

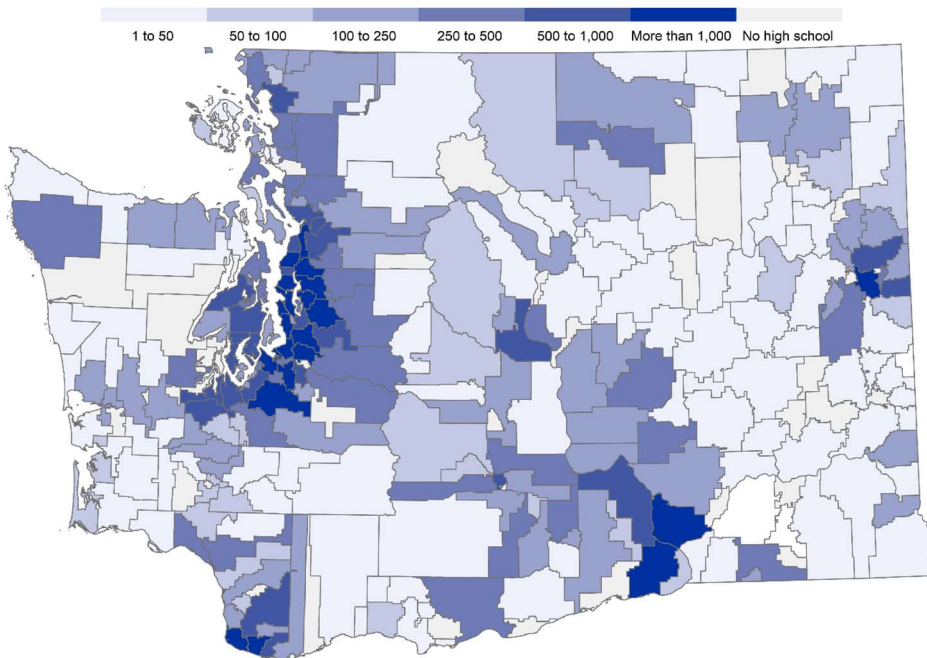
Data Digest

Regional Variation in Postsecondary Enrollment: A District-Level Analysis

Overview: This digest examines three direct postsecondary enrollment rates for the high school graduating class of 2023 across the state: overall enrollment defined as enrollment at either a community and technical college (CTC) or a four-year institution, CTC enrollment only, and four-year institution enrollment only. Postsecondary enrollment rates vary considerably by school district and postsecondary institution sector. Larger districts tend to outperform the statewide rate of enrollment overall and at four-year institutions. Smaller districts tend to lag the overall statewide enrollment rate, while outperforming the statewide CTC enrollment rate. Statewide, enrollment dropped six percentage points during the pandemic and has since rebounded two percentage points. Likewise, a substantial majority of districts (74%) still have not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels of postsecondary enrollment.

High school graduates across districts: There were 263 districts with high school graduate information for the class of 2023. Figure 1 illustrates the substantial variation in the number of high school graduates across the state. Not surprisingly, most high school graduates are located near larger population centers. The enrollment behavior of students in larger and smaller districts likely reflects varying district resources, college-going intentions, local labor markets, and other factors. Importantly, enrollment measures in very small districts might reflect the behavior of just a handful of high school graduates.

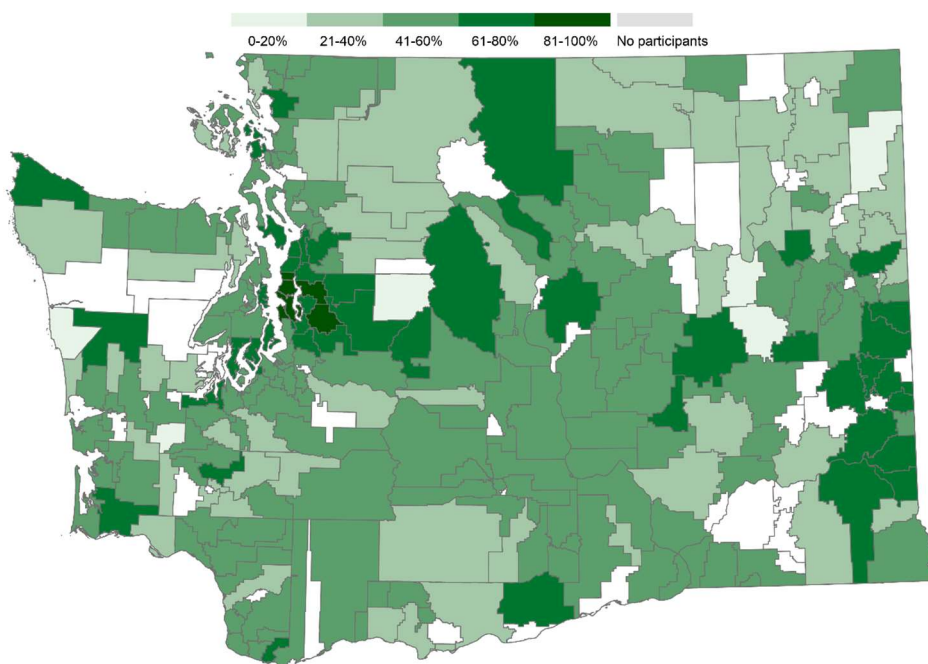
Figure 1. The number of high school graduates varies across the state. High school graduates are largely concentrated near larger population centers in the state.



Note: Districts shaded white have missing high school graduate data in 2023.

How does immediate enrollment differ across districts? Statewide, 55% of high school graduates from the class of 2023 enrolled in a postsecondary institution in the year following high school, but these direct enrollment rates varied considerably across the state (Figure 2). Only 72 districts (27% of districts) had direct enrollment rates at or above the statewide enrollment rate and these districts tended to be clustered in urban or suburban areas.

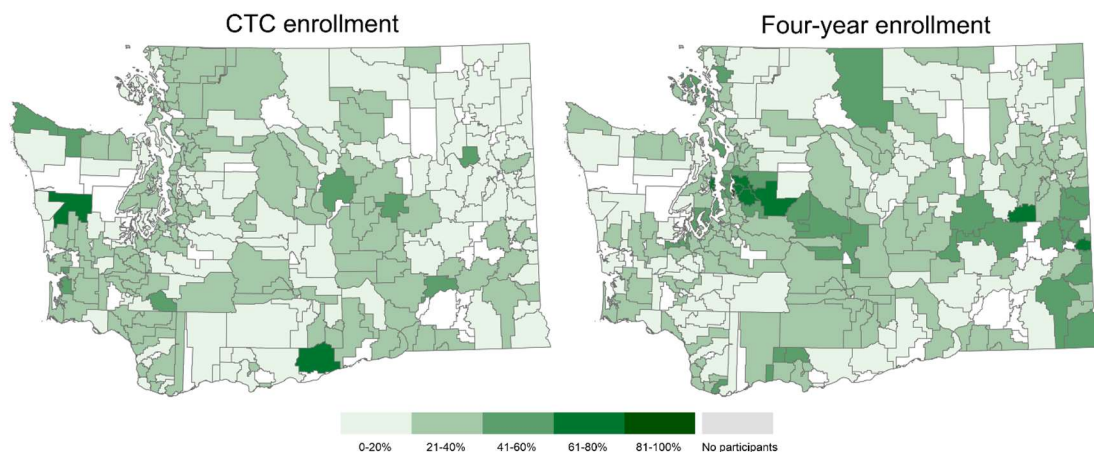
Figure 2. Urban and suburban districts tend to have higher overall enrollment rates.



Note: Districts shaded white have no traditional public high school or missing high school graduate data.

Do districts send students to different postsecondary sectors? Enrollments at both CTCs and four-year institutions are relatively high in the Puget Sound regions of Washington (Figure 3). Generally, however, districts with higher four-year enrollment rates tend to have lower rates of CTC enrollment and vice versa. Enrollment at four-year institutions is higher than that of CTCs in Puget Sound, central (particularly near the Cascades and Yakima), and eastern regions. Enrollment in CTCs is higher than four-year institutions in the Olympic, southwestern, and northwestern Washington regions.

Figure 3. Enrollment in four-year institutions and CTCs are generally higher in the Puget Sound districts but vary across other districts in the state.

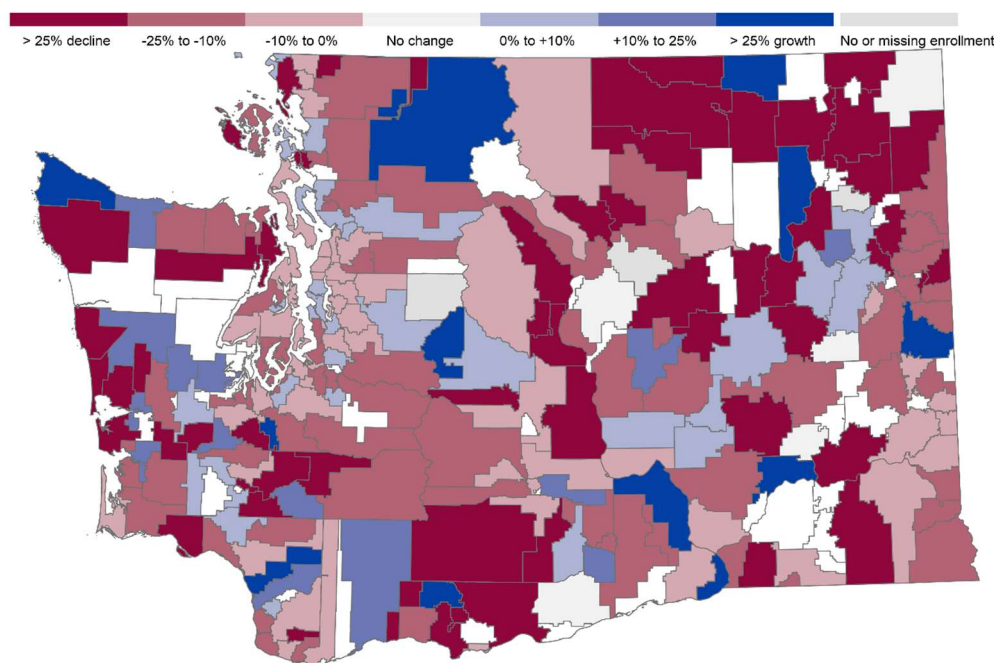


Note: Districts shaded white have no traditional public high school or missing high school graduate data.

How does district enrollment compare to the statewide rates by institutional sector? Statewide, 33% of high school graduates enrolled in four-year institutions, while 22% immediately enrolled in a CTC. About 25% of districts have four-year enrollment rates that are higher than the statewide four-year enrollment rate, whereas 42% of districts have CTC enrollment rates above the statewide CTC enrollment rate. Districts that outperform the four-year statewide enrollment rate tend to be larger than the average district size, while districts outperforming the CTC state average enrollment tend to be smaller than average.

Are districts recovering equally from pandemic-related enrollment declines? Most districts (74%) are still below their pre-pandemic postsecondary enrollment rates measured in 2019 (Figure 4). There are no strong regional patterns relating to whether a district has rebounded to pre-pandemic enrollment levels. Districts with positive growth or sustained declines as compared to 2019 appear evenly located geographically across the state.

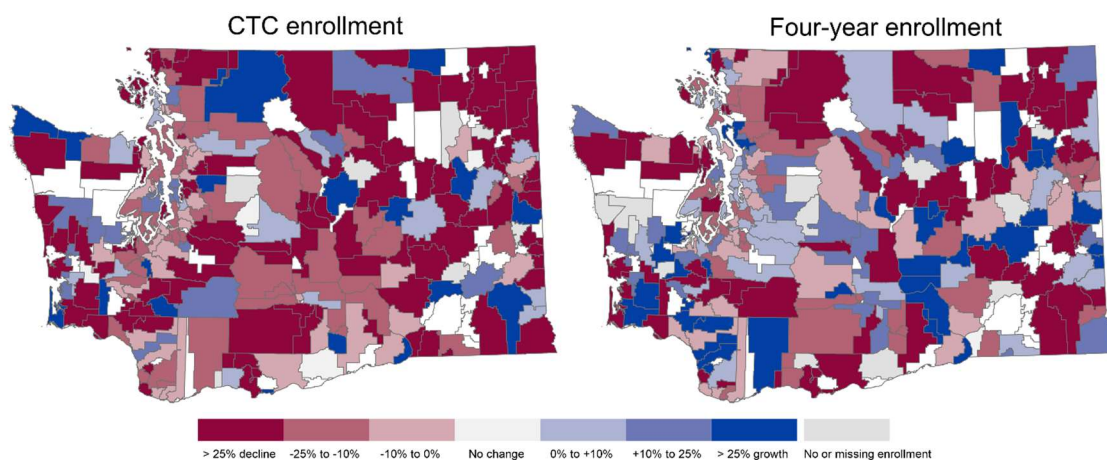
Figure 4. Compared to 2019, 26% of districts increased overall enrollment and are spread evenly across the state.



Note: Districts shaded white have no traditional public high school or missing high school graduate data.

Are pandemic-related district declines similar across institutional sector? More districts experienced larger rebounds in four-year enrollment than in CTC enrollment (Figure 5). More than 40% of districts had four-year enrollment rates at or above that of 2019, compared to about 25% of districts that experienced increases in CTC enrollment. Only 10% of districts, mostly located in the Puget Sound area, had high school graduates enroll at or above their 2019 rates at both CTCs and four-year institutions.

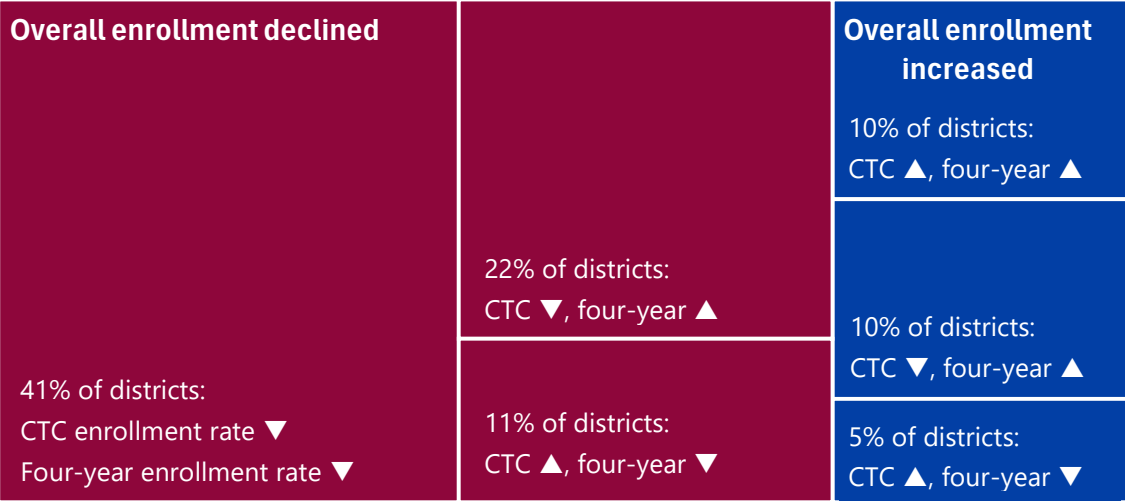
Figure 5. Since 2019, more districts have experienced increases in four-year enrollment rates than in CTC enrollment rates.



Note: Districts shaded white have no traditional public high school or missing high school graduate data.

While most districts that experienced declining overall enrollment had decreases in both CTC and four-year institution enrollment, there are notable exceptions. In some districts, sector-specific enrollment trends rebounded despite overall declines (Figure 6). For instance, 11% of districts had declining overall enrollment but increasing CTC enrollment. Likewise, 22% of districts experienced a drop in overall enrollment but saw a resurgence in enrollment rates at four-year institutions. These trends highlight areas of recovery within the higher education landscape, even amid broader enrollment challenges.

Figure 6. From 2019 to 2023, 59% of districts increased postsecondary enrollment in at least one sector, but overall postsecondary enrollment declined in 74% of districts



Conclusion: Regional analysis reveals considerable variation in postsecondary enrollment trends overall and by sector. This brief highlights how student enrollment behavior appears at least partially related to conditions at a district level. Understanding regional factors that impact postsecondary enrollment and developing local approaches to address challenges and opportunities faced by students could help improve postsecondary enrollment statewide.

To view more statewide, district, and school data, visit our
High School Graduate Outcomes Dashboard:
<https://erdc.wa.gov/data-dashboards/high-school-graduate-outcomes>

Technical notes:

¹ Direct Enrollment is defined as having an enrollment record at a postsecondary institution at some point in the academic year following graduation, which is defined as the summer term immediately following graduation through spring term of the next calendar year. If a student enrolled at a two-year and a four-year institution in the year, they are categorized as a four-year enrollee.

² Two-Year Community and Technical Colleges (CTCs) include all Washington and out-of-state private and publicly funded two-year institutions. This uses the NSC data for private and out-of-state two-year institutions and the SBCTC data for the publicly funded two-year Washington institutions.

³ Four-year institutions include all Washington and out-of-state private and publicly funded four-year institutions. This uses the NSC data for private and out-of-state four-year institutions and the PCHEES data for the publicly funded four-year Washington institutions.

⁴ High school graduate data come from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) provided to ERDC. Recent submission of data from OSPI was missing high school graduation data for three districts. ERDC expects this will be remedied in future submissions.