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In Wisconsin, alternatives to traditional public school see post-pandemic boom

Olivia Herken

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Instructor Eamon Montgomery reads to students at Acton Academy, a new microschool that opened in Madison just two weeks ago. It's among the growing number of alternative schooling options for families since the start of the pandemic.

JOHN HART, STATE JOURNAL

Enrollment in Wisconsin's traditional public schools has continued to decline since the start of the pandemic.

There isn't a single answer as to where students are going and why. A nationwide declining birth rate and changing trends in where families live are big contributors.

But there's clearly a growing appetite in Wisconsin for more alternative schooling, including charter schools and home-schooling.



Ten new independent charter schools have opened across the state since 2019, with 35 options now available. Other options that break the traditional mold have also sprouted, from **a new forest school in La Farge** to an **expanding campus** at Madison's private Hickory Hill Academy.

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“From what I’ve seen, the pandemic has had an impact where parents kind of got a firsthand look into their children’s experience in the classroom and probably got a better sense for what they’re learning and really digging into that,” said Marisa Palmer, a lecturer in UW-Madison’s School of Business and a mom who just launched **an Acton Academy microschool** in Madison.

The pandemic “jolted” parents out of normalcy, said Johanna Schmidt, director of enrollment and marketing at Wingra School, a longtime progressive private school in Madison. Schmidt also is a mom of two Wingra students.

“Everyone was just going ahead and doing their things, your kids went to public school, and then all of a sudden they’re at home,” she said. “And they’re at home doing virtual learning and perhaps you’re hearing more or seeing more or more involved, just because you have to be as a parent because you’re sitting right there with them.”

Inside the numbers

Enrollment in Wisconsin public schools dropped again this year, in keeping with a **pandemic-era historic decline** from which public schools have yet to recover.

More families have been opting for alternative schooling for years, but interest has recently increased.

From fall 2021 to fall 2022, headcounts in public schools declined 0.85%, while the headcount in independent charter schools increased 4.5%, **according to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction**. Enrollment in the state’s four private school parental choice programs, which allow students to attend a private school using state aid, rose by 6.7%.

The second headcount for this school year was done on Friday, but the numbers have yet to be released.

The number of students who are being home-schooled has also increased. In 2020-21, 31,878 students were being home-schooled, or just over 3% of the state's students. That was a 47% increase from the previous year. Those numbers dropped slightly to 29,402 students in 2021-22, but still remained much higher than before the pandemic.



Just four students are currently enrolled in a new Madison microschool called Acton Academy, but the independent elementary school hopes to eventually grow to up to 100 students and expand to offer middle and high school.

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Similarly, there were 13,395 students enrolled in virtual charter schools in 2021-22 and 16,020 in 2020-21, compared to the 8,696 in 2019-20.

Applications at Wingra have doubled from last year, Schmidt said. The school expects to have about 20% more students next year than it had last year. This increase would likely bring Wingra to its pre-pandemic enrollment levels or even surpass them, she

said.



Enrollment expected to keep declining in Madison schools

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It's common for students to come to Wingra after trying public schools, but there's been an uptick in applications for its kindergarten and first-grade programs.

“I think it tells me that people are looking at these options earlier on,” said Ebony Rose, head of Wingra School. “I also think it means that parents might not want to even experiment with public schools or other schools.”

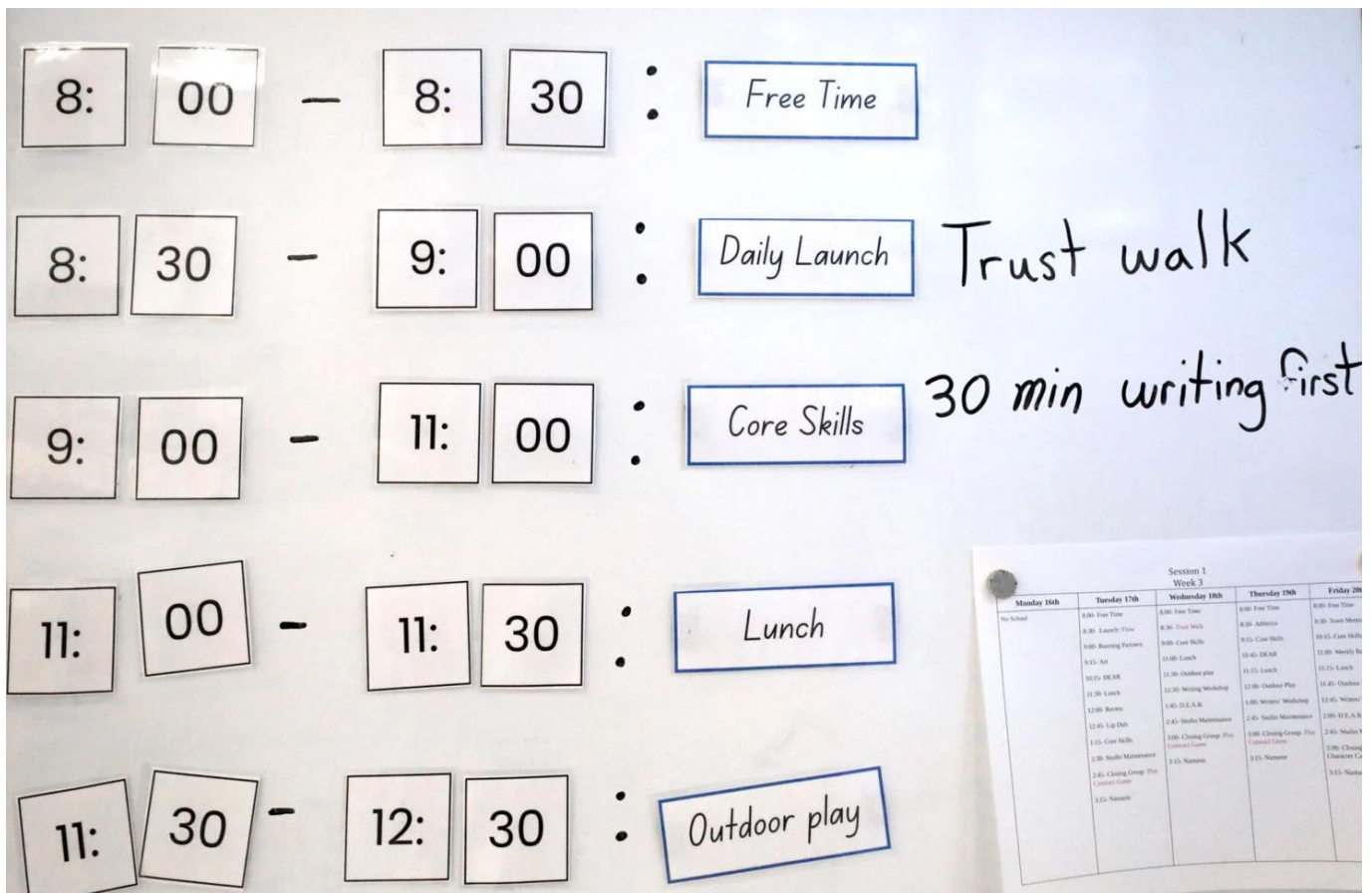
What parents want

Schmidt said parents are interested in Wingra's focus on the outdoors, the mixed-age classrooms and the lower student-to-teacher ratio.

This was true for Schmidt herself, who moved her family to Madison almost two years ago from Austin, Texas, where her oldest child was briefly in public school before switching to a charter. She noted that most kindergartens her family looked at only had about 15 minutes of outside time for recess.

“And that didn't feel like enough time,” she said.

Students at Wingra School spend between an hour and 90 minutes outside every day. “Rain, sleet or snow, our students are outside every day,” Rose said.



Acton Academy, a new microschool that opened in Madison earlier this month, follows an education model similar to that found in Montessori schools — student-driven and hands-on.

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Palmer decided to launch a branch of Acton Academy because she wasn't happy with what she discovered about early education through research and in her own experience as a mom. When her son jumped from play-based preschool to traditional kindergarten, he was given homework.

The Acton microschool follows principles similar to that of Montessori schools, which strive to be hands-on, child-centered and driven by students' interests rather than formal lesson plans. The school has mixed-age classes, children learn at their own pace, and there is a heavy focus on science and projects.

Classes at Madison's Acton Academy just started about two weeks ago, and four children are enrolled so far with "lots of interest" for enrollment in the fall, Palmer said. The school hopes to grow to 75-100 elementary students and then hopefully expand to a small middle and high school.



Acton Academy student Corrine Hannaman, 8, explores a book during an independent reading period Wednesday.

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'A lot of inertia'

Palmer hears from a lot of parents interested in Acton and other alternative schools that their child is bored. She said parents don't want their children to have to learn in lockstep with the rest of their class, and they don't want them to have to sit still at a desk all day.

But it's also about adapting to a changing world, Palmer said.

Jobs today are much different than the careers for which traditional schooling is preparing children, she said. Acton appeals to parents who are in technology, entrepreneurship, medicine and science.



Who gets the money? One City's closure complicates funding for it and Madison Schools

Olivia Herken

“The way I think about Acton is, when you think about public schools, there’s a long legacy of curriculum and the system, and it has a lot of inertia, and I think it works well for a lot of learners,” Palmer said. “But Acton and some of these microschools is what a school would be today if you designed it from scratch. If you just had a clean slate today, how would you design school?”

Schmidt believes the pandemic helped parents see other schooling options.

“The pandemic changed a lot of what people consider to be normal,” she said. “And as their kids are going back to school or as they’re having maybe been back in school for a year and a half, they’re perhaps a little more willing to consider alternatives to what they perceived to be just what everybody did.”

To be ‘seen’

As staffing continues to be an issue for most schools, parents may be drawn to smaller, alternative schools that offer a better student-to-teacher ratio.

“We have had parents tell us that their child was invisible in public schools,” Rose said. “And at Wingra, those students are seen, and that means a lot to parents to have their students not feel alienated or estranged from not only the academic part of school, but also the social-emotional part of school.”



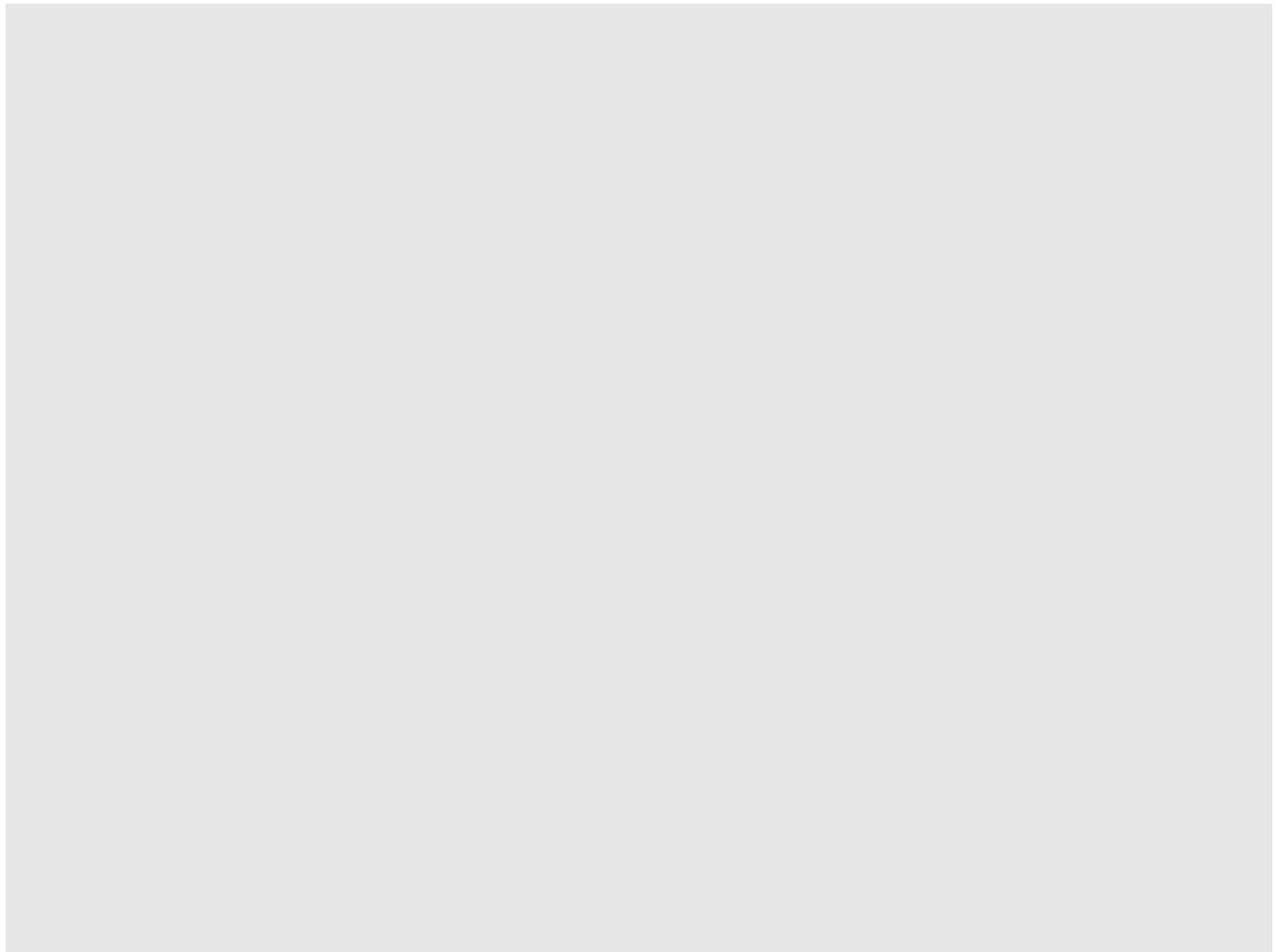
A sign at Acton Academy echoes a motto from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. Marisa Palmer started the Madison branch of the microschool earlier this month after being unsatisfied with other early education options.

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But that doesn't mean they want to compete with public schools, Rose emphasized, especially because Wingra doesn't have a high school and most of its students go to public high school later on.

He said, instead, Wingra just wants to be an additional option for students.

"Our justice, equity, diversity and inclusion focus also includes supporting public schools," Rose said. "We don't believe that we should have an adversarial relationship with public high schools. That's like a zero-sum game."



Acton Academy, a new microschool in Madison, hears from parents that their students are bored with traditional learning, having to stay in lockstep with fellow students and being expected to sit still for long periods at a desk.

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“Our philosophy is that there are students for each of the school options in Dane County,” Rose said. “We have our niche, and we don’t have to expand our niche or drive into other people’s lanes, because the students and the families that we want here exist.”

Photos: Kickapoo Valley Forest School
