



Districts with declining enrollment saw a **larger increase** in total expenditures per student, relative to districts with enrollment gains.






“(vouchers) take scarce funding from public schools ... This means public school students have less access to music instruments and science equipment, modern technology and textbooks, and after-school programs.”
[National Education Association, 2021]




“Declining School Enrollment Spells Trouble for Education Funding.”
[Urban Institute, 2020]

“When more kids are leaving the public schools, that’s less funding for the public schools and those who are left, are left with less.” **[NBC News Story, 2024]**



“... education institutions are facing fiscal cliffs, born of declining enrollments and rising costs, and are struggling with teacher, staff, and school leader shortages, burnout, and insufficient staffing for school psychologists and counselors for the students who remain.”

[American Education Research Association, 2025]



“because state and federal financial support to public schools is typically proportional to student counts while costs are more fixed, enrollment declines may threaten some schools’ financial and operational viability. Schools with diminishing enrollment may have to lay off teachers or shut down completely.”

[Hamilton Project, Brookings, 2023]

Lots of folks say it,
but it is not true.



The Truth About Enrollment Declines

Looking at Changes in
Dollars and Resources
Per Student



**What I will
Show You ...**

Public school districts with enrollment declines have a fiscal and resource ADVANTAGE over districts with enrollment gains, because they get to retain funds for students they no longer serve.

How is that even possible?

- **Because local revenues are typically not automatically reduced when enrollments decline**
- **Some state revenues are not enrollment-driven**
- **In practice a lot of federal revenue is not enrollment-driven**
- **So districts with enrollment declines are able to retain funds for students they no longer serve**
- **Which means they can devote those additional funds to their students who remain**

What I do ...

Using data on public school districts across the United States*, I analyze four time periods:

2018 to 2019 [short-term]

2015 to 2019 [medium-term]

1998 to 2019 [long-term]

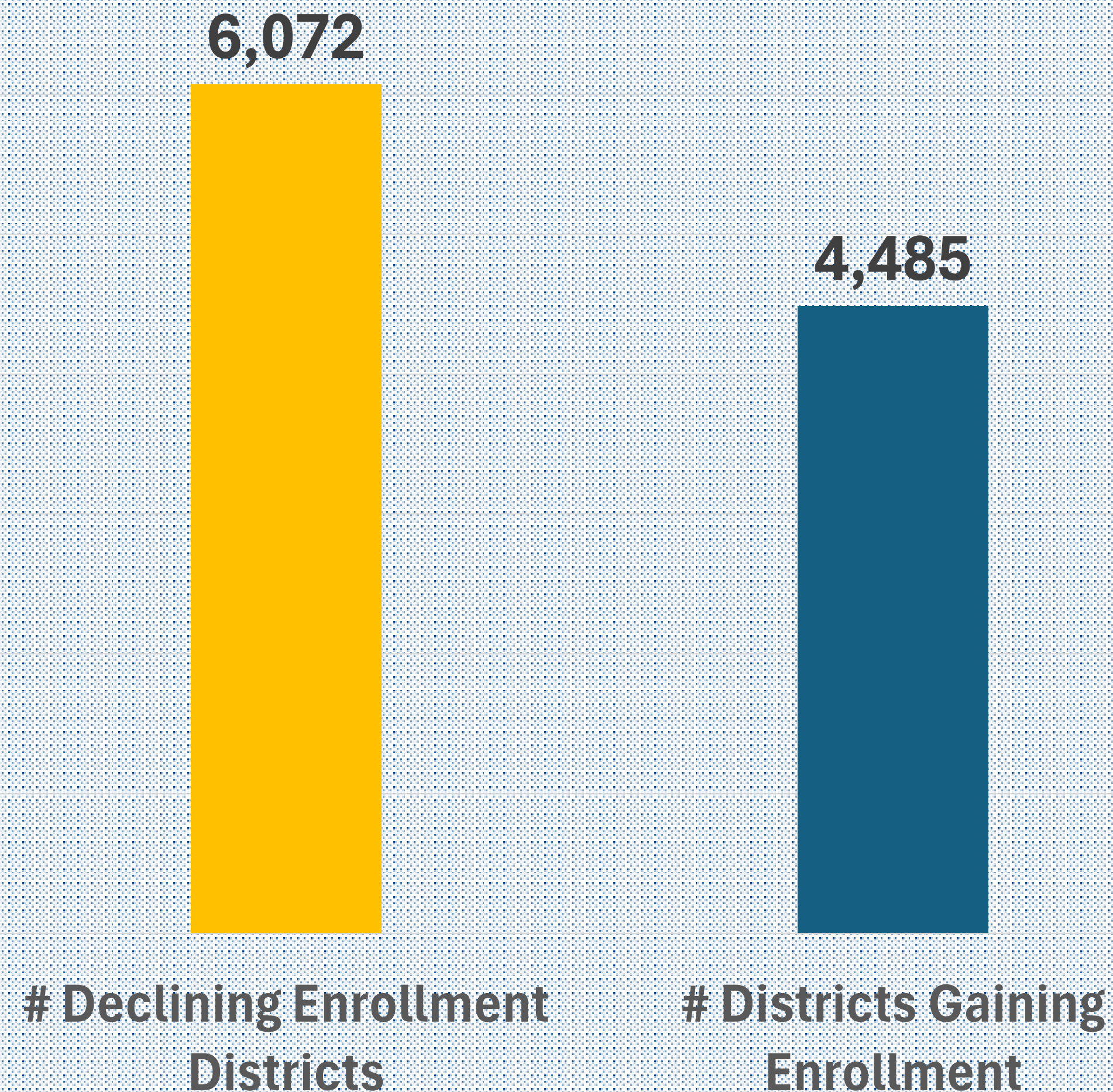
COVID-era [“first look”]

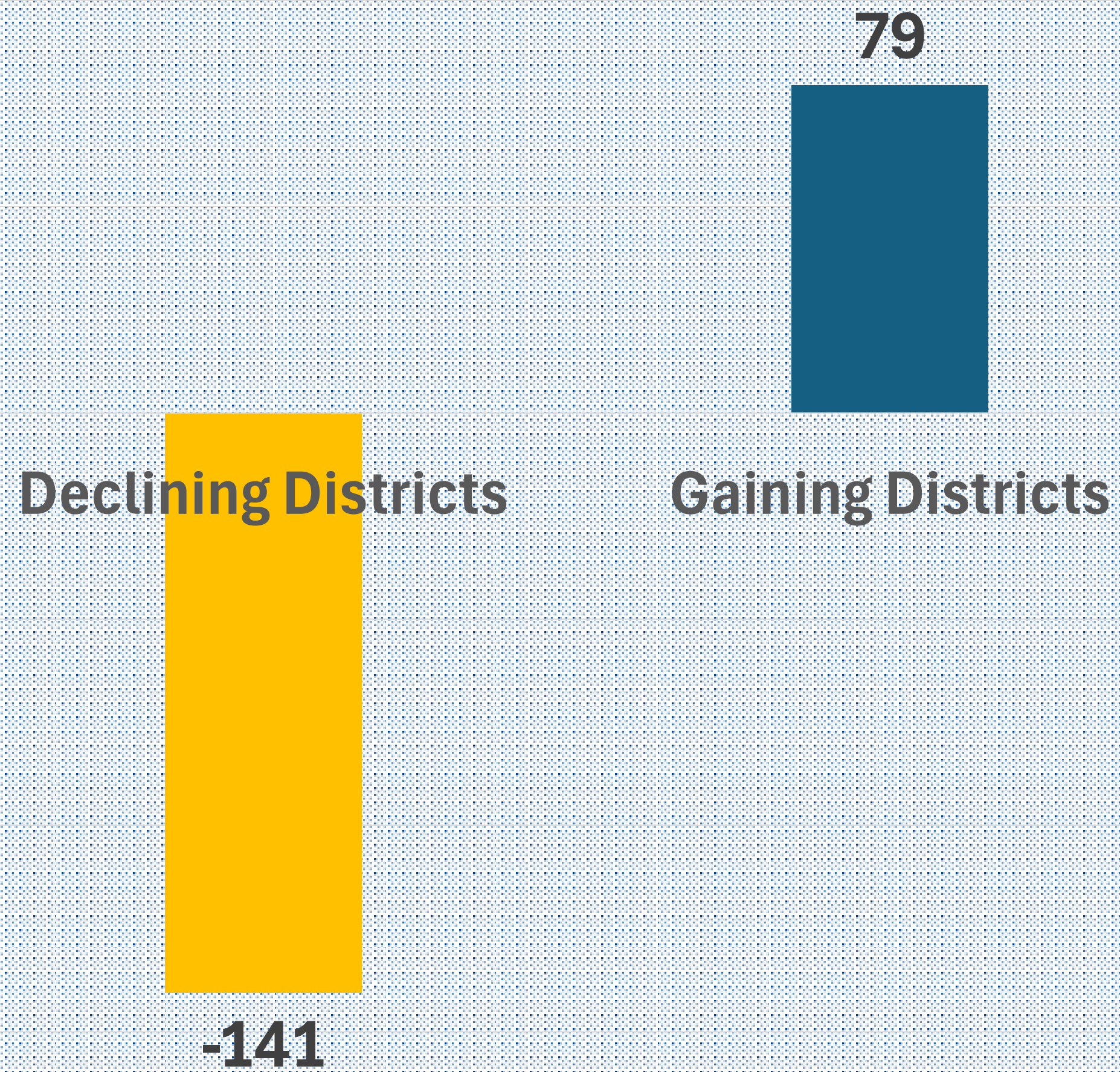
I also analyze rural school districts separately

(*NH, OH, UT, VT and sometimes CA had bad data and could not be included)

Most American school districts were experiencing enrollment declines, even before “the COVID”

**Academic Year (AY) 2018 to 2019
2017-18 to 2018-19**

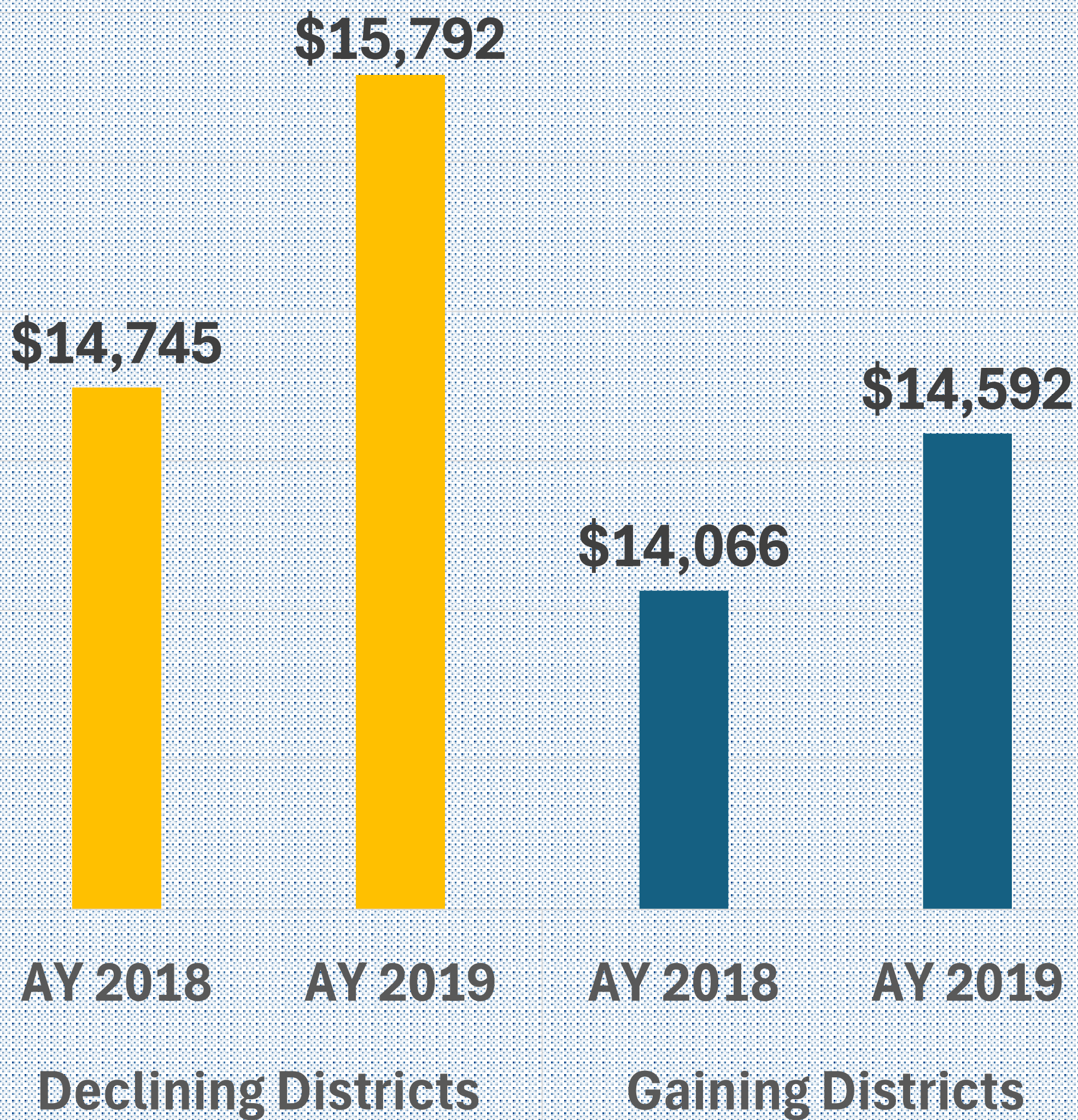




The average district with declining enrollment lost 141 students, and the average district gaining enrollment gained 79 students.

AY 2018 to 2019





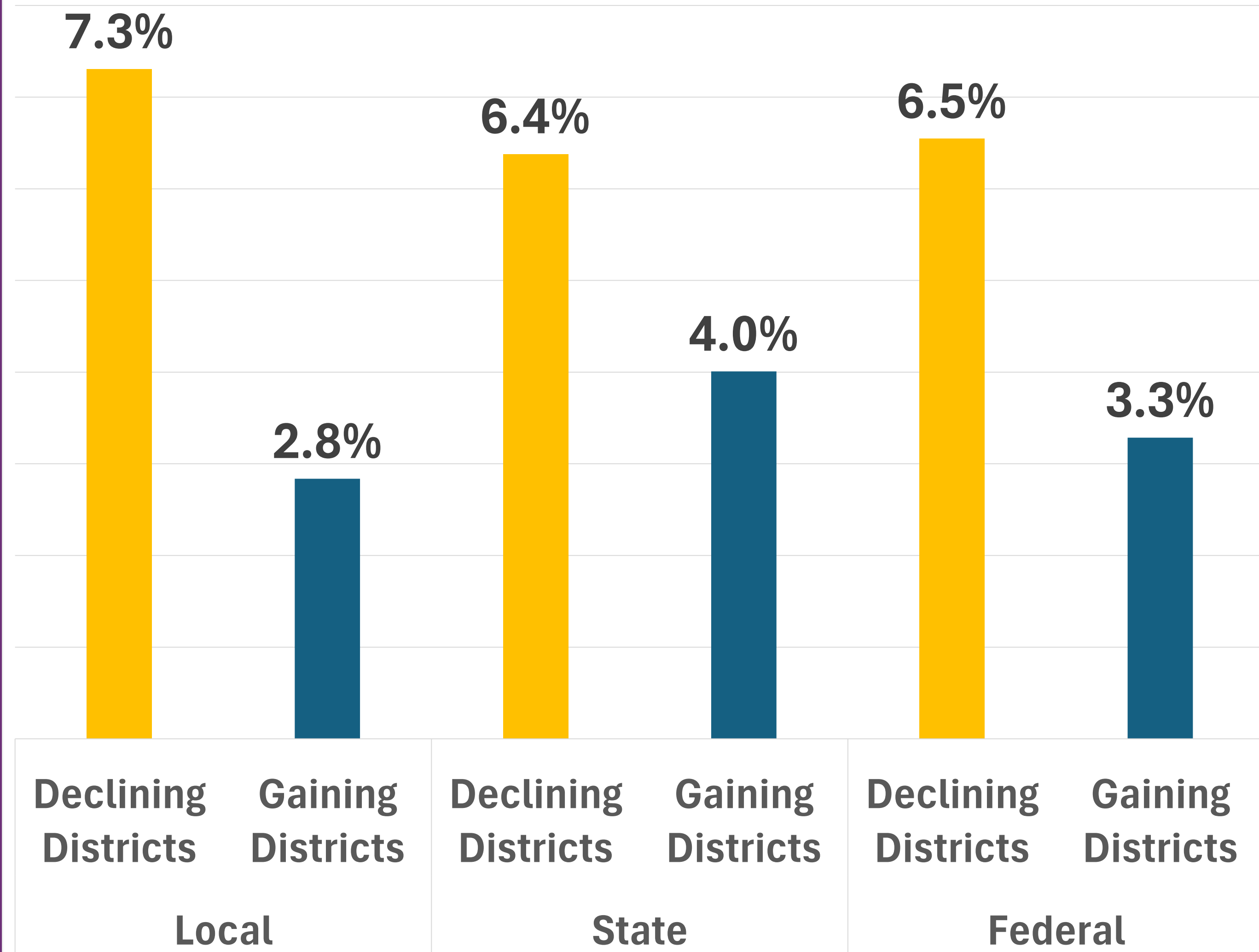
Districts with declining enrollment saw a **larger increase** in total expenditures per student, relative to districts with enrollment gains.



Enrollment declines led to larger increases in revenues per student from all sources

AY 2018 to 2019

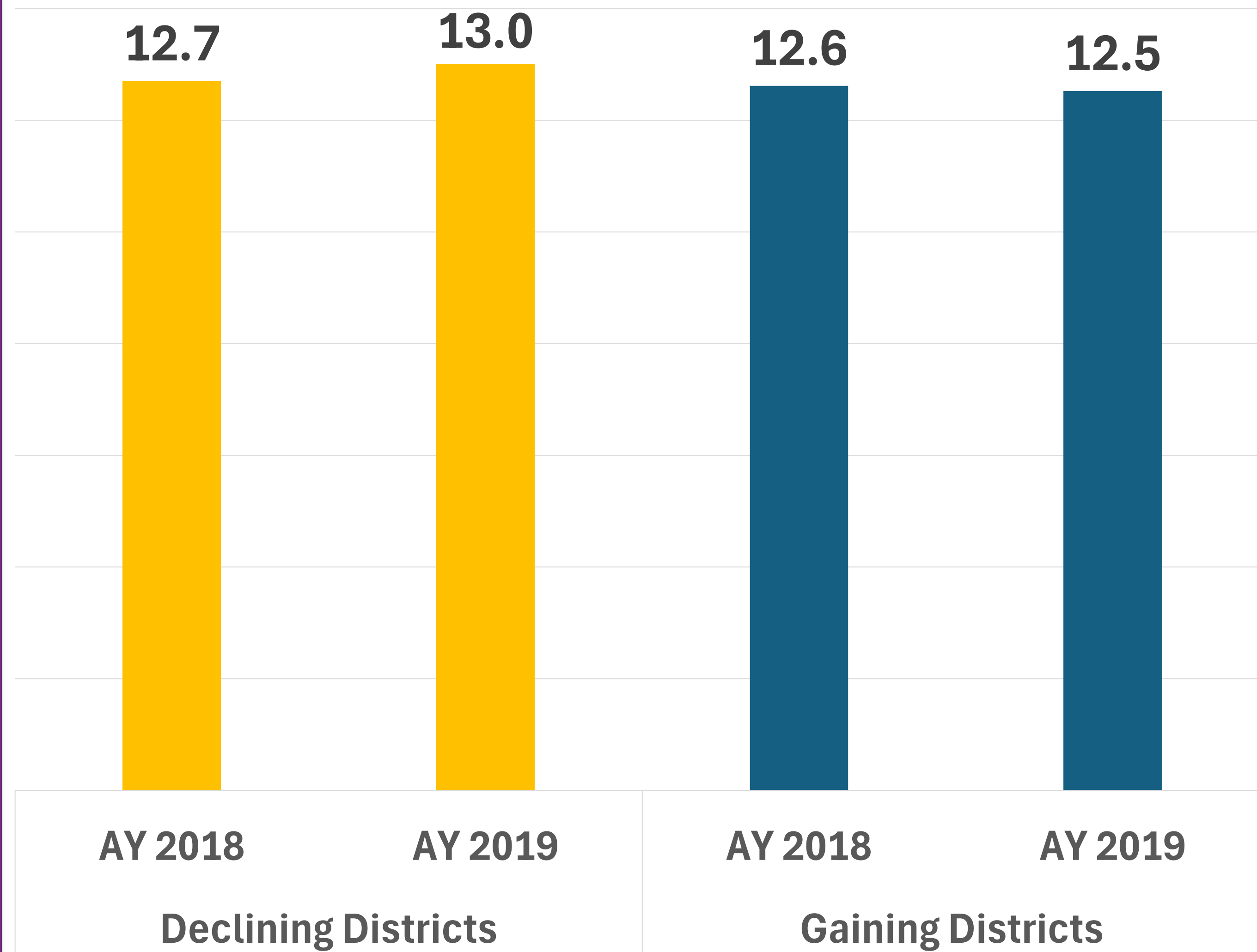
Inflation was only 1.5% over this year



Staff Per 100 Students

AY 2018 to 2019

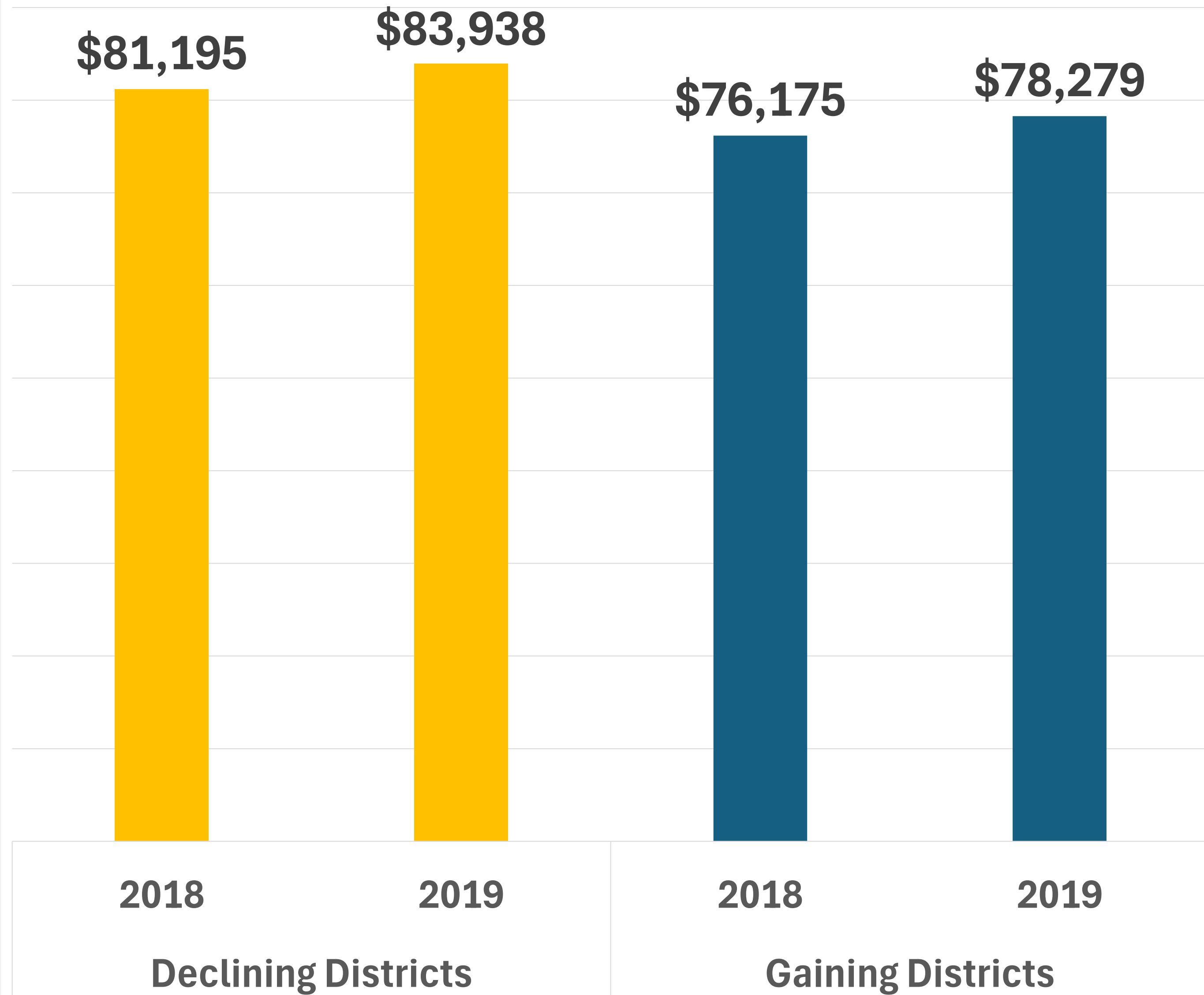
Students in districts with declining enrollment had access to more staff



Compensation Per Employee (salary & benefits)

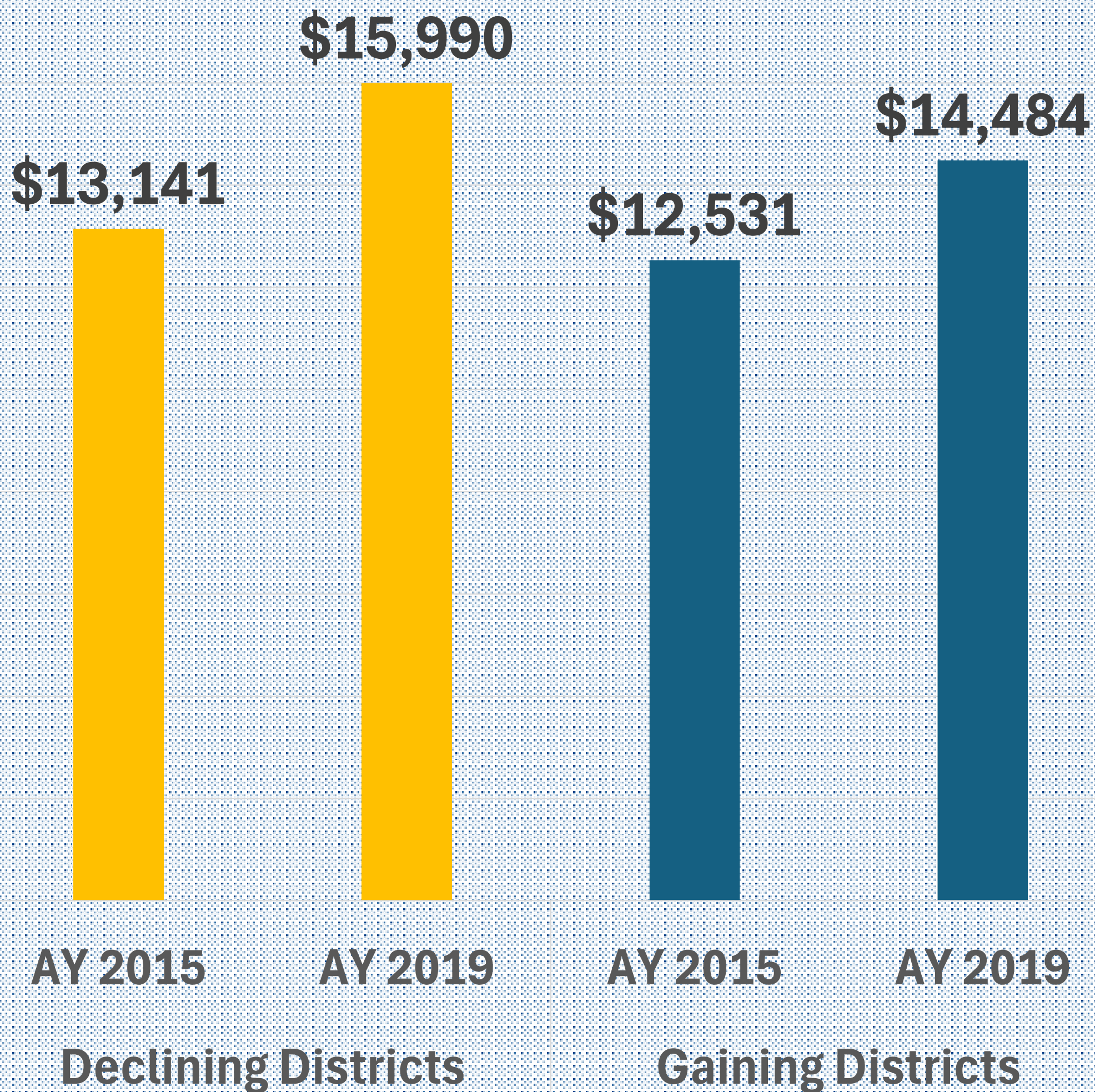
AY 2018 to 2019

Employees in districts with declining enrollment had higher compensation and larger increases in compensation



**But what about
longer time periods?**

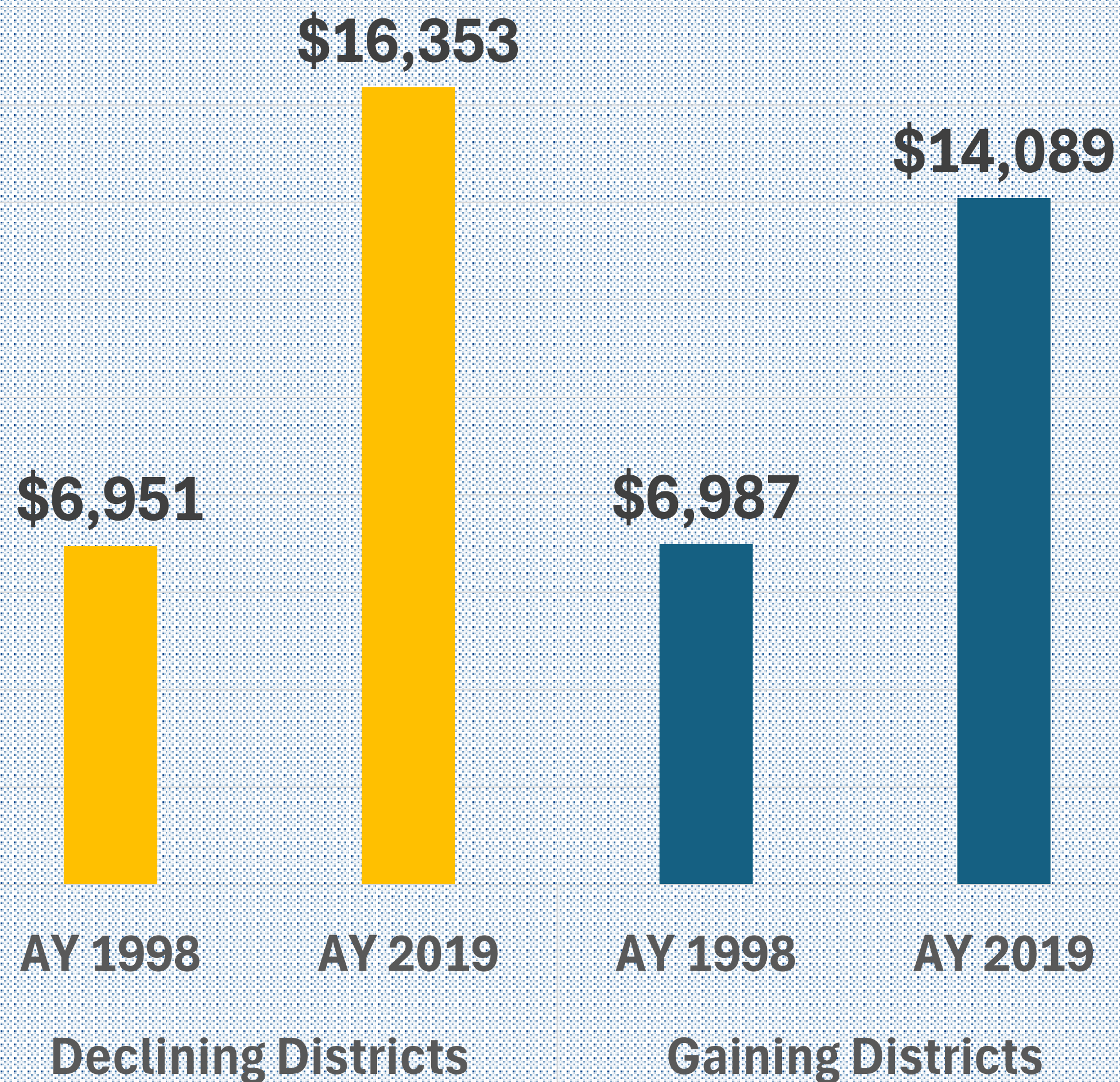
2015 to 2019



Declining enrollment districts between 2015 and 2019 saw a **larger increase** in total expenditures per student, relative to districts with enrollment gains.



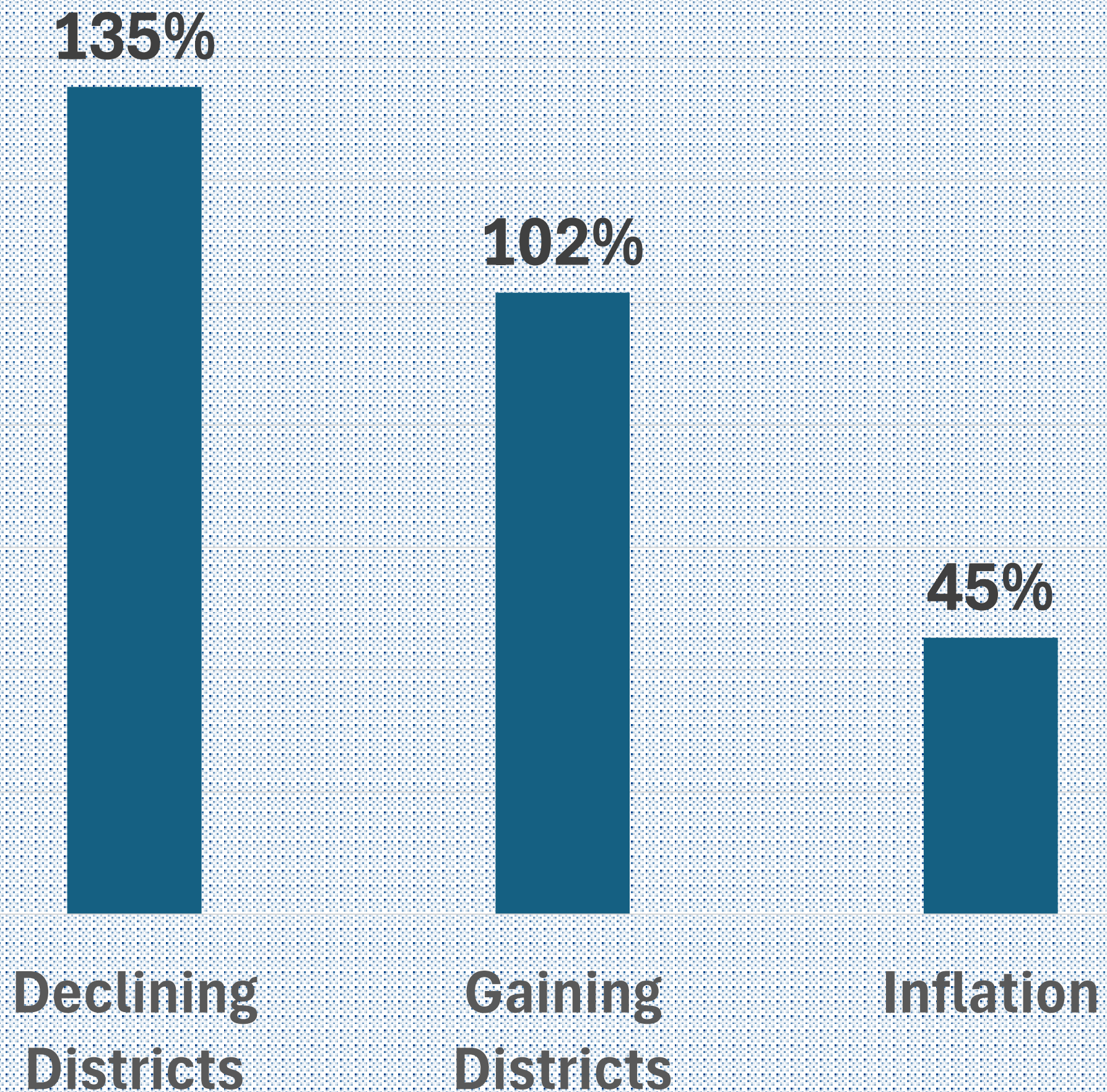
1998 to 2019



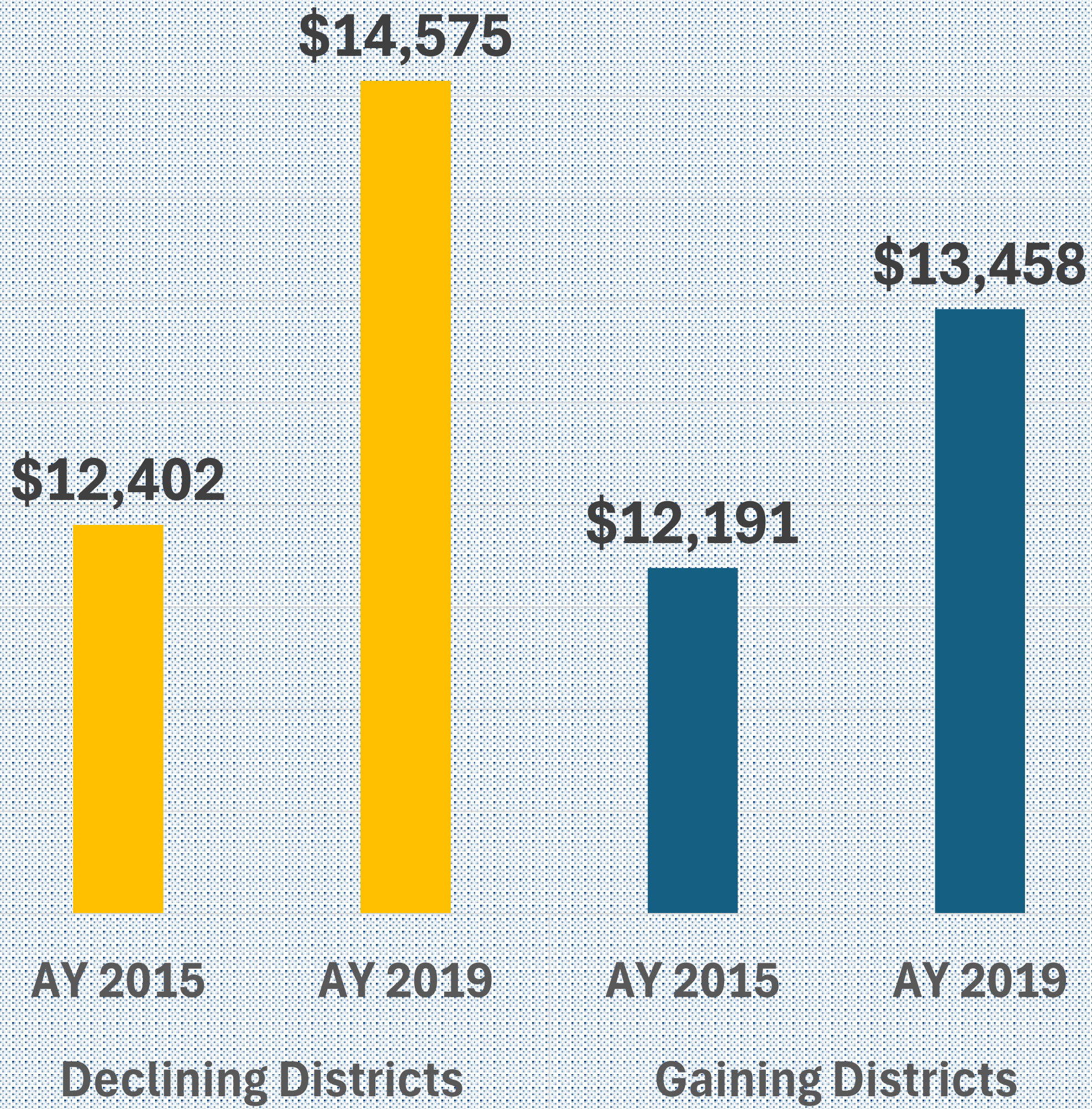
Declining enrollment districts between 1998 and 2019 saw a **larger increase** in total expenditures per student, relative to districts with enrollment gains.



Between 1998 and 2019 total expenditures per student increased a lot more than inflation



**But what about
rural school districts?**



Yes, these patterns are also present for **rural districts**

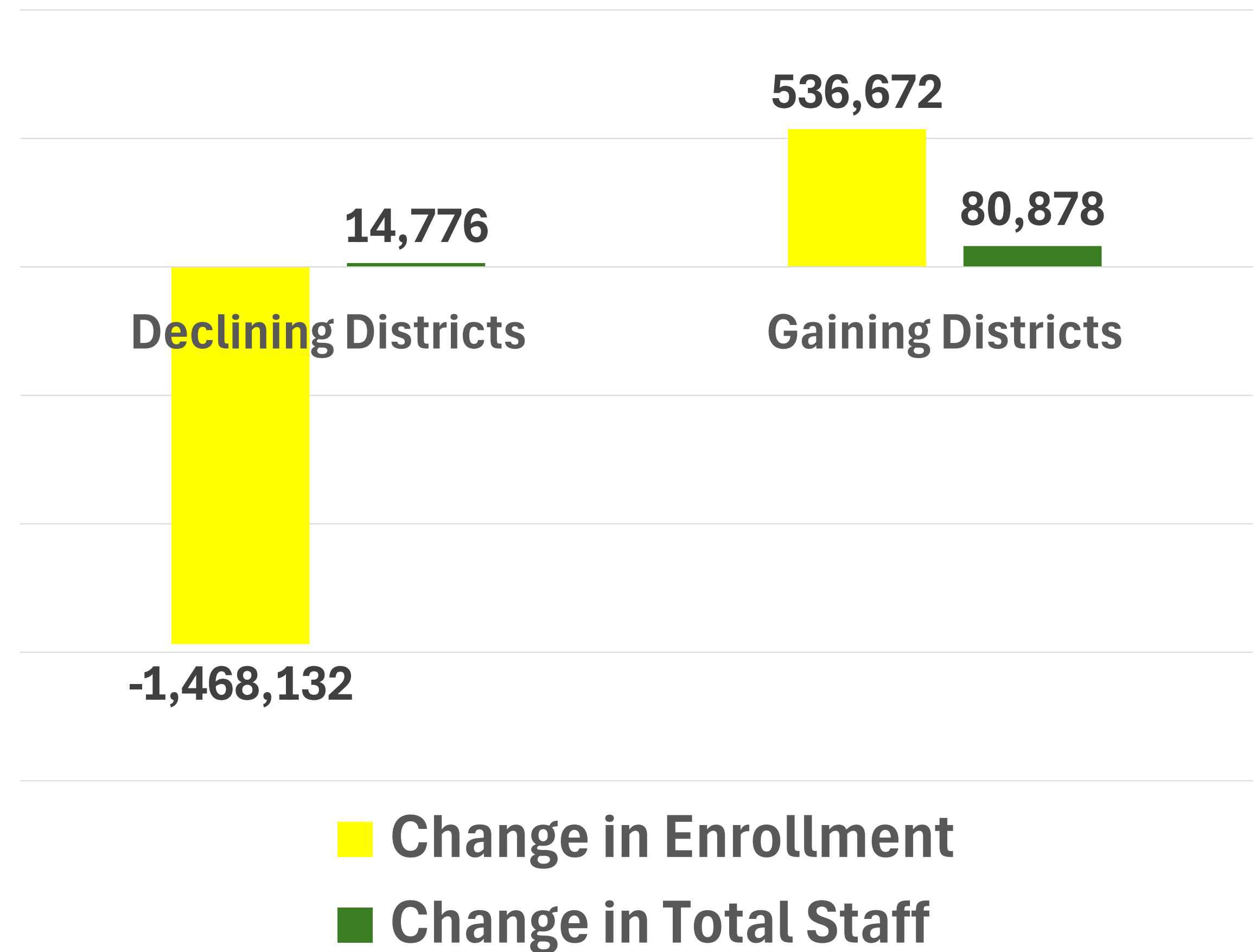
2015 to 2019 increases in total expenditures per student



**But what about
COVID?**

COVID-era AY 2020 to 2023

Districts with
declining enrollment,
increased staffing.



COVID-era

Districts prioritized the hiring of administration and counselors & psychologists.

	Percent Change 2020 to 2023	
	Declining Districts	Gaining Districts
Students	-5.1%	5.2%
Total Staff	0.2%	5.8%
Teachers	-1.2%	5.3%
Administrators	8.0%	8.6%
Admin Support	8.0%	12.5%
Counselors & Psychologists	2.7%	6.4%
All Other Staff	-1.0%	5.0%

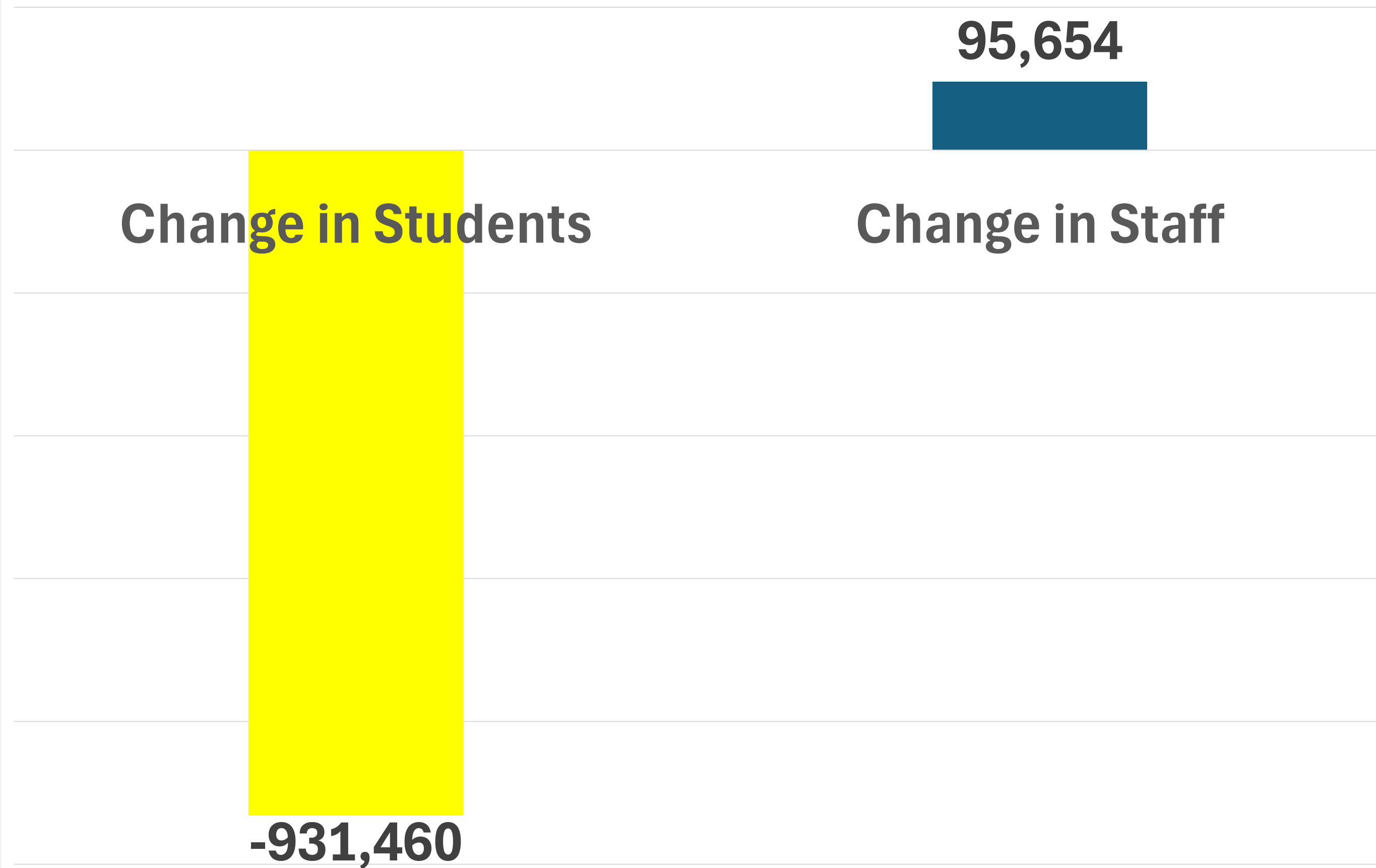
**What if Public
School Staffing Had
Changed at the
Same Rate as
Student Enrollment
between 2020 and
2023?**

**How much money
would school districts
have saved annually?**

United States AY 2020 to 2023

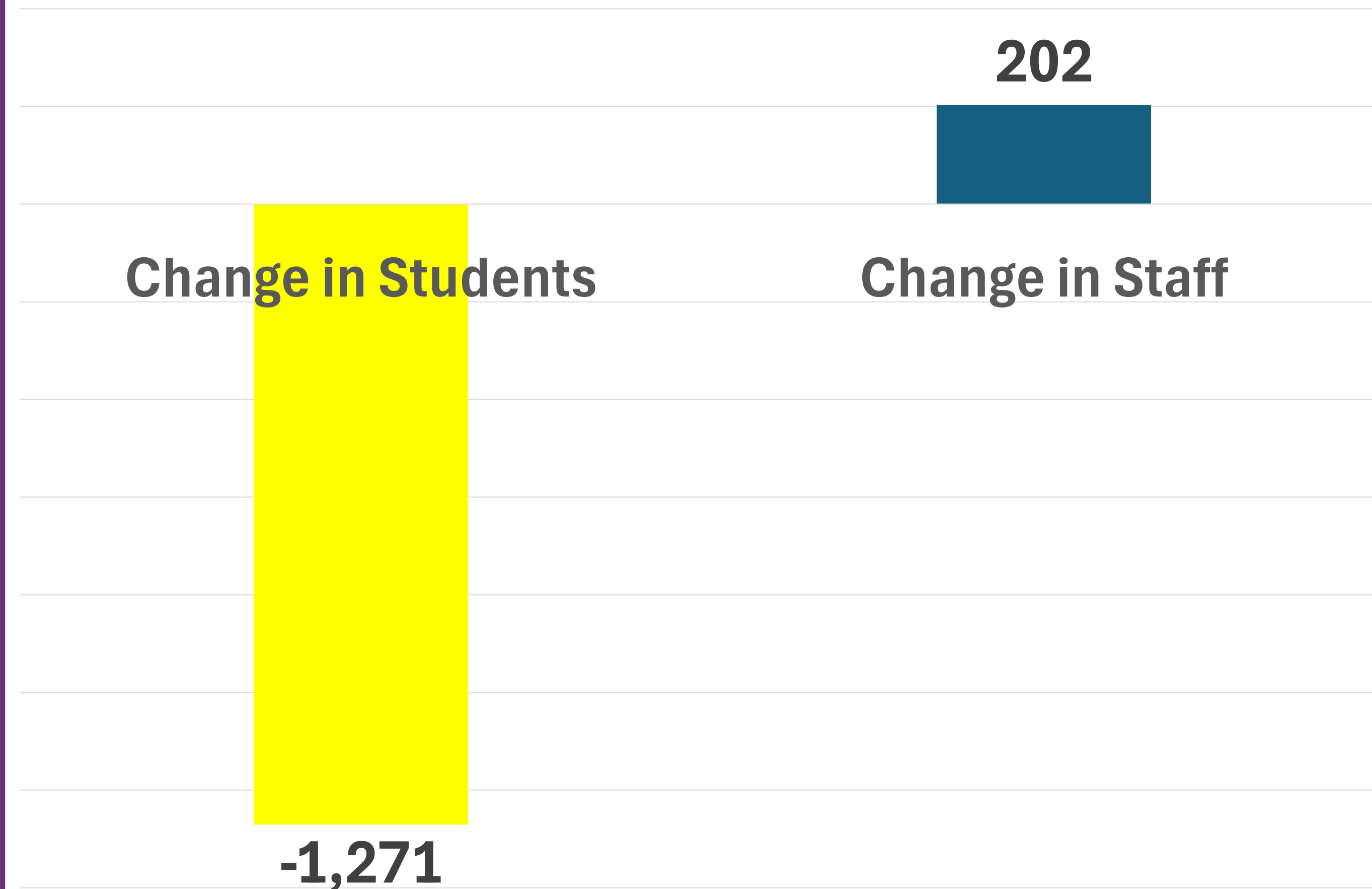
U.S. Public Schools
would have saved
\$20.3 billion if staffing
changed at the same
rate as enrollment

(CA, NH, OH, VT excluded)



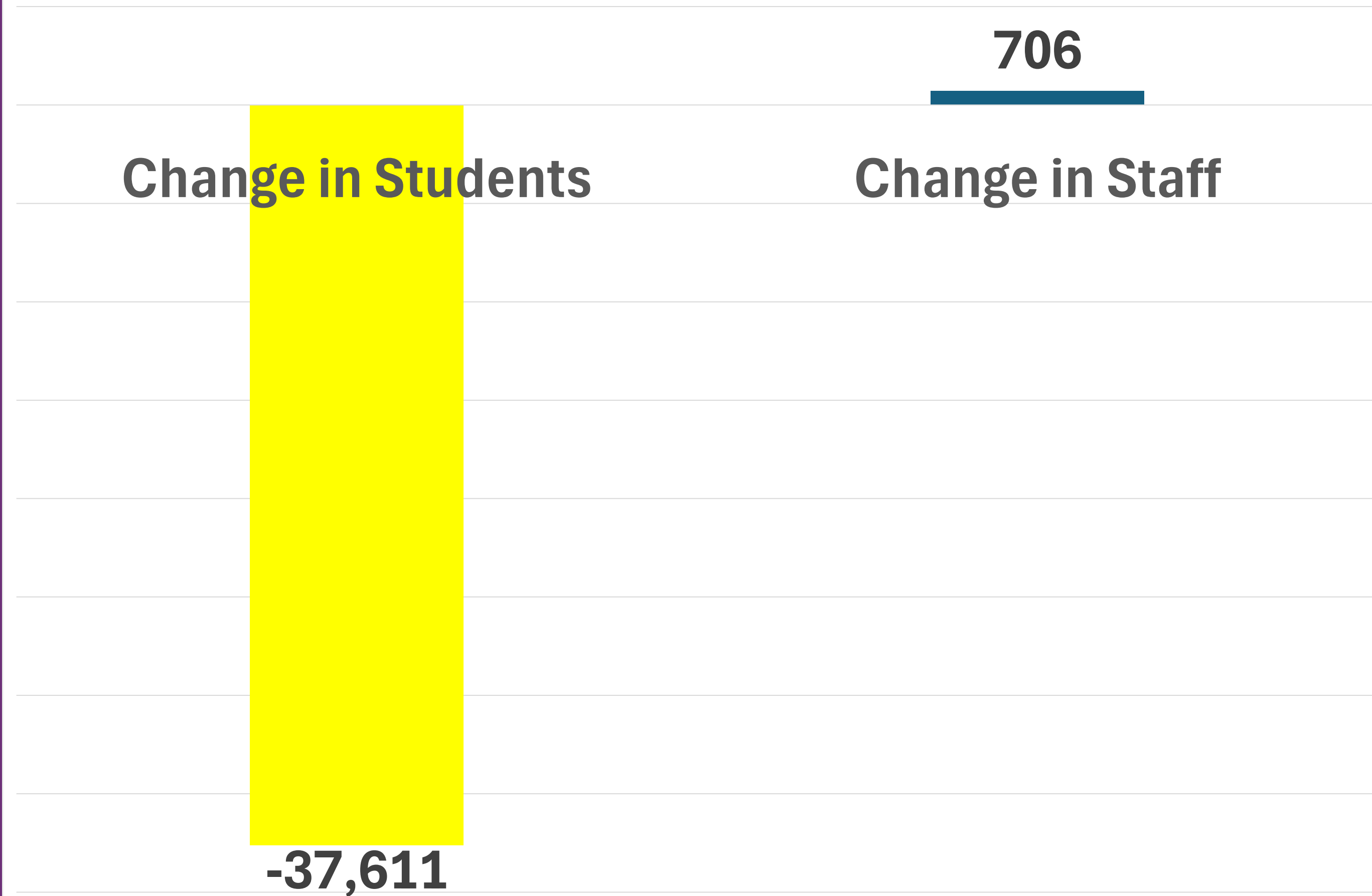
Alaska AY 2020 to 2023

Alaska Public Schools
would have saved
\$38.4 million if staffing
changed at the same
rate as enrollment



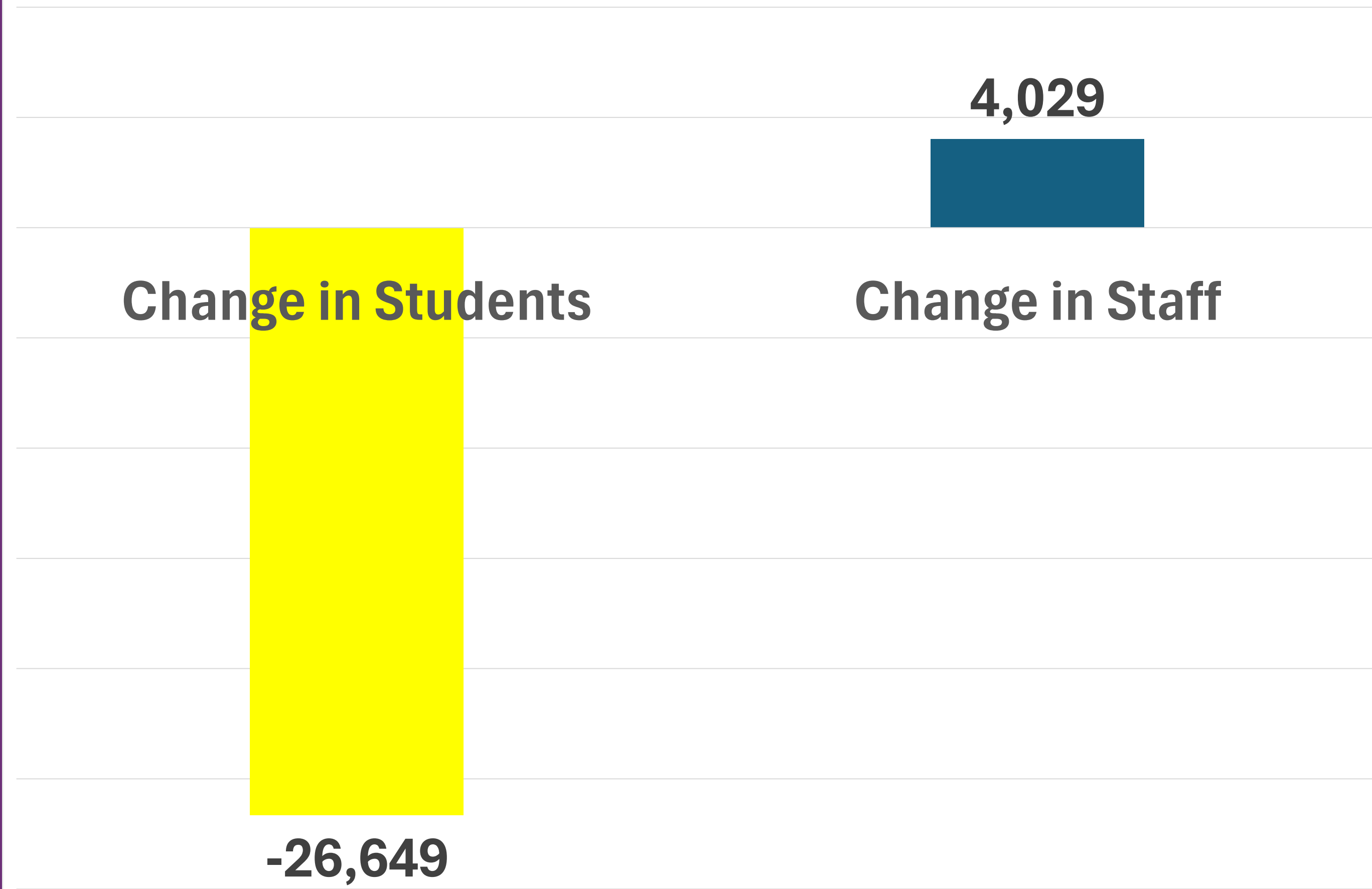
Arizona AY 2020 to 2023

Arizona Public Schools
would have saved
\$350.6 million if staffing
changed at the same
rate as enrollment



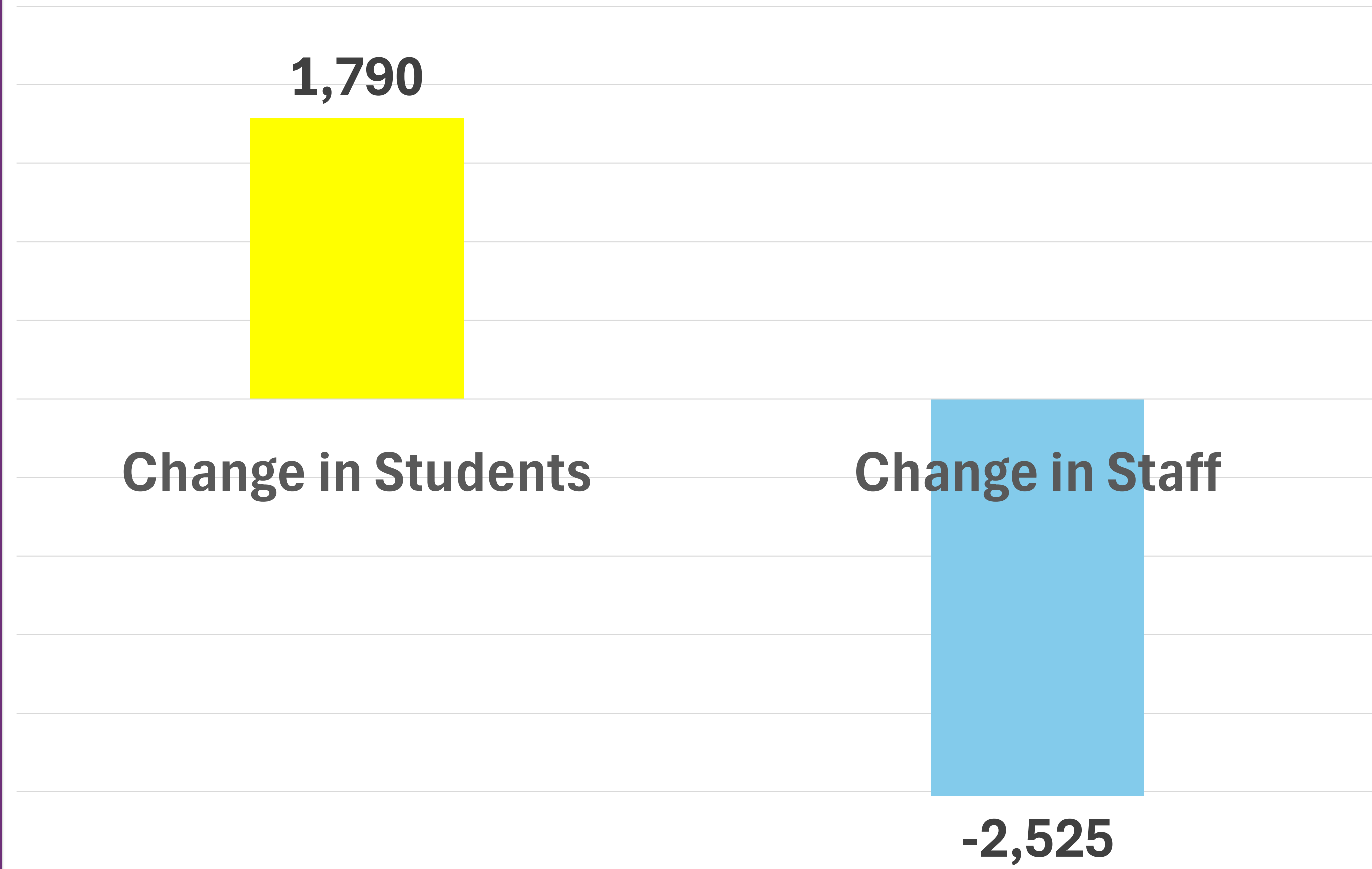
Georgia AY 2020 to 2023

Georgia Public Schools
would have saved
\$596.8 million if staffing
changed at the same
rate as enrollment



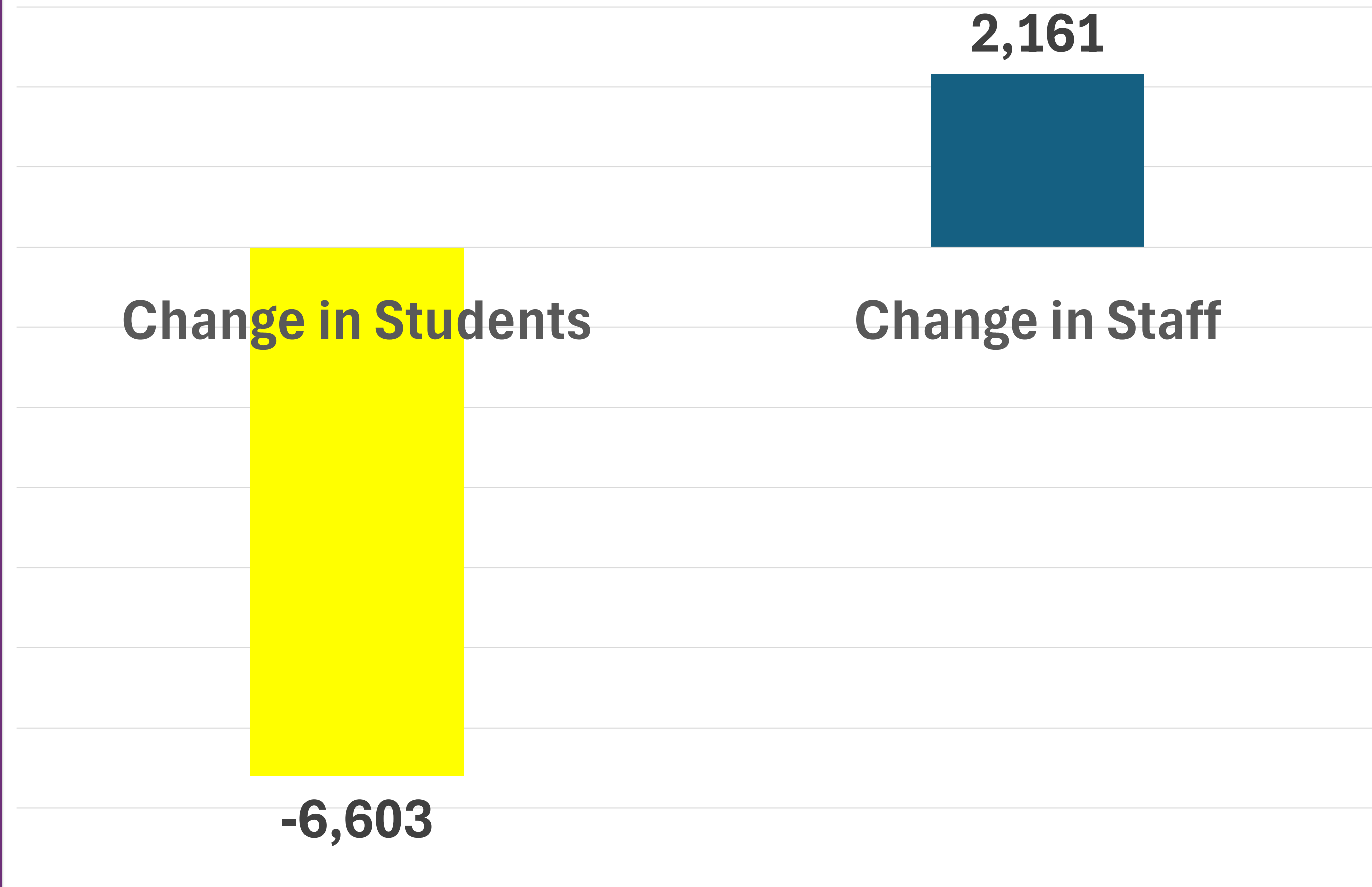
Louisiana AY 2020 to 2023

Louisiana Public Schools saved **\$191.9 million** because staffing was reduced at a higher rate than enrollment



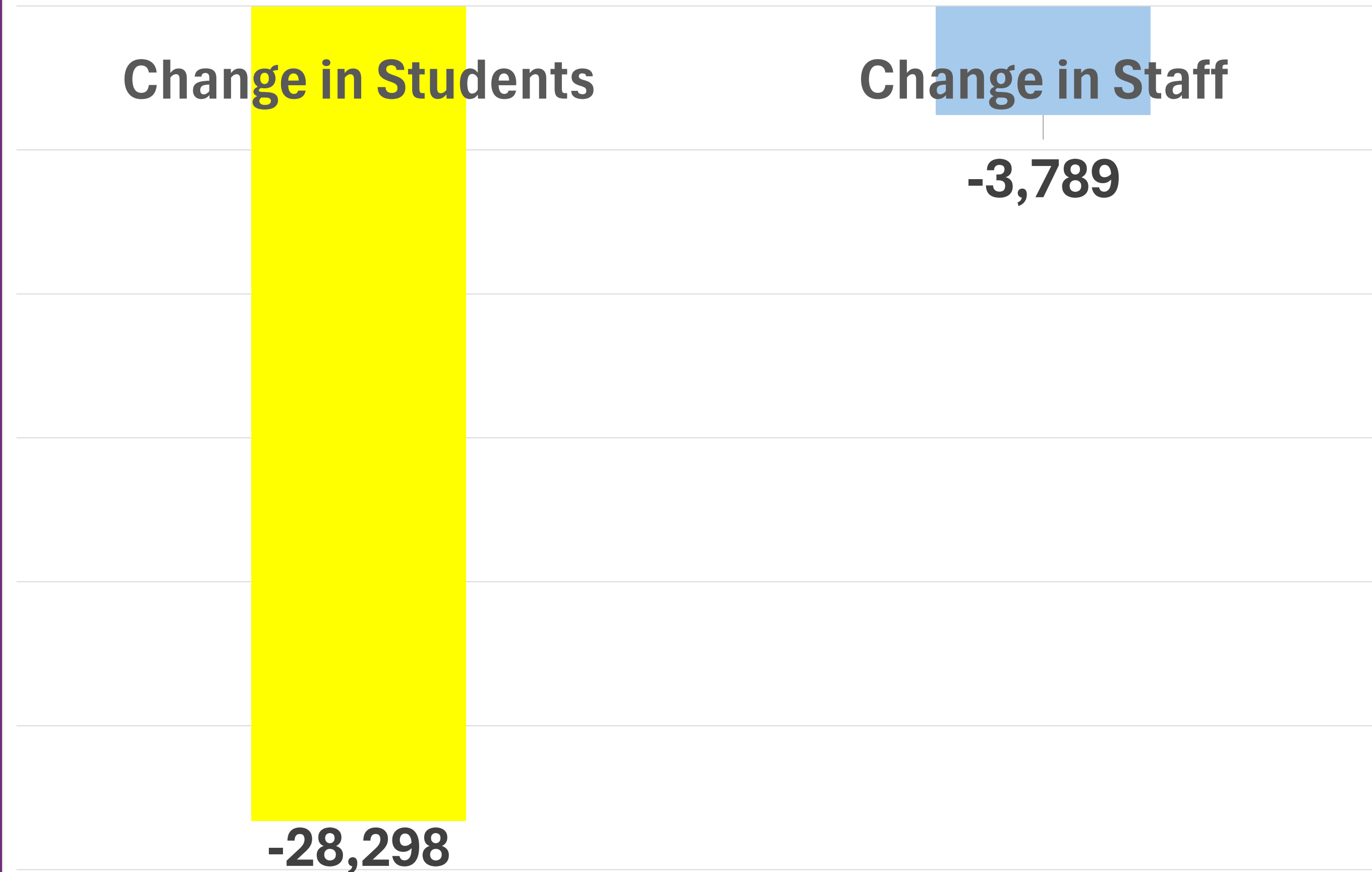
Maine AY 2020 to 2023

Maine Public Schools
would have saved
\$238.8 million if staffing
changed at the same
rate as enrollment



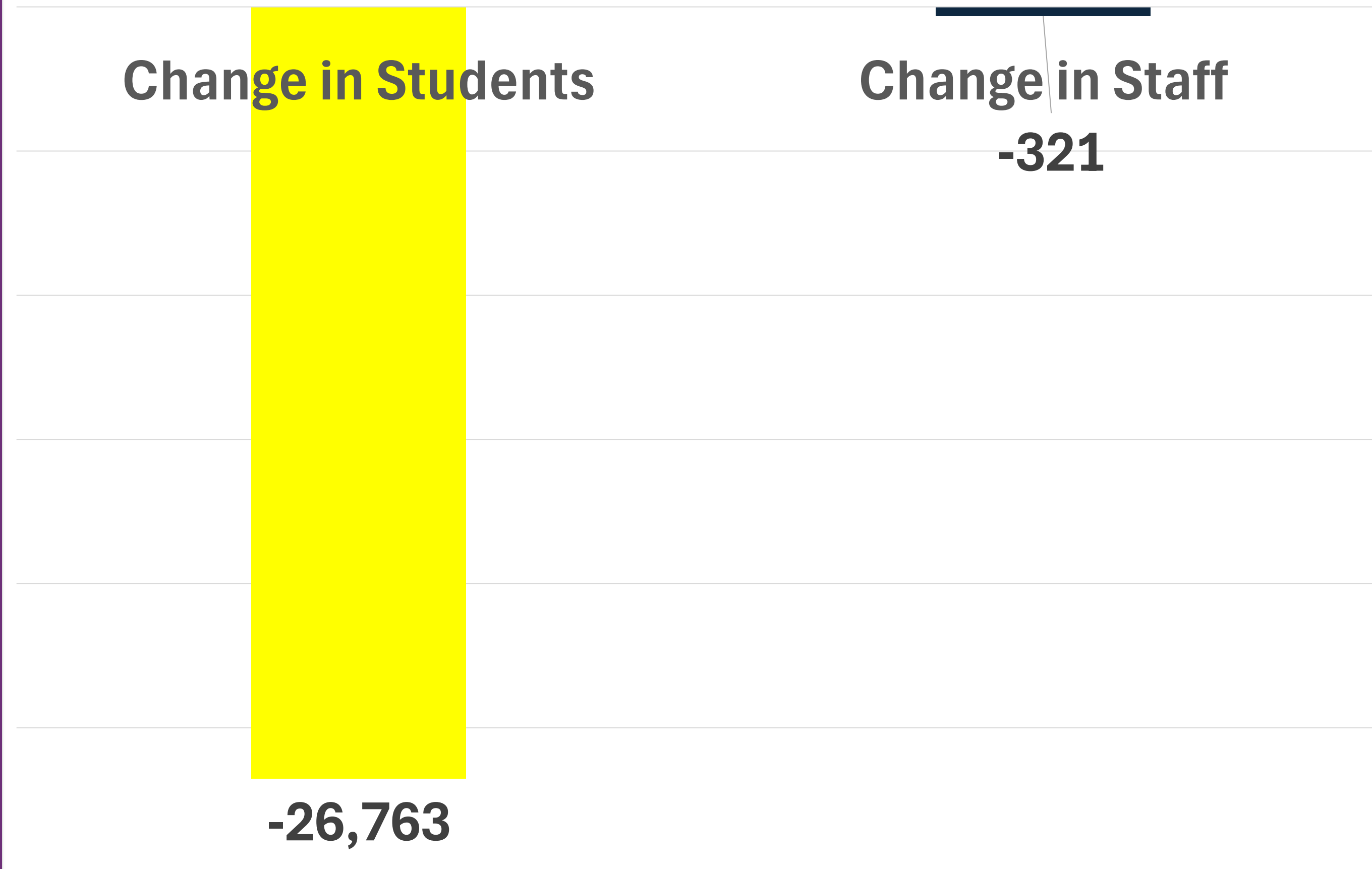
Minnesota AY 2020 to 2023

Minnesota Public Schools
would have saved
\$63.6 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



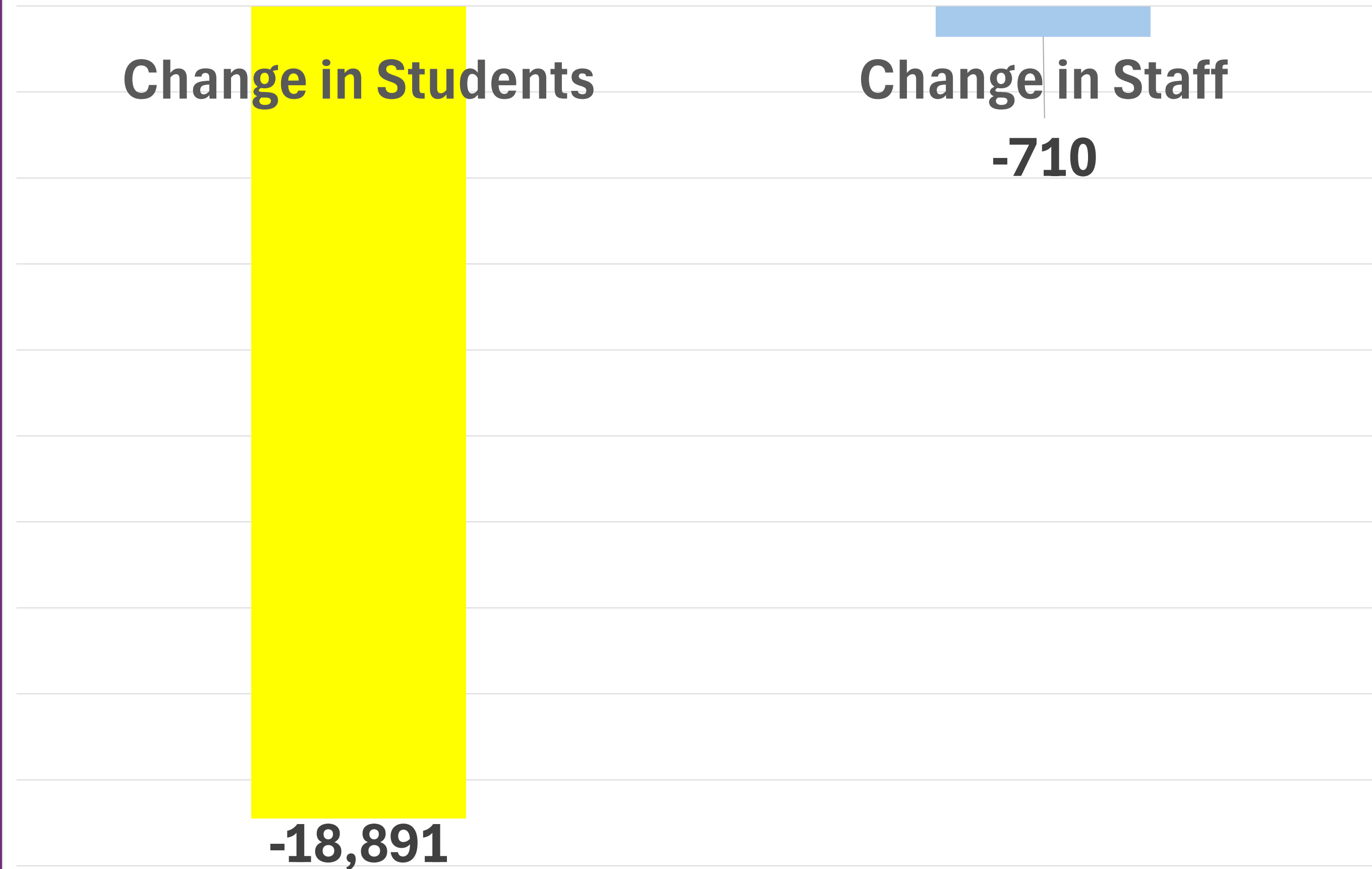
Mississippi AY 2020 to 2023

Mississippi Public Schools
would have saved
\$202 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



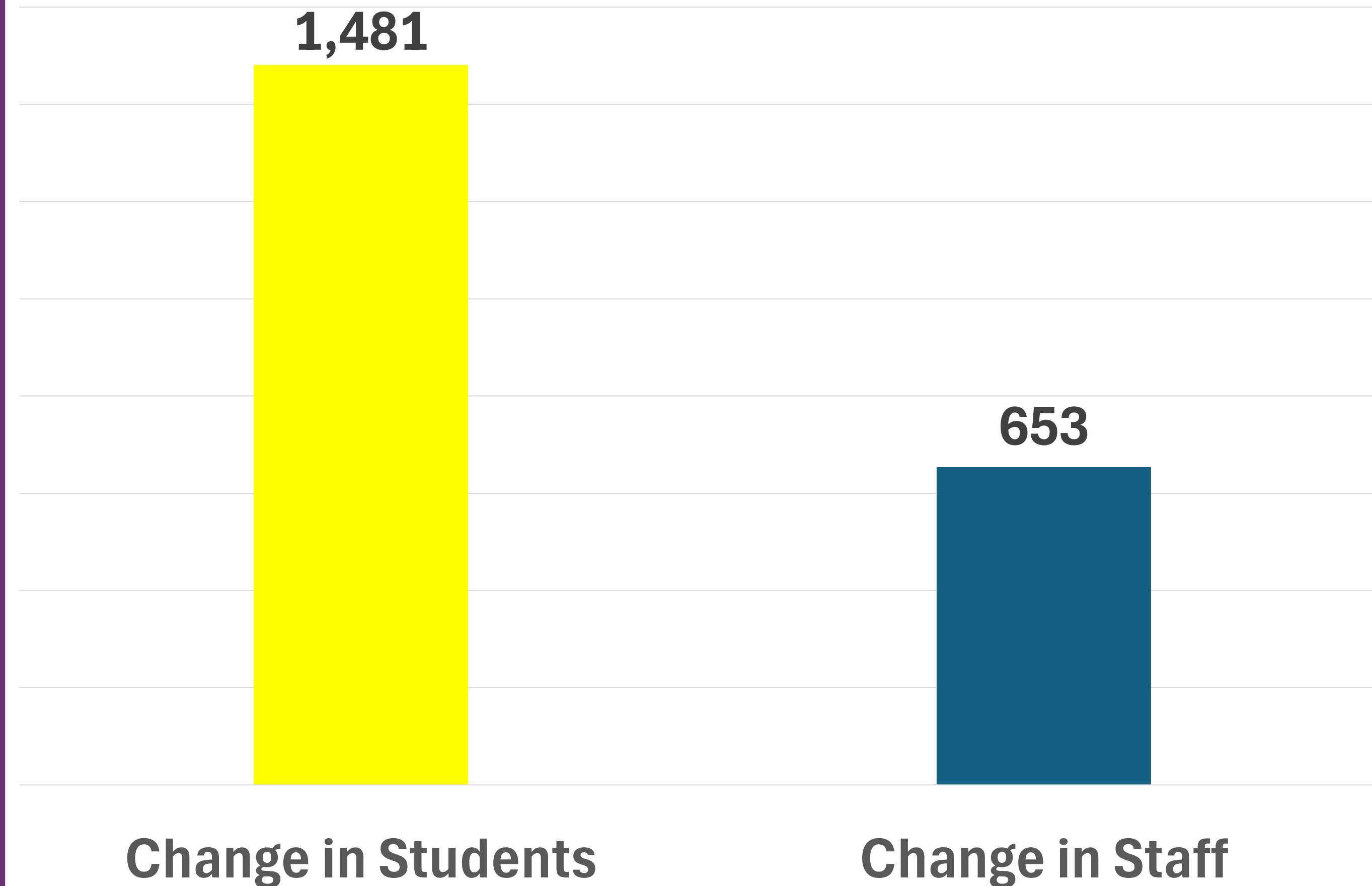
Missouri AY 2020 to 2023

Missouri Public Schools
would have saved
\$145.3 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



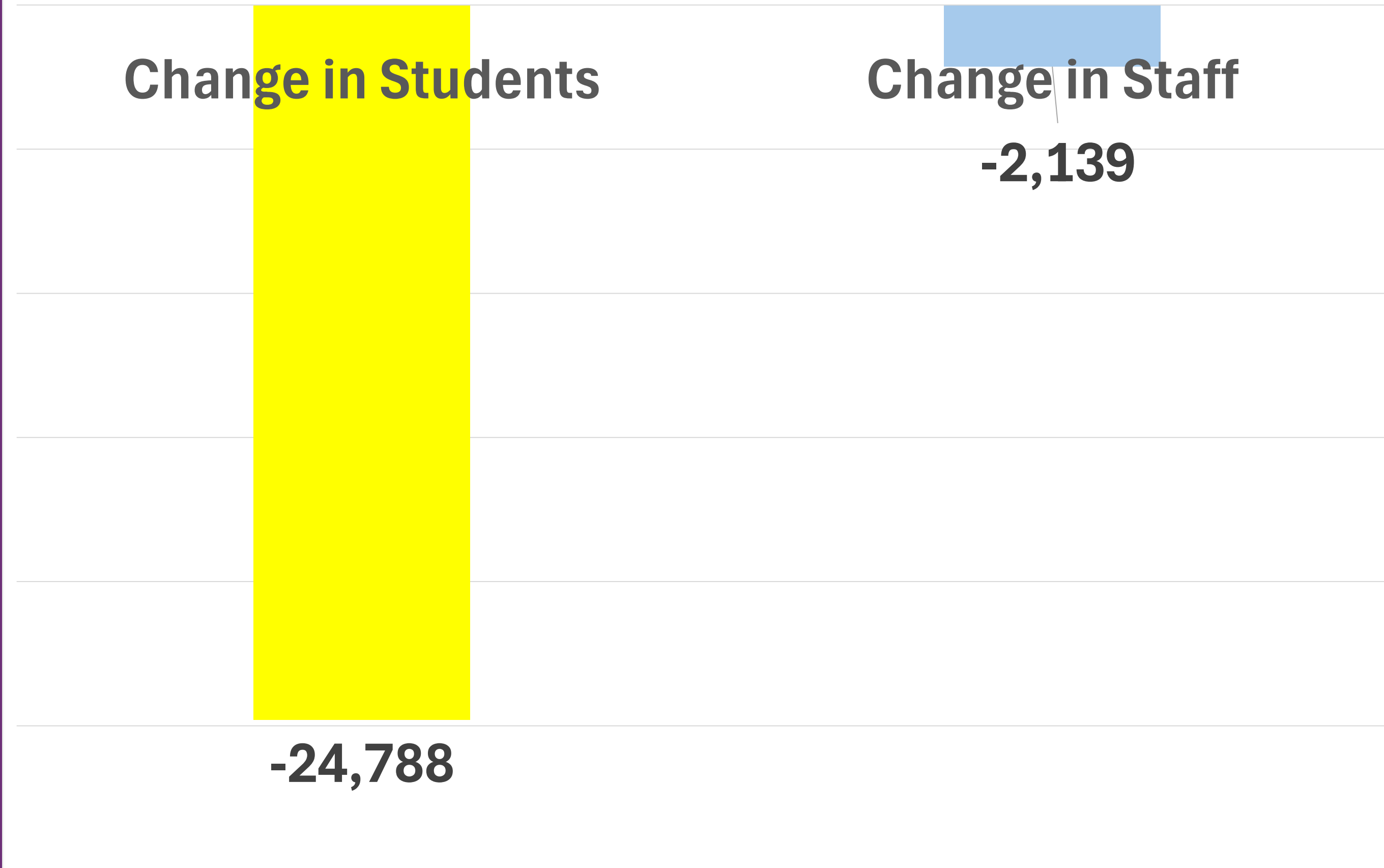
Montana AY 2020 to 2023

Montana Public Schools
would have saved
\$28.6 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



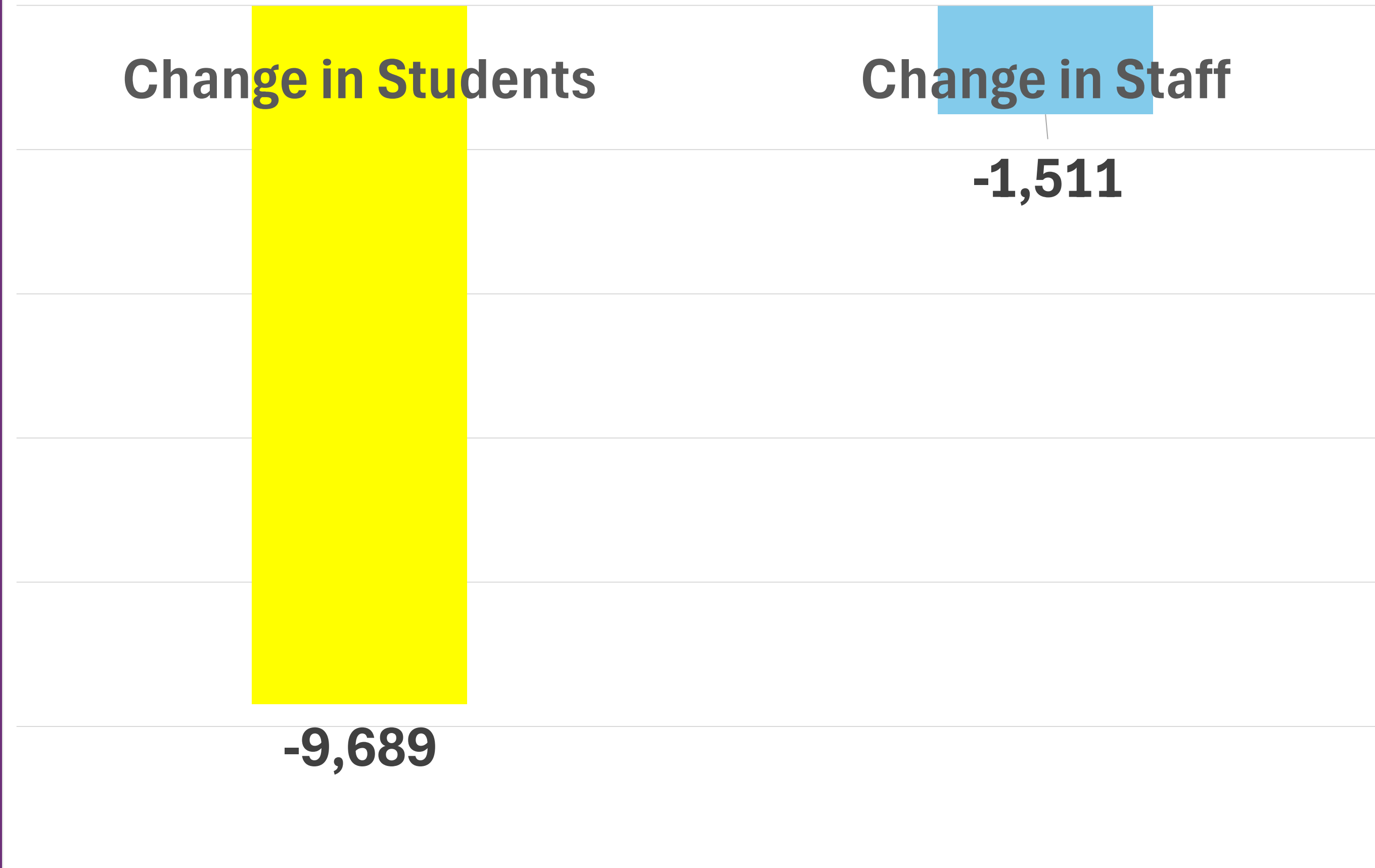
Nevada AY 2020 to 2023

Nevada Public Schools
would have saved
\$47.1 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



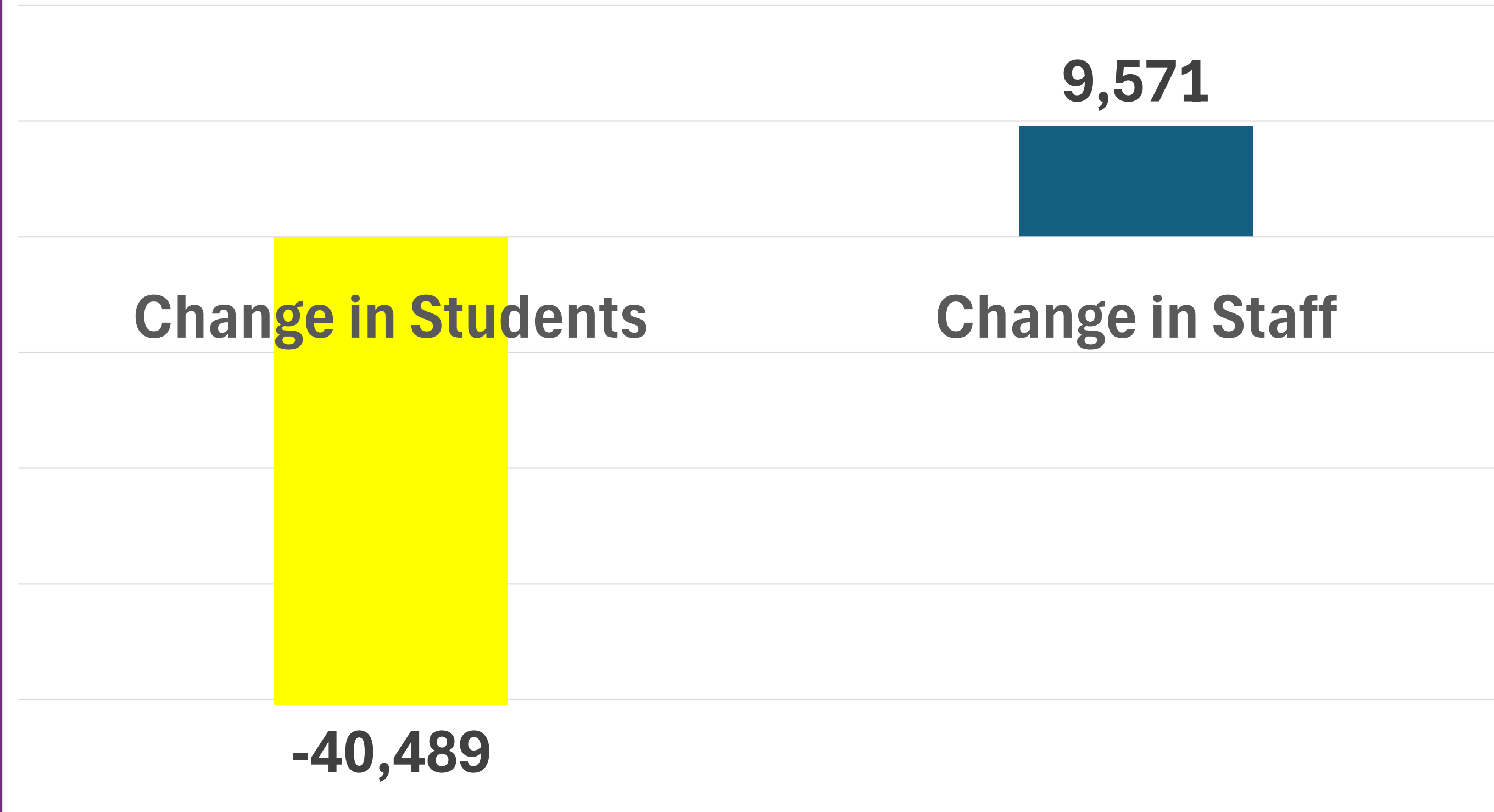
New Hampshire AY 2020 to 2023

N.H. Public Schools
would have saved
\$32.4 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



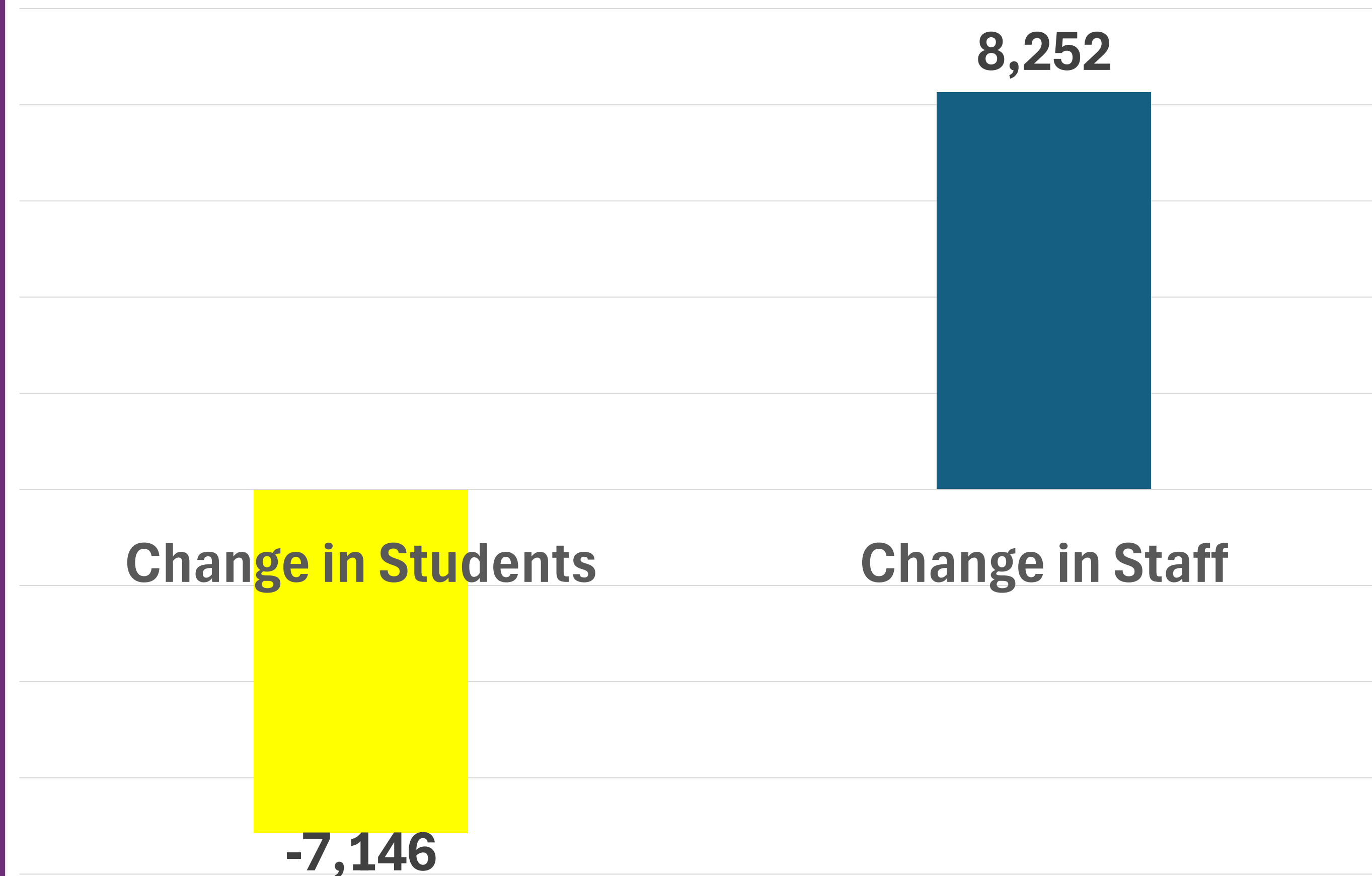
North Carolina AY 2020 to 2023

North Carolina Public Schools
would have saved **\$1.1 billion**
if staffing changed at the
same rate as enrollment



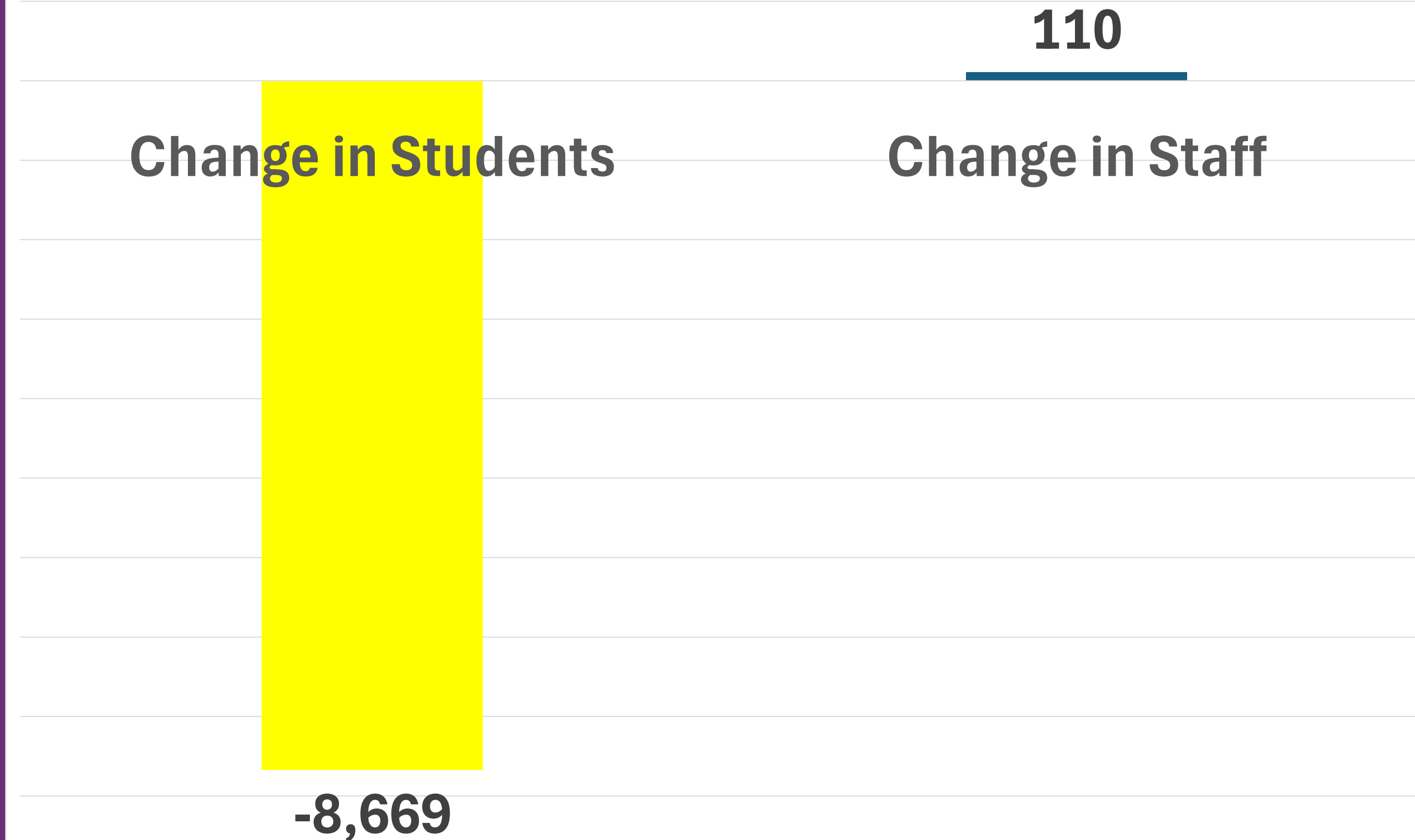
Oklahoma AY 2020 to 2023

Oklahoma Public Schools
would have saved
\$509.4 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



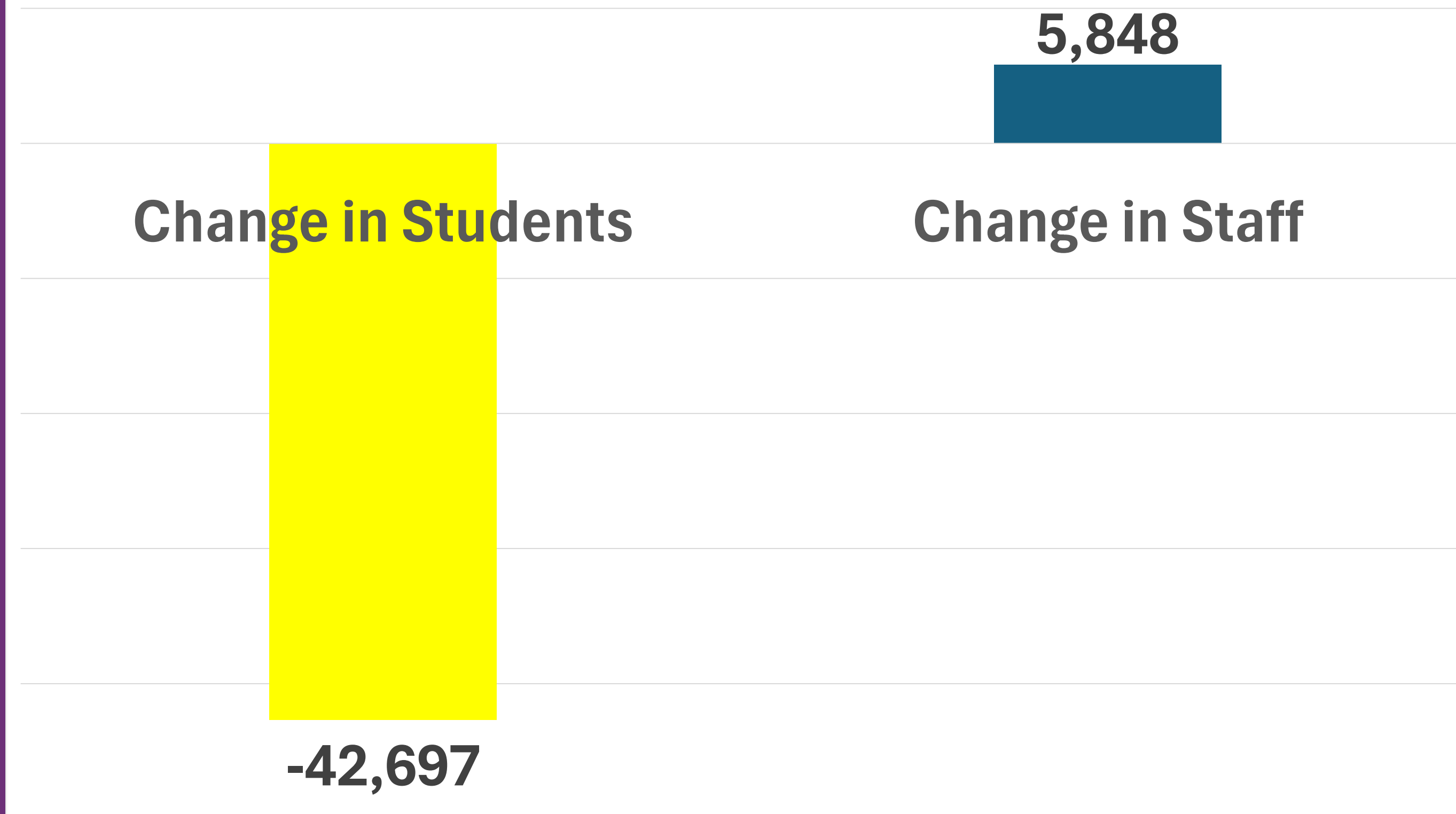
South Carolina AY 2020 to 2023

South Carolina Public
Schools would have saved
\$97.5 million if staffing
changed at the same rate as
enrollment



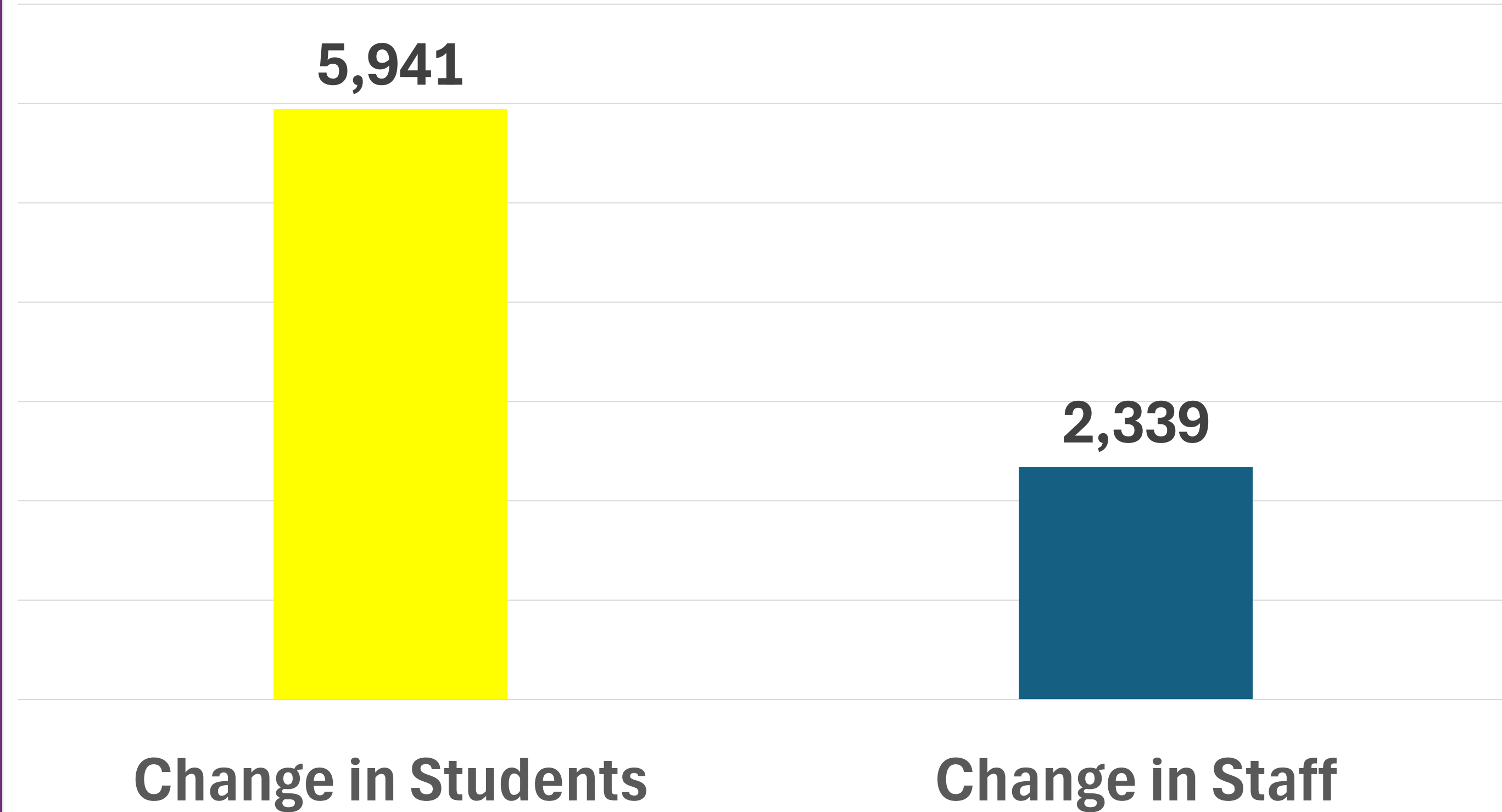
Texas AY 2020 to 2023

Texas Public Schools would have saved **\$741.5 million** if staffing changed at the same rate as enrollment



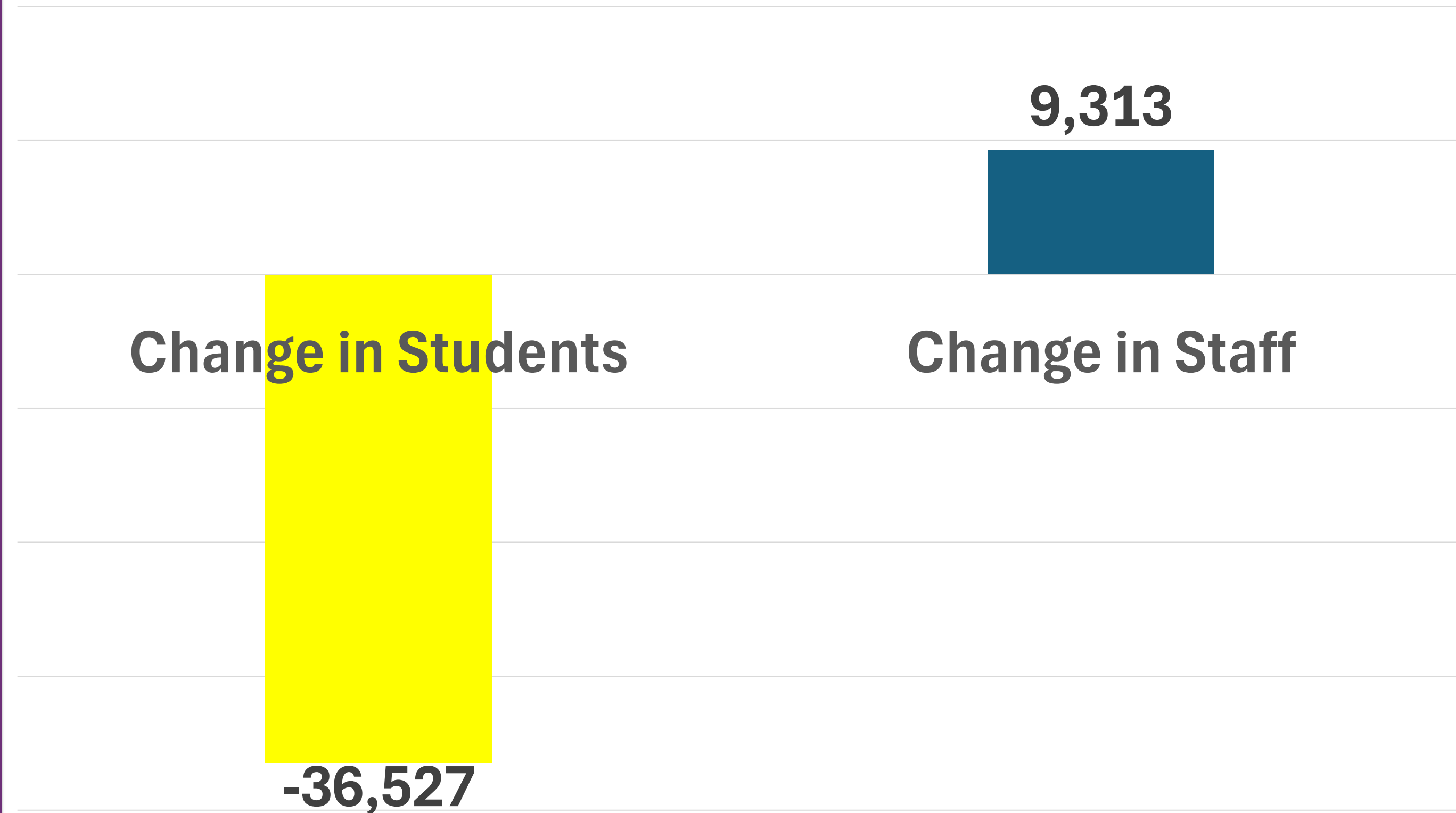
Utah AY 2020 to 2023

Utah Public Schools would have saved **\$147.3 million** if staffing changed at the same rate as enrollment



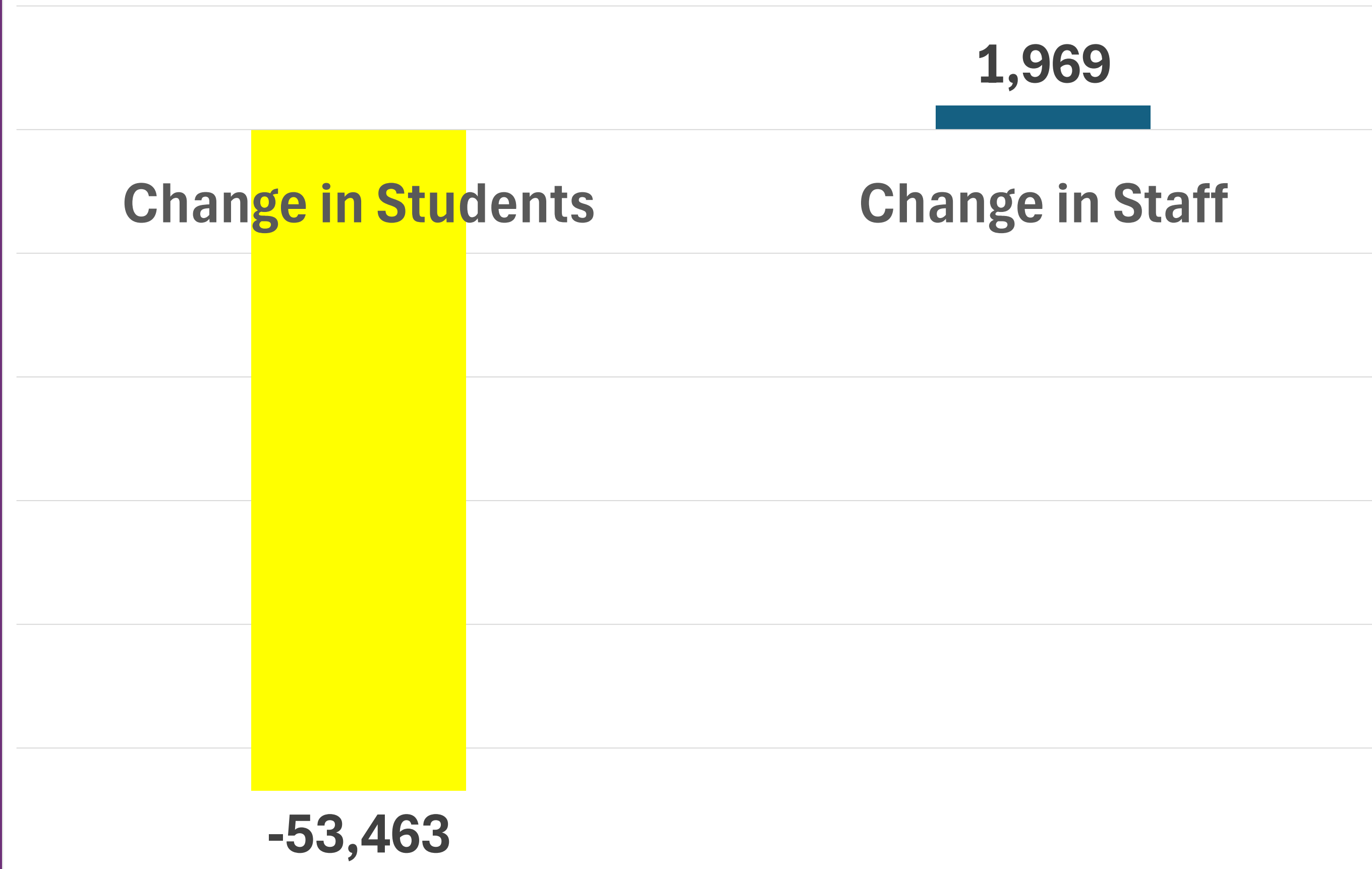
Virginia AY 2020 to 2023

Virginia Public Schools would have saved **\$1.2 billion** if staffing changed at the same rate as enrollment



Washington AY 2020 to 2023

Washington Public
Schools would have saved
\$955 million if staffing
changed at the same rate
as enrollment



Thanks!

