

Knocking update: new data about private high school graduates

In the December 2016 edition of *Knocking at the College Door*, WICHE projected that the U.S. is headed into a period of stagnation in the overall number of high school graduates it produces, and that high school graduates from private religious and nonsectarian schools would decline.¹ New data have become available, and they confirm WICHE's overall projections, but modify the projections for private high school graduates (who constitute about 9 percent of the total number of high school graduates in the nation). Specifically, declines in the future number of private high school graduates no longer appear imminent through at least 2018. WICHE is not issuing new projections of private high school graduates at this time, but herein discusses the newly released data that have been posted to knocking.wiche.edu so that users of the *Knocking* projections may analyze them alongside the published projections.²

The newly available data

In the simplest terms, WICHE's projection methodology uses the latest available actual data about student levels and numbers of graduates to project future numbers of graduates.³ Therefore, the introduction of new actual data has the potential to change the numbers projected. In October 2016, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released an additional year of public school enrollments through the federal Common Core of Data, for school year 2014-15; no additional data for the number of public high school graduates

Key takeaways

- New data show a recent strong increase in private school enrollment, despite a prior expectation of decline. The data suggest an increase in private school graduates through 2018, then potential decline up to 12 percent by 2025.
- Overall trends WICHE projected for high school graduates—a period of stagnation and slow increase through 2032—still hold, since private school graduates are just 9 percent of the total.
- Catholic schools still enroll the majority of private school students, but their proportion is decreasing, the relative influence on trends of other private school types has increased, and there is wide variation by state.

beyond school year 2012-13 have been released.⁴ These enrollment data were released past the point at which WICHE could have incorporated them in the published projections. In September 2017, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) released revised *Projections of Education Statistics to 2025*.⁵ And between October 2016 and November 2017, USDOE released new private

WICHE has been producing national, regional, and state-level projections of public high school graduates (with race/ethnicity detail) and of state-level private school graduates for almost 40 years, in the *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates* series. The 9th edition of these projections for the Classes of 2013 to 2032 was released in December 2016 and is available at knocking.wiche.edu along with charts, data, and other materials.

school enrollment and graduate counts for school years 2013-14 to 2015-16, with the most recent graduate counts released in November 2017 being different from what appeared in the September 2017 *Projections of Education Statistics to 2025*.

Total and public high school graduates

WICHE’s projections for *total* high school graduates and *public* high school graduates appear to be in line with the latest available data about high school students and graduates, which indicate that the total projected number of high school graduates and public high school graduates is stable or increasing slightly (see Table 1). WICHE’s projections of *public* high school graduates are very close to the USDOE’s, from 1 to 3 percent fewer in any given year out to 2025 (16,400 to 90,700 fewer graduates, respectively).⁶ WICHE’s projections of the *total* number of high school graduates are still also quite close to USDOE’s, from one to four percent fewer in any given year out to 2025 (37,100 to 132,200 graduates, respectively). The differences in the *private* school sector that are discussed below account for as much as 60 percent of the net difference in the *total* number of high school graduates projected by WICHE and USDOE.

Private high school graduates

In the December 2016 edition of *Knocking at the College Door*, WICHE projected a strong decline in the number of high school graduates of private religious and private nonsectarian schools, which contribute between 9 and 10 percent of total graduates in any given year, nationally. A primary source of information about private schools, the USDOE’s Private School Universe Survey (PSS) data,⁷ indicated years of declining enrollments up through school year 2011-12. The data showing a decade or more of student decreases at private schools—ending in the lagged year of 2011-12 due to data availability—drove WICHE’s projections that there may be as many as 25 percent fewer private high school graduates by the early 2030s. Similar decreases were projected in several previous editions of the USDOE’s *Projections of Education Statistics* and in previous editions of *Knocking*.⁸

Table 1. *Knocking* projections compared to USDOE (thousands)

	Total public & private schools		Public schools		Private schools	
	<i>Knocking</i> 2016	USDOE proj.	<i>Knocking</i> 2016	USDOE proj.	<i>Knocking</i> 2016	USDOE proj.
2000–01	2,850		2,569		281	
2001–02	2,911		2,622		289	
2002–03	3,019		2,720		299	
2003–04	3,060		2,760		300	
2004–05	3,095		2,799		296	
2005–06	3,116		2,813		302	
2006–07	3,196		2,893		303	
2007–08	3,315		3,001		314	
2008–09	3,348		3,039		309	
2009–10	3,441		3,128		313	
2010–11	3,446	3,450	3,144	3,144	302	306
2011–12	3,453	3,455	3,149	3,149	304	306
2012–13	3,467	3,478	3,169	3,169	298	309
2013–14	3,443	3,480	3,152	3,169	291	311
2014–15	3,421	3,478	3,135	3,166	286	311
2015–16	3,413	3,506	3,139	3,192	274	314
2016–17	3,386	3,510	3,119	3,196	267	315
2017–18	3,460	3,558	3,198	3,243	262	315
2018–19	3,455	3,549	3,203	3,243	252	306
2019–20	3,408	3,509	3,166	3,208	242	301
2020–21	3,420	3,536	3,185	3,234	235	302
2021–22	3,424	3,544	3,196	3,249	228	295
2022–23	3,435	3,559	3,217	3,273	218	286
2023–24	3,511	3,604	3,271	3,326	241	278
2024–25	3,561	3,658	3,317	3,379	244	280
2025–26	3,518	3,651	3,281	3,372	237	279

Confirmed graduates released in Nov. 2017:

343

Note: Shading indicates projections.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Projections of Education Statistics*, multiple editions, and WICHE *Knocking at the College Door*, 2016.

Since WICHE is not making new private school projections at this time, USDOE’s most recent (revised) projections for private high school graduates are shown in Figure 1 to compare with WICHE’s *Knocking* projections and the prior series of USDOE projections that ended with school year 2024.

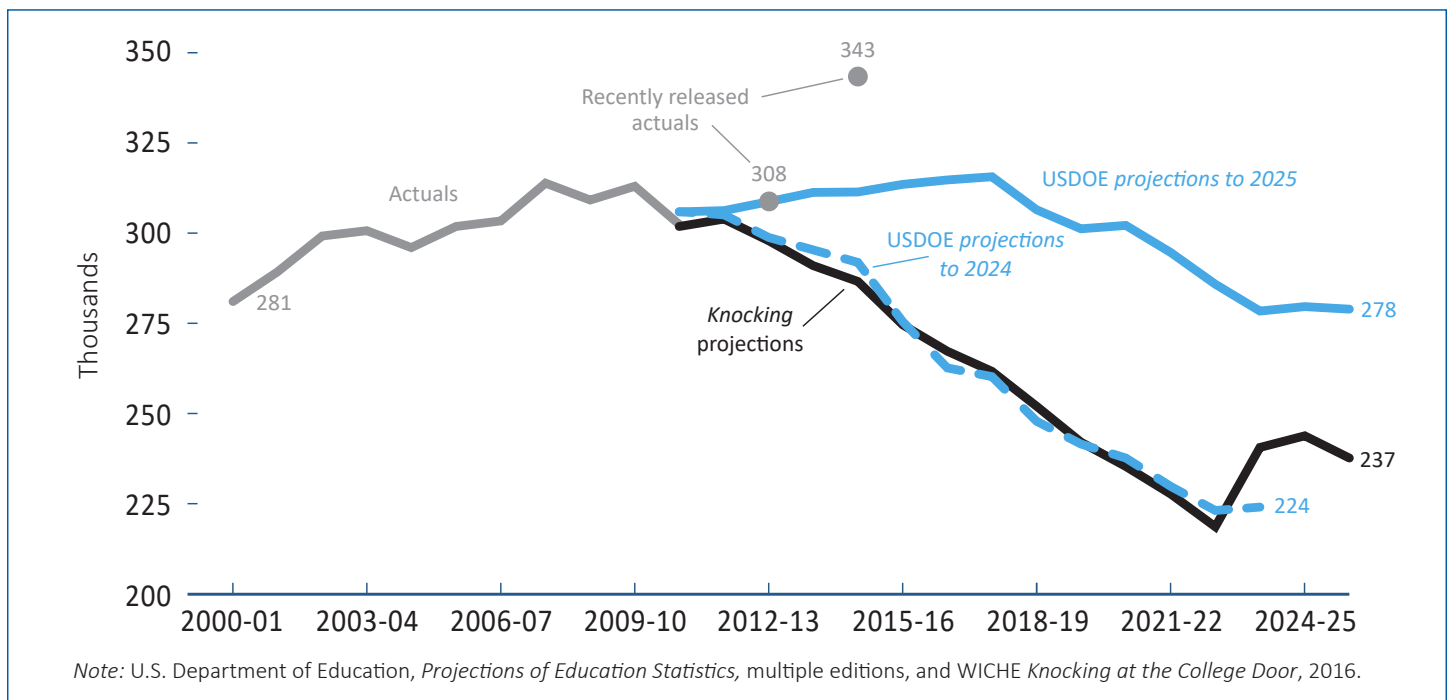
Highlights include:

- All sources of data confirm that private high school graduates did decline slightly between 2007-08 and 2010-11.
- USDOE's newest projections (to 2025) incorporate the recently released private high school graduate counts for 2012-13, showing a slight increase, nationally, between 2010-11 and 2012-13 (from 305,840 to 308,770).
- By incorporating these graduate counts for 2012-13 and the enrollment data discussed below, USDOE now projects there will be a relatively stable number of private high school graduates between 2010-11 and 2017-18, when there will be about 3 percent more.
- In November 2017, private school graduate counts for school year 2014-15 were released (as shown as a gray dot in Figure 1). There were 343,252 private high school graduates reported for 2014-15, which puts them out of line with both WICHE's and USDOE's recent projections.
- USDOE's projected high school graduates are expected to increase through 2017-18, followed by a decline of 12 percent through 2025-26. The

decrease projected by USDOE between 2018-19 and 2025-26 would be consistent with private school enrollments still not having returned to the levels of the early 2000s (see Table 2), the same reason for WICHE projecting fewer private high school graduates during those years. But actual numbers of graduates are likely to be even higher than USDOE projected, in reflection of the particularly strong recent private high school enrollment levels and the graduate counts just released in November 2017.⁹

In short, the *Knocking* private high school graduate projections for the nation were 4 percent lower for 2012-13 than were subsequently reported (11,140 graduates), and 17 percent lower for 2014-15 (56,822 graduates). Thus, the *Knocking* projections of private high school graduates in any year between 2016-17 and 2025-26 are between 15 percent and 24 percent lower than USDOE's revised projections—not considering the newly released data for 2014-15. The difference between WICHE's and USDOE's projections narrows to 15 percent by 2025-26 (41,470 graduates). While all regions have experienced this sudden, recent increase of private school students, it has been greater in the South and Midwest, where the *Knocking* projections were 19 percent and 16 percent lower, respectively,

Figure 1. Actual and projected private high school graduates



in 2014-15 than the graduate counts just released. In the West and Northeast there were 15 percent and 14 percent more graduates, respectively, just reported for 2014-15 than were projected. Of course, there is significant variation by state, not to mention by private school type.

These new data do not appear to have a material effect on WICHE's overall total projections or projections by race/ethnicity, but WICHE encourages users to rely on the new private high school enrollment and graduate counts to inform their decision-making when specifically considering the projections of private high school graduates.

Enrollments of private school students

WICHE's projection methodology emphasizes the most recently available actual data as a primary predictive factor for projected future graduates. So, the strong rates of decline in actual numbers of private school students between 2006-07 and 2011-12¹⁰—which were an accelerated continuation of declines emerging since the early 2000s—were a primary reason for the subsequent declines predicted for private high school graduates. Table 2 shows total private school enrollments, elementary and high school enrollments, nationally and by broad private school type, at several points in time from the late 1980s.¹¹

The PSS data for school years 2013-14 and 2015-16 show an increase of almost 10 percent in private school students since 2011-12—a sudden and unexpected reversal of previous enrollment declines, over a very short period.¹³ Private *elementary* school students increased 8 percent between 2011-12 and 2015-16; private *high school* students increased 13 percent. Decreasing numbers of Catholic school students accounted for the greatest portion of the private school

The strong decrease in the number of private religious school students through school year 2011-12 is what predicted the overall downward trend for future numbers of private high school graduates.

Table 2. U.S. private school enrollments, by school year

	1987-88	2001-02		2011-12		2015-16	
	Students (millions)	Students (millions)	Compared to 1987-88	Students (millions)	Compared to 2001-02	Students (millions)	Compared to 2011-12
Total	3.34	4.82	44%	3.97	-18%	4.36	10%
Grade 1 to 8	2.44	3.48	44%	2.70	-22%	2.92	8%
Grade 9 to 12	0.914	1.34	47%	1.27	-5%	1.44	13%
Catholic	n/a	2.67	--	2.09	-22%	2.08	0%
Other religious	n/a	2.33	--	2.00	-14%	2.27	14%
Nonsectarian ¹²	n/a	1.32	--	1.19	-10%	1.40	18%

Source: WICHE calculations of PSS data.

total declines over the prior decade or so, but the rates of decrease in Catholic school students have slowed on a national level since 2011-12.

- Catholic schools in the Northeast continue to report fewer students.
- Midwest Catholic schools report recent increases.
- In the South and West, generally only Catholic *high schools* report student increases over the last several years.

Student increases at non-Catholic religious schools accounted for the majority of increase between 2011-12 and 2015-16, nationally. Non-Catholic religious schools reported 14 percent more students, and private nonsectarian/nonreligious schools reported 18 percent more students, over this period. The highest rates of increase were in the high school grades, 22 percent and 28 percent, respectively.

- The South tracks the national pattern for non-Catholic and nonsectarian schools for these recent years.
- In the West, increases among private nonsectarian schools account for the greatest portion of new private school students overall.
- In the Northeast, non-Catholic religious school students increased 23 percent and accounted for 72 percent of private school student increases between 2011-12 and 2015-16. Private nonsectarian students increased 11 percent over this period.
- In the Midwest, non-Catholic religious and nonsectarian schools reported 19 percent and 17 percent more students between 2011-12 and 2015-16, respectively. Non-Catholic religious student increases accounted for 60 percent of the private school increases in the Midwest.

What explains the private school shifts?

WICHE contacted various private school associations and the USDOE, as well as others who have reported about and researched private school trends, to confirm the general direction of these new data and learn what is behind these dramatic shifts. WICHE did not receive a specific explanation of the trends, or of whether recent increases should be expected to continue. USDOE staff suggested that the enrollment reductions between 2007-08 and 2011-12 likely relate to the effects of the Great Recession, and that the enrollment rebounds between 2011-12 and 2015-16 relate to the subsequent economic recovery.¹⁴ Data from the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) confirm the overall decrease and recent stabilization in Catholic school student enrollments (through 2016-17).¹⁵ The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) confirmed that enrollments among their independent, nonprofit non-religious and religious schools remained steady with virtually no change since 2011-12, and that increasing enrollment numbers might correspond with for-profit school enrollment levels.¹⁶ The National Council for Private School Accreditation (NCPA) concurred that the enrollment trends reported in the PSS data were representative of what they knew from their membership of private school accrediting associations.¹⁷

Prior to the release of these new data, WICHE began investigating the varying trends among types of private schools, and what might explain the contraction among private schools. Private schools disproportionately enroll White students, on average, and this likely explains some of their student levels compared to overall youth population increases in the recent past. And recent research indicates that economic factors may strongly affect private school enrollment trends.¹⁸ Moreover, studies have provided some evidence that growth in the charter school movement and other school choice options has contributed to the decline in private school enrollment.¹⁹

WICHE's initial analysis of the private school enrollment data confirmed that some aspect of each of these factors appeared to be at play in the recent steep declines during the Great Recession, and the overall longer-term downward trend in private school enrollments. But WICHE's initial investigations into private school trends did not include these more recent years of data, so the patterns that WICHE observed may have changed with the sudden trend shifts we report in this brief.

Private school trends are important to me. How do I use this new information?

WICHE's *Knocking* projections tracked other projections that reflected a decade or more of private school student decreases. This was amplified during the years of the Great Recession. Only the introduction of new data showing the recent, strong, unexpected increase in private school students could produce a new projected trendline, such as that recently published by USDOE.

It is because WICHE is committed to transparency and prefers to publish the most recent, accurate information for the users of the *Knocking* projections that WICHE is making note of these new data. The *Knocking* projections are produced every four or five years when sufficient new data become available (and therefore an entirely new series of projections for all student categories may be produced in the next two to three years). WICHE is not releasing new projections of private high school graduates at this point. The recent shift will need to stabilize before WICHE will make new projections, particularly state-level projections, which are more sensitive to changes. Specifically, several more years of data will reveal whether the recent strong increases in private school enrollments continue, or these were just rebound years and the contraction in private school enrollments that began prior to the Great Recession will resume.

But there is important information to be gleaned from the actual, reported counts of private high school graduates. Therefore, WICHE has compiled and makes available data for private high school graduates by state from 2000-01 to 2014-15 on the website knocking.wiche.edu. Values for 2000-01 to 2010-11 are what WICHE has previously published; values for the newly released data for 2011-12 to 2015-16 are also now included (state-level values have been computed but have not undergone the same level of data review as the projection data). WICHE hopes users will compare these data to the published projections for an understanding of recent trends in areas of their interest.

Endnotes

¹ Peace Bransberger and Demarée K. Michelau, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, 9th Edition. Boulder, Colo.: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2016.

² See sidebar on page 6, “Private school trends are important to me. How do I use this new information?”

³ See Bransberger and Michelau, *ibid*, Appendix C: Technical Information and Methodology.

⁴ See *How Do Newer Data Affect WICHE’s High School Graduate Projections*, March 2017, at knocking.wiche.edu/knocking-blog/2017/3/3/how-does-newer-data-affect-wiches-high-school-graduate-projections.

⁵ William J. Hussar and Tabitha M. Bailey, *Projections of Education Statistics to 2025*, U.S. Department of Education, September 2017, accessed Nov. 14, 2017, nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017019.pdf. U.S. Department of Education, Private School Universe Survey Public-Use Data Files for 2013-14 and 2015-16, and Table 15. Number of private schools, students, full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers, and high school graduates, by state, for 2012-13 and 2014-15, accessed Nov. 15, 2017, nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/pssdata.asp.

⁶ WICHE’s projections differ from those of NCES in three primary ways. First, WICHE relies on the number of births reported through the National Center for Health Statistics as the primary determinant for the number of graduates 18 years later, in the outer years of the *Knocking* projections (through school year 2031-32), whereas NCES uses population estimates from the U.S. Census in combination with school enrollment data (ending at school year 2025-26). Second, while both NCES and WICHE use cohort survival projection methodologies, WICHE uses a weighted-average five-year cohort survival ratio method, whereas NCES uses exponential smoothing methods. Finally, WICHE produces projections for private schools and public schools by race/ethnicity for each state, whereas NCES does not.

⁷ Other sources of estimates for private and homeschooled students are the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey and the USDOE’s National Household Education Survey.

⁸ Hussar and Bailey, *ibid*, and Bransberger and Michelau, *ibid*.

⁹ USDOE provides projections through 2025. WICHE’s *Knocking* projections extend to 2032, with the years past 2025 reflecting births in recent years that are not yet reflected in school enrollments, and these data suggest that private schools are likely to produce fewer graduates between 2025 and 2032 simply due to recent declines in the sheer number of U.S. births.

¹⁰ Data for school year 2011-12 were the latest data available from the USDOE Private School Universe Survey (PSS) to include in the projections at the time that WICHE published in December 2016.

¹¹ The PSS data encompass a portion of homeschooled students, those who are associated with a private school that supports homeschooling. The number of these students ranged from 228,000 to 435,000 between 2001-02 and 2015-16 (about a quarter of the estimated 1.7 million homeschooled students in 2016). Students associated with these private schools increased by 75 percent between 2011-12 and 2015-16, to 398,000.

¹² “Nonsectarian schools” as defined for the USDOE PSS data collection is not equivalent to the definition of independent schools. Nonsectarian refers to schools without a religious affiliation. Independent schools encompass schools defined by their governance structure, including nonprofit and for-profit and religious and non-religious schools.

¹³ Changes in private high school graduate numbers are more perceptible than changes in public school numbers, given their much smaller numbers. Also, private school enrollments are presumably more variably impacted by a wide range of school choice factors than are public schools.

¹⁴ Stephen Broughman, Private School Universe Survey staff contact, U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, Nov. 13, 2017, email correspondence with the author.

¹⁵ National Catholic Education Association, *Catholic School Trend Data*, accessed Nov. 13, 2017, ncea.org/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/NCEA/Proclaim/Catholic_School_Data/Catholic_School_Data.aspx.

¹⁶ Amada Torres, Vice President for Studies, Insights, and Research, National Association of Independent Schools, Nov. 13, 2017, correspondence with the author.

¹⁷ Clayton Petry, Executive Director, National Council for Private School Accreditation, Nov. 15, 2017, email correspondence with the author.

¹⁸ Richard J. Murnane and Sean F. Reardon, “Long-Term Trends in Private School Enrollments by Family Income” (CEPA Working Paper No.17-07), Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, December 2017. Accessed Dec. 4, 2017, cepa.stanford.edu/wp17-07. Anne T. Lamb, “Private school exodus in the wake of the Great Recession: the role of income in private school choice,” working paper originally presented at 2017 Association for Education Finance and Policy conference, October 2017, draft and permission to cite provided by author.

¹⁹ Rajashri Chakrabarti and Joydeep Roy, “Do Charter Schools Crowd Out Private School Enrollment: Evidence from Michigan,” Institute for Education and Social Policy: New York, N.Y., 2011, accessed Mar. 15, 2017, from newyorkfed.org/research/staff_reports/sr472.html. Stephanie Ewert, “The Decline in Private School Enrollment,” Working Paper Number FY12-117, U.S. Census Bureau Social, Economic and Housing Statistics Division: Washington, D.C., 2013, accessed May 13, 2017, from census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2013/acs/2013_Ewert_01.pdf.

This supplement to the ninth edition of *Knocking at the College Door* (knocking.wiche.edu) was prepared by Peace Bransberger, senior research analyst, WICHE (303.541.0257 or pbransberger@wiche.edu).

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