



School Size in St. Louis: How Average Enrollment in the River City Compares Across Missouri & Nationally

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KEY POINTS

Enrollment in public schools across St. Louis City has fallen alongside the city's overall population decline, reviving conversation around closing some of the city's underutilized school buildings. In this brief, we analyze how total public school enrollment and average building enrollment in St. Louis compare across Missouri and nationally. We find:

- St. Louis City has smaller average enrollment per building than any other district in the state.
- When compared to the 5 largest districts in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, SLPS's average enrollment ranks 245th out of 247 districts.
- Compared to the other members of the Council of Great City Schools, SLPS has the smallest average per building enrollment of all the member districts.
- Compared to a matched sample of 117 cities allowing charter schools, St. Louis City has the second lowest average building enrollment.

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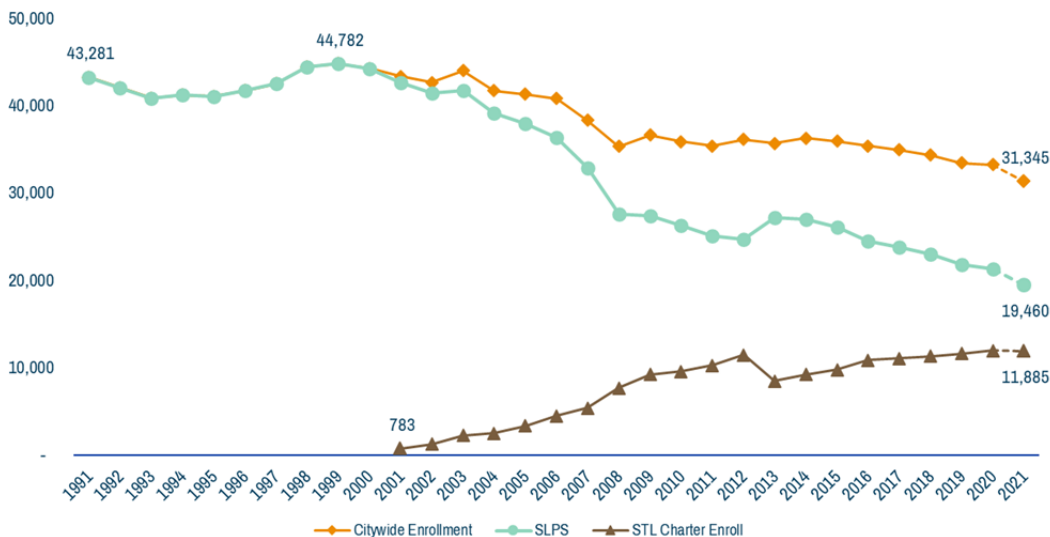
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Introduction

St. Louis City's experience with population decline has spanned over half a century as the city peaked at over 856,000 residents in 1950.¹ During the 2010 census, St. Louis had a population of 319,294, a decline of 63% from its peak. The most recently available population estimates have shown an additional 6% decline in population from 2010 to 2019, with a city population of 300,576 in 2019.

As the city's population has fallen, so has student enrollment in public schools. The city hit its peak enrollment in public schools in 1967, serving over 115,000 students in St. Louis Public Schools. Since then, the district experienced significant enrollment declines. According to enrollment data reported by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), SLPS

Figure 1: Total St. Louis City Public School Enrollment, 1991-2021



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enrollment fell from just under 45,000 students in 1999 to an estimated 19,460 students for the 2020-21 school year. As SLPS' enrollment has declined, the city has seen the charter school sector start and grow from 784 students in 2001 to nearly 12,000 students during the current school year (Figure 1). Despite these additional options for public education in the city, the city still enrolls 13,000 fewer students today than just 20 years ago.

While funding is determined on a per capita basis, the city faces fixed costs of owning and maintaining 105 schools, 71 of which are owned by SLPS and 34 by charters. In light of these infrastructure costs and the impact declining enrollments can have on revenues, SLPS closed eleven schools in 2010 and two more in 2016.² In 2020, the district began examining the potential of closing more schools across the district. In early 2021, SLPS announced they would close seven schools in the fall of 2021.³

Table 1 : Enrollment and School Count for Missouri's 20 Largest Districts, 2018-19

District	Enrollment	Buildings	Elementary	Middle	High School
<i>St. Louis City</i>	<i>33,166</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>22</i>
St. Louis Public Schools	21,841	71	47	8	16
St. Louis Charter Schools	11,619	36	23	6	7
<i>Kansas City</i>	<i>27,769</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>43</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>15</i>
Kansas City Public Schools	15,356	33	24	3	6
Kansas City Charter Schools	12,413	39	19	9	11
Springfield R-XII	25,893	52	38	9	5
Rockwood R-VI	21,614	33	23	6	4
North Kansas City 74	20,807	30	20	6	4
Columbia 93	18,555	71	47	8	5
Lee's Summit R-VII	18,413	34	22	7	5
Ft. Zumwalt R-II	18,062	25	19	3	4
<i>Remaining Districts Average*</i>	<i>16,163</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>3</i>

Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education enrollment 2018-19;

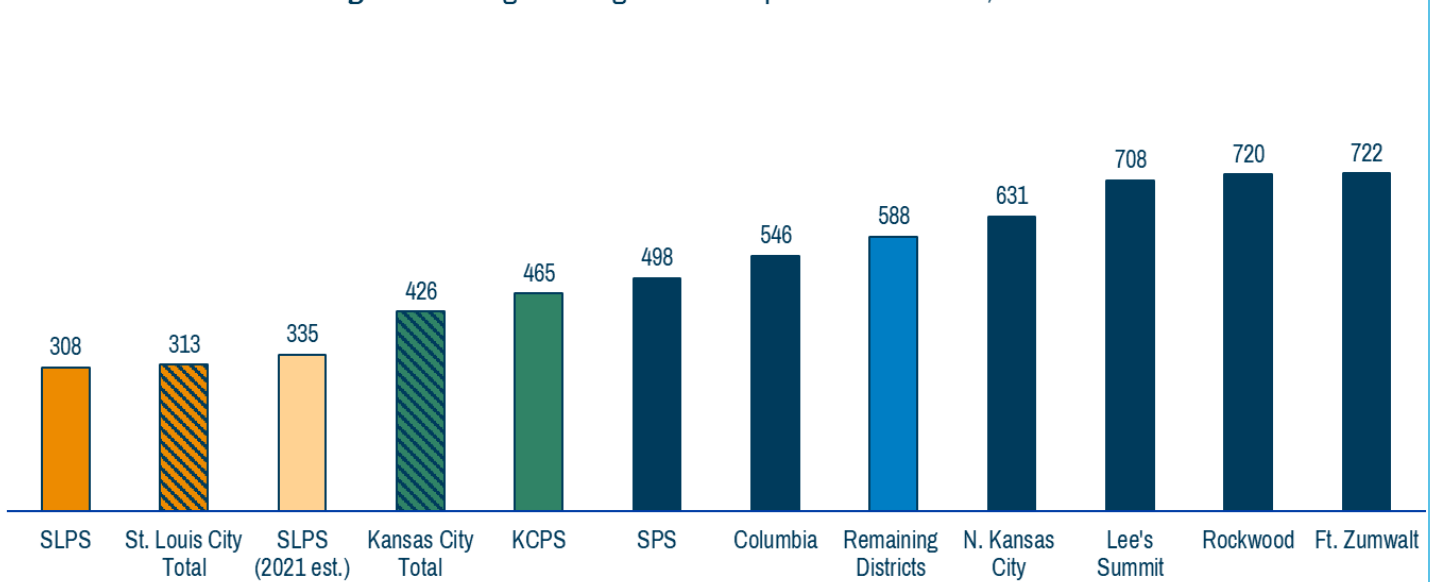
* Parkway C-2, Francis Howell R-III, Hazelwood, Wentzville R-IV, Independence 30, Blue Springs R-IV Liberty 53, Park Hill, Fox C-6, St. Joseph, Ferguson-Florissant R-II, & Mehlville R-IX

St. Louis City Has Smaller Building Enrollments than Other Missouri Districts

To provide context around district size in Missouri, we first compare total enrollment in St. Louis City (SLPS + charter enrollment) to total enrollment in Kansas City, as this is the only other city with charter schools. We then compare both SLPS and St. Louis City total enrollment to the 20 largest districts in the state (Table 1). During the 2018-19 school year, SLPS was the second largest district in the state.

We find that, during the 2018-19 school year, St. Louis City had a lower average building enrollment than Kansas City's total enrollment, as well as the other 19 districts. As shown in Figure 2, St. Louis City had a total average building enrollment of 313 students (308 students per building in SLPS). By comparison, the average building enrollment in all public schools in Kansas City—the only other district with charter schools—was 36% higher with 465 students per school building (426 students per school in KCPS 33). The largest district in Missouri (Springfield Public Schools) had an average building enrollment of 498 students, which is 59% higher than St. Louis City's total. Rockwood, which was the state's third largest

Figure 2: Average Building Enrollment per Missouri School, 2018-19



district during the 2018-19 school year with 21,614 students, had an average building enrollment more than double that of St. Louis City.

Even with the proposed closure of 7 schools in SLPS for the 2021-22 school year, the city’s average building enrollment will still be the lowest in the state. Despite enrolling 4,000 fewer students than Springfield (SPS) during the 2018-19 school year, SLPS had 19 more schools, with stark differences between the number of elementary and high schools across the two districts. In St. Louis City as a whole, there were nearly as many total schools (107) as SPS, Rockwood, and North Kansas City 74 combined (115). These three districts combined to enroll over 68,000 students, whereas St. Louis City had half as many students enrolling in public schools (33,460). Additionally, SLPS itself had more total school buildings as the whole of Kansas City, despite SLPS enrolling 6,000 fewer total students.

St. Louis City Has Smaller Building Enrollments than Similar Cities Nationwide

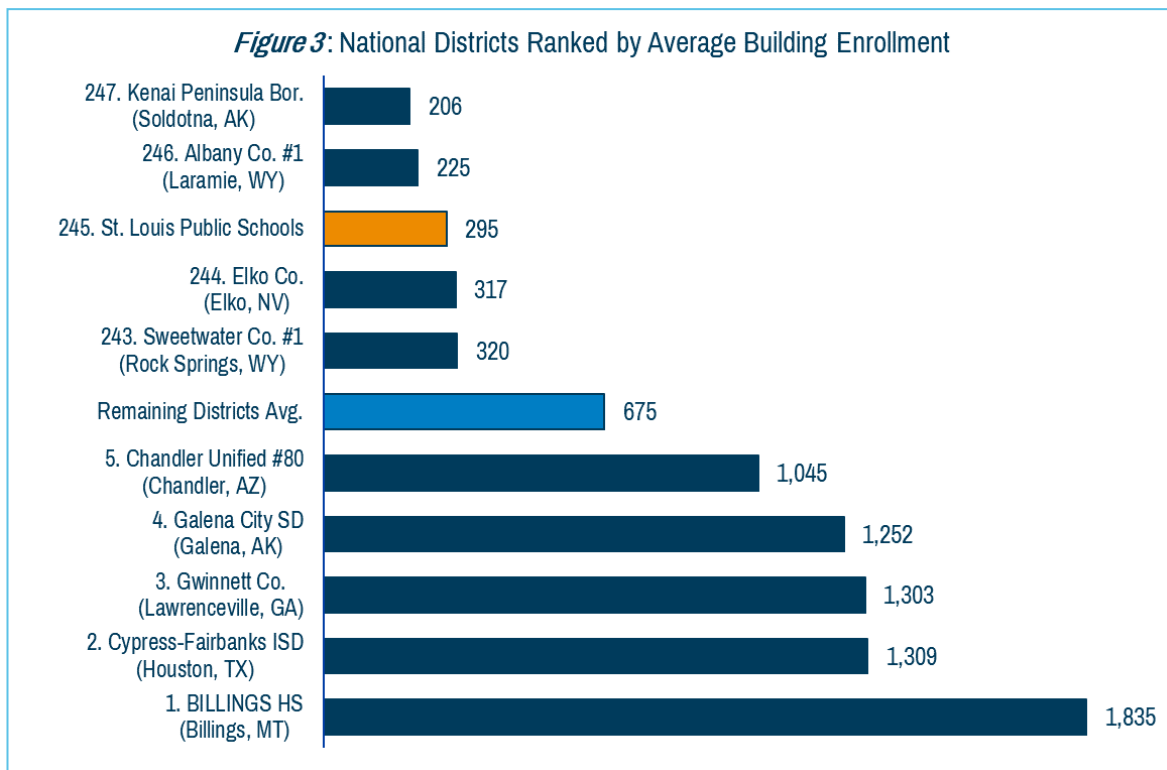
SLPS and St. Louis City has smaller average building enrollments than almost every comparable district nationally. While other districts in Missouri might be subject to the same state regulations and context, looking nationally allows us to understand whether school size in St. Louis is unique only to Missouri. To place St. Louis in context nationally, we conducted several comparisons and found that SLPS and St. Louis City nearly always has one of the smallest average building enrollments. In the first two comparisons we examine only traditional public school enrollment. This is due to the fact that not every state allowed charter schools to operate during the 2018-19 school year. Our comparisons include:

1. The five largest districts from each state and the District of Columbia (247 traditional public school districts),
2. Members of the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) (77 traditional public school districts), and
3. Cities with charter schools operating and a similarly sized traditional public school district (117 cities, traditional public and public charter school enrollments combined).

Below, we describe the findings from each comparison.

Comparison 1: SLPS has the third smallest (245th) building enrollments amongst the sample of 247 national districts.

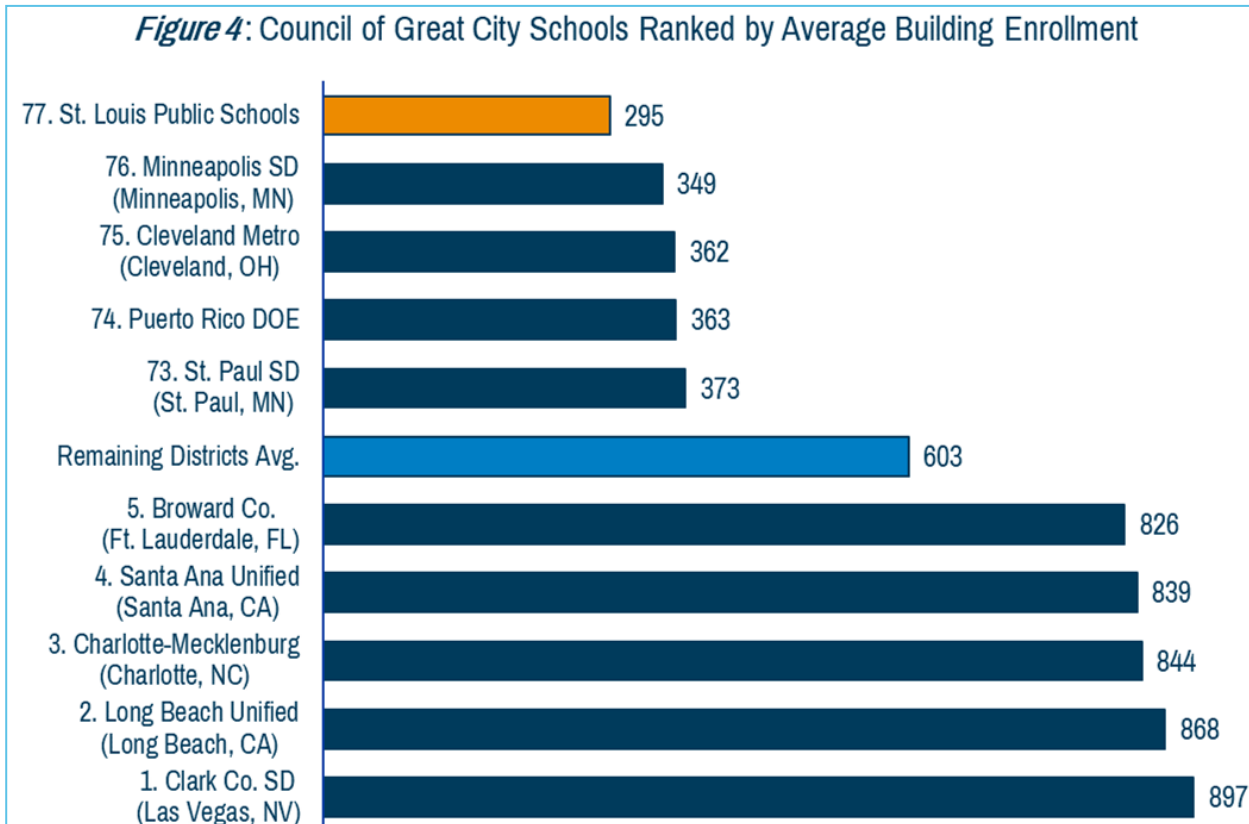
Using available enrollment and school count information from the Common Core of Data (CCD) for the 2018 -19 school year, we examine the average building enrollment from the five largest districts in each state and Washington, DC. Hawaii and DC both have one traditional public school district, providing a sample of 247 total traditional public school districts. Among these, SLPS ranks 245th in terms of average building



enrollment. Only Kenai Peninsula Borough School District in Soldotna, Alaska, and Albany County School District #1 in Laramie, Wyoming (Figure 3) have smaller average enrollments.

Comparison 2: SLPS has the smallest building enrollments of the Council of Great City Schools districts

SLPS is a member of the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS), which is a network of 77 urban school districts. Using CCD data for public school enrollment in the CGCS districts, we examine the average building enrollment in each of the districts. We find that SLPS has the smallest average building enrollment of all CGCS members (Figure 4). Minneapolis (MN) has the second lowest but still enrolls 50 more students per school.



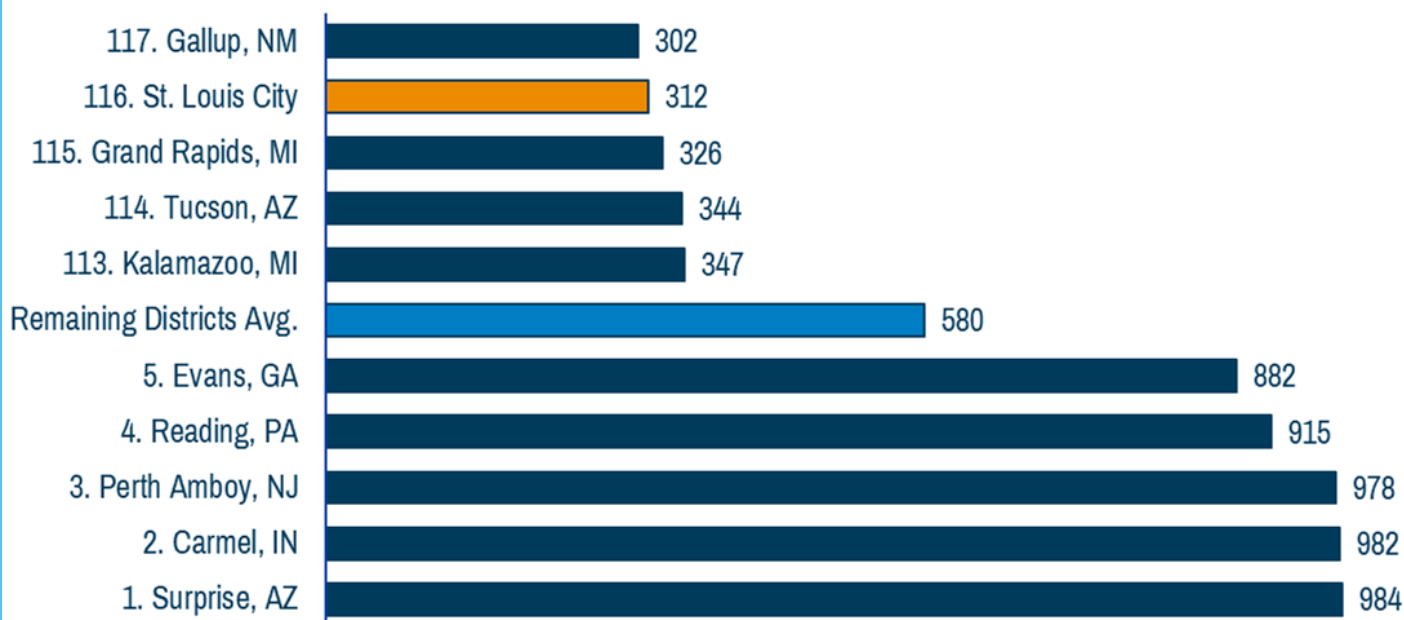
Comparison 3: St. Louis City (SLPS + charters) has the second smallest building enrollments compared to similar cities nationally

In the preceding comparisons, we have examined the average building enrollments only for the traditional public school districts. However, St. Louis City has a substantial number of students enrolling in public charter schools. In our final comparison we examine the total public school enrollment (traditional public + public charter) in St. Louis City compared to other cities with a charter school market. Again, we use enrollment and building count data from the Common Core of Data for the 2018-19 school year to select cities based on the following criteria:

- Charter market saturation:** Our initial inclusion criteria around charter schools examines whether or not charter schools are able to operate within a city. Much like SLPS, these cities will have traditional public and charter public schools competing for the same students.
- Serve full grade range in traditional public school district:** SLPS serves students in grades PK-12. Therefore we exclude any city where traditional public school districts are limited to either only elementary- or high school-aged students.
- Similar traditional public school enrollment:** SLPS enrolled 21,814 students during the 2018-19 school year. Using a range of 50% smaller or larger, our first criteria includes any school district with an enrollment between 10,907 students and 32,721 students.

Using these standards, we were able to compare total public school enrollment in St. Louis City to 116 other cities. Our results showed that St. Louis City has a smaller average building enrollment than 115 of the other

Figure 5: Matched Cities with Charter Schools Ranked by Average Building Enrollment



cities. The only city with a smaller average building enrollment is Gallup, New Mexico, which has two charter schools enrolling a total of 191 students.

The next closest city—Grand Rapids, Michigan—has an average enrollment in Grand Rapids Public Schools and the surrounding charter schools that is slightly larger (326 students) than St. Louis City’s. Much like the current school closure conversation in which SLPS currently finds itself, Grand Rapids experienced a period of significant enrollment declines. Over the last few years, Grand Rapids Public Schools has closed 35 schools⁴, including 10 following the 2012-13 school year.⁵

Conclusions

According to our analysis, St. Louis City has smaller average building enrollments than any of the largest 20 districts in Missouri and than almost every other district included in our national comparisons. We found that the average building enrollment in SLPS is smaller than almost every one of the five largest districts in each state, including districts in more heavily populated areas like Los Angeles (CA) Unified, Houston (TX) ISD, and Miami-Dade (FL), as well as districts in more sparsely populated areas including Alaska, Wyoming, and Montana. SLPS ranks 245th among the 247 districts in this group. We also compare SLPS to the other members of the Council of Great City Schools, finding that SLPS has the smallest average per building enrollment among all of the districts in the network. Finally, using a set of 117 matched cities allowing charter schools and a similar traditional public school district enrollment as SLPS, we find that St. Louis City has the second lowest smallest average building enrollment.

We note the limitations of this analysis – we only select a sample of districts in Missouri and nationally with which to compare SLPS and St. Louis City. Thus, it’s possible that other cities not included in these samples also have small enrollments per school. However, our samples were chosen to be as comparable to St. Louis as possible. Moreover, the stark contrast between St. Louis and the other cities in our samples makes us suspect that St. Louis City is indeed unique.

This brief does not attempt to address whether and how St. Louis City should address this relative imbalance. In addition to average school enrollment and related operating costs, cities and school districts must weigh many political, operational, and financial factors in deciding whether to adjust the number of schools open. Nonetheless, we hope sharing comparisons to other cities can inform discussions about the future of schools in this historic city.

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