Fall 2020 Pre-K/K Enrollment Trends

The benefits of attending pre-K are clear.
Pre-K is a critical support for Louisiana's youngest learners to start their educational journey. Longitudinal research of high-quality pre-K programs indicates that these children, compared with their peers who did not participate in pre-K, exhibit stronger early reading and math skills and show significant gains in social and emotional skills, reduced grade retention, reduced placement in special education, increased likelihood of being in school at age 21, and increased likelihood of attending a four-year university (Source: Albert Wat, *"The Pre-K Pinch: Early Education and the Middle Class"*). Research notes that students who begin school behind are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to attend college. (Source: *Heckman, "The Economics, Technology and Neuroscience of Skill Formation"*; *Center on Children and Families at Brookings, "Starting School at a Disadvantage"*).

Louisiana has shown encouraging results in pre-K, especially for its most vulnerable children. Internal data indicate that when children whose home language is not English attend pre-K, they are better prepared for kindergarten than similar students who did not attend pre-K. Similar benefits were shown in the data for students with disabilities and economically disadvantaged students. A child who attends pre-K has a better chance at being successful in elementary school and continuing their educational journey through to graduation (LDOE's PDG Needs Assessment, 2019).

COVID has disrupted pre-K and early elementary attendance.
Louisiana public schools saw large declines overall in pre-K enrollment; 17% fewer students enrolled overall in fall of 2020 than in fall of 2019. While reasons for these dips in enrollment are not totally understood, a variety of factors -- including families keeping children out of school for health reasons and challenges surrounding virtual learning -- likely contribute. Pre-K enrollment declines were present across all subgroups analyzed, but were most pronounced for students who were economically disadvantaged (19%), Black (25%), or in an urban school (18%). Declines were also present in kindergarten and elementary schools, but not as pronounced.

Table I. Change in Public School-Based Pre-K Enrollment (Fall 2019 to Fall 2020)
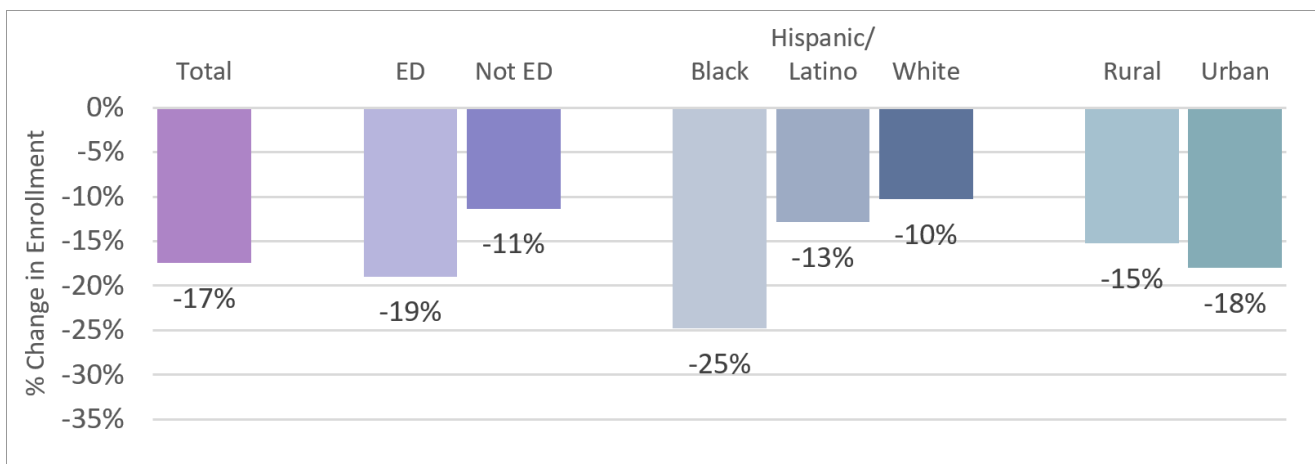
Since fall 2020, preliminary pre-K enrollment data indicate that enrollment has increased. Compared to fall 2019 data, February 2021 internal data show enrollment at 87% of prior levels. While this increase does not bring pre-K attendance back to anything resembling pre-pandemic levels, it is an encouraging start for supporting Louisiana's youngest learners.

Compared to fall 2019, Kindergarten enrollment in fall 2020 declined by 7% and enrollment in first through fifth grades declined by 4%.

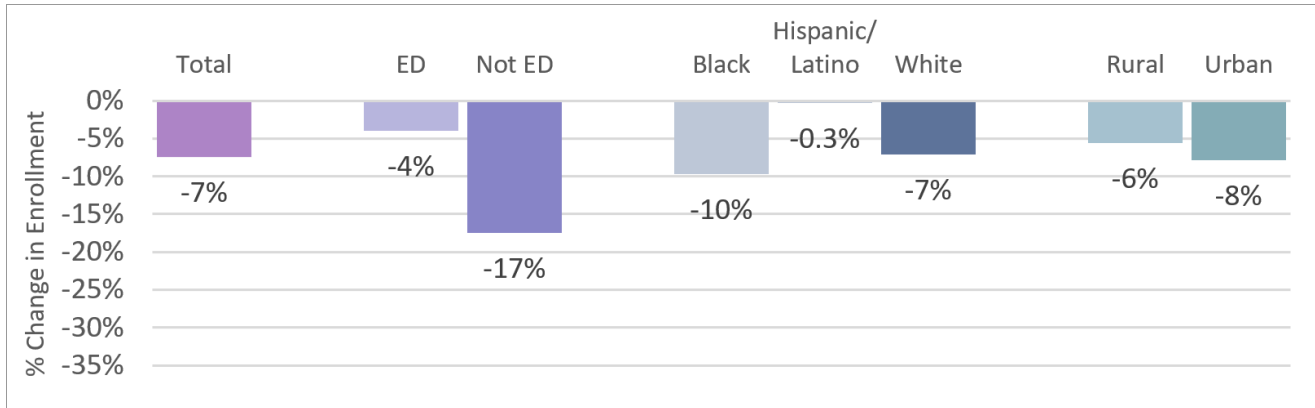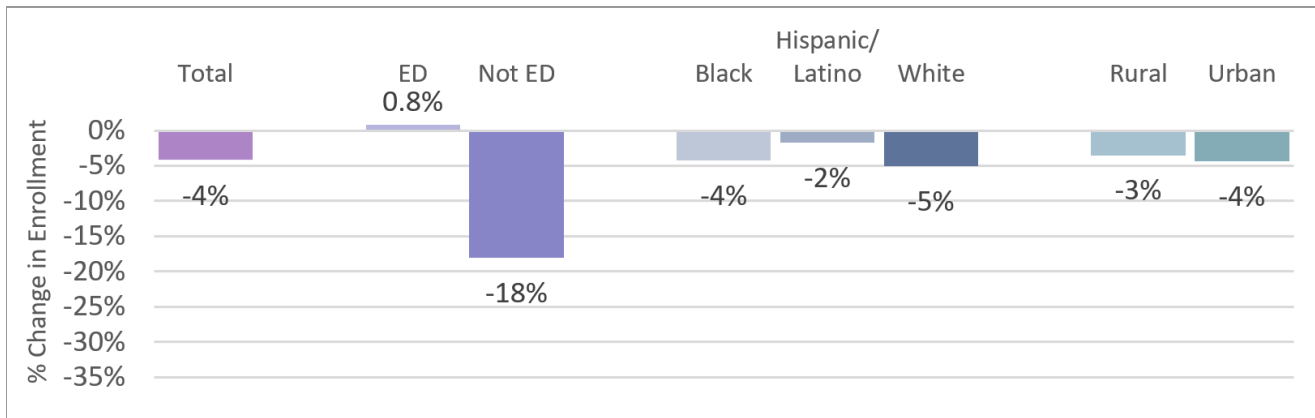*Table II. Change in Kindergarten Enrollment (Fall 2019 to Fall 2020)*

Table III. Change in First through Fifth-Grade Enrollment (Fall 2019 to Fall 2020)

For more information on enrollment changes from fall 2019 to fall 2020, including data by LEA and subgroup, please view the COVID-19 PreK - Grade 5 Enrollment Changes Data (downloadable Excel file).

How should school systems and early childhood community networks respond?
Communities and school systems should anticipate needing to provide additional support to children entering school this fall, including identifying children in need of intervention, partnering with families to support school transitions, support student social and emotional development, and enhance early learning at home. More information and resources to support school system and early childhood community network planning efforts are available in the *Achieve! (pre-K-12)* and *Believe! (Early Childhood)* planning guides.