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# PRIORITIES OF STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS FROM 1994 TO 2022

K-12 Public Schools have been the Major Employment Priority

**Ben Scafidi**

[bscafidi@kennesaw.edu](mailto:bscafidi@kennesaw.edu)



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Ben Scafidi: [bscafidi@kennesaw.edu](mailto:bscafidi@kennesaw.edu)

Paul DiPerna: [paul@edchoice.org](mailto:paul@edchoice.org)

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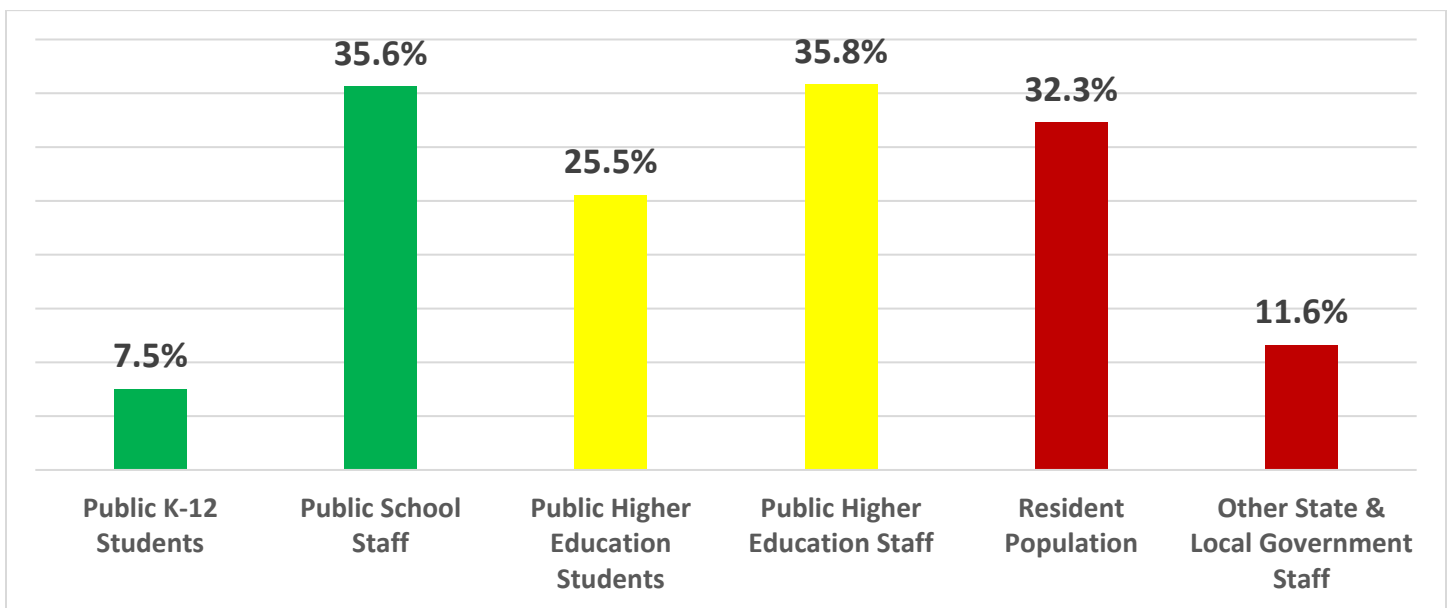
# FINDINGS

This report, and its accompanying web tool present the employment priorities of state and local governments in the United States from fiscal year (FY) 1994 to FY 2022. For each state and the District of Columbia, the growth in full-time equivalent (FTE) state and local government employment is compared to the growth in the number of students served in K-12 public schools and public colleges and universities. The growth in all other state and local government FTE employment is compared to the growth in the resident population of each state.

Considering the United States as a whole, public K-12 education has been the major employment priority of state and local governments between 1994 and 2022. Specifically, while the number of district public school students increased by 7.5 percent over this period, the number of FTE district public school staff increased by 35.6 percent. This growth in staffing was almost five times larger than what was needed to accommodate student enrollment growth.

**Figure 1. Percent Changes in Staffing and Students/Population Served, 1994 to 2022**

*District K-12 public schools have been the employment priority among American state and local government.*



The data on K-12 district public school staffing, along with the data on public higher education and all other state and local government staffing comes from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Annual Survey of Public Employment & Payroll (ASPEP). With respect to K-12 schools, the ASPEP data excludes charter public schools. Thus, charter schools are also excluded from K-12 public school enrollment totals.

Public higher education (public colleges and universities) experienced a more modest staffing surge during this period. As the number of public higher education FTE students increased by 25.5 percent between 1994 and 2022, the number of FTE staff increased by 35.8 percent—which is 1.4 times the increase needed to accommodate the growth in students. Thus, public higher education employment was also prioritized during this time period.

However, as shown in Figure 1, when considered as a group, all other state and local government employment failed to keep up with the growth in the U.S. population. As the U.S. population increased by 32.3 percent during the time period under study, the increase in all other state and local government staff increased by only 11.6 percent. All other state and local government employment includes all state and local government functions except K-12 public schools and public higher education.

# State-Specific Changes in Staffing and Students/Population Served, 1994 to 2022

Clearly, when state and local public-sector employment is divided into these three categories—K-12 district public schools, public higher education, and all other state and local government functions—the biggest employment priority has been K-12 public education over the past three decades. Employment in public higher education has also been a priority, but, when considered as a group, all other state and local government functions have not been an employment priority. Table 1 below shows that these patterns have been consistent across most states.

**Table 1. Percent Changes in Staffing and Students/Population Served, 1994 to 2022**

*District K-12 public schools have been a priority in every state.*

	Public K-12 Students	Public School Staff	Public Higher Education Students	Public Higher Education Staff	Resident Population	Other State & Local Government Staff
U.S.	7.5%	35.6%	25.5%	35.8%	32.3%	11.6%
Alabama	2.0%	17.5%	18.6%	40.5%	23.3%	14.0%
Alaska	3.2%	27.4%	-32.0%	27.6%	27.3%	6.3%
Arizona	26.6%	44.3%	60.6%	68.0%	85.6%	23.1%
Arkansas	3.9%	22.8%	39.2%	70.7%	28.0%	20.9%
California	1.3%	46.1%	38.0%	37.8%	28.9%	22.6%
Colorado	37.7%	69.3%	34.6%	94.4%	67.1%	55.1%
Connecticut	0.5%	50.8%	10.9%	25.7%	14.1%	-9.9%
Delaware	15.9%	62.2%	25.8%	34.5%	47.9%	16.7%
District of Columbia	-39.7%	10.0%	-65.2%	-49.1%	24.6%	-3.1%
Florida	38.4%	45.5%	65.7%	61.4%	62.8%	20.2%
Georgia	37.6%	55.2%	77.0%	83.0%	60.6%	-3.4%
Hawaii	-4.1%	13.9%	-5.8%	43.8%	28.8%	-0.3%
Idaho	21.0%	44.6%	46.6%	40.0%	76.5%	41.3%
Illinois	-2.2%	34.4%	-19.1%	11.8%	10.9%	-8.7%
Indiana	2.2%	13.9%	38.1%	41.9%	23.0%	-2.0%
Iowa	2.3%	29.6%	12.3%	8.9%	17.5%	8.1%
Kansas	5.6%	29.2%	7.4%	19.0%	19.4%	19.2%
Kentucky	2.0%	28.7%	16.2%	37.4%	22.1%	9.6%
Louisiana	-23.3%	-0.8%	12.1%	20.4%	11.0%	-0.1%
Maine	-19.5%	25.2%	8.9%	19.7%	14.6%	0.3%
Maryland	14.1%	53.6%	30.5%	70.5%	27.9%	2.1%
Massachusetts	-1.7%	42.4%	5.3%	37.8%	20.7%	2.7%
Michigan	-19.3%	-14.7%	-3.8%	8.9%	7.8%	-7.0%
Minnesota	-0.8%	34.6%	6.4%	4.0%	29.5%	14.2%
Mississippi	-13.2%	8.4%	22.9%	20.9%	15.0%	21.0%
Missouri	1.4%	36.8%	10.4%	13.4%	21.1%	9.2%
Montana	-8.6%	-0.7%	15.5%	8.4%	35.6%	21.6%
Nebraska	14.9%	37.1%	7.0%	78.6%	25.6%	3.4%
Nevada	82.8%	105.0%	112.0%	78.3%	132.0%	56.6%

New Hampshire	-11.2%	55.0%	1.1%	23.3%	27.2%	13.1%
New Jersey	14.1%	36.6%	21.1%	34.1%	20.3%	-6.5%
New Mexico	-7.5%	15.6%	1.5%	3.3%	33.5%	17.3%
New York	-13.0%	26.5%	4.9%	20.2%	12.9%	-7.9%
North Carolina	23.0%	31.3%	46.2%	57.0%	57.3%	46.9%
North Dakota	-3.3%	35.8%	7.5%	17.6%	26.9%	27.7%
Ohio	-13.5%	26.7%	12.2%	0.6%	8.9%	-2.8%
Oklahoma	5.8%	19.9%	8.2%	20.6%	27.3%	-2.2%
Oregon	5.5%	19.8%	22.7%	76.4%	43.3%	37.4%
Pennsylvania	-12.2%	8.6%	5.1%	15.4%	11.5%	1.0%
Rhode Island	-12.1%	13.6%	1.5%	-8.1%	14.1%	-9.5%
South Carolina	16.2%	40.1%	40.1%	41.9%	47.4%	21.6%
South Dakota	-1.2%	23.7%	22.0%	17.4%	29.8%	12.9%
Tennessee	16.1%	54.8%	23.2%	14.2%	40.7%	14.6%
Texas	40.2%	70.4%	64.6%	72.8%	68.1%	30.4%
Utah	30.4%	62.7%	80.6%	51.6%	81.3%	86.4%
Vermont	-18.3%	8.3%	23.3%	1.3%	17.0%	15.3%
Virginia	19.5%	45.4%	34.4%	42.0%	38.4%	13.6%
Washington	17.6%	55.4%	28.2%	57.9%	50.9%	40.0%
West Virginia	-19.6%	7.5%	-3.5%	19.3%	0.3%	13.2%
Wisconsin	-3.0%	21.8%	0.1%	4.4%	19.5%	-2.6%
Wyoming	-8.0%	37.6%	-2.0%	15.5%	26.4%	46.3%

## ***K-12 District Public School Staffing Surge***

As shown in Table 1, in each of the 50 states plus the District of Columbia, there was a staffing surge in K-12 district public school staff, as the percent change in public school staff from 1994 to 2022 was larger than the percent change in students. In each of the 29 states that experienced increases in their student enrollments over this period, staffing increases were larger than what was needed to accommodate this enrollment growth. While most states saw growth in staffing that was well above what was needed to accommodate enrollment growth (e.g. Connecticut increased public school staffing 50.3 percentage points over and above what was needed to accommodate enrollment growth; in Delaware, the growth in staff was 46.2 percentage points greater than the increase in students), some states had modest staffing surges in among their district public schools—Florida’s staffing surge was only 7.1 percentage points above student enrollment growth and North Carolina’s surge exceeded enrollment growth by only 8.4 percentage points. That said, public school officials and advocates routinely claim that districts have substantial fixed costs, and if that were true then staffing should increase less than increases in student enrollments, as one superintendent or school principal could serve more students. Given that school district fixed costs surely are not zero, even Florida and North Carolina public schools saw a staffing surge, even if their surges were more modest relative to other states.

Among the 22 states, including the District of Columbia, that saw enrollment declines between 1994 and 2022, district public schools in 19 of these states actually increased staffing over this period. That is, in 19 of 22 states that saw net enrollment declines, K-12 public schools increased staffing even though they served fewer students. The exceptions were Louisiana, Michigan, and Montana. Nevertheless, in each of these latter three states, staffing declined by less than enrollments. In some cases, such as New Hampshire—55 percent increase in public school staffing from 1994 to 2022, while student enrollments fell by 11.2 percent—the increases in staffing were quite large, even as the number of students served declined.

## ***Public Higher Education Staffing Surge***

Table 1 above shows that in the United States as a whole, public colleges and universities increased their staffing by 35.8 percent from 1994 to 2022, while their enrollment growth was only 25.5 percent. This staffing surge was significantly more modest than the K-12 district public school staffing surge, where staffing increased by 35.6 percent as the number of students served increased by only 7.5 percent. In addition, there was significant heterogeneity across states—while 37 states, inclusive of Washington, D.C., increased public higher education staffing more than enrollment growth, another 14 states did not increase staffing by as much as the increase in students served. Public higher education in Nebraska saw the largest staffing surge—as the number of students served increased 7 percent from 1994 to 2022, public higher education staff increased by 78.6 percent. At the other end of the spectrum, staffing in Nevada’s public higher education sector increased 33.7 percentage points less than the state’s tremendous increase in students served. A few states—Missouri, New Mexico, and South Carolina—experienced increases in staffing that were only slightly above enrollment growth. And in 10 states, the staffing surge in higher education was larger than the K-12 public school staffing surge (Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, North Carolina, and Oregon).

Public colleges and universities provide additional services other than educating students, such as housing students and research. Voters and elected officials in states that had significant staffing surges in their public higher education sectors should analyze to what extent their staffing increases, above what was needed to accommodate student enrollment growth, were warranted.

## ***All Other State & Local Government Functions Saw a Staffing Retreat***

In this subsection, “all other state and local government” is a category of employees that includes all state and local government employees, with the exceptions of K-12 district public school employees and public higher education employees.

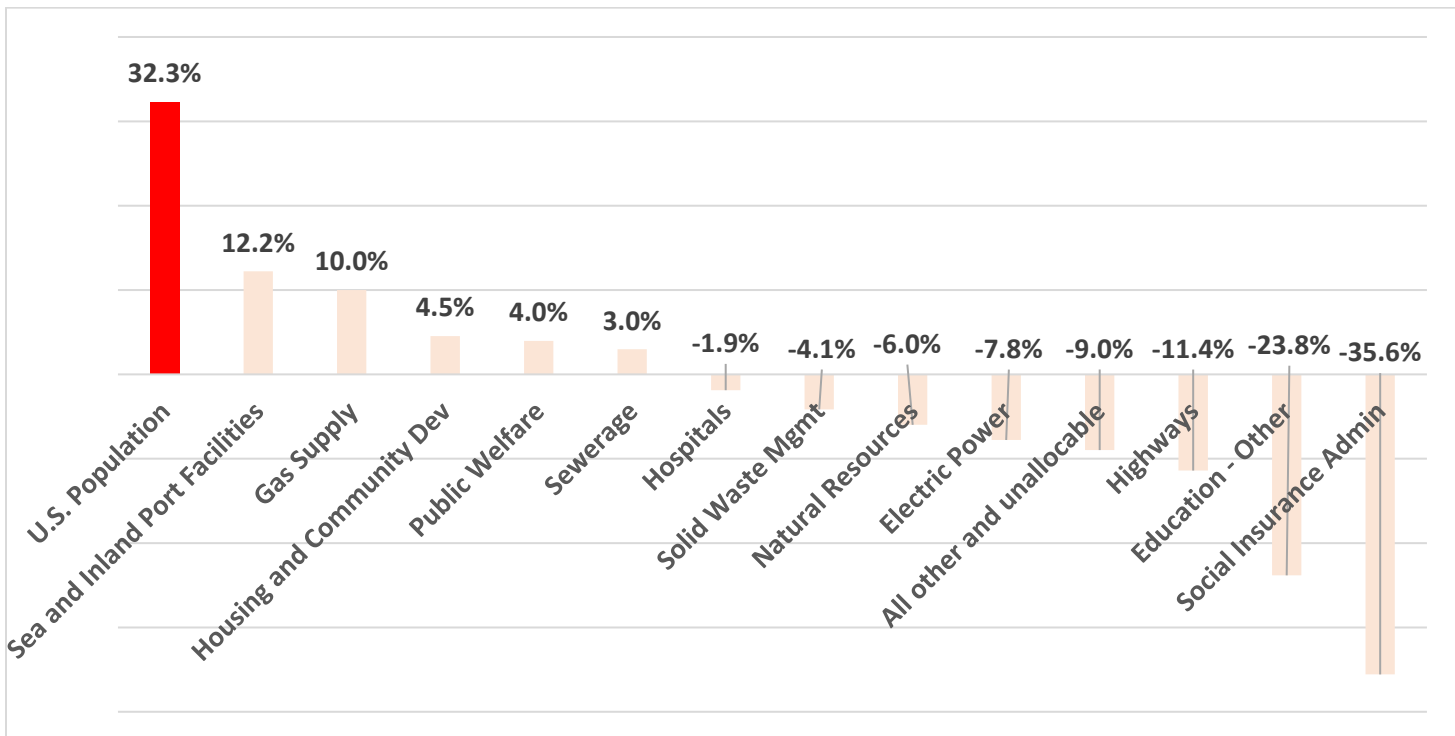
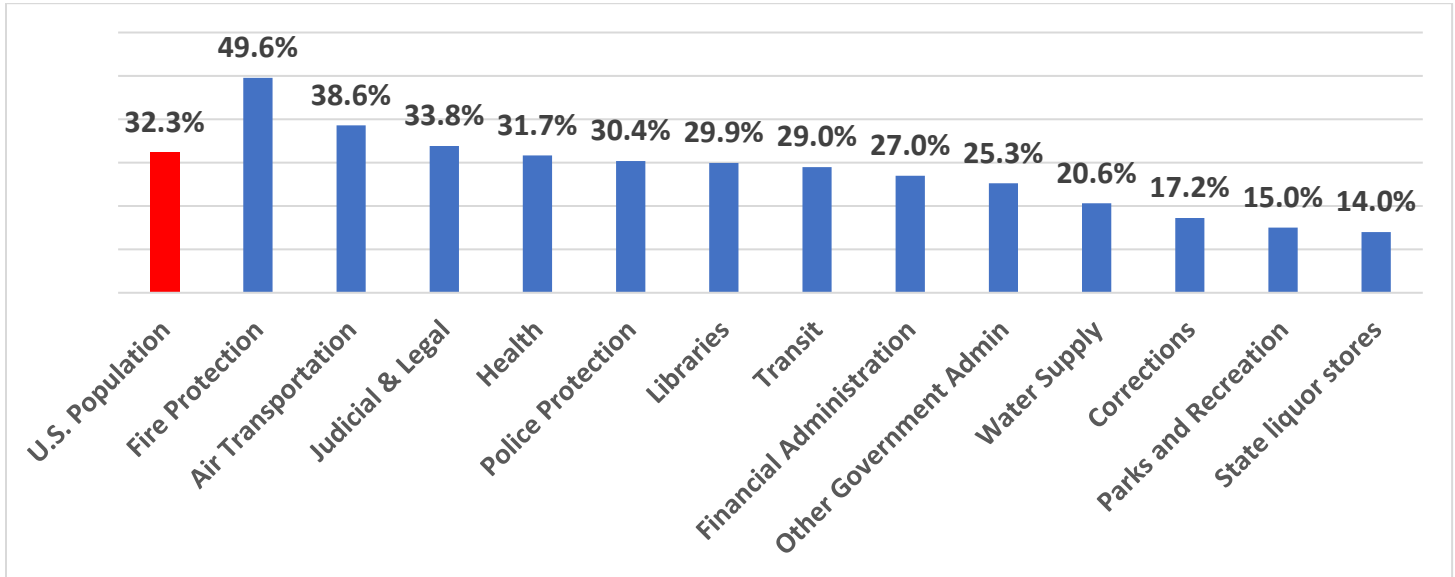
In stark contrast of the staffing increases in public higher education and especially with K-12 district public schools, all other state and local government functions—considered as a group—saw their employment fail to keep up with increases in the populations they serve. Overall, 46 states, including the District of Columbia, experienced changes in staffing that did not keep up with increases in state population between 1994 and 2022. The largest retreats in this category of all other state and local government staffing were in fast growing states such as Nevada, Georgia, Arizona, Florida, Texas, and Idaho. In five of these six states, the changes in other state and local government staffing increased much slower than the increase in resident population—and in one state (Georgia), population growth was large (60.6 percent), but the number of other state and local staff experienced a modest decline (-3.4 percent).

Nationally, the changes in the population served and in the employment of specific state and local government functions are shown in the two panels of Figure 2. The specific functions listed in Figure 2 are the state and local government functions present in the U.S. Census Bureau’s ASPEP data.

As shown in the top panel of Figure 2 below, only three state and local government functions—aside from K-12 public schools and public higher education—saw employment growth that exceeded the growth in the U.S. population between 1994 and 2022: Fire Protection, Air Transportation, and Judicial and Legal. Another 15 state and local government functions experienced employment growth, but this employment growth was less than the 32.3 percent increase in the U.S. population. Finally, as shown on the bottom panel in Figure 2, eight functions saw their employment decline over this time period: Hospitals, Solid Waste Management, Natural Resources, Electric Power, employment not classified (“Other and Unallocable”), Highways, Other Education Employment, and Social Insurance Administration.

**Figure 2. Percent Changes in Staffing and Population Served, 1994 to 2022**

*Most state and local government functions have not seen employment grow at the same rate as the American population.*



For the purposes of this report, the author makes no conclusions regarding whether the modest staffing surges among the three functions was warranted, or whether the declines in employment in the eight functions were warranted. Voters and policymakers in each state need to consider whether these changes in employment have been good or bad for their states and local communities.

For context, Table 2 below displays the numerical employment changes for total state and local government employment and for each state and local government function individually. While some functions may have had large positive or negative percent changes in employment, it is helpful to know which functions had numerically larger or smaller changes in employment.

**Table 2. Numerical Change in State & Local Government Staffing 1994 to 2022***Almost 75 percent of the increase was concentrated in two sectors: K-12 public schools and public higher education.*

	<b>Change in FTE Employment</b>
All State & Local Government Employment Functions	3,149,679
<b>Specific Functions</b>	
K-12 Public Education	1,796,224
Public Higher Education	561,608
Police Protection	219,344
Fire Protection	127,066
Health	111,467
Judicial & Legal	104,038
Corrections	94,857
Financial Administration	89,909
Other Government Admin	57,415
Transit	55,894
Parks and Recreation	35,024
Water Supply	30,248
Libraries	29,064
Public Welfare	19,159
Air Transportation	14,199
Housing and Community Dev	4,657
Sewerage	3,538
Sea and Inland Port Facilities	1,501
State Liquor Stores	1,220
Gas Supply	1,019
Solid Waste Management	-4,540
Electric Power	-6,389
Natural Resources	-10,771
Hospitals	-19,475
Education - Other	-23,656
Social Insurance Administration	-38,482
All Other and Unallocable	-42,783
Highways	-61,676

From 1994 to 2022, state and local government FTE employment increased by more than 3.1 million workers. However, a large majority of this increased employment was concentrated in just two sectors—K-12 public education and public higher education. Public K-12 schools increased their employment by almost 1.8 million over this time period—which accounts for 57 percent of the entire increase in state and local government employment from 1994 to 2022. Public higher education employment increased by more than 561,000—another 17.8 percent of the total increase in state and local government employment. Together, these two education functions were responsible for about 75 percent of the increase in state and local government employment between 1994 and 2022.



# DATA SOURCES

The publicly available data used to compile the information in this report come from two federal government agencies: The U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education.

The data on K-12 district public school staffing, along with the data on public higher education and all other state and local government staffing comes from the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Survey of Public Employment & Payroll (ASPEP).<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the ASPEP surveys contain data from March of each year. In the early years of ASPEP, including FY 1994, these surveys contain data from October of each year. The earliest ASPEP survey with granular data on FTE employment counts for state and local government functions contains data from October 1993, which is FY 1994. The most recent ASPEP data contains FTE employment counts from March 2022, which is FY 2022.

With respect to K-12 schools, the ASPEP data do not contain data for charter public schools. Thus, charter schools are excluded from K-12 public school totals. In addition, the ASPEP data are a census of state and local governments in only years that end in a "2" or a "7". Therefore, the FY 2022 data on full-time equivalent staffing counts are the result of a census of all state and local governments, including all public-school districts. However, the FY 1994 data are statewide estimates of FTE employment in each government function. In census years—years that end in a "2" or "7", the Census Bureau surveys all local governments, including all K-12 public school districts and all public colleges and universities. In non-census years such as FY 1994, the Census Bureau surveys a sample of local governments (which includes a sample of public-school districts, colleges, and universities) in each state and uses those survey responses to construct statewide estimates. Employment patterns have been analyzed across years for each year from FY 1994 to the present, and the estimates from non-census years appear reasonable—which is not surprising given the expertise of the U.S. Census Bureau.

The Census Bureau also provides estimates of the resident population of each state and the District of Columbia for July 1 of each year. This report considers changes in state and local government employment between FY 1994 and FY 2022, where FY 1994 begins in the second half of calendar year 1993 and FY 2022 begins in the second half of calendar year 2021. Therefore, to measure the change in the population of each state, this report used U.S. Census Bureau estimates from July 1, 1993 for FY 1994 and July 1, 2021 for FY 2022.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, changes in K-12 public school district enrollments and public higher education enrollments between FY 1994 and FY 2022 come from fall 1993 and fall 2021. Student counts for fall 1993 and fall 2021 for both K-12 public schools and public colleges and universities come from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the U.S. Department of Education. The K-12 public school enrollment data was pulled from the Elementary / Secondary Information System (EISi) at the NCES.<sup>3</sup> Since the ASPEP data on FTE employee counts for K-12 public schools does not include charter public schools, charter school enrollments were omitted. Thus, the ASPEP data allowed for the computation of the percent increase in FTE public school staff in each state for district public schools, and the EISi data allowed for the computation of the percent increase in students served by district public schools in each state.<sup>4</sup>

The Fall FTE enrollment of public higher education students in 1993 (FY 1994) and 2021 (FY 2022) comes from the Digest of Education Statistics, which is published annually by the NCES. Both two-year and four-year public college and university FTE enrollments are included in student counts for each year, because both two-year and four-year public college and university staffing levels are included in the ASPEP data.

# CONCLUSION

Public school advocacy organizations, elected officials, and the media routinely make assertions that lead Americans to believe (incorrectly) that K-12 public education has not been a priority in this country. The data presented in this report indicate that these assertions are misleading and are polar opposites from the truth. As an example, a 2023 article by the Kentucky Center for Economic Policy laments that, “Public Schools are (sic) Becoming a Lower State Budget Priority” between 2006 and 2021.<sup>5</sup> However, as shown in Table 1 in this report, Kentucky public schools served 2 percent more students in 2022 as compared to 1994—yet the state’s public schools managed to increase their FTE staff by 28.7 percent over this time period. Public higher education in Kentucky also had a staffing surge that was also large. On the other hand, all other state and local government functions saw their FTE staff increase by only 9.6 percent, while the state’s population increased by 22.1 percent. Clearly, public K-12 schools have been the main priority in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and public higher education has been prioritized as well.

Another example comes from former Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, who in 2016 claimed that the Missouri General Assembly had not made public education a priority.<sup>6</sup> Yet, from 1994 to 2022, K-12 public school enrollment increased by 1.4 percent, while employment in the Show-Me state’s public schools increased by 36.8 percent. While the state’s public higher education system saw a very modest staffing surge, all other state and local government functions saw their staffing increase 9.2 percent as the state’s population increased 21.1 percent during this time period. Clearly, public K-12 schools have been the priority in the Show-Me state.

It is easy to find myriad misleading quotes from all states that incorrectly suggest K-12 public schools have not been a priority. Table 1 of this report shows that K-12 public schools have been the major employment priority among state and local government functions in the United States over the past 30 years.

The focus of the report is to document that K-12 public education has been the employment priority of state and local governments over the past three decades. However, in previous work, I have shown that the staffing surge in American public schools dates back at least to 1950.<sup>7</sup> Since 1950, the number of FTE public school employees has increased at a rate seven times greater than the increase in students served.<sup>8</sup>

While I have been researching the staffing surge in American public schools for over a decade, I have not analyzed changes in staffing in other state and local government functions. While three functions saw staffing surges over the period studied here, other functions saw gains in employment that were less than increases in population growth or net declines in employment as state populations grew. At this time, I have no opinion, expert or otherwise, whether a given staffing surge among other state and local government functions was warranted—or whether the much more common staffing retreats were warranted. I leave deeper state-level analyses to other researchers and think tanks. That said, an important takeaway from this report is that the tremendous K-12 public school staffing surge has presented taxpayers with a large opportunity cost. Specifically, as I have shown in previous research, it appears that the public school staffing surge has crowded out increases in teacher salaries, as the increased funding given to public school districts in recent decades has largely been devoted to increased staffing. This increase in staffing, above what was needed to accommodate student enrollment growth, means the inflation-adjusted increases in per student funding given to public schools could not be devoted to increases in teacher salaries on an inflation-adjusted basis.<sup>9</sup> The present study also shows another opportunity cost—the large staffing surge in American public schools appears to have come at the expense of staffing other state and local government functions. The staffing retreats in other state and local government functions may have been warranted due to productivity increases, economies of scale, changes in voter priorities, etc. But the large staffing surge in American public schools does not seem to be associated with student learning gains, which makes this tremendous staffing surge problematic for taxpayers and policymakers.<sup>10</sup> Of course, another alternative is that the significant taxpayer funds used to fund the public school staffing surge could have been returned to taxpayers via tax cuts.

Finally, there are myriad levels of government and elected officials who have contributed to the decades-long K-12 public school staffing surge in each state—from the President, Congress, and the rulemaking of the U.S. Department of Education, the courts, state government, local school boards and superintendents, etc. Thus, it would not be accurate to blame any one level of government for this longstanding phenomenon.

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau Annual Survey of Public Employment & Payroll (ASPEP), retrieved from:

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/apes.html>

<sup>1</sup> The Census Bureau's population estimates for the U.S. as a whole and for each state were retrieved from:

<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/tables/1990-2000/housing/totals/st-98-51.txt> for July 1, 1993 (FY 1994) and

<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-total.html> for July 1, 2021 (FY 2022).

<sup>1</sup> Elementary / Secondary Information System. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/>

<sup>1</sup> Most states have a small number of state-level public schools, such as schools that serve deaf or blind students and/or alternative schools. These state-level schools are included in staffing counts for K-12 public schools, so student enrollments at these state-level schools are included as well. That said, more than 99 percent of K-12 public school staff and public school students are in district public schools—which is why this report characterizes the staffing increases and changes in student populations as occurring in “district” public schools. It is not possible to omit state-level public schools from the ASPEP employment counts for FY 1994. Given these state government schools represent less than 1 percent of public school staff and students, their inclusion does not impact the findings in this report in any meaningful way.

<sup>1</sup> Jason Bailey and Pam Thomas (2023), *Public Schools are Becoming a Lower State Budget Priority*, retrieved from Kentucky Center for Economic Policy website: <https://kypolicy.org/kentucky-public-school-funding/>

<sup>1</sup> Alex Stuckey (2016, March 11), *Public Education Not a Priority for Lawmakers, Nixon Says*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, retrieved from: [https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/public-education-not-a-priority-for-lawmakers-nixon-says/article\\_dd42e28b-3f50-5834-a9cb-6b75f3eb179b.html](https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/public-education-not-a-priority-for-lawmakers-nixon-says/article_dd42e28b-3f50-5834-a9cb-6b75f3eb179b.html)

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Benjamin Scafidi (2012), *The Staffing Surge: Decades of Employment Growth in America's Public Schools*, retrieved from EdChoice website: <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/11-2012-Staffing-Surge-WEB.pdf> and Benjamin Scafidi (2017), *Back to the Staffing Surge: The Great Teacher Salary Stagnation and the Decades-Long Employment Growth in American Public Schools*, retrieved from EdChoice website: <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Back-to-the-Staffing-Surge-by-Ben-Scafidi.pdf>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Scafidi (2012, 2017); and Moulick, Abhisekh Ghosh & Lori L. Taylor (2017) *Fiscal slack, budget shocks, and performance in public organizations: evidence from public schools*, *Public Management Review*, 19:7, 990-1005, DOI: [10.1080/14719037.2016.1243813](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1243813)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Ben Scafidi is a professor of economics and director of the Education Economics Center at Kennesaw State University. He is also a Friedman Fellow with EdChoice (the legacy foundation of Milton and Rose Friedman), a senior fellow with the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, and was recently appointed by Governor Brian Kemp to serve a second stint on the Georgia Charter Schools Commission. Previously, he served as the director of education policy for the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, the first chair of the state of Georgia's Charter Schools Commission, a member of the Charter Advisory Committee, the Education Policy Advisor to Governor Sonny Perdue, a staff member to both of Governor Roy Barnes' Education Reform Study Commissions, and as an expert witness for the state of Georgia in school funding litigation. He received a BA in Economics from the University of Notre Dame and a PhD in Economics from the University of Virginia.

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The contents of this publication are intended to provide empirical information and should not be construed as lobbying for any position related to any legislation. The authors welcome any and all questions related to methods and findings.

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