

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

## Fewer students attending private, religious schools in California. Here's why.

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The number of California students enrolled in private schools has fallen by nearly 25 percent since 2000 – dragged down by a significant drop in the number of students attending religious schools.

About 479,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade attended private schools during the 2018-19 school year, compared to about 536,000 a decade prior and 637,000 in 2000, according to the [California Department of Education](#).

The number of students in secular private schools – roughly 130,000 – has remained fairly steady since 2000. Religious schools have taken the biggest hits. The number of students enrolled in religion schools in California has dropped from about 506,000 in 2000 to about 339,000 during the last school year.

Private schools have seen increased competition from charter schools and new suburban public schools. Many lost a lot of students during the recession and have struggled to bounce back.

At the same time, the proportion of Californians who [adhere to a religious faith has fallen](#), and sex abuse scandals have hurt the reputation of Catholic schools, in particular.

Private school enrollment fell fastest since 2000 in rural and semi-rural counties like San Benito, Butte, Nevada, Sutter and Stanislaus. Almost half of the state's private school enrollment declines occurred in Los Angeles County, which dropped about 73,000 private school students, a decline of roughly 33 percent.

The decline in private school enrollment was more modest in the Sacramento region, falling from about 27,500 in 2000 to about 25,000 in 2019. Those figures are a bit misleading, though because state data for 2019, but not 2000, includes an online high school – [Pacific High School](#) – that serves nearly 4,000 students across the state. Without Pacific High, the Sacramento region would have about 21,000 private school students.

Two wealthy counties – Marin and Santa Clara – saw an increase in private school students from 2000 to 2019.

The California Department of Education data is drawn from affidavits filed by private schools with more than six students. It is not perfect. Sometimes schools disappear from the data for a year, only to reappear during the next year. The census bureau also collects data on private school enrollment. That data shows the same trend – a decline in private school enrollment over the last 20 years - though the drop is not quite as steep as shown in state figures.





Sarah Vintze, left, and Alexandra Frank hug one each other outside the gates of Loretto High School in January 2009 after it was announced the private school for girls was closing at the end of the school year due to lack of enrollment. *AUTUMN CRUZ SACRAMENTO BEE*



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