

# No Cliff in Sight? Idaho K-12 Enrollment Trends and Patterns and Their Potential Effect on Enrollment at Public Post-Secondary Institutions

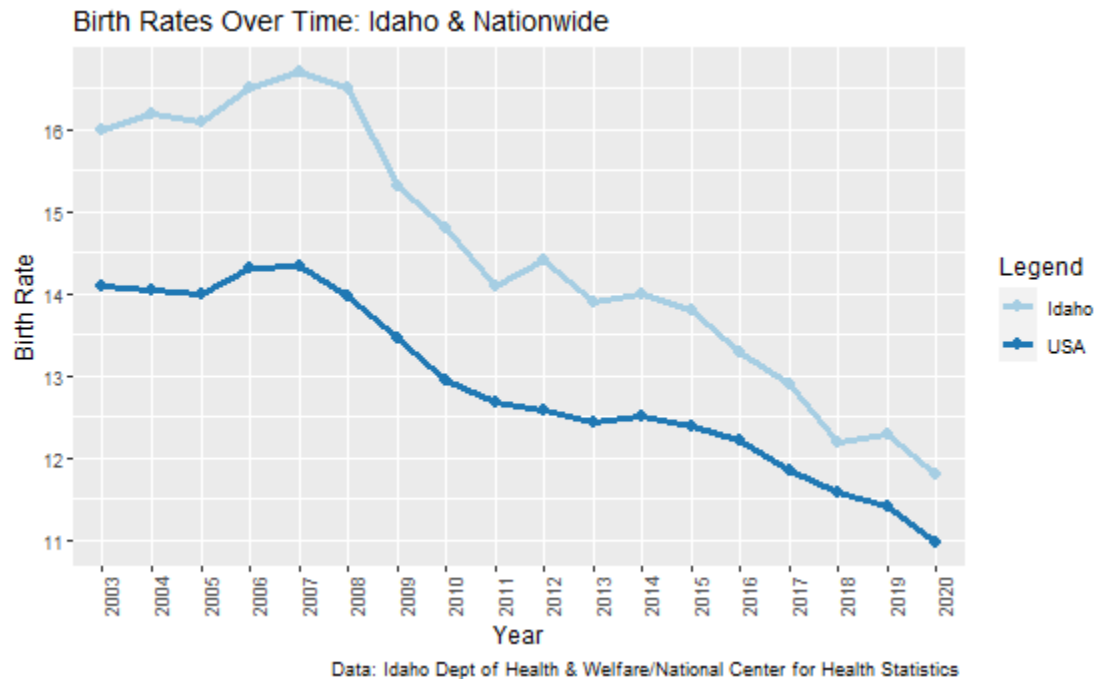
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## **Research Summary**

*At the national level, colleges and universities are facing a demographic or enrollment cliff. Due to declining birth rates, high schools are graduating fewer students which, assuming stable or declining go-on rates, means fewer students enrolling in post-secondary institutions. Is this also the case for Idaho? This analysis shows that although enrollment in Idaho's regular public schools has leveled off in the very recent past, overall K-12 enrollment (i.e., including private school and charter enrollment as well as homeschooling) is on the rise. This should be good news for Idaho's public post-secondary institutions, but there are risks to keep in mind, such as possibly declining go-on rates, increased attendance of out-of-state or private post-secondary institutions (especially by students born outside of Idaho) by students graduating from Idaho high schools, and lower enrollment in Idaho's colleges and universities by out-of-state students.*

## Idaho K-12 Enrollment: Trends and Forecasts

Idaho's population has grown significantly over the last few decades, increasing from a census count of 1,293,953 in 2000 to 1,839,106 in 2020,<sup>1</sup> and estimated to be 1,964,726 in July 2023<sup>2</sup>. Most of this growth, especially in the most recent decade, is due to domestic migration into the state, not to a high birth rate.



In fact, the absolute annual number of births in the state has been quite low since the Great Recession (2007-09) despite sizable overall population growth<sup>3</sup>. This suggests that future growth of the state's K-12 student population depends on continued in-migration of families with school age kids or soon to have kids. The Idaho Department of Labor projects a 1.1% annual population growth rate through 2031, raising the population to well over 2.1 million<sup>4</sup>.

Idaho State Department of Education data indicates a total public school enrollment (grades 1-12) of 294,132 in the 2023-24 school year. As detailed below, this includes regular public schools and charter schools. Enrollment has increased significantly over the last three decades or so, as shown in the two figures below, but at a lower rate than overall population growth and the growth has leveled off in recent years. This raises questions about future enrollment, which has implications for future teacher demand, facility needs, and college enrollment, among other things.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/popchange-data-text.html>

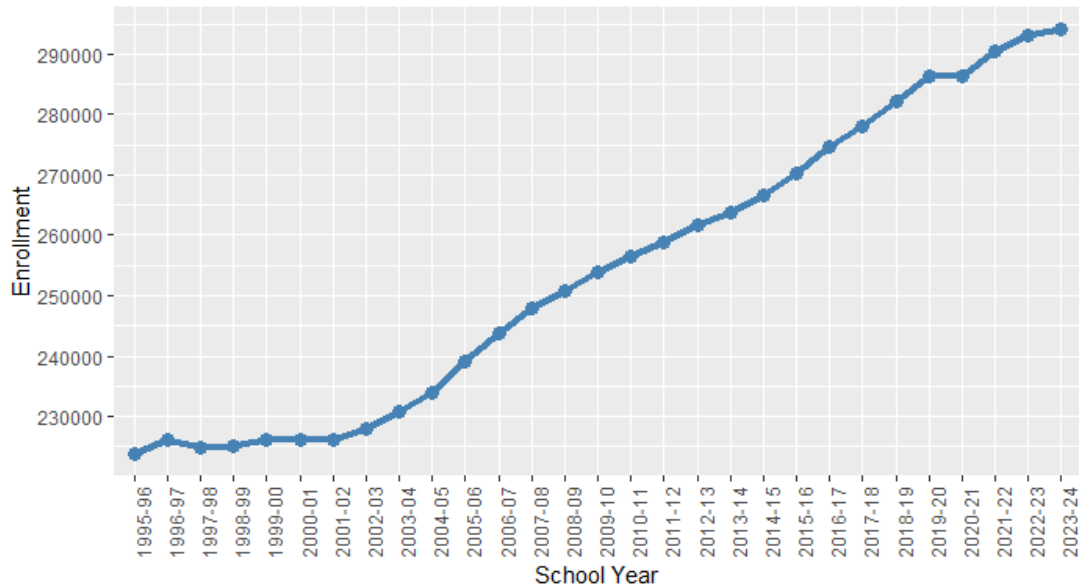
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/ID/PST045222>

<sup>3</sup> <https://idahoatwork.com/2023/08/31/how-idahos-birth-rates-shifting-population-affect-school-enrollments/>

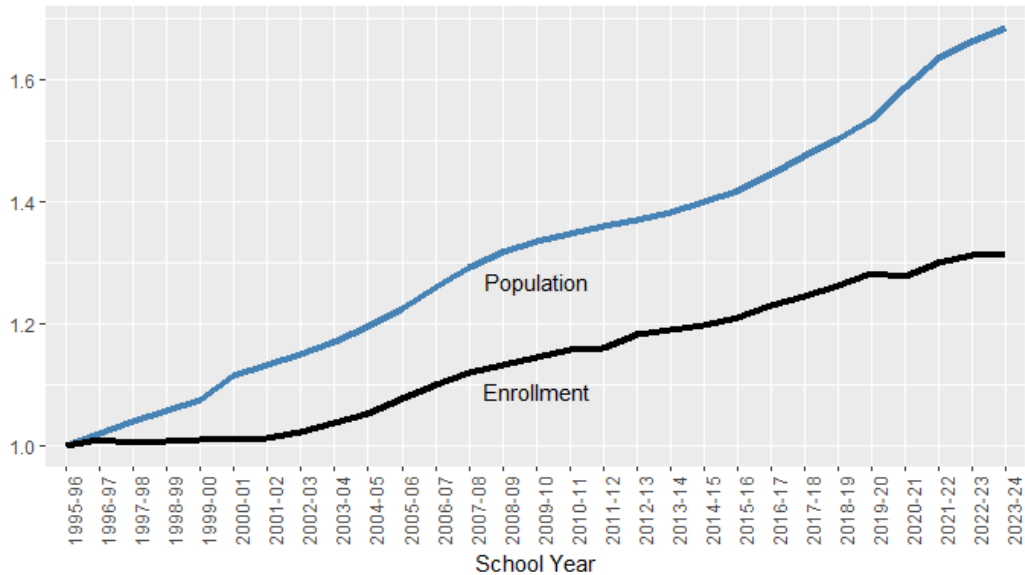
<sup>4</sup> <https://idahoatwork.com/2022/05/03/idaho-population-projected-to-top-2-million-by-2031/>

### Enrollment in Idaho Public Schools (Grades 1-12)

Idaho Dept of Ed data

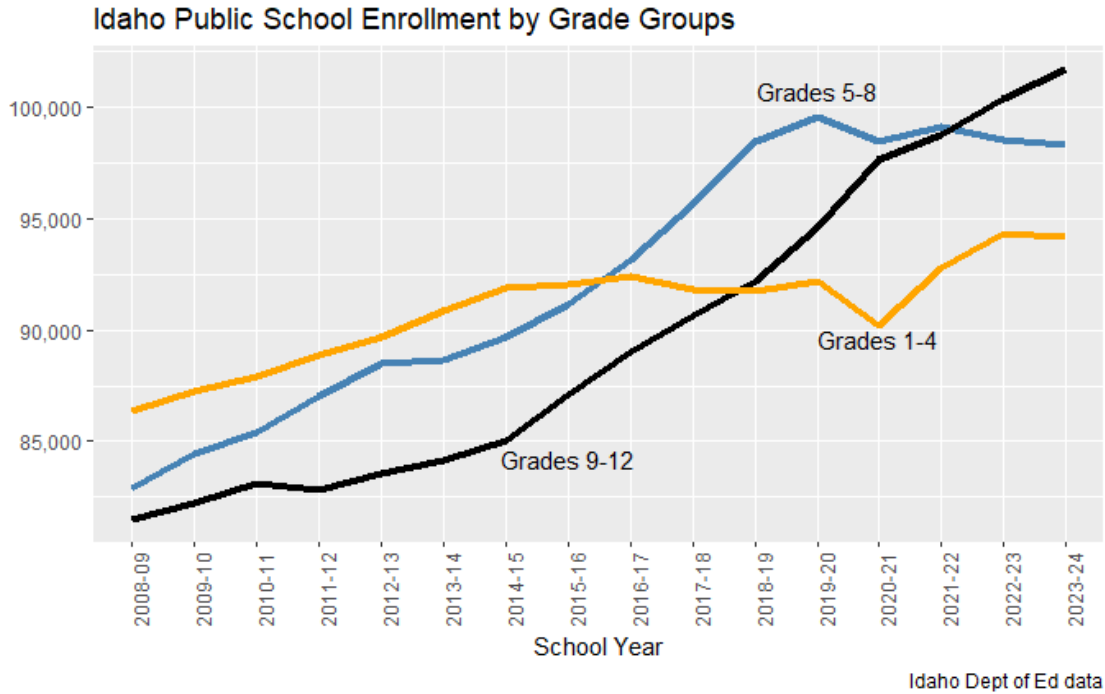


### Idaho Population and Public School Enrollment Growth (Indexed on 1995-96)



Idaho Dept of Ed & Census data

Breaking down the trends by grade groups shows particularly robust and continued growth in grades 9-12 and significant growth followed by a more recent leveling off in the grades 1-4 and 5-8 grade groups. Given that grades 1-8 feed into grades 9-12, we may expect a leveling off in grades 9-12 in the next few years.



Longer term it is worth keeping our eyes on the under 5 population, which is the only group of young people whose size has decreased over the last decade or so, as shown in the table below.

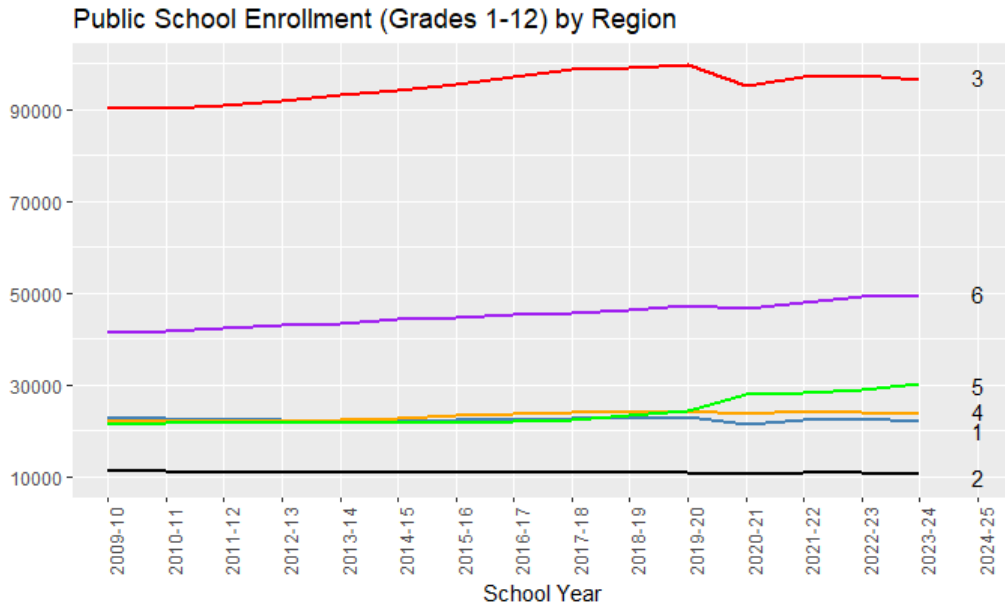
#### Idaho Young Population Cohort Size Over Time

	2010	2022	Change
<5 years old	119,090	112,576	-6,514
5-9 years old	116,037	125,400	+9,363
10-14 years old	114,510	135,597	+21,087
15-19 years old	116,037	142,387	+26,350
20-24 years old	108,403	125,853	+17,450

Data: 2010 US Census and 2022 American Community Survey

## Enrollment by Region

As is clear from the below graph, most Idaho regions have experienced enrollment growth over the last 15 years. The exceptions are regions 1 (panhandle) and 2 (central Idaho), where enrollment has been bouncing around 22,000 and 11,000 students, respectively. More recently, most regions have seen little change either way in enrollment, although the eastern regions 5 (especially) and 6 have witnessed continued significant growth.



Idaho Dept of Ed data

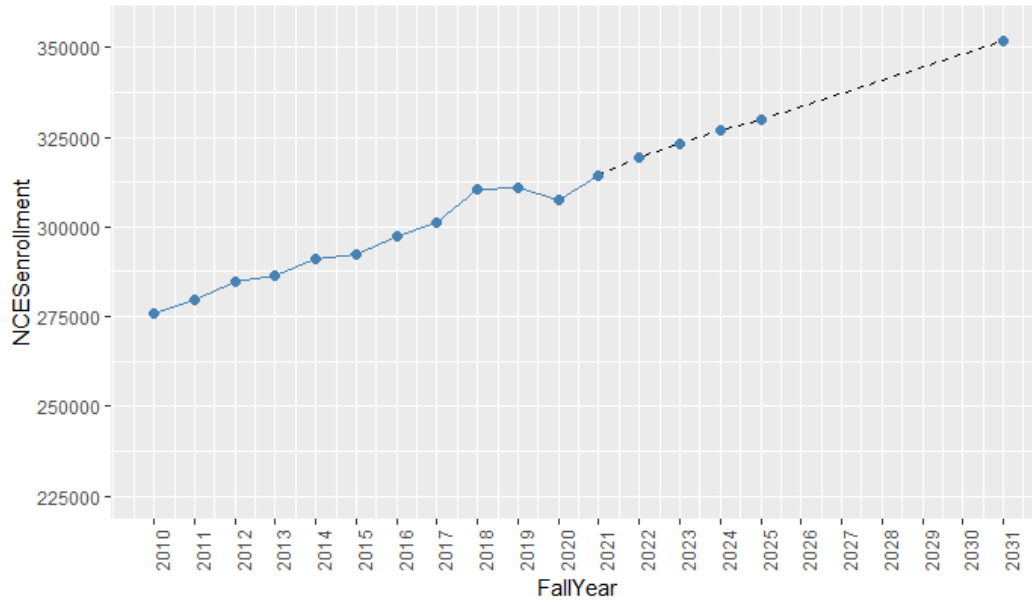
## Idaho Educational Regions



## Forecasts

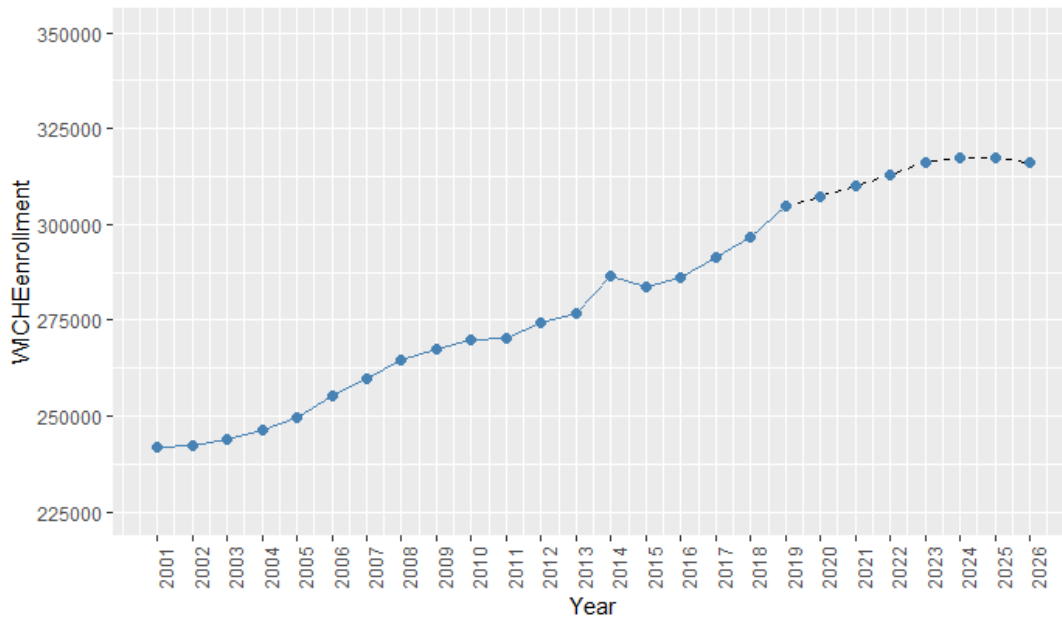
Consistent with overall population forecasts, various projections suggest continued growth in Idaho's K-12 enrollment. Differences in estimates are explained by different assumptions and modeling choices. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for example, estimates an enrollment exceeding 350,000 students in 2031.

Idaho Public K-12 Enrollment (NCES data)



The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), meanwhile, predicts enrollment figures up until 2026, and forecasts they will rise to about 293,000 (grades 1-12) by that time.

Idaho Public 1-12 Enrollment (WICHE data)



An important difference between the NCES and WICHE forecasts is that the latter predicts a decline in statewide enrollment by 2026, whereas the NCES predicts continued robust growth until at least 2031. On current evidence, the more conservative WICHE projection is more likely to be accurate. In fact, if we look at SDE numbers for K-12 rather than for 1-12, a first albeit very slight decline has already occurred with total enrollment decreasing from 318,979 to 318,884.

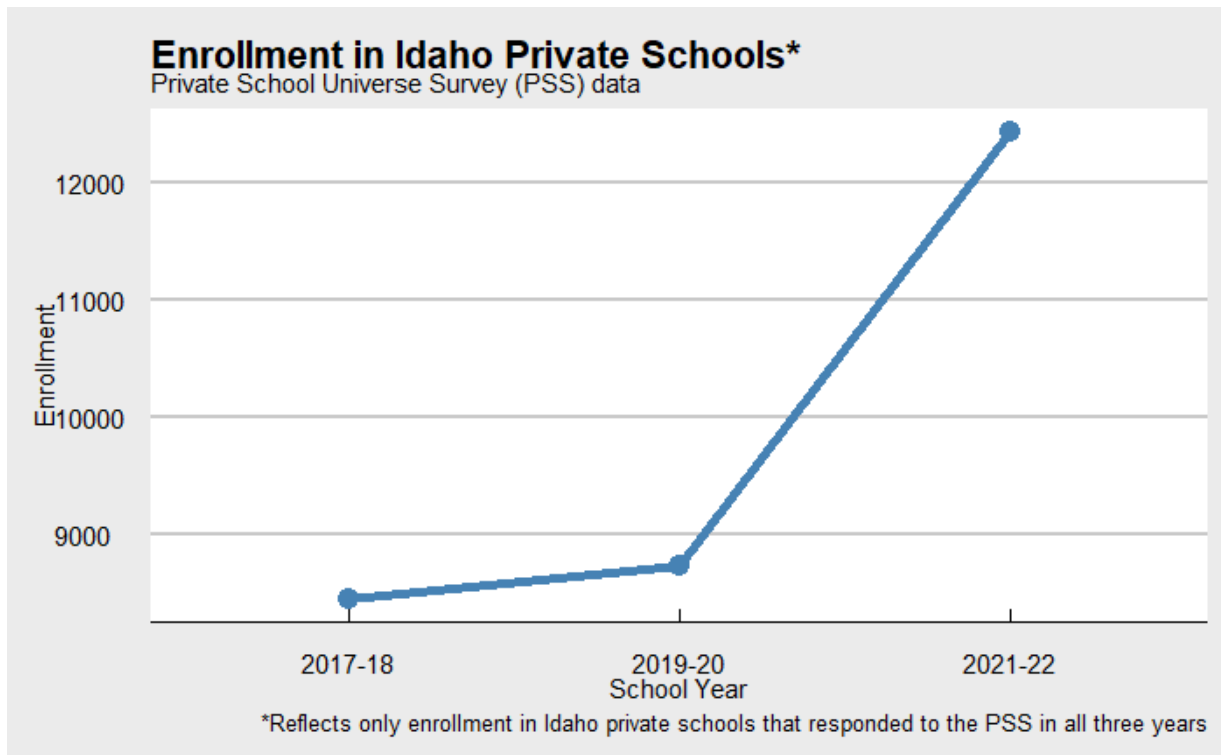
### **How many students are enrolled in Idaho private schools?**

The enrollment numbers presented so far pertain to public schools only and thus do not include enrollment figures for private schools. This is important to acknowledge because growth in private school enrollment could help explain anemic growth in public school enrollment. What is more, at a national level private school graduates are more likely to attend college, suggesting that higher private school enrollment may lead to higher post-secondary enrollment in Idaho, though we need to be wary of selection effects<sup>5</sup>. In the absence of data collected by the state, it is not easy to produce exact total private school enrollment figures. Combining data from the 2021-22 Private School Universe Survey (PSS), Private School Review, and some additional sources<sup>6</sup> produces an estimate of 16,843 private school students in schools offering grade 1-12 education. This compares to 312,643 students in the public school system, meaning that about 5.1% of grade 1-12 students are enrolled in private schools.

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<sup>5</sup> This is based on Private School Universe (PSS) data showing 62.5% of 2020-21 private school grads attended a 4-year college in Fall 2021 (<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/tables/TABLE13fl2122.asp>) and NCES data showing that 43% of all 2020-21 grads attended a 4-year college in Fall 2021 (<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cpa/immediate-college-enrollment-rate>).

<sup>6</sup> These include school websites, [www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org), [www.classicalchristian.org](http://www.classicalchristian.org), [www.niche.com](http://www.niche.com), and [www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com).



To get a sense of over-time change, we can only turn to PSS data because it is the sole source of relevant longitudinal data. The figure above shows a significant absolute increase in private school enrollment over the last half decade or so. The most significant jump occurred between the 2019-20 and 2021-22 school years, and it is likely the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in this, as it did across the country<sup>7</sup>. It is too early to tell whether this increase is permanent. The share of total enrollment this group of PSS schools represents also went up during this period, from 2.7% to 3.6%, suggesting that the amount of private school enrollment went up in both absolute and relative terms.

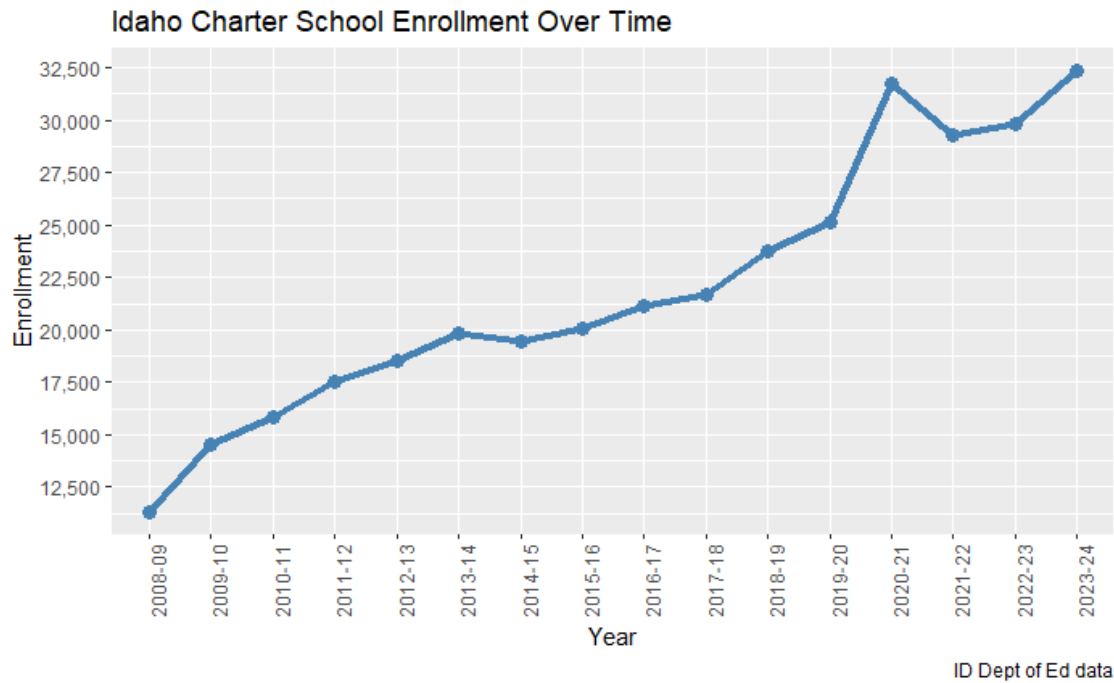
### How many students are enrolled in Idaho charter schools?

Charter schools are another alternative to regular public schools. Established under Idaho’s Public Charter Schools Act of 1998, they are free public schools driven by a particular mission outlined in the school’s charter and founded as alternatives to private and regular public schools. As is clear from the graph below, enrollment in Idaho charter schools has grown explosively over the last 15 years or so, almost tripling from 11,312 in the 2008-09 school year

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.kennesaw.edu/coles/centers/education-economics-center/docs/the-effect-of-covid-19-on-independent-k-12-school-enrollments.pdf>



to 32,368 in the current school year.



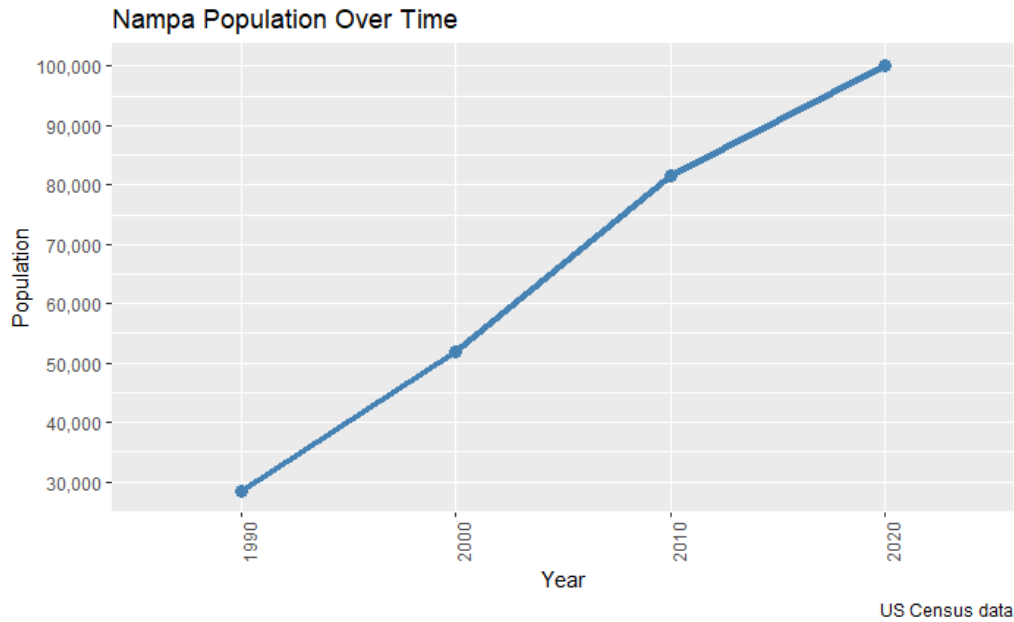
### Homeschooling

A third alternative to regular public schools is homeschooling. Idaho does not require parents to inform the state that they are homeschooling their kids, leaving us without an even approximate count of the homeschooled student population. As best as we can tell, homeschooling in the state, as in the country as a whole, peaked in the 2020-21 school year, when a good number of parents elected to homeschool rather than send their children to school. According to the US Census Household Pulse Survey, homeschooling rates increased from 8.0% in April-May 2020 to 10.1% the following September-October, though it must be said that the confidence intervals for these estimates overlap somewhat. It is not completely clear whether this increase was entirely temporary, or whether the homeschooled population has remained at a level higher than pre-pandemic, but there are two metrics—both cited in a recent *Idaho Ed News* piece—that allow us some insight into this question. First, the Idaho Department of Education collects data on the reasons why students who leave the state’s public K-12 education system do so. These data show that more students left the public system to homeschool in 2021-22 and 2022-23 than in 2019-20, the last pre-pandemic year. Second, Idaho Department of Education data also records the annual number of homeschooled students accessing public school services and this indicator also shows an upward trend in recent years.<sup>8</sup> All in all, then, homeschooling numbers appear to be on the rise in the state, though the exact number of homeschoolers is hard to pin down.

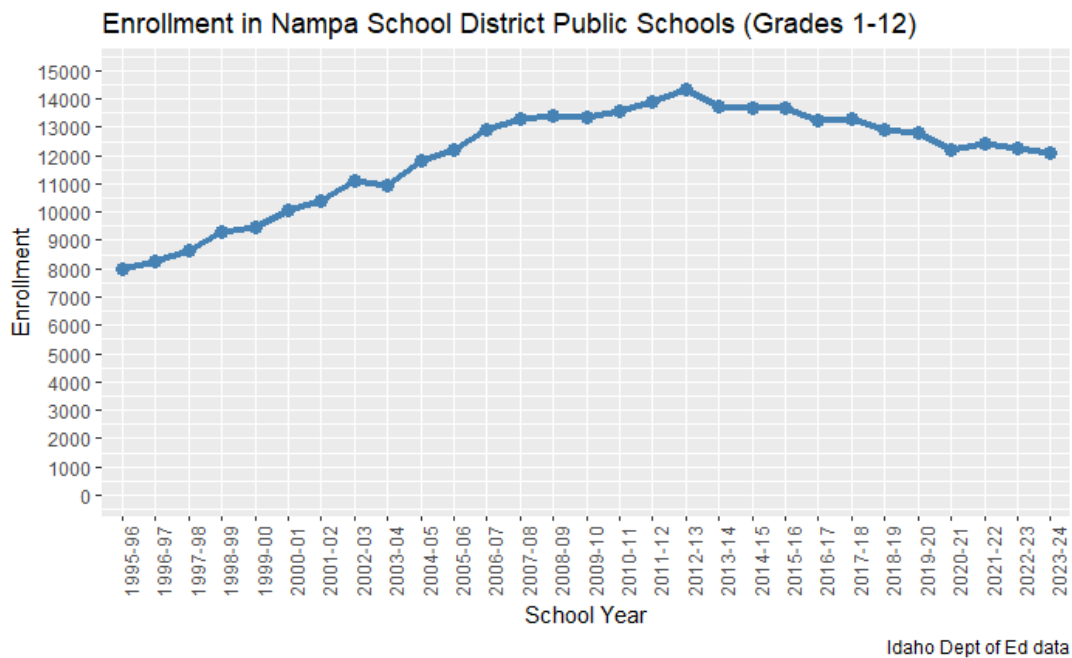
<sup>8</sup> All numbers in this section are cited or referenced in: <https://www.idahoednews.org/top-news/defying-pandemic-era-predictions-homeschooling-remains-on-the-rise-in-idaho-and-beyond/>

## Nampa Case Study

One of the fastest growing cities in Idaho—the country, in fact—is Nampa. The city grew from a population of 28,365 in 1990 to 100,200 in the 2020 Census.



Given this explosive population growth, one might expect corresponding growth in public school enrollment in Nampa. As the figure below shows, however, enrollment in regular public schools grew only through the 2012-13 school year, after which a gradual decline set in. A partial explanation for this is that the absolute number of people of school-going age has stayed stable over the last decade at 29,000-30,000.



The enrollment numbers presented above do not include charter schools. Nampa happens to have quite a few of them and their enrollment has gone up significantly, which might help explain the decline in the city’s regular public school enrollment.

**Nampa Charter School Enrollment Over Time**

School Name	Year Opened	Earlier Enrollment (08-09, unless noted)	2023-24 Enrollment	Enrollment Increase
Elevate Academy—Nampa	2022	314 (22-23)	414	100
Gem Prep—Nampa	2016	194 (16-17)	509	315
Idaho Arts Charter School	2005	578	1,367	789
Legacy Charter School	2011	240	312	72
Liberty Charter School	1999	404	509	105
Pathways in Education	2017	106 (17-18)	299	193
Victory Charter School	2005	367	515	148

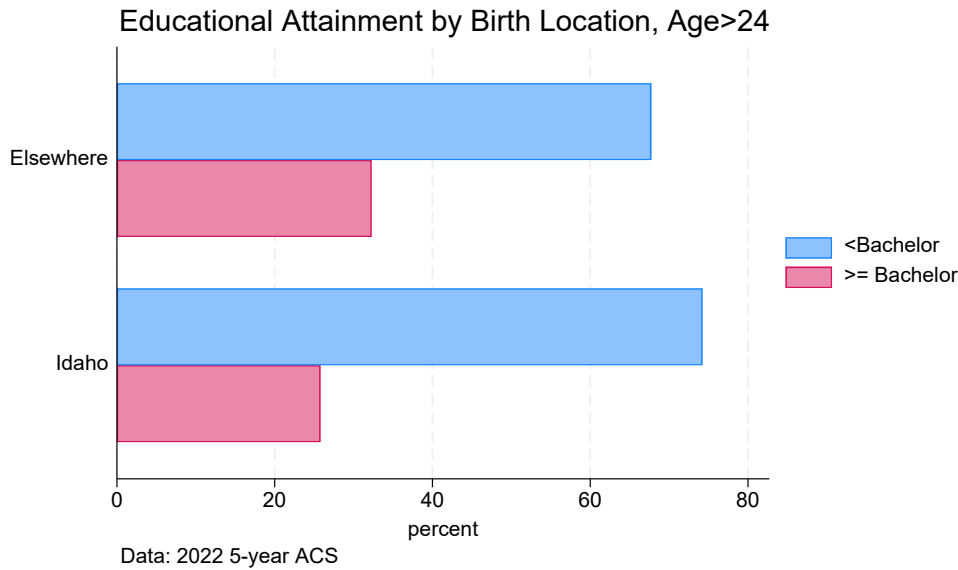
Data: Idaho Department of Education

In 2008-09, when Nampa had four charter schools, total charter enrollment was 1,589. Fifteen years later, having added three charter schools, enrollment was 3,925 for a total growth number of 2,336. To be clear, not all these charter school students are from Nampa and those that are would not necessarily have otherwise attended regular public schools in Nampa so we cannot simply conclude that 2,300+ more of Nampa-based students attended charter schools. It is, however, reasonable to conclude that a significantly higher number of Nampa students attend charter schools now than in the past and that this has come partially at the expense of regular public school enrollment.

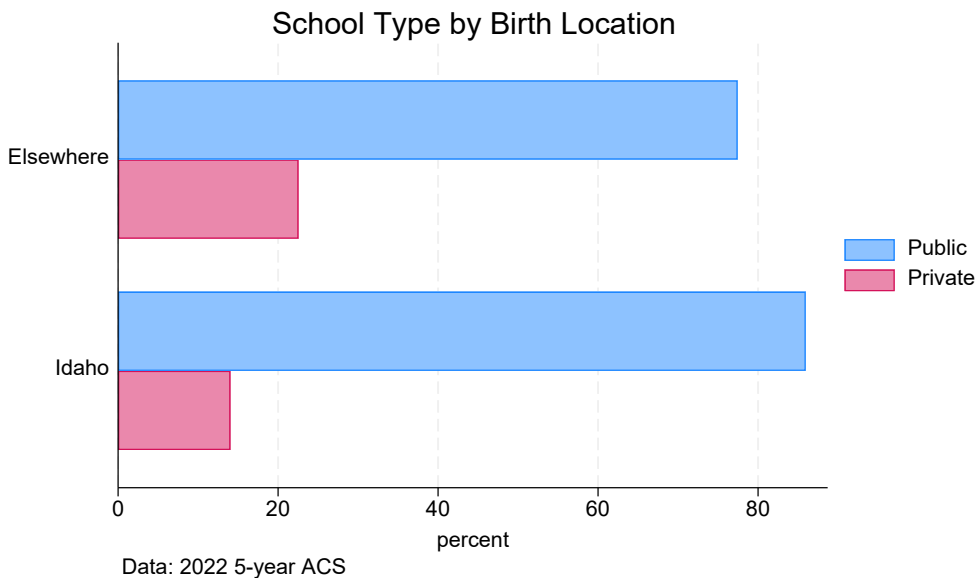
As discussed earlier, another alternative to regular public schools is private schools. Nampa has five private schools, including the second biggest one in the state (Nampa Christian School). Its enrollment has grown significantly over time: according to the Private School Universe Survey (PSS), enrollment jumped from 920 in 2019-20 to 1,060 in 2021-22, a 15.2% growth in enrollment in just one year. Again, an important caveat is that private schools draw students from beyond their home city, but it is likely that a non-trivial proportion of students at Nampa private schools would otherwise have attended its private schools.

### Idaho Natives versus In-migrants

As mentioned before, Idaho's continued growth depends on on-going in-migration from other states. What might this mean for enrollment in Idaho's K-12 and collegiate institutions?

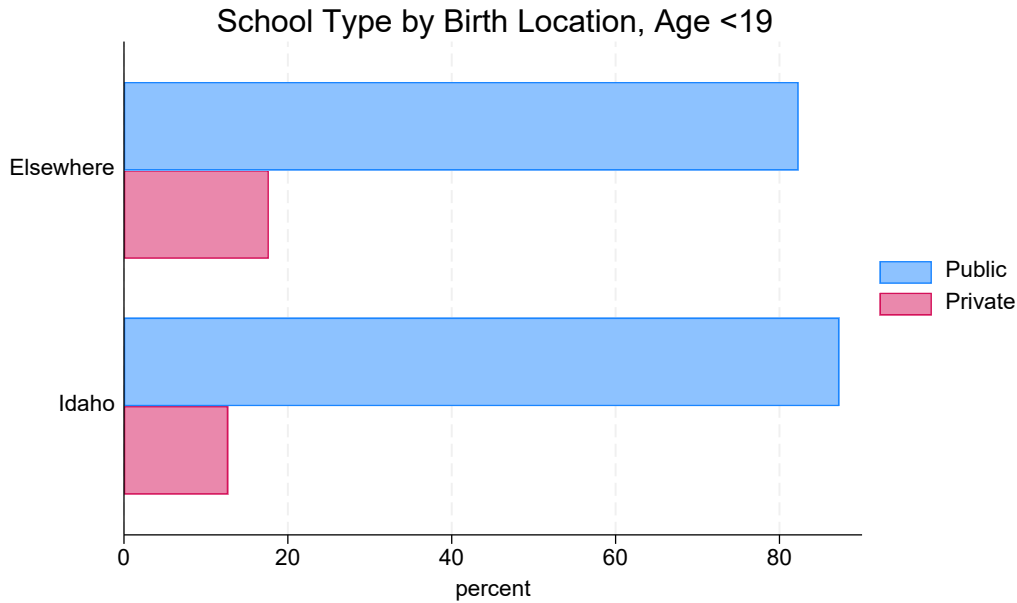


First, in-migrants have higher educational attainment than natives on average. Assuming that this applies to the *children* in in-migrant families, we might expect higher demand for post-secondary education among Idaho high school graduates going forward, as in-migrants and their offspring make up a higher proportion of the student population than before.

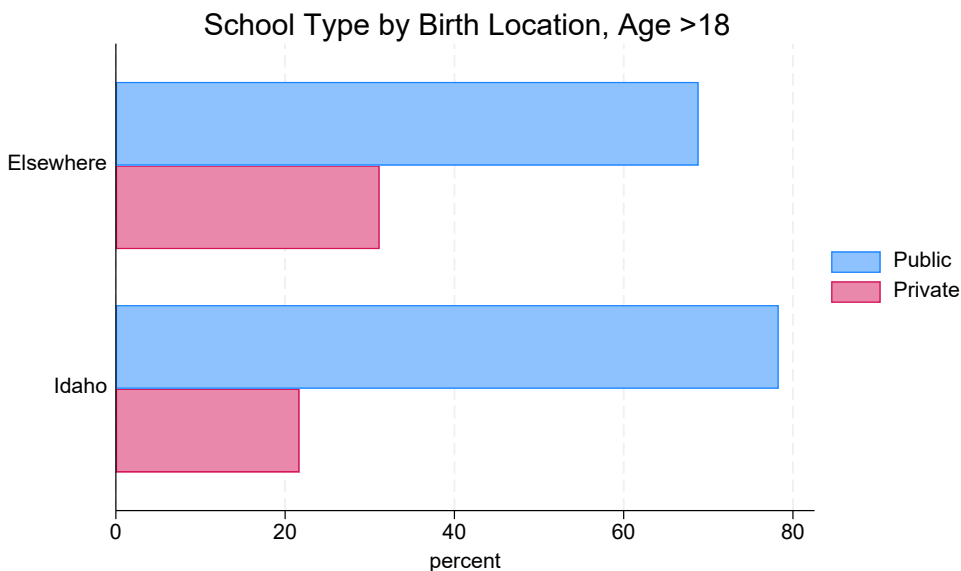


Second, those born outside the state are significantly more likely to attend private rather than public institutions. To fully grasp the implications of this, it is instructive to split the sample up by age.

Among students under 19 who were born in Idaho 12.7% attend private schools. The corresponding percentage for those born elsewhere is 17.7%.



Among students over 18 years of age higher percentages attend private institutions, presumably mainly universities and colleges. There is a big difference according to birthplace, however: 31.2% of those born elsewhere attend private university compared to 21.7% of those born in Idaho.



This is potentially a problem for Idaho's public institutions, since in-migrants and their children make up a bigger proportion of the population than before, possibly resulting in higher private post-secondary enrollment and declining/stagnating public post-secondary enrollment.

## **Conclusion**

The good news for Idaho is that, unlike many other states, it does not face an enrollment cliff. Public school enrollment growth is slowing down, but not forecasted to decrease significantly in the near to medium future. In addition, private school enrollment growth has been robust and homeschooling numbers appear to be growing, making for a generally healthy increase in overall K-12 enrollment.

On its face this seems to bode well for Idaho's public post-secondary institutions, but there are some risks to keep in mind. First, as in-migrant students and Idaho-born children of in-migrants make up an increasing proportion of the Idaho K-12 system, a larger proportion of college-bound students may be interested in attending college out-of-state. What is more, out-of-state universities, especially in states experiencing enrollment cliffs and/or low state funding, may step up efforts to recruit Idaho students. Second, as private school students make up a larger proportion of the state's K-12 population, a larger proportion of students than before may elect a private option for their post-secondary education as well. Third, the implications of the increased proportion of homeschooled students are unclear. On the one hand, these parents' students are serious enough about education to choose the more time- and labor-intensive homeschooling option. On the other hand, because they actively choose an alternative to the public education system for K-12 they may also be more likely to choose non-public or other alternative options after high school graduation. Fourth, as the number of high school graduates decreases nationally, fewer out-of-state students are available to attend Idaho's public colleges and universities. Finally, it is possible that although already low compared to other states go-on rates in Idaho might go down. If a lower proportion of an only slowly growing group of high school graduates goes on to college, this will be a challenge for the state's post-secondary institutions.