

Issue Brief № 44

School Enrollment in Alabama's Black Belt Continues to Decline

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"The migration shift of residents from Alabama's rural Blackbelt areas to more suburban areas where resources and supports such as hospitals, larger and new schools, tranquil parks, community recreation, plentiful job opportunities, and other quality of life factors exist is a real threat to the continued sustainability of rural Alabama."

— Dr. Jacqueline A. Brooks, Macon County Superintendent¹

Overall enrollment at Alabama public schools increased at the onset of the 2019-20 school year for the first time since 2013-14. According to *Al.com*, "[there] are 724,178 students enrolled across the state in kindergarten through 12th grade."² Despite this increase, enrollment is "down 12,000 from six years ago, when overall enrollment began to shrink across Alabama."³ At the same time, however, most enrollment growth is centered in city rather than county school districts. This trend, present in the Black Belt but also other parts of rural Alabama, is greatly challenging local funding for school districts as taxpaying residents relocate and local economies decline. In this issue brief, published by the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center, public K-12 enrollment data for the state and the Black Belt is examined.

Declining Enrollment in the Black Belt

From 1995-96 to 2019-20, total school enrollment in statewide fell by 10,421 from 734,899 to 724,178, a decline of one percent. In the same quarter-century when statewide public school enrollment was essentially flat, public school enrollment in the 24 counties that comprise Alabama's Black Belt fell from 139,739 in 1995-96 to 106,801, a decline of thirteen percent. This means that school enrollment across the rest of Alabama *increased* by 22,217. The 32,938 decline in the 24 Black Belt counties over the past twenty-five years represents a community

roughly a third larger than the size of Selma. Moreover, the problem in some Black Belt counties may be even more severe, because school enrollment increased in three of the 24 counties.⁴

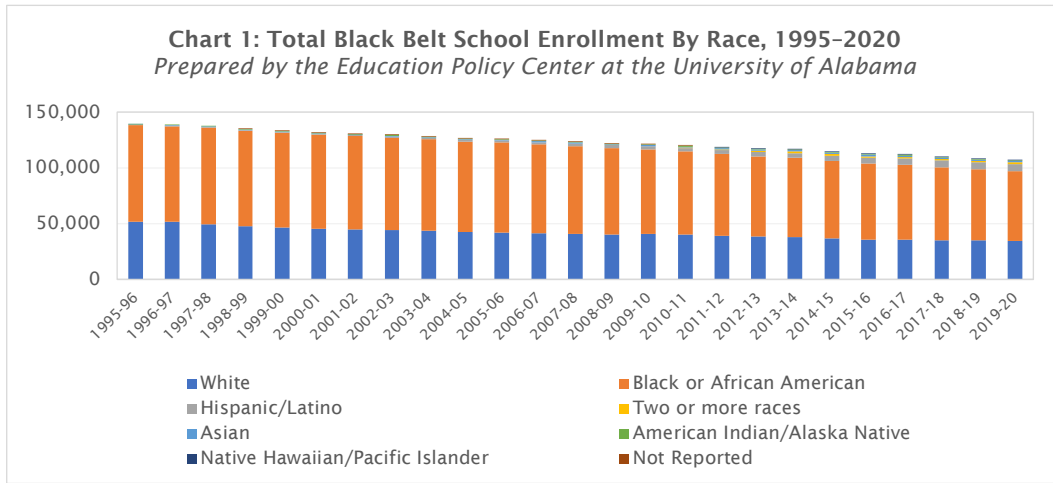
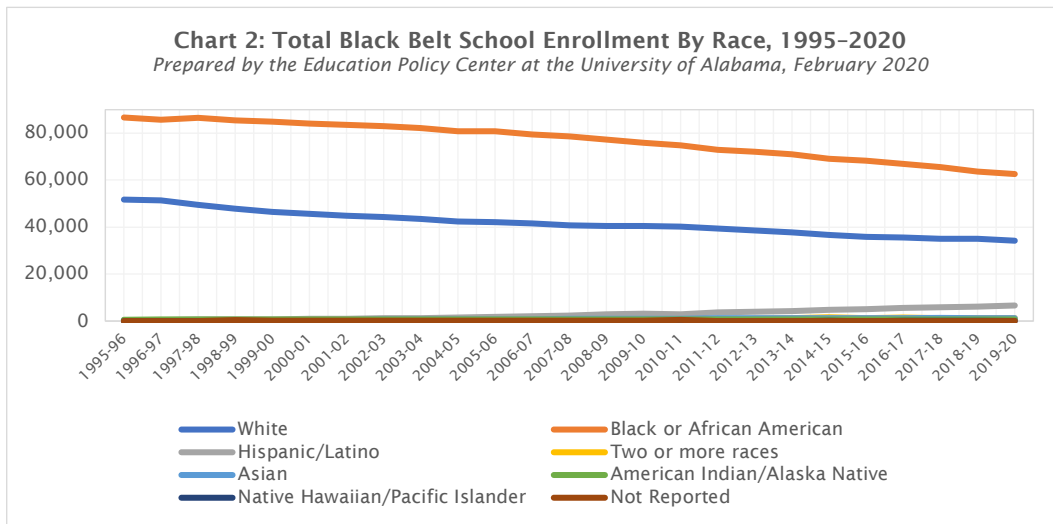
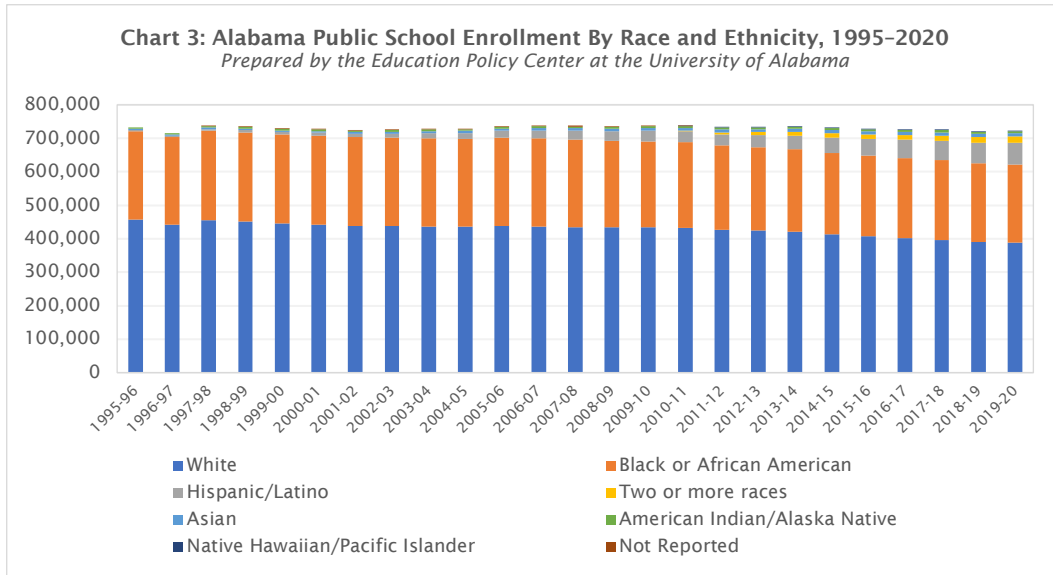


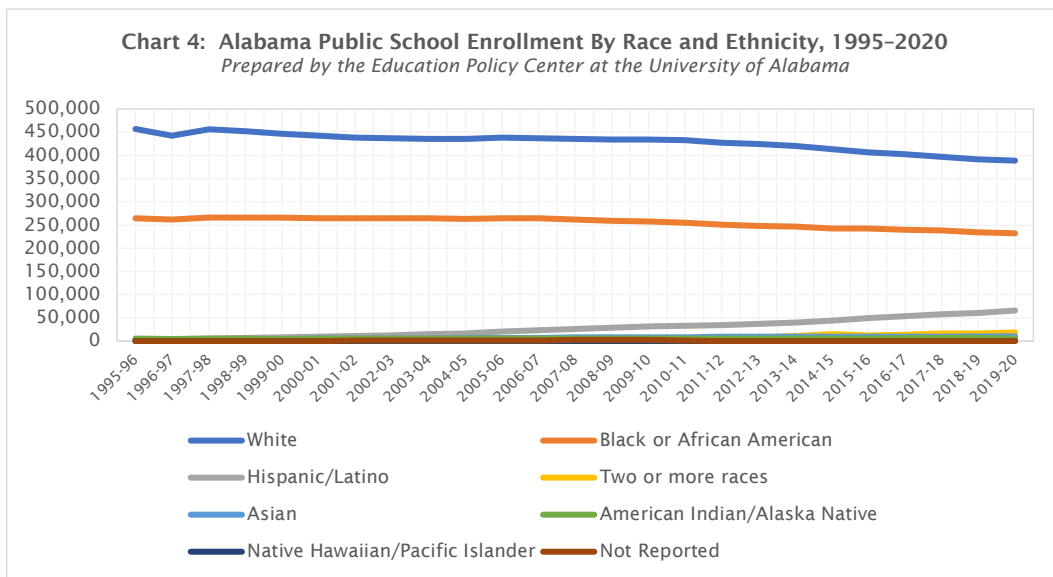
Chart 1, above, and Chart 2, below, provide a historical perspective on public school enrollment in Alabama’s 24 Black Belt counties over the past quarter-century. From 1995–96 to 2019–20, African American enrollment in the Black Belt’s public schools fell from 86,680 to 62,209, a decline of 24,471 (28 percent), and white enrollment fell from 51,724 to 34,218, a decline of 17,506 (34 percent). The increase in Hispanic enrollment from just 432 students in 1995–96 to 6,638 in 2019–20 could not cover this difference. The result is many school closures and the loss of community identity that goes with it in many small Black Belt towns.



School Enrollment, Statewide



Charts 3 and 4 examine Alabama’s statewide enrollment by race and ethnicity from 1995–96 to 2019–20. While total enrollment was flat, there were differences among major racial and ethnic subgroups. White and African American enrollments declined at about the same rates statewide, while Hispanic enrollments grew significantly.



“Failing” Schools in Alabama & the Black Belt

The Alabama Accountability Act of 2013 requires the bottom 6 percent of schools to be labeled “failing.”⁵ The most recent list of these “failing” schools was released on November 1, 2019, and included 74 schools in 28 school districts (plus one public charter school).⁶ Of the 74 schools on the list, 32 (43 percent) are located in the Black Belt. As stated before, the declining population of the region is shrinking local tax bases, challenging funding for schools, and in all likelihood making a turnaround more challenging. Governor Ivey has expressed interest in changing the “failing” label, but the last effort to do so—in 2017—was unsuccessful.⁷

Declining Rural Enrollment is a National Problem

“Rural students and the schools they attend receive little attention in either policy or academia,” writes Megan Levalley, research analyst at the Center for Public Education, “...despite the fact that more than 46 million Americans live in nonmetropolitan areas.”⁸ Furthermore, rural areas often rely on their schools for more than just education. The National Education Association explains: “[rural] school districts are often the largest single employer in their area and rural schools serve as the social, recreational, and cultural foundation of their communities.”⁹ Despite their prevalent role in rural America, these schools face persistent poverty, achievement gaps, teacher retention, and funding. “On average,” Levalley writes, “rural district receive just 17% of state education funding...[considering] that one in two districts is rural and serve one in five students...this distribution is severely lacking.”¹⁰ Nationally, rural education presents a major challenge to lawmakers at the local, state, and federal level.

Conclusion

In a statement to the EPC, Alabama State Superintendent Dr. Eric Mackey commented: “[the] success of the Black Belt is important to all Alabamians. We are glad to see the University of Alabama research and analyze the needs of the Black Belt so we can continue to improve and provide better educational resources to help the students of these communities.”¹¹ Enrollment decline in the Black Belt is symptomatic of deeper challenges facing rural America. The loss of residents is hurting rural economies and prompting them to seek opportunity elsewhere. In the long-term, schools—and the students who stay—are left hanging. The first

issue brief in the EPC's series focusing on the Black Belt noted a decline of 40,000 residents since 1998.¹² While indicative of deeper issues, without a state strategy to focus special help for these schools, the continuing enrollment decline spells hardship for the Black Belt, which in turn further exacerbates the issues herein discussed.

THE EDUCATION POLICY CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

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