon Hospital  
Children's Study Sch.  
Children's Study School  
Community Access Job Training  
Continued Education Project  
Educ Therap Support At Madison  
Elias Michael Elem.  
External Location  
Gallaudet Sch. For Deaf Elem.  
Gateway Michael High  
Griscom Detention Ctr.  
Griscom Juvenile Detention Ctr.  
Madison Alt. Education Sch.  
Meda P. Washington Early Child  
Meda P. Washington Educ. Ctr.  
Media P. Washington Ed. Ctr.  
Media P. Washington Educ. Ctr.  
Nahed Chapman New American Academy  
Shearwater High School  
St. Louis Children's Hospital  
Tri-A Outreach  
Tri-A Outreach II  
VICC  
Vo. Tech. Tuition

Vocational - Tuition  
Vocational-Tuition  
Work Study-Attendance  
Work Study-Attendance Only

**Online Appendix B:**

**All Local Education Agency (LEA)  
Names and Years of Operation.**

**Online Appendix C:**

**All schools, name changes, and years  
of operation by ward.**

**Online Appendix D:**

**City of St. Louis enrollment and  
schools by grade level, 1991 - 2023**

**Online Appendix E:**

**City of St. Louis School Closures and  
Openings by Year**

**Online Appendix F:**

**System Enrollment by Grade, City of  
St. Louis, 1991-2023**

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