

A Guide to Research

CHARTER SCHOOLS

IN

PERSPECTIVE →



A joint project of the Spencer
Foundation and Public Agenda



PUBLIC AGENDA

Charter Schools In Perspective: A Guide to Research

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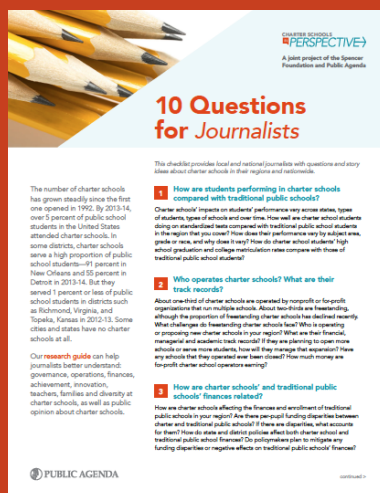
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CHARTER SCHOOLS IN PERSPECTIVE

This guide is one of several resources developed to help policymakers, journalists and community members think through the issues related to charter schools in their cities and states.



10 Questions for Journalists



10 Questions for Policymakers



A Choicework Discussion Starter:
Are Charter Schools a Good Way to
Improve Education in our Community?

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN PERSPECTIVE

A Guide to Research

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INTRODUCTION

Communities across the country are grappling with different approaches to improving their schools. Introducing or expanding charter schools is one of the approaches that states and school districts have considered or implemented.

Charter schools serve more than 5 percent of public school students nationwide and make up close to 7 percent of all U.S. public schools. Yet they can be deeply polarizing. This polarization can use up policymakers', educators' and community members' limited time, energy and resources, making it that much more difficult to find practical solutions to improve schools for all children.

Charter Schools In Perspective, a partnership between Public Agenda and the Spencer Foundation, is designed to counter this controversy by contributing to a more informed, civil dialogue about charter schools. We hope the resources developed for this project enable policymakers, educators and communities to better grapple with decisions about whether and how to introduce or expand charter schools in their states or districts.

Grappling with these decisions requires understanding a range of issues that researchers have addressed: What are charter schools' effects on student achievement? Who operates charter schools? How are they financed and governed? How do charter schools affect neighboring traditional public schools?

This guide to research is a nonpartisan, nonideological overview of some of the key research on these and other aspects of charter schools. It provides policymakers, journalists and community members with an easily digestible summary of a very wide body of research, including studies that are typically accessible only to academics.

The guide covers the following topics:

- Key facts about charter schools
- Student achievement
- Diversity and inclusion
- Teachers and teaching
- Finances
- Families
- Governance and regulation
- Charter school operators
- Innovation
- Public opinion
- Questions for future research

Charter schools and the policies that govern them vary considerably from city to city, state to state and even school to school. We use the symbol to the left throughout the guide to highlight variation.

Understanding these variations is key to avoiding misleading generalizations about charter schools and their benefits and trade-offs. Some of the data covered in the research guide are national in scope, while some are specific to certain locations or types of charter schools.



This guide to research is one of several resources developed for the *Charter Schools In Perspective* project, all of which help policymakers, journalists and community members think through the issues related to charter schools in their cities and states. Other resources include the following:

- 10 Questions for Journalists
- 10 Questions for Policymakers
- A Choicework Discussion Starter

For more about the *In Perspective* project, Public Agenda and the Spencer Foundation, please visit us online at www.in-perspective.org.

Key Facts About Charter Schools



- What is a charter school?
- How many charter schools are there in the United States?
- How many students attend charter schools?
- What are the demographics of charter school students?
- Where are charter schools located?
- Which grade levels do charter schools serve?

What is a charter school?

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are created and operated by organizations other than local school districts. Here are some other defining characteristics of charter schools:

Who can attend them?

- Charters provide a free education and, like other public schools, cannot discriminate by race, gender, religion or disability.
- Charter schools are meant to have open admission policies; any eligible public school student can attend a charter school. In this way, charter schools are not like private schools, which can accept or reject students based on their test scores, student and family interviews, religious affiliation, ability to pay tuition, or general fit with the school's mission. In practice, many charter schools have a lottery system for admission, owing to their popularity, meaning that not all children can find their way into a charter school.

Who opens and operates them?

- About two-thirds of charter schools are stand-alone schools created and operated by groups or organizations such as groups of teachers, community groups, universities, foundations, businesses or faith-based groups.¹
- About one-third of charter schools are created and operated by management organizations that operate multiple schools. These organizations can be nonprofit or for-profit.²

How are they governed?

- Charter schools are so named because they operate under the conditions of a legally binding contract called a charter. A school's charter is issued to an operator by a governing body or authorizer.
- Charter school authorizers vary from state to state and even within states. Most authorizers are local school districts that also oversee traditional public schools, but some are universities, nonprofit agencies or government agencies.
- A school's charter typically exempts the school from select state and district rules and regulations. For example, a charter may mandate a longer school year for students. It may exempt a school from having to hire certified teachers. These rules vary depending on the school's contract as well as the charter legislation of the charter school's state.
- In exchange for this flexibility, charter schools are held accountable to standards laid out in their charters.
- A school's charter is reviewed regularly, typically every three to five years, by the charter school authorizer. If the school fails to meet the standards outlined in its charter, the charter is not renewed and the school is closed.

Are charter schools public schools?

- Charter schools are classified as public schools by the U.S. Department of Education. They receive public money, offer a free education and are held to the same nondiscrimination standards as traditional public schools.
- However, charter schools have been extremely controversial in some communities. Critics have often argued that charter schools do not sufficiently account for the public money they receive, produce insufficient student performance data and are a threat to traditional public schools.

Where did charter schools come from?

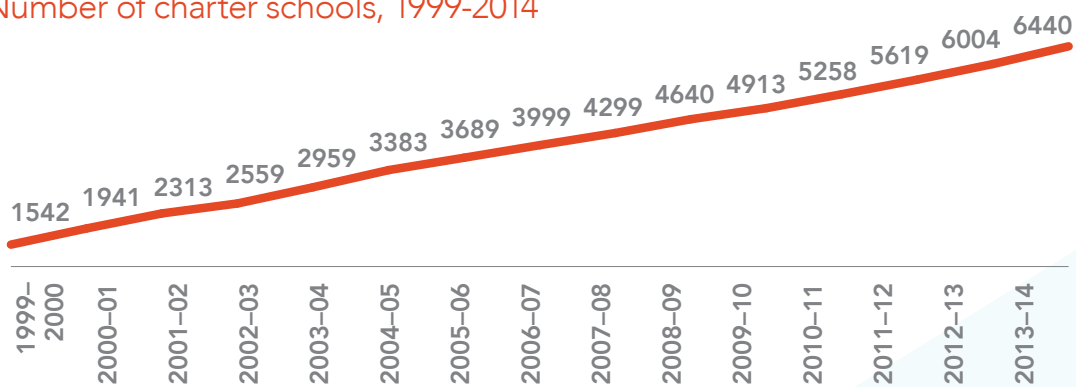
- Charter schools were originally conceptualized by Ray Budde, a former teacher and principal, in 1974.³
- The concept caught on in the 1980s, when *A Nation at Risk*, the landmark 1983 study from President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, and other education reports questioned the quality of American public schools.
- Albert Shanker, who was then the president of the American Federation of Teachers, one of the two major national teachers' unions, brought the charter school concept to a broader audience when he endorsed charter schools during a speech in 1988 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.⁴
- The first law allowing the establishment of charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991, and the first charter school opened in that state in 1992.⁵
- Charter schools are different from other choice programs like vouchers and magnet schools. Vouchers enable children in the public school system to attend a private school of their choice. Magnet schools are created by traditional school districts and have a special theme or curriculum. Magnet schools are designed to attract and enroll students from outside the normal attendance zone, and sometimes from other school districts, often with the goal of increasing racial integration.

How many charter schools are there in the United States?

By the 2011–12 school year, laws allowing the creation of charter schools had been passed in 42 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. In 2015, Alabama passed legislation permitting the creation of charter schools.⁶

The most recent data on how many charter schools exist and how many students attend those schools come from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), which calls itself “the leading national nonprofit organization committed to advancing the quality, growth, and sustainability of charter schools.” The NAPCS estimates that there were 6,004 charter schools in the United States in 2012–13 and 6,440 in 2013–14. The proportion of charter schools to all public schools was 6.3 percent in the 2012–13 school year.⁷ The following chart illustrates the growth in charter schools over time.

Number of charter schools, 1999–2014



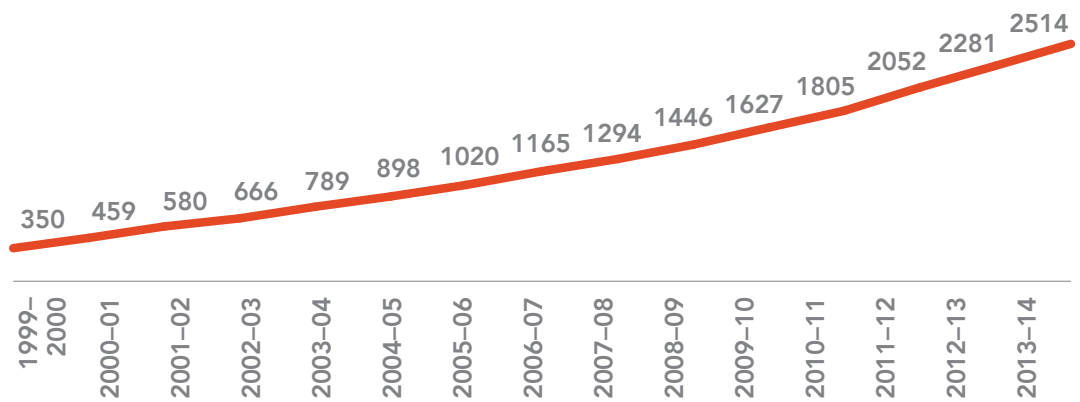
SOURCE: Dashboard, The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is part of the U.S. Department of Education, also has data on the number of charter schools and how many students attend them. However, their data are less current than those published by the NAPCS. When more current data are released, they can be found on the NCES website: <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/>.

How many students attend charter schools?

According to the NAPCS, about 2.5 million students attended charter schools in 2013–14, meaning that charter school students accounted for more than 5 percent of all public school students. Student enrollment in charter schools grew more than 70 percent from 2008–09 to 2013–14.⁸ The following chart illustrates the growth in charter school enrollment over time.

Number of charter school students, in thousands, 1999-2014



SOURCE: Dashboard, The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2014.

What are the demographics of charter school students?

On average, charter schools nationwide tend to enroll a larger proportion of African-American students and students living in poverty than do traditional public schools nationwide. On average, charter schools nationwide also tend to enroll a smaller proportion of English-language learners and special education students than do traditional public schools nationwide.⁹ However, these demographics vary from school to school and district to district. The demographic picture becomes even more complex when comparing the demographics of charter school students to those of their peers in nearby traditional public schools.

Eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches is a standard way of identifying students who are living in poverty. According to the NCES, at 33.8 percent of charter schools, more than 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. By contrast, at 19.7 percent of traditional public schools, more than 75 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.¹⁰

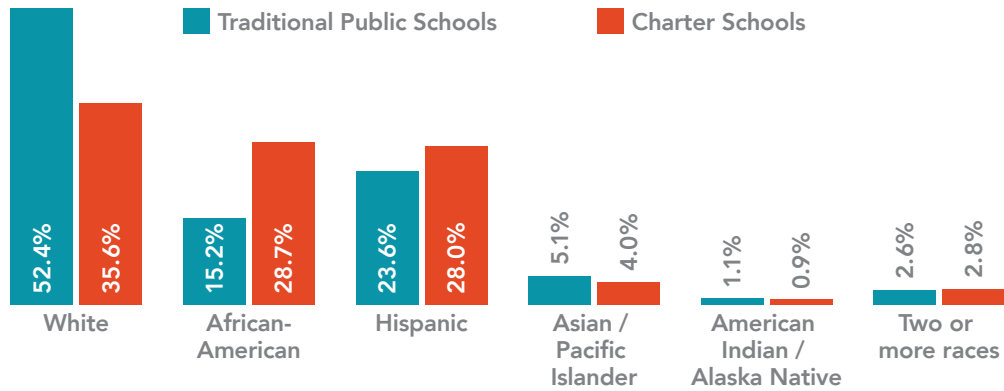
The ongoing Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) study from Stanford University compares charter school and traditional public school populations in 27 states. Note that CREDO counts Washington, D.C., as a state and also counts New York City as a “state” separately from New York State. In these 27 states, the CREDO compares traditional public schools to charter schools and to what they call “feeder” schools—the traditional public schools from which local charter schools draw their student populations.¹¹

CREDO found that in these 27 states in 2010-11, charter schools served a slightly higher proportion of low-income students than traditional public schools did. However, the proportion of low-income students was the same at charter schools and their “feeder” schools—the traditional public schools from which local charter schools draw their student populations.¹²

The following graphs illustrate these and other demographic characteristics of charter school students and traditional public school students, including the percentage of students who are English-language learners or who are in special education programs. For more information on charter students’ demographics, see the [Diversity and Inclusion](#) section of this research guide.

Student race and ethnicity

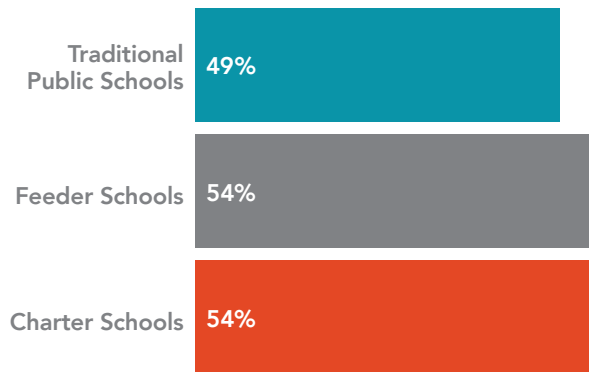
Percent of students enrolled in charter and traditional public schools by race and ethnicity, 2011-12:



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2014.

Students from low-income households

Percent of low-income students in 27 states by school type, 2010-11:



SOURCE: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) National Charter School Study, Stanford University, 2013.

Student gender

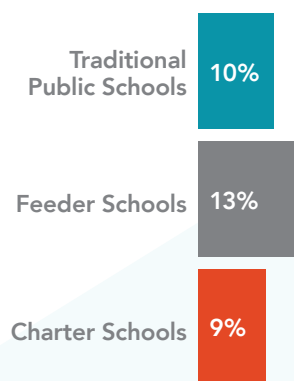
Percent of male and female students at charter and traditional public schools, 2011-12:



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 1999–2000 through 2011–12.

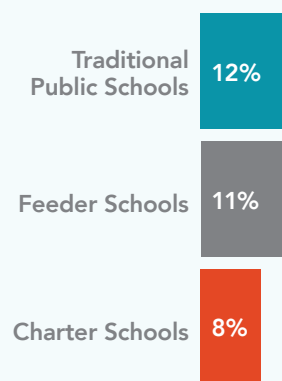
English-language learners

Percent of English-language learners in 27 states by school type, 2010-11:



Special education students

Percent of special education students in 27 states by school type, 2010-11:

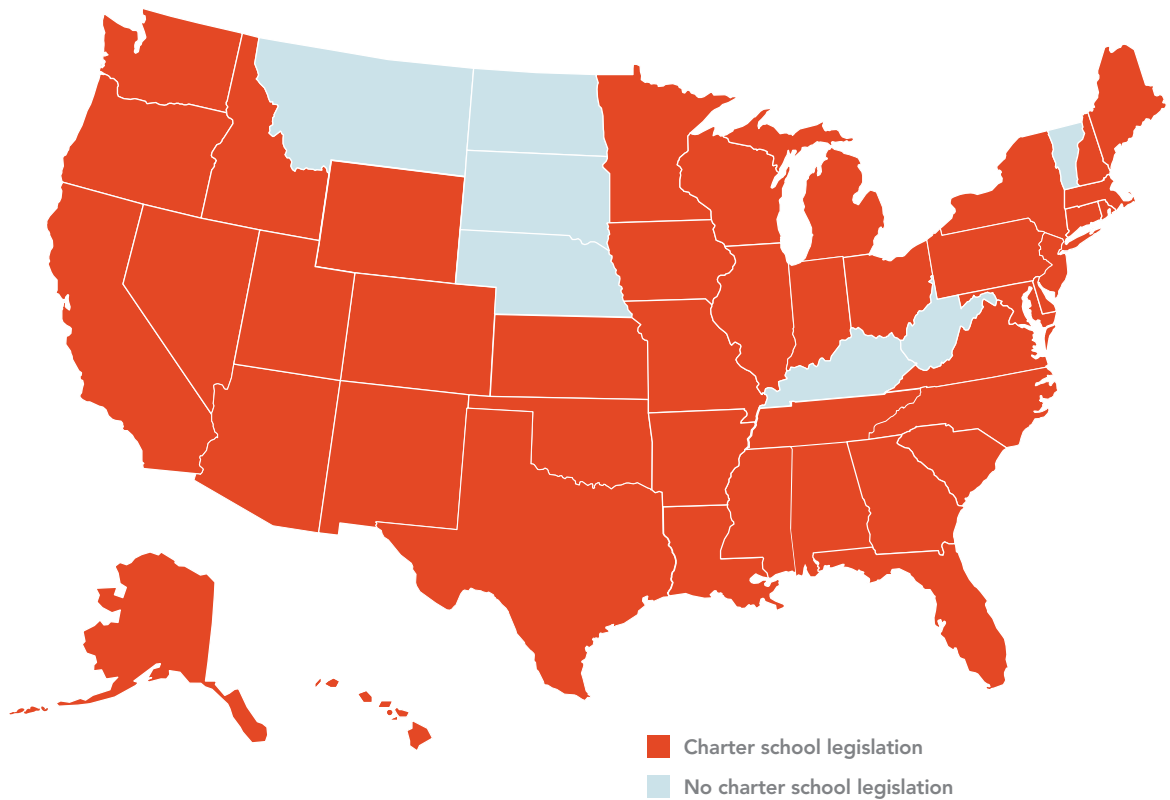


SOURCE: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) National Charter School Study, Stanford University, 2013.

Where are charter schools located?

Minnesota was the first state to pass a law allowing the establishment of charter schools, in 1991. The first charter school opened in 1992. By the 2011–12 school year, legislation allowing charter schools had been passed in 42 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. In 2015, Alabama passed legislation permitting charter schools. Despite legislative approval in Maine and Washington State, no charter schools were operational in these states in 2011–12. Legislation allowing charter schools has not been passed in Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont or West Virginia.¹³

States with charter school legislation



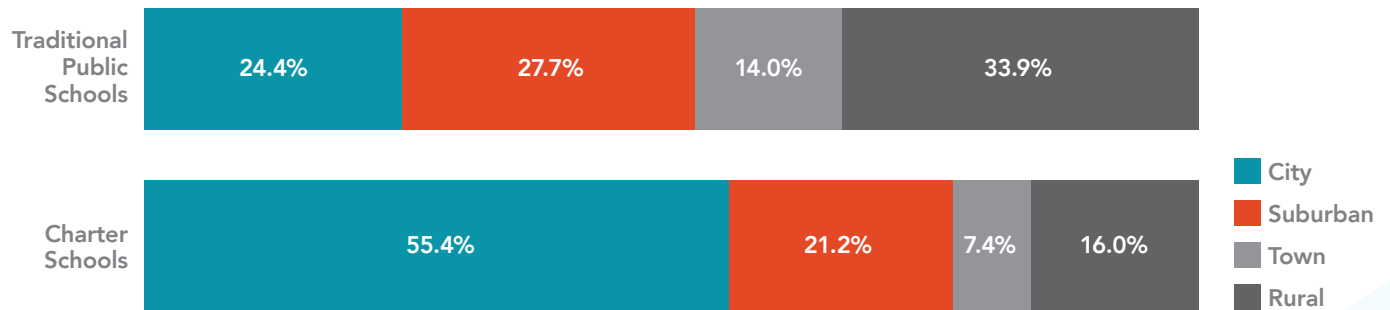
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “The Condition of Education 2014,” 2014.

Note: In March 2015, Alabama passed legislation permitting charter schools. This change has not yet been reflected in the source data for the above graphic. For more information, visit the Alabama Department of Education website at www.alsde.edu.

According to the NCES, over half of charter schools (55.4 percent) are located in cities. Just over twenty percent are in suburban locales, 7.4 percent are in towns, and 16 percent are located in rural areas.¹⁴ The following chart compares the distribution of charter schools and traditional public schools in different locales.

Most charter schools are located in cities

Percent of charter and traditional public schools in different locales, 2011-12:

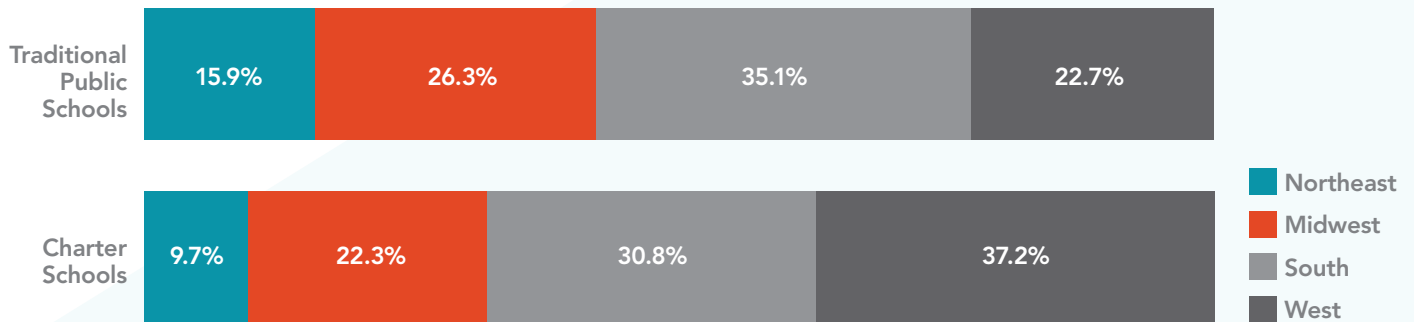


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 1999–2000 through 2011–12.

There are more charter schools in the South and West than in other parts of the country. Over a third (37.2 percent) of the country's charter schools are located in the West.¹⁵ The following chart compares this distribution of charter schools by region with traditional public schools.

Most charter schools are located in the South and West

Percent of charter and traditional public schools in different regions, 2011-12:

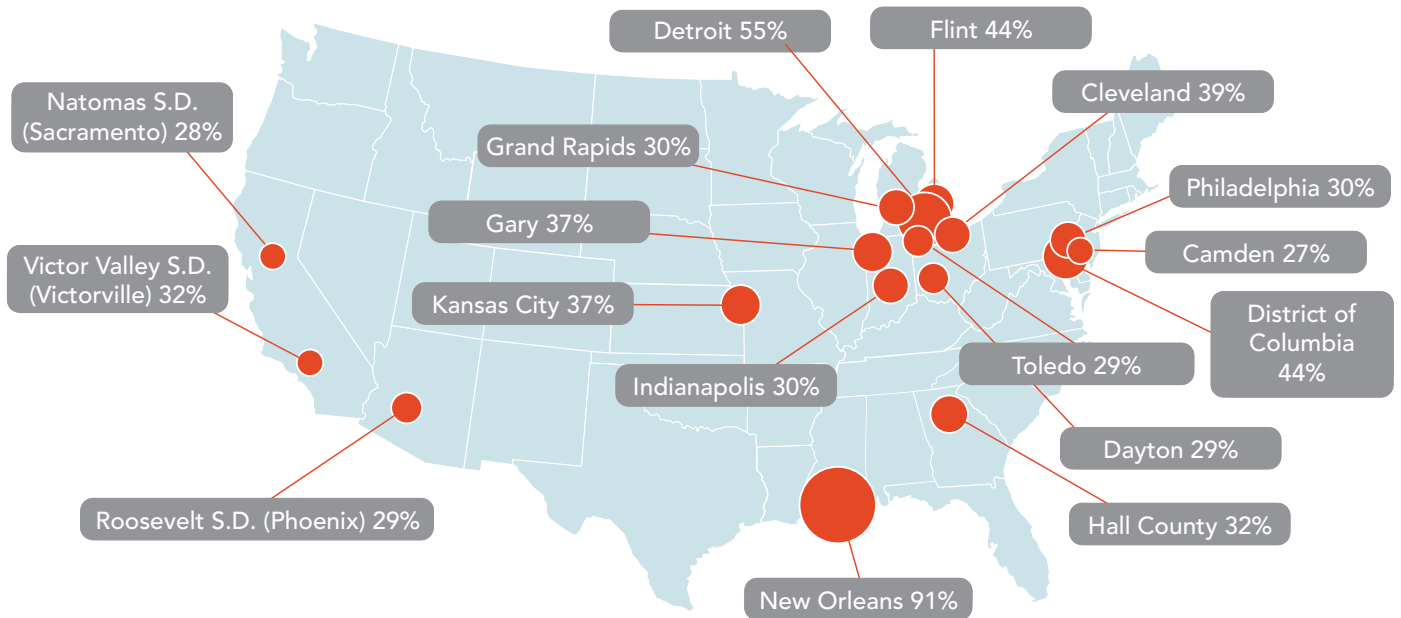


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 1999–2000 through 2011–12.

Charter schools are much more heavily concentrated in some states than others, and the proportion of charter schools to public schools also varies from state to state and district to district. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, California has the most charter schools, with 1,065 schools in the 2012–13 school year, which may account for the high percentage of charters located in the western region of the country.¹⁶

If counted as a state, Washington, D.C., has the highest proportion of charter schools, at 47.1 percent of all public schools in 2012-13. New Orleans is the city where charter schools serve the highest percentage of students: 91 percent of New Orleans public school students attended charter schools in 2013-14. Detroit had the next highest percentage: 55 percent of Detroit public school students attended charter schools in 2013-14.¹⁷

Districts with the highest percentage of students attending charter schools, 2013-14



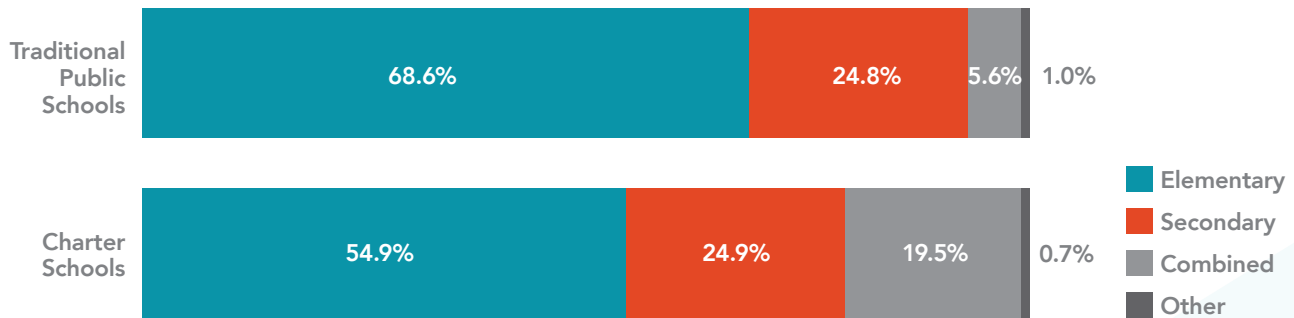
SOURCE: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter School Communities," 2014.

Which grade levels do charter schools serve?

According to the most recent data from the NCES, over half of all charter schools are elementary schools (54.9 percent). This is lower than the percentage of traditional public schools that are elementary schools (68.6 percent).¹⁸ The following chart compares the distribution of charter schools and traditional public schools, by grade.

Distributions of charter and traditional public schools differ across grade levels

Distribution of charter and traditional public schools across grade levels, 2011-12:



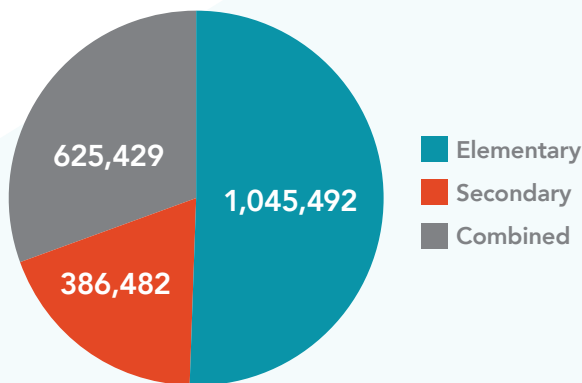
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2014.

Note: According to NCES definitions: Elementary schools begin with grade 6 or below and have no grade higher than 8. Secondary schools have no grade lower than 7. Combined schools begin with grade 6 or below and end with grade 9 or above.

There were 5,696 charter schools in 2011–12 according to the NCES. Of these, 3,127 were elementary schools, 1,418 were secondary schools, 1,112 were combined elementary/secondary and 39 were not classified by grade level. The following chart shows charter school enrollment by grade level.¹⁹ ●

Most charter school students attend elementary schools

Number of charter school students by grade level, 2011-12:



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 1999–2000 through 2011–12.

Note: According to NCES definitions: Elementary schools begin with grade 6 or below and have no grade higher than 8. Secondary schools have no grade lower than 7. Combined schools begin with grade 6 or below and end with grade 9 or above.

Notes

- ¹ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Schools by Management Organization, 2012-13," In *The Public Charter Schools Dashboard*. Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/mgmt/year/2013>
- ² NAPCS, "Schools by Management Organization, 2012-13," 2014. <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/mgmt/year/2013>
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- ⁵ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "What Are Public Charter Schools?," Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/public-charter-schools/>
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- ⁷ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Total Number of Schools, 2013-14," In *The Public Charter Schools Dashboard*, Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2014>

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- ⁸ NAPCS, "Total Number of Students 2013-14," 2014. <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/page/overview/year/2014>
- ⁹ Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), *National Charter School Study 2013*, Stanford, CA: CREDO at Stanford University, 2013. <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf>
- ¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 1999-2000 through 2011-12," *In Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey*, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_216.30.asp
- ¹¹ CREDO, *National Charter School Study 2013*, 2013. <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf>
- ¹² CREDO, *National Charter School Study 2013*, 2013. <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf>
- ¹³ U.S. Department of Education et al., "What Are Charter Schools?," 2014. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>

Alabama Department of Education, "2015 Legislative Tracking." http://web.alsde.edu/Home/Legislative/Legislative_Tracking_Regular.aspx
- ¹⁴ U.S. Department of Education et al., "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics," 2014. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_216.30.asp
- ¹⁵ U.S. Department of Education et al., "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics," 2014. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_216.30.asp

- ¹⁶ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Total Number of Schools, 2012-2013 California," In *The Public Charter Schools Dashboard*, Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/state/CA/year/2013>
- ¹⁷ NAPCS, "Total Number of Schools, 2012-13," 2014. <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2013>
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- ¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education et al., "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics," 2014. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_216.30.asp
- ¹⁹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by School Level, Type, and Charter and Magnet Status: Selected Years, 1990-91 through 2011-12," In *Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey*, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2013. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_216.20.asp

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Reading the Research

- Why research on charter schools matters
- Terms and concepts to help understand the research
- Some challenges researchers face studying charter schools
- How to spot good research and how to interpret findings carefully

Why research on charter schools matters

K–12 education can often be highly politicized and hotly contested.¹ Charter schools are a particularly charged subject in K–12 education policy and reform. Research on charter schools has grown over the past decades as charter schools have expanded across the country. The scope and scale of charter school research continue to grow as more data become available.

Research on charter schools can help generate new information, uncover problems and point toward solutions. Findings from research can help foster a more civil dialogue and a more informed debate about how to improve education for all children, whether they attend a charter school or not.

This guide to research summarizes and explains research on charter schools across key topics, including [Student Achievement](#), [Diversity and Inclusion](#), [Teachers and Teaching](#), [Innovation](#), [Finances](#), [Governance and Regulation](#), [Charter School Operators](#), [Families](#) and [Public Opinion](#). The guide is designed to help research play a more meaningful role in how policymakers, journalists and communities think about charter schools and about children’s education generally.

However, research on charter schools can itself be the subject of vigorous debate. This guide includes research that has generated controversy. It attempts to explain some of those debates without taking sides. The section below outlines some research concepts and challenges to keep in mind as you read our guide and as you encounter new research on charter schools.

Terms and concepts to help understand the research

Correlation and causation

Researchers often find that two things they are interested in occur close in time or space to each other or change together. That is called “correlation.”

For instance, a study might find that as schools reduce the number of students per classroom, student achievement improves. It would be easy and perhaps intuitive to conclude that smaller class size causes better student outcomes. But unless the study is designed as an experiment or leverages a natural experiment—such as a lottery system that would randomly assign some students to the smaller classes and other students to the larger classes—researchers cannot conclude that smaller class size necessarily causes better outcomes. Other factors may be at play that are causing student achievement to improve. For example, principals may have sought to reward their best teachers by assigning them to the smaller classes first. Or the most affluent and engaged parents may have been the most successful in lobbying for admission into smaller classes. Those other factors may be reasons for increased student achievement. That said, many studies find noteworthy correlations (or a lack thereof) that can contribute to a more informed and nuanced debate about schools and education and suggest hypotheses about causal relationships to be tested in further research.

It is also important to remember that even when an experimental study finds a causal relationship between two variables of interest, there are likely to be many additional factors that affect an outcome.² For example, a study may find that being assigned a lottery-based seat in a charter school leads to higher student achievement *on average*. But there is still likely to be significant variation in the achievement of students within both charter and traditional public schools and hence many other factors that affect any individual student’s achievement.

Significance and effect size

If a researcher finds that students who attend one type of school score higher on standardized tests than students who attend another type of school, how likely is it that those differences are just a fluke? Mathematical tests for statistical significance help researchers figure out how likely it is that the differences they observe between groups or the associations they observe between two variables are a result of chance.

However, even if a difference or association is statistically significant, that does not necessarily mean it is large enough to be of practical relevance. In general, studies with larger samples are more likely to identify statistically significant effects, even when those effects are substantively small. After having identified that a difference or an association is not a fluke (in other words, that it is statistically significant), researchers examine how large and how meaningful the difference or association (in other words, the effect) is. *Effect sizes* are calculated to help decide the size and practical relevance of an observed difference or association.

Effect sizes are calculated and reported in a variety of ways—some are more technical and others are more real-world. For example, differences in test scores in charter school research are typically measured in standardized forms rather than in actual test scores. Therefore, researchers sometimes report effect sizes using more technical terms, such as a “standard deviation.” When they do so, statistical differences may be reported as fractions of a standard deviation. But there are no set standards for interpreting standard deviation differences, and conventions vary across different analytic tests. Interested readers may want to look at Jacob Cohen’s writing on effect sizes, which has been particularly influential for researchers thinking about what constitutes small, medium or large standard deviation differences.³

Researchers may also translate statistical differences into more real-world effect sizes, such as “days of learning.” A statistically significant difference in test scores may turn out to be equivalent to just four or five extra days of learning. Or it might translate into several months of extra learning.

Average and variation

Many research questions about charter schools revolve around comparisons. Studies may compare charter school students with traditional public school students, lower-income with higher-income students, different types of charter schools with traditional public schools or with one another, or charter school policies in one state with those in another.

These studies report on whether or not there are significant and relevant average differences among groups, schools or states. For example, a study may find no significant difference in charter school students’ average reading gains compared with the average reading gains of similar students in traditional public schools. Or a study may report that higher-performing charter schools on average have longer school years than lower-performing charter schools.

Highlighting average differences or lack thereof is an important research contribution. But part of understanding averages is also considering the degree of variation around that average. Even if a study finds no difference on average between charter school students’ and traditional public school students’ achievement scores, it may still report significant and relevant differences for certain types of students, for particular types of schools or in specific states or cities. Even within states or within a specific type of charter school, some charter schools may have greater impacts on student achievement than others, and impacts may be more notable for some types of students than others.

Paying attention to variation is crucial in charter school research, given that charter schools are a heterogeneous group of educational institutions, states vary in their regulations and oversight of charter schools, and charter schools—just like other types of schools—enroll many different kinds of students.

Some challenges researchers face studying charter schools

How do we define and measure the phenomena we are studying?


Turning an idea or issue into a researchable question requires clear definitions of terms and reliable measurements. Generating these definitions and measurements is rarely an easy process. For example, innovation is often cited as an important aspect of charter schools. But comparing innovation at charter schools with innovation at traditional public schools requires defining “innovation,” identifying specific practices as innovative and measuring them in precise and consistent ways. Standardized tests can provide useful metrics for some aspects of student achievement, but they do not measure every outcome that matters, such as future success in college and career, civic skills, communication or grit.

Whom should we compare?

When comparing charter schools with traditional public schools, or charter school students with traditional public school students, researchers need to think carefully about how to make fair comparisons. For example, charter schools are schools of choice, and there might be something inherently different about students and families that choose a charter school over a traditional public school. Even when studies carefully match charter school students with their peers in traditional public schools in the same district on demographic variables and test scores, it would be difficult to rule out the possibility that there are other important but nonmeasurable (or not measured) factors that distinguish charter students from those in traditional public schools.

Oversubscribed charter schools that admit students through a lottery system allow researchers to compare students who were randomly offered a seat in the charter with those who were not offered one. Such natural experiments provide opportunities for unbiased comparisons between a group of charter students and a group of students who also chose to apply to a charter school but did not get a seat.

How much can we generalize?



Students, schools and the laws governing them vary considerably across the country. For example, in the 2013–14 school year, 91 percent of public school students in New Orleans attended a charter school.⁴ But in Richmond, Virginia in 2012-13, only 0.8 percent of public school students attended a charter school. As of 2015, seven states still did not permit charter schools at all.⁵ Some charter schools are freestanding, while others are managed by larger organizations. States vary in their regulations, including whether or not they cap the number of charter schools that are allowed to open and the certifications they require for teachers. States, districts and schools differ in many ways, such as school financing and in demographics. And most charter school studies use samples of charter schools and students that are not representative of all charter schools and students. Researchers can therefore generalize their findings only to the specific student population, geographic location or type of charter school that they studied.

Nevertheless, any high-quality charter school study can help researchers, journalists, policymakers, practitioners and community members better reflect upon the dynamics and problems that may be occurring or about to occur with their students, in their schools or regions. Studies of other states, districts and schools can suggest questions that journalists, policymakers and practitioners may want to ask about their own communities. At the same time, it is important to consider individual studies as part of a larger body of research and to expand one's scope beyond single findings to understanding the literature as a whole.

Data can be difficult to find, inaccessible or nonexistent

Important questions about charter schools are often difficult to answer because data do not exist, are hard to access or are hard to compile. For example, the precise formulas for funding charter schools and funding traditional public schools can vary from state to state and district to district. Those formulas can change from year to year. Meanwhile, charter schools are often eligible for funding and finances through federal and state grant programs and from philanthropic foundations. This means that figuring out charter schools' exact revenues, their spending and their contracting can be painstaking work—to say nothing of generalizing about those findings to the nation as a whole. About one-third of charter schools are operated by management organizations that run multiple schools.⁶ Some of these organizations are nonprofit and others are for-profit. Collecting and comparing data across operators can be difficult, in part because many operators manage schools in multiple states with different reporting requirements.

How to spot good research and how to interpret findings carefully

Research has sometimes been produced and interpreted to serve the political goals of advocates for and opponents of charter schools.⁷ Asking a few questions can help readers decide how seriously to take a study's findings:

- How are the researchers defining and measuring the phenomena they are studying?
- What types of students, schools or locations are included in the study? To whom or where can the findings be generalized?
- How old are the data the researchers are using? How relevant are they to current policies and debates?
- If the study makes comparisons, are these fair and relevant comparisons? If it compares charter and traditional public school students, does it leverage a lottery admissions system or provide a detailed description of how it matches charter school students with traditional public school students in the same district?
- Do the researchers highlight variation in their findings? What kinds of variations are there?
- How relevant are the findings to the real world? How big are the differences the researchers find?
- What are the possible explanations for the correlations researchers find? Are there important variables the researchers overlooked or that were not available to them because of the limitations of their data? Are there alternative explanations to the ones suggested by the researchers?

- Does the study contain big news or surprises that seem too good or too bad to be true? Do the study's findings complement or sharply diverge from those of other high-quality studies of the same issues? If they diverge, do the authors provide a compelling explanation for why this is the case and their study should be given greater credibility?
- Who wrote and funded the study? Were the research questions posed or were the findings presented in ways that suggest authors or funders have specific interests in promoting or opposing charter schools? Are the authors downplaying findings that do not advance their interests or overstating findings that do advance their interests?
- Was the study published in a peer-reviewed academic journal? Are the authors willing to share copies of their article and respond to additional questions about their work?
- Are media reports on the research providing all the details you need? Are there important findings, methods, details or caveats discussed in the original publication that are missing from media reports?


For more detail on how to read, report on and use research with care, see the nonpartisan Council of State Governments' "A State Official's Guide to Science-Based Decision-Making"⁸ and the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearinghouse.⁹ A recent article in *The Atlantic* describes some of the ways that journalists, policymakers and practitioners can avoid "oversimplifying or overstating" the results of education research studies.¹⁰ Harvard University's Shorenstein Center has a useful primer on statistical terms used in research studies. ●

Notes

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- ⁵ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Total Number of Schools, 2012–13," in *The Public Charter Schools Dashboard*, Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2013>
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- ⁸ The Council of State Governments (CSG), "A State Official's Guide to Science-Based Decision-Making," Lexington, KY: CSG, 2014. http://knowledgecenter.csg.org/kc/system/files/SoundScience2014_FINAL_web_0.pdf
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Education and Institute of Education Sciences, "What Works Clearinghouse," Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences, 2013. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/document.aspx?sid=15&pid=1>
- ¹⁰ Jessica Lahey and Tim Lahey, "How to Read Education Data Without Jumping to Conclusions," *The Atlantic*, July 8, 2014. http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/07/how-to-read-education-data-without-jumping-to-conclusions/374045/?single_page=true

2

Student Achievement

- 
- A young girl with dark hair and glasses is smiling broadly at the camera. She is wearing a blue and white striped shirt. In the background, another student is visible, writing in a notebook. The scene is set in a classroom with a wooden desk.
- What is important to understand about the methodologies researchers use to study charter school impacts on students?
 - What are charter schools' impacts on students' standardized test scores, compared with those of traditional public schools?
 - What are charter schools' impacts on other measures of academic engagement and success, including high school and college graduation, compared with those of traditional public schools?
 - What are charter schools' impacts on employment outcomes, compared with those of traditional public schools?
 - How do charter schools impact civic engagement outcomes, compared with traditional public schools?
 - Does a charter school education impact behavioral or health outcomes?
 - Do charter schools impact the performance of students in traditional public schools?

What is important to understand about the methodologies researchers use to study charter school impacts on students?

Over the last decade, a number of large-scale studies have examined whether attending a charter school can improve students' performance on standardized tests and other outcomes, compared with attending a traditional public school. Among the key players in this field of research are the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, the public policy research institutes Mathematica and the RAND Corporation, and a number of academic researchers from various universities around the nation.

Before reviewing the main findings of this research, it is important to understand some basic facts about the methodologies of the most reputable studies in the field.

Studies that are considered methodologically most sound typically study charter school impacts in one of two ways:

Lottery studies: They leverage the lottery system that oversubscribed charter schools typically employ to admit students. This system can work as a natural experiment by which students are randomly assigned to a charter school or not. Research can then compare the academic trajectories of lottery winners who were offered a charter school spot with those of lottery non-winners—that is, their peers who were not admitted but presumably are no different from charter school students on any other characteristic. These studies' statistical techniques can also account for the fact that not all lottery winners accept their place in the charter school and that some initial lottery non-winners get a place in a charter school later on.

One limitation of this approach is that it reduces the studies to the most popular charters—that is, those that are oversubscribed and use a lottery system to enroll students. Findings may not be generalizable to other charter schools. It is particularly common for charter schools in large urban areas (for example, Boston and New York City) to rely on lotteries for student admission.

Also, observers have noted that charter schools' lotteries vary and may not always imply that all students have an equal chance of being accepted. It is not always possible for researchers to monitor each charter lottery effectively to know that assignment is indeed completely random. For more information on lottery systems, see the [Families](#) section.

Matching studies: They match and compare charter school students with similar students in traditional public schools in the same district. These studies find matches for each charter student in the study among students who attend those traditional public schools that are known to "feed" charter schools (that is, from where students are known to have transferred into local charter schools)—hence, "feeder" schools. That means that charter school students' performance is compared with the performance of students from the schools that the charter school students are likely to have been attending were they not attending a charter school. Matches are made on basic demographics and on baseline test scores—for instance, third-grade test scores are used as a baseline to estimate charter school impacts in fourth grade and above. Some matching studies, especially CREDO studies, use particularly rigorous matching

processes, by which each charter school student is matched to a composite of traditional public school peers, thus creating a “virtual twin” that resembles the charter school student more closely than any individual traditional public school student.

Notably, research teams differ on whether they consider test scores that were obtained *after* a student entered a charter school as legitimate baseline scores. For example, CREDO studies include students who never attended a traditional public school and use their third-grade charter school test scores as a baseline to measure effects in higher grades. Studies conducted by RAND and Mathematica have taken a more purist approach and include only charter school students whom they could match to traditional public school students on pre-charter achievement. The latter approach, however, precludes researchers from measuring impacts of charter elementary schools.

By comparing students’ achievement with a baseline score, matching studies are primarily examining students’ individual learning growth over time (or change in achievement). As such, these studies test whether charter school education leads to greater or lesser growth compared with a traditional public school education. The key advantage of this approach is that it controls for students’ individual educational histories. It also means these studies require at least two years of performance data for each participant (see discussion on baseline test scores above). While lottery studies do not necessarily have to include baseline scores and thus compare students on growth, some use this approach.

The main criticism of the matching approach is that no matches are perfect, including “virtual twins.” Students can be matched only on measurable characteristics. Many other, unknown or unmeasured variables may contribute to a students’ performance (for example, parent attitudes and resources). Nonetheless, the matching approach has been shown to produce results that successfully replicate the results of “gold standard” experimental (lottery-based) studies.¹

Results from achievement studies can be generalized only to students who might choose charter schools.

It is also important to keep in mind that any research results on charter school impacts on students—from lottery as well as matching studies—can be generalized only to students (and families) who want to attend charters. By definition, charters are schools of choice, and the study samples are therefore limited to students and families who might choose a charter school instead of a traditional public school. This

is particularly important to consider if charter applicants systematically differ from students and families who do not apply to charter schools in ways that could affect students’ academic performance. For more information on what is known about whether charters seem to attract more or less prepared students and families, see the [Diversity and Inclusion](#) and [Families](#) sections.


What are charter schools' impacts on students' standardized test scores, compared with those of traditional public schools?

Impacts vary widely across states, types of students, types of schools and over time.

The main take-away from studies that have examined charter schools' impacts on students' performance on standardized tests is that these impacts vary widely across states, types of students, types of schools and over time. Moreover, the research is continuously evolving as more and better data become available.

Here, we summarize the current state of knowledge of charter schools' impacts on student achievement. We summarize the field's key findings, nationally and across states, student demographics, types of schools and over time. Our review focuses on the largest and most recent studies and selected local studies. It is not comprehensive, but it provides a general overview of charter education impacts in the literature.

Nationally, there is very little evidence that charter and traditional public schools differ meaningfully in their average impact on students' standardized test performance. The most recent CREDO research (matching study) drew on data through 2010–11 from 27 states and found that charter schools on average had a small positive impact on students' reading achievement but no differential impact on students' math achievement. Note that CREDO counts Washington, D.C., as a state and also counts New York City as a "state" separately from New York State.² A 2014 meta-analysis of the literature on charter school effects, by researchers with the Center on Reinventing Public Education—a research and analysis organization associated with the University of Washington Bothell that focuses on "innovative schools of choice" and that works to "develop, test, and support evidence-based solutions to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools"—reported no significant impacts on reading scores and small positive impacts on math scores.³

 However, there are many different kinds of charter schools, many different types of students and wide variation in states' charter school laws and hence significantly different regulatory contexts in which charter schools operate. For more information on these regulatory and operational variations, see the [Charter School Operators](#) section. Considering these variations, research findings become more nuanced and more meaningful:

In some states charter schools have had positive impacts on student learning, in other states they have had negative impacts, while in others charters have had no differential impact compared with traditional public schools. For example, the most recent CREDO research (matching study) used data through 2010–11 and reported that in 16 states, charter schools were associated with greater reading gains compared with traditional public schools. In eight states, they found negative impacts for charter schools, and in three states they found no differences between charter school and traditional public school students' reading improvement, on average (the study included 27 states). The differences ranged from charter schools showing reading gains

equivalent to 86 days *more* learning than in traditional public schools in Rhode Island and Tennessee, to reading gains equivalent to 108 days *less* learning than in traditional public schools in Nevada.⁴ For the full list of charter school impacts by state, see pages 52–53 of CREDO’s *National Charter School Study 2013*.

CREDO authors pointed out that the diversity of charter impacts in generally low-performing areas is particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, charter impacts were associated with the equivalent of 101 extra days of math learning in Washington, D.C. and 91 extra days of learning in New York City. In these cases, one can argue that charters improve educational opportunities for students. On the other hand, when charter schools’ impacts are negative in already low-performing states (for example, Nevada) one may argue that they are further limiting educational opportunities for students.

Lower-income and urban students are most likely to benefit from a charter education. A number of studies that focus on charter schools in large urban districts (for instance, New York City, Boston and Los Angeles) found positive impacts of charters on students’ standardized test score achievement. For example, Caroline Hoxby and colleagues’ evaluation of New York City charter schools (lottery study; nearly all New York City charter schools are lottery based) analyzed data through 2007–08 and reported positive impacts for charter schools on students’ achievement in English and math. The size of these effects increased as students spent more years in charter schools.⁵ Similarly, Atila Abdulkadiroglu and colleagues (lottery study) analyzed data through 2006–07 and reported positive impacts on English and math achievement among charter middle and high school students in their evaluation of Boston charter schools.⁶

These single-city studies are highly informative for charter school debates in those respective cities, but their findings are not easily generalizable beyond their specific locations and population. First, locations vary in their charter school laws and oversight, which in turn may differentially affect charters’ impacts. Second, as charter school students in large urban cities such as New York City, Boston and Los Angeles are predominantly African-American or Hispanic and living in poverty, these single-city studies cannot tell us whether the impacts are specific to low-income students, minority students, urban schools, a combination or none of these factors.

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National studies, such as the 2013 27-state CREDO study and Mathematica’s 2011 evaluation of fifth through seventh graders in 36 schools across 15 states, can help disentangle some student subgroup and locale impacts.

CREDO (2013, matching study, including schools across 27 states) analyzed data through 2010–11 and found charter schools' greatest impacts on the math and reading growth of low-income, minority students (low-income is measured as students' eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch). For example, they reported math gains equivalent to 36 extra days of learning for African-American students living in poverty, compared with African-American students living in poverty and attending traditional public schools. The study reported no differential impacts for African-American charter school students who were not living in poverty. Similarly, CREDO 2013 found positive impacts for low-income Hispanic students, but negative impacts for Hispanic students who were not living in poverty. Impacts on low-income, minority students were especially pronounced in urban areas.

Mathematica's evaluation of charter middle schools in 15 states (lottery study) examined data through 2007–08 and also found that both students' background and the location of the school mattered for achievement outcomes. The study reported small positive impacts for low-income students (those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and somewhat larger negative impacts for higher-income students in reading and math. At the same time, the study found that regardless of income, urban charter schools were more likely to have positive impacts on students' math achievement than nonurban charter schools, which tended to have negative impacts. After conducting further exploratory analyses, the authors noted that urban charter schools' relative edge could be due to their urban comparison schools constituting lower-quality alternatives than the study's suburban and rural comparison schools, especially for low-income students.⁷

One charter school's impact can differ greatly from another's. Some school characteristics have been found to relate to charter impacts. Every charter evaluation study has reported great variation among individual charter schools' impacts and among different types of charter schools' impacts. For example, CREDO 2013 (matching study) analyzed data through 2010–11 and found that the majority of the schools in their study (56 percent) had no greater or lesser impact on their students' reading gains than did traditional public schools, but 25 percent of the schools in their study improved students' reading over and above traditional public schools' impact, while 19 percent diminished students' reading gains compared with traditional public schools. The same study also found more positive impacts for charters that were elementary or middle schools, but no impacts for charter high schools.⁸

Similarly, Mathematica studied impacts of 22 charter management organizations (CMOs) (matching and lottery study). CMOs are nonprofit organizations that manage multiple charter schools. For more information about these organizations, see the [Charter School Operators](#) section. Examining data through 2010–11, Mathematica reported differences in impacts that ranged from the highest-impact CMO demonstrating three years' worth of learning gains within a two-year period to the lowest-performing CMO showing as little as one year of learning gains in a two-year period. Overall, the study found positive impacts on students' math *and* reading scores in 45 percent of the CMOs studied, but just as many CMOs had negative impacts in either math or reading.⁹

Studying impacts of a specific CMO, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) (matching and lottery study), Mathematica examined data through 2010–11 and found that while KIPP middle schools had overall positive impacts on student learning in reading and math, some KIPP middle schools had greater impacts than others.¹⁰

Such variation raises the question of what aspects of a charter school make it more or less likely to impact students' learning compared with traditional public schools. While results pertaining to this question are correlational and hence preclude us from making direct and confident attributions about cause, the relationships are suggestive in ways that warrant further study. For example, positive charter school impacts have been correlated with:

- A longer school year
- More time devoted to core academic tasks each day
- A mission statement that emphasizes academic performance and high expectations
- School-wide disciplinary systems
- Grouping students by academic ability
- Smaller school size
- Frequent feedback and coaching for teachers
- Using data from frequent assessments to inform instruction
- Frequent tutoring for students in small groups¹¹

For more information about the research on these and other practices, see the [Innovation](#) section.

What are charter schools' impacts on other measures of academic engagement and success, including high school and college graduation, compared with those of traditional public schools?

There is comparatively little rigorous research comparing charter schools with traditional public schools on measures of academic outcomes other than standardized test scores, such as indicators of academic engagement and motivation, high school completion, college matriculation, graduation and so on. These tend to be long-term outcomes that cannot be

There is comparatively little rigorous research comparing charter schools with traditional public schools on measures of academic outcomes other than standardized test scores.

measured until several years after students entered a charter school. Moreover, much of this information is not collected in the same comprehensive ways as standardized test scores.

However, a growing number of studies have looked at additional measures of academic engagement and success. Their results typically mirrored what they reported on charters' impacts on standardized test scores.


For example, Mathematica researchers' 15-state study of charter school fifth through seventh graders (lottery study)—

a study that examined data through 2007–08 and reported no differential impacts for charters overall—reported no evidence that charter school students had better school attendance or grade promotion than their peers in traditional public schools.¹²

However, studying charter schools' impacts in New York City with data through 2007–08, Caroline Hoxby and colleagues (lottery study) not only found positive charter impacts on math and reading scores, but also reported that the longer students stay in charter schools, the higher they scored on the New York State high school Regents examinations and the more likely they were to earn a New York State Regents diploma. Similarly, Joshua Angrist and colleagues' 2013 lottery-based evaluation of Boston charter schools reported positive impacts for charter schools not only on students' standardized test scores, but also on indicators of college preparedness, including SAT scores and students' likelihood to enroll in a four-year college.¹³ Will Dobbie and Roland Fryer, too, found in their 2012 survey of former students that winning a lottery-based place at Promise Academy in Harlem increased students' college enrollment rate and especially their likelihood to enroll at a four-year school.¹⁴

Evaluating charters in eight locations (matching study), Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill and colleagues reported positive impacts of charter school education on academic outcomes other than standardized test scores, using data through 2006–07. In a sample of charter middle school students in Florida and Chicago, students who transferred into a charter high school were more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to attend college than those charter middle school students who did not transfer into a charter high school.¹⁵

Mathematica researchers reported that students who were offered a lottery-based place at KIPP middle schools not only performed better on standardized math and reading tests than students who did not win a seat in a KIPP school, but also reported doing more homework and being more satisfied with their school. At the same time, the study found no difference between KIPP lottery winners and non-winners on such measures as academic engagement and effort and educational aspirations (all self-reported by students).¹⁶

 Again, there is significant variation in the extent to which charter schools impact students' academic engagement and success. Across six CMOs, Mathematica (matching study) found no overall impact on high school graduation, but substantial variation among CMOs, ranging from one increasing students' probability of graduating by 23 percent to another that reduced students' likelihood of graduating high school by 22 percent.

What are charter schools' impacts on employment outcomes, compared with those of traditional public schools?

There is hardly any research so far that estimates how a charter school education shapes students' future employment trajectories and income. One exception is a matching study by Kevin Booker and colleagues. Leveraging long-term student tracking data from Florida through 2006–07, this study matched charter high school students who had also attended charter middle schools with charter middle school students who had not attended charter high schools and found that in their early to mid-twenties, former charter high school students had significantly higher earnings.¹⁷

How do charter schools impact civic engagement outcomes, compared with traditional public schools?

The mission of public education extends beyond academic learning to include the preparation of students to be engaged citizens. An important research question is therefore how successful charter schools are in developing students' civic knowledge, skills and attitudes, in both the short and the long term.

Civic engagement outcomes are again more difficult to measure and track than students' standardized test scores. Hence there is so far little research on this issue. In one early matching study, Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider reported that charter school students who were surveyed in 2003 reported more civic skills training and community participation but were no different in their endorsement of civil liberties than their peers in traditional public schools.¹⁸

Recent studies have not included civic engagement outcomes, even though a number of charter school networks focus explicitly on civic education.

Does a charter school education impact behavioral or health outcomes?

The literature on charters' impacts on behavioral and health-related outcomes is limited to small-scale studies that focus on specific charter schools, and their findings are mixed.

Will Dobbie and Roland Fryer analyzed data through 2012 and reported a decline in teenage pregnancy for females and a decline in incarceration rates among males who won a place at Promise Academy in Harlem, compared with their peers who did not win a lottery-based seat at the school. However, the study found impacts neither on behaviors such as alcohol or drug use nor on health outcomes. Information on these outcomes was collected through surveys with students.¹⁹

Mathematica's evaluation of KIPP middle schools (lottery study) utilized data through 2010-11 and found that KIPP lottery winners were also more likely to say they argued with their parents, lost their temper, lied or gave teachers a hard time than students who applied to KIPP but did not win a place—results the authors suggest could reflect true differences in behavior or differences in students' likelihood to honestly report such behavior. At the same time,

Mathematica found no difference in how KIPP lottery winner parents and parents whose children did not win a lottery-based seat described their children's behavior outside of school and behavioral problems.²⁰

A lot more research is needed to understand if, how and when charter schools shape children's academic and nonacademic outcomes.


It is generally acknowledged that a lot more research, and much more data, is needed to understand if, how and when charter schools shape children's academic and nonacademic outcomes.

Do charter schools impact the performance of students in traditional public schools?

To fully understand charter schools' impact on all students' achievement, it is important to consider whether the existence and expansion of charter schools affect academic and nonacademic outcomes of students in nearby traditional public schools.

Advocates have argued that charter schools carry the potential to increase competition in the education market and thus encourage traditional public schools to do more to improve student performance. Proponents have also often pointed out that charter school innovations could spread to traditional public schools, an issue that our section, [Innovation](#), discusses in more detail. Skeptics have pointed out that the existence of charter schools could negatively impact the education and performance of students in nearby traditional public schools by taking financial resources away from those public schools and by attracting the most motivated and engaged families ("cream skimming"). For more information on these issues, see the [Diversity and Inclusion](#) and [Finances](#) sections.

Studies have measured charter schools' "pressure" on traditional public schools by a) the proportion of public school students in a given district who are enrolled in charter schools, or b) the number of charter schools located within a certain radius of a traditional public school, or c) the percentage of students a school has lost to charter schools each year. These studies use longitudinal student test score data to examine whether traditional public school students' performance changed with increasing pressure from charter schools.

 The results of these studies are mixed and vary notably across location. Moreover, whenever impacts were found, they have typically been small.

Some studies have found no evidence that charter school competition affected the performance of students in nearby traditional public schools. For example, Ron Zimmer and Richard Buddin, using data through the 2001–02 school year, found no evidence that competition from charters impacted the test score performance of traditional public school students in California.²¹ Similarly, Robert Bifulco and Helen Ladd, also using data through the 2001–02 school year, found no evidence for such impacts in North Carolina.²² Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill and colleagues found no impact in seven of the eight states and districts they studied, using data through the 2007–08 school year.²³ Analyzing spring 2002 data from a national student sample, Tomeka Davis, too, found no evidence that charter school competition affected students' achievement in traditional public schools.²⁴

Some studies have reported findings that showed positive impacts of charter school competition on the standardized test scores of students in nearby traditional public schools. For example, Kevin Booker and colleagues analyzed data from Texas through the 2003–04 school year and found that students' performance in traditional public schools improved as charter schools came to their districts. They found particular improvement among low-income and African-American and Hispanic students in traditional public schools.²⁵ Marcus Winters also found some evidence in New York City that traditional public school students' scores improved slightly as charter school competition grew, analyzing data through the 2008–09 school year.²⁶ Using data through the 2004–05 school year and a different statistical method from that of Robert Bifulco and Helen Ladd's study cited above,²⁷ Yusuke Jinnai found small positive impacts in North Carolina.²⁸ Small positive impacts have also been reported for Florida.²⁹

However, Yongmei Ni, using data through 2003–04 from Michigan, reported small negative impacts on traditional public school students' tests that increased with the number of years traditional public schools experienced charter competition.³⁰ Based on data through 2004–05, Scott Imberman reported small negative impacts on student achievement in one large southwestern district, but positive impacts on middle and high school students' discipline.³¹

Again, more research is needed regarding the effects of charter schools on the achievement of students in nearby traditional public schools. Existing studies are limited to specific areas and may not be generalizable nationally. They have looked almost exclusively at standardized test scores — an important but limited outcome — and the most recent data they consider is from 2009. As the number of charter schools has increased nationwide, forthcoming studies can be expected to leverage more recent data and thus estimate impacts of increased charter school competition on traditional public schools. ●

Notes

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3

Diversity and Inclusion



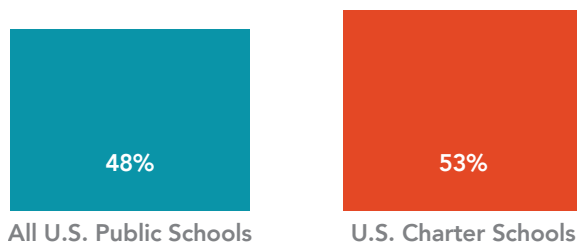
- Are there socioeconomic or racial/ethnic differences between charter school students and those attending traditional public schools?
- Are charter schools enrolling the same proportion of special education students as traditional public schools?
- Are charter schools enrolling the same proportion of English-language learners as traditional public schools?
- Is there evidence that charter schools pull the highest-achieving students away from traditional public schools?
- Is there evidence that charter schools push out low-performing students?

Are there socioeconomic or racial/ethnic differences between charter school students and those attending traditional public schools?

Nationally, charter school students are more likely to be from families living in poverty, as measured by students' eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. A 2013 report from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that in the 2010–11 school year, 48 percent of all public school students—3.7 percent of whom were charter students in that year¹—were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, whereas 53 percent of all charter school students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.²

Charter school students are more likely to be from low-income households compared with all public school students

Percent of low-income students in 27 states by school type, 2010-11:

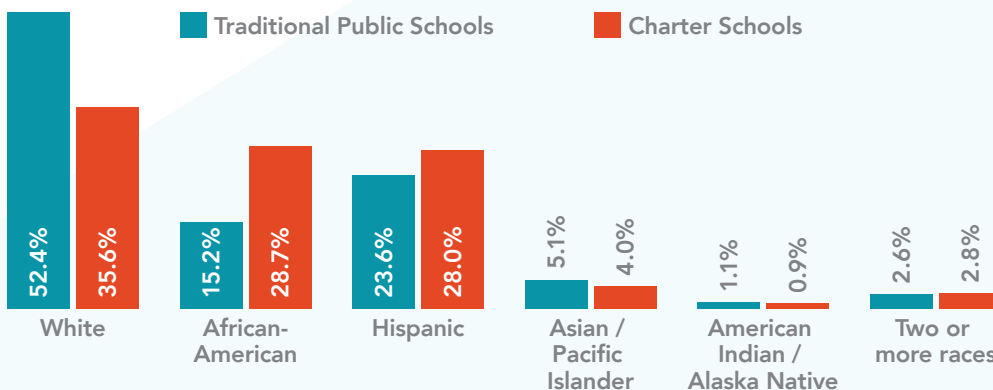


SOURCE: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), National Charter School Study, 2013.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2011–12, charter school students nationwide were more likely to be African-American or Hispanic than traditional public school students. And charter school students were less likely to be white and less likely to be Asian than traditional public school students.³

Charter school students are more likely to be African American or Hispanic than traditional public school students are

Percent of students enrolled in charter and traditional public schools by race and ethnicity, 2011-12:



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2014.

This national pattern is partially explained by the fact that charter schools tend to be concentrated in large urban centers where the student population is majority African-American and Hispanic and is more likely to be living in poverty compared with students in nonurban areas. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2011–12 school year, over half of charter schools (55.4 percent) were located in cities. Just 21.2 percent were in suburban locales, 7.4 percent were in towns, and 16 percent were located in rural areas.⁴

When researchers compare charter school students' demographics with those of their peers in nearby traditional public schools, a more nuanced picture emerges: The 2013 CREDO study compared charter school students with students in local "feeder" schools—that is, schools from which charter school students are known to transfer if they do not start off at a charter school—in 27 states and found that at both charters and their traditional public feeder schools, 54 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in 2010–11.⁵



The extent to which charters educate more or less disadvantaged students than their nearby traditional public schools also varies across geographic locations. For example, Caroline Hoxby and her colleagues examined New York City students and found that charter school students in 2005–06 were more likely to live in poverty than students in New York City's traditional public schools, as measured by their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches. But Atila Abdulkadiroglu and colleagues, using data from 2006–07, found the opposite pattern in Boston—traditional public school students were more likely than charter school students to be living in poverty.⁶

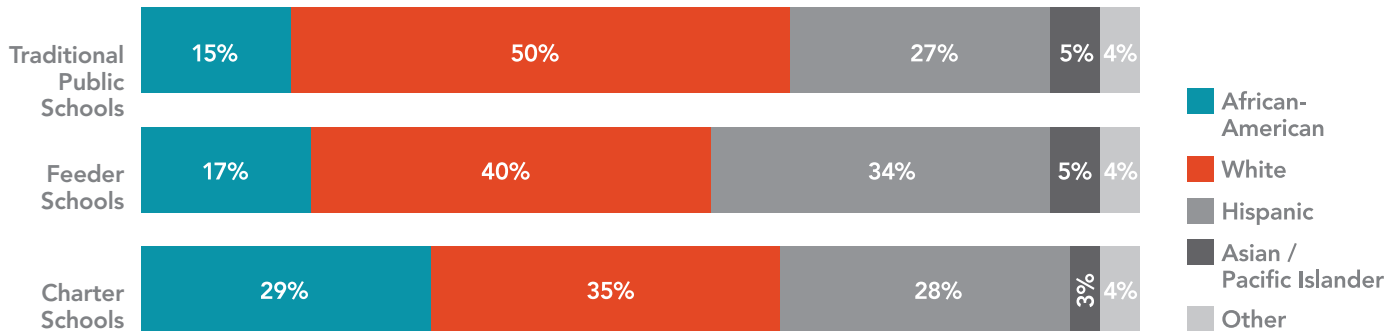
The public policy research institute Mathematica, in a study of nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) — nonprofit organizations that operate multiple charter schools—used data through 2010–11 and reported that of 11 CMOs for which they had sufficient information on their and their districts' students' eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, eight served more low-income students than their host districts, and two served fewer.⁷ These three studies, however, did not compare charter students only with feeder school students, which some observers argue are the more relevant comparison group. For more information about charter management organizations, see the [Charter School Operators](#) section.

Local comparisons of students' race/ethnicity typically have confirmed one national-level trend—namely, that charter schools have disproportionately attracted African-American students. CREDO reported that in 2010–11, charter school students in the 27 states they studied were notably more likely to be African-American than students in traditional public feeder schools and hence less likely to be Hispanic or white compared with students in their feeder schools.⁸

Similarly, Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill and colleagues—in a study published by the nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research institute the RAND Corporation examining data from 2006–07—found that in six out of seven urban areas and states they studied, African-American students were overrepresented in charter schools compared with feeder public schools.⁹ New York City and Boston school studies have also reported that charter schools in these urban centers enroll a larger number of African-American students compared with traditional public schools in these areas.¹⁰

Charter schools enroll proportionally more African-American students than traditional public schools do

Percent of students enrolled in charter, traditional public and feeder schools in 27 states by race and ethnicity, 2010-11:



SOURCE: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), National Charter School Study, 2013.

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

The overrepresentation of African-American students in charter schools has led observers to ask whether charter schools contribute to racial/ethnic segregation. Indeed, a number of studies have provided evidence that charter schools tend to be less racially/ethnically diverse than both the traditional public schools in their districts and the more limited group of feeder schools from which students transfer into charters.

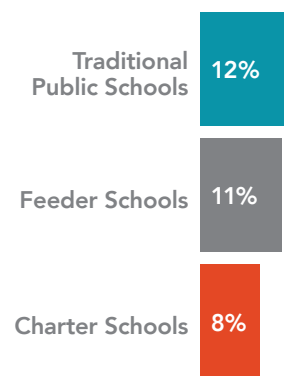
For example, Caroline Hoxby concluded that New York City traditional public schools were more diverse than the city's charter schools, which were educating largely African-American students in 2005–06.¹¹ Kevin Booker and colleagues—in a study published by the RAND Corporation examining data from 2003–04—found that in Texas and California, African-American students who transferred into charters were typically leaving more diverse schools and entering less diverse charters—that is, charters that educated mostly African-American students.¹² Similarly, Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill and colleagues detected a trend for African-American students to transfer to charters with more African-American students, and hence enter less diverse schools than the ones they left, in five of seven locations they studied. Transfer students from other racial/ethnic groups typically entered charters with racial/ethnic compositions similar to those in the traditional public schools they left.¹³ For more information about the race and ethnicity of charter school families and how they choose, see the [Families](#) section.

Are charter schools enrolling the same proportion of special education students as traditional public schools?

Charter school studies have consistently reported that students with special education needs have tended to be underrepresented in charter schools. For example, CREDO 2013 reported that in the 2010–11 school year, 8 percent of charter school students in their 27-state study were considered special education students, while 11 percent of students in these charters' feeder schools and 12 percent of students in the traditional public schools in these states were considered special education students.¹⁴

Charter schools enroll proportionally fewer special education students than traditional public schools do

Percent of special education students in 27 states by school type, 2010-11:



SOURCE: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) National Charter School Study, Stanford University, 2013.

Location-specific studies, including those focusing on New York City, Boston and Los Angeles, have also reported that charter schools enrolled fewer special education students than did traditional public schools in their districts, including those charters' feeder schools.¹⁵ Mathematica's research on nonprofit charter school management organizations (CMOs), using data from 2010–11, found that 18 out of 23 CMOs for which they had relevant data served fewer students who had received a special education plan prior to entering the middle school, compared with traditional public schools in host districts.¹⁶ And Mathematica's research on charter middle schools in one CMO, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), found that students in 2010–11 who transferred into these charter schools were less likely to have received special education than their traditional elementary school peers.¹⁷

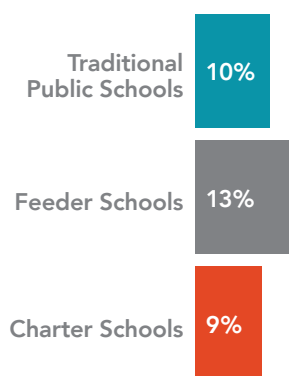
Critics have argued—and cited anecdotal evidence—that charter schools purposefully discourage families with special needs kids from applying and/or steer them away to other schools. Several other reasons have also been suggested by researchers and other observers for why charters serve a lower proportion of special education students. It is possible that parents of children with special needs believe that traditional public schools are better equipped to educate their children. They may therefore be less likely to consider a charter school. It is also possible that charter schools use different criteria for classifying students as special needs, thereby undercounting those students. However, the latter argument cannot explain why some studies, such as Mathematica's KIPP evaluation, found that children who receive special education status in a traditional public school are less likely to transfer into a charter school.

Are charter schools enrolling the same proportion of English-language learners as traditional public schools?

Charter school studies have consistently reported that students with limited English proficiency are typically underrepresented in charter schools. For example, CREDO 2013 reported that in the 2010–11 school year, 9 percent of charter school students in their 27-state study were considered English-language learners, while 13 percent of students in these charters' feeder schools and 10 percent of students in the traditional public schools in these states were considered English-language learners.¹⁸

Charter school students are less likely to be English-language learners than traditional public school students

Percent of English-language learners in 27 states by school type, 2010-11:



SOURCE: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), National Charter School Study, 2013.

Location-specific studies, including those focusing on New York City, Boston and Los Angeles, also reported that charter schools enrolled fewer students with limited English proficiency than did traditional public schools in their districts, including these charters' feeder schools.¹⁹ Mathematica's research on middle schools in charter management organizations, using data through 2010–11, found that 13 out of 16 organizations for which they had data served fewer students considered to have limited English proficiency prior to entering the middle school, compared with traditional public schools in host districts.²⁰ And Mathematica's research on charter middle schools in one charter management organization, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), found that students in 2010–11 who transferred into these charter schools were less likely to have had limited English proficiency than their traditional elementary school peers.²¹

Again, observers have suggested several reasons for why charters serve a lower proportion of students with limited English-language proficiency. Critics argue that charters purposefully discourage English-language learners from applying to their school and/or steer them to other schools. It has also been suggested that these students' parents may have less access to information about their school options and thus may be less likely to consider charter schools. It could also be that charter schools use different criteria for assessing students' language difficulties, or they may use different methods to help students reach English proficiency faster. However, the latter is not an explanation for studies such as Mathematica's KIPP evaluation that find that children who were classified as having limited English proficiency in a traditional public school are less likely to transfer into a charter school. For more information about how parents choose charter schools, see the [Families](#) section.

Is there evidence that charter schools pull the highest-achieving students away from traditional public schools?

Questions about whether charters pull more motivated and better-prepared students (and parents) away from traditional public schools have been of great concern to many observers.

To address this question, researchers have compared the prior test scores of students who transferred from a traditional public school into a charter school—or who applied to a charter school lottery—with those of their same-school peers who did not enter or apply to a charter school. Given that charter schools are schools of choice, this methodology is the most rigorous for estimating the extent to which students who choose a charter school may be better prepared to succeed academically than the students who stay behind. However, this methodology is limited in two important ways:

- It cannot account for the many students who either start their education in a charter school or transfer before they have taken a standardized test (that is, before third grade). We thus do not know whether this very large group of students who have had no or limited experience in the traditional public school system may be more motivated or better prepared than their peers in traditional public schools.
- Using test scores as indicators of academic preparedness may not capture the many other student and family characteristics that differentiate students who transfer to charter schools from those who stay in traditional public schools. These other indicators may also shape their academic performance.²²

Moreover, there are very few studies that have enough data to compare charter transfer students with their peers in the schools they left.

With that said, the available, albeit limited, evidence does not support the notion that charter school transfer students are consistently better prepared than their traditional public school peers.

Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill and colleagues conducted a study published by the RAND Corporation using student data from 2007–08 in Chicago, San Diego, Philadelphia, Denver, Milwaukee and the states of Ohio and Texas. They found that in those metropolitan areas and states, the prior standardized test scores of students transferring to charters differed slightly from those of their feeder school peers, and the direction of the difference varied across locations. In two locations (Chicago and Philadelphia), charter transfer students had higher test scores than their feeder school peers. In four locations (Ohio, Texas, Denver and San Diego), their scores were slightly lower than those of their feeder school peers. And in Milwaukee, there was virtually no difference in test scores between charter movers and their feeder school peers.²³

The same study also found that Hispanic and African-American students who transferred to a charter school had lower prior standardized test scores than their same-race elementary school peers in the majority of sites. White transfer students, who were a small minority in most locations, tended to have higher prior achievement scores than their elementary school peers.²⁴



Studying middle schools run by the nonprofit charter management organization Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), Mathematica found that in 2010–11, KIPP students tended to have slightly lower math and reading scores in elementary school than students in the same elementary feeder schools who did not apply to KIPP.²⁵ However, students who transferred into KIPP middle schools in higher grades tended to have higher prior achievement levels than students already enrolled at KIPP.²⁶

Finally, researchers who examined Florida students' standardized test scores from 2000 to 2005 found that the better students were performing at traditional public schools, the less likely they were to transfer into charter schools.²⁷

Is there evidence that charter schools push out low-performing students?

Critics have repeatedly argued that charter schools may be counseling out or otherwise “pushing out” lower-performing students in an effort to keep their average student performance high, enhance their reputations as high-performing schools or save money.

However, there is very little empirical research on the topic. One exception is a recent study by Ron Zimmer and Cassandra Guarino of student data from 2006–07 in an anonymous large urban school district. They found no significant differences in the prior performance of students who had left charter schools compared with those who had left traditional public schools.²⁸

Much more research and data are needed on this question, especially studies that are able to estimate both national trends and the extent to which charter schools and management organizations may vary in their approaches to the needs of the lowest-performing students. ●

Notes

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4

Teachers and Teaching



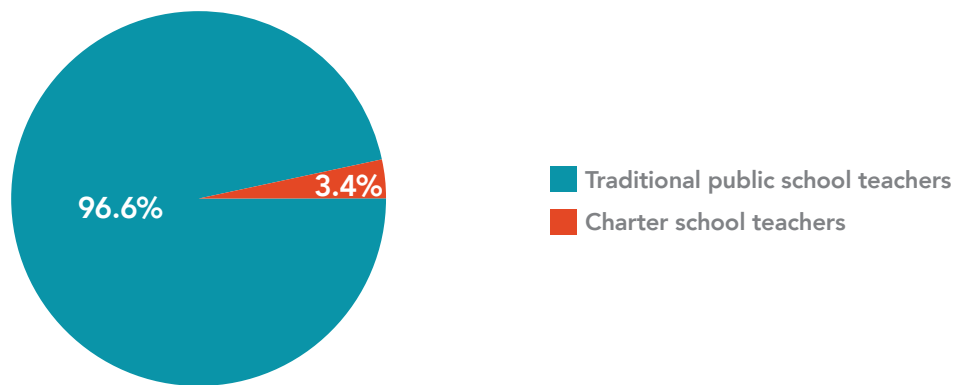
- Who teaches at charter schools, and how do they differ from teachers at traditional public schools?
- What does the research show about teacher and principal turnover at charter schools?
- How satisfied are charter school teachers with their jobs?
- How many charter school teachers are unionized?
- What types of teaching methods and administrative practices do charter schools use?
- Are charter school classes necessarily smaller than traditional public school classes?

Who teaches at charter schools, and how do they differ from teachers at traditional public schools?


There were approximately 3,385,200 public school teachers in the United States in the 2011–12 school year, the most recent year for which data are available from the U.S. Department of Education’s Schools and Staffing Survey. Of those, 115,600 taught in charter schools, meaning that about 3.4 percent of all public school teachers are charter school teachers.¹

Most public school teachers teach at traditional public schools

Percent of teachers by school type, 2011-12:



SOURCE: NCES, “Results from the 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey,” 2013.

 Laws pertaining to charter schools vary from state to state. According to the nonpartisan Education Commission of the States, charter school teachers must be certified in 14 states and in Puerto Rico; certification is not required in Arizona or the District of Columbia while Louisiana requires only a baccalaureate degree; certification is required under specific conditions, with exceptions, or can be waived in 26 states.²

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Schools and Staffing Survey, charter school teachers on average differ from public school teachers in several ways.

Charter school teachers tend to be:

- **Younger:** The average age of charter school teachers was 37, whereas the average age of traditional public school teachers was 43.
- **Less educated:** 48 percent of traditional public school teachers had master’s degrees, whereas 37 percent of charter school teachers had master’s degrees.
- **Less experienced:** On average, charter school teachers had nine years of teaching experience, whereas public school teachers had 14 years.
- **Newer to their schools:** Charter school teachers had been at their current schools for an average of 3.6 years, whereas traditional public school teachers had been at theirs for an average of 8.1 years.

- **Paid less:** Traditional public school teachers' average salary was \$53,400, whereas charter school teachers' average salary was \$44,500. It is possible that charter school teachers' salaries are lower because they tend to have worked for fewer years at their current schools. However, the Schools and Staffing Survey does not provide salary data by seniority level. Note also that some charter schools pay teachers markedly higher salaries.³
- **More racially diverse:** Charter school teachers were more likely to be black, Hispanic or Asian and less likely to be white than traditional public school teachers.
- **Equally likely to get professional development:** 99 percent of traditional public school teachers participated in some type of professional development, and 98.3 percent of charter school teachers did so.
- **Focused on different types of professional development:** Higher percentages of charter school teachers took professional development in student discipline and classroom management, teaching English-language learners and teaching students with disabilities. Higher percentages of traditional public school teachers took professional development in the subjects they teach and in use of computers.⁴

What does the research show about teacher and principal turnover at charter schools?

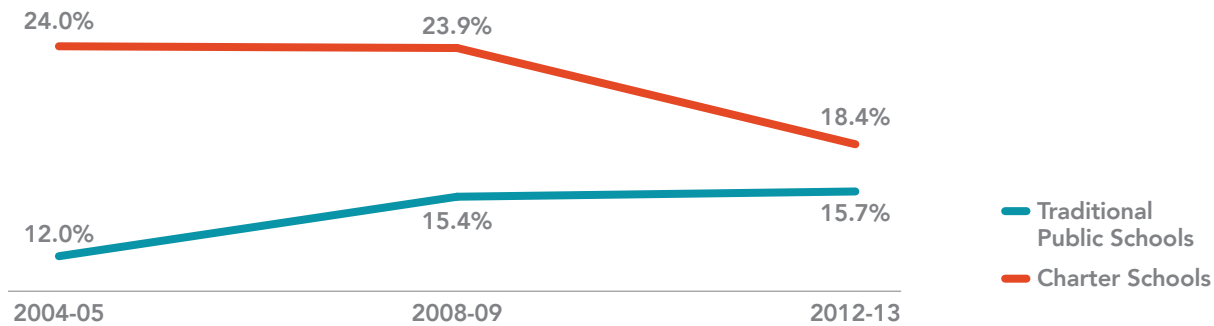
Teacher turnover is not necessarily a problem if it means that less effective teachers are leaving schools or being fired, or if it means that more effective teachers are moving to the schools where they can have the most impact. But as in any organization, turnover can be a cause and a sign of problems. High teacher turnover can be disruptive to a school's culture and organization, making it hard to implement curricula, foster good relationships among staff and build trust.⁵

Turnover at charter schools is higher than turnover at traditional public schools. But turnover at charter schools appears to be declining, while turnover at traditional public schools appears to be increasing.

A peer-reviewed analysis of data from the 2003–04 Schools and Staffing Survey and the 2004–05 Teacher Follow-up Survey found that teacher turnover at charter schools was just over 24 percent annually, while turnover at traditional public schools was less than 12 percent.⁶ Results from the 2008–09 Teacher Follow-up Survey found that turnover in charter schools was 23.9 percent annually, while turnover at traditional public schools was 15.4 percent annually.⁷ The 2012–13 Teacher Follow-up Survey showed that turnover in charter schools was 18.4 percent, while the turnover rate at traditional public schools was 15.7 percent. Turnover rates include teachers who moved to other schools as well as those who left the teaching profession entirely.⁸

Charter school teacher turnover has declined

Percent of teacher turnover over time by school type:



SOURCES: NCES, "Results from the 2008-09 Teacher Follow-up Survey," 2010.
NCES, "Results from the 2012-13 Teacher Follow-up Survey," 2014.

Data from the 2012-13 Teacher Follow-up Survey have not yet been analyzed to find out why charter school teachers left their positions or whether their reasons differ significantly from why traditional public school teachers left. However, the peer-reviewed analysis of data from the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey and the 2004-05 Teacher Follow-up Survey found that charter school teachers were more than twice as likely as traditional public school teachers to leave their positions involuntarily. This could be either because they were fired or because their charter school closed.⁹ Charter schools do have higher rates of closure than traditional public schools.

The peer-reviewed analysis of the data from the 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey and the 2004-05 Teacher Follow-up Survey also found that charter school teachers were more likely than traditional public school teachers to cite dissatisfaction with compensation, teaching assignments and workplace conditions as reasons for voluntarily leaving their schools or the teaching profession entirely. That study found that the low unionization rates of charter schools was the most important factor in explaining higher turnover rates based on its analysis of 2003-04 and 2004-05 data.¹⁰ However, as discussed further below, some charter school teachers are unionized.

Turnover among principals is also slightly higher at charter schools than at traditional public schools. The Schools and Staffing Survey showed that from the 2011-12 to 2012-13 school years:

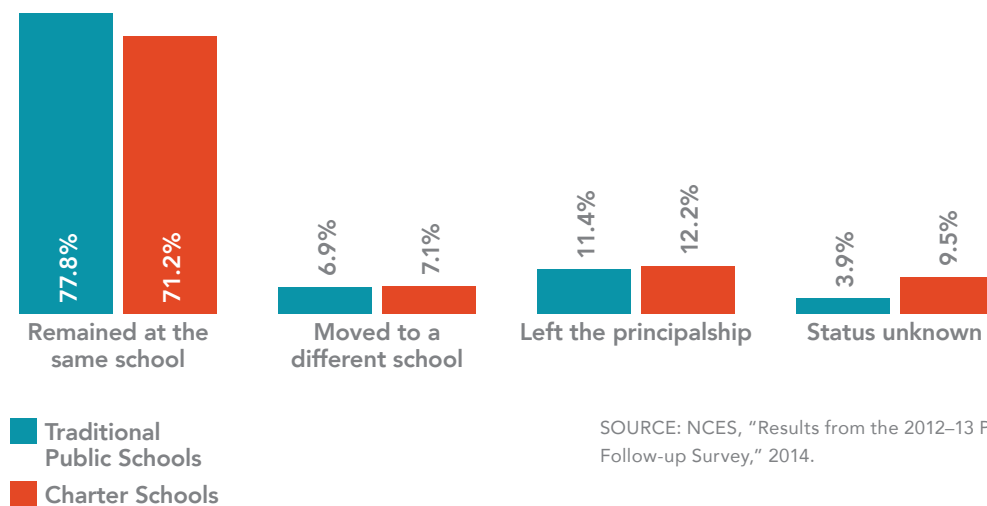
- 71.2 percent of charter school principals remained at the same school during the following school year.
- 7.1 percent of charter school principals moved to a different school.
- 12.2 percent of charter school principals left the principalship.
- The status of 9.5 percent of charter school principals was unknown.¹¹

By contrast, principals in traditional public schools had somewhat lower turnover:

- 77.8 percent of traditional public school principals remained at the same school during the following school year.
- 6.9 percent of traditional public school principals moved to a different school.
- 11.4 percent of traditional public school principals left the principalship.
- The status of 3.9 percent of traditional public school principals was unknown.¹²

Principal turnover is slightly higher at charter schools than at traditional public schools

Percent of principals leaving or remaining in their jobs by school type, 2011-12:



How satisfied are charter school teachers with their jobs?

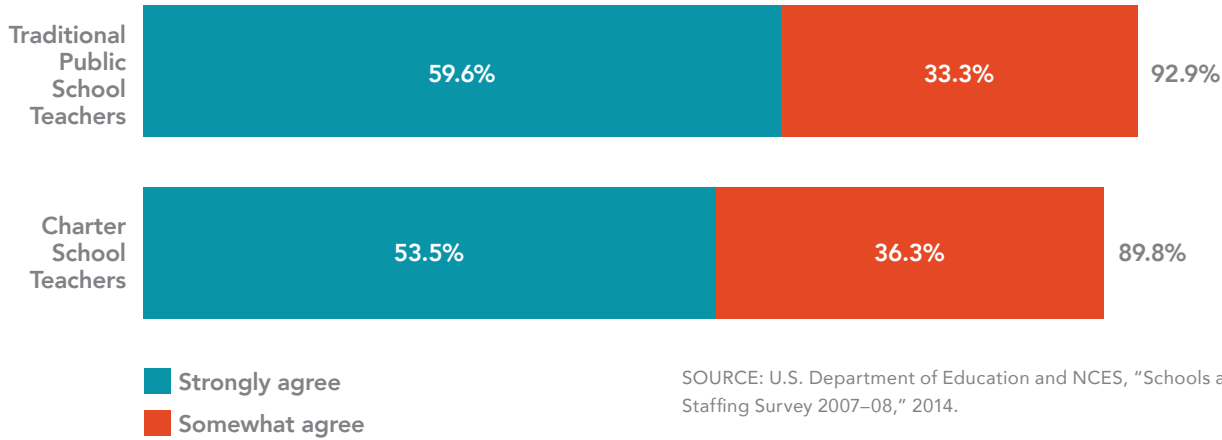
There is a lack of comprehensive, current data on charter school teachers' job satisfaction. However, the most recently available data show that satisfaction levels for charter and traditional public school teachers are fairly similar. The 2007-08 edition of the Schools and Staffing Survey asked teachers about their job satisfaction. It asked how strongly teachers agreed with the statement "I am generally satisfied with being a teacher at this school." Charter school teachers expressed very slightly less satisfaction than traditional public school teachers:

- 59.6 percent of traditional public school teachers strongly agreed and 33.3 percent somewhat agreed that they were generally satisfied with being a teacher at their school.
- 53.5 percent of charter school teachers strongly agreed and 36.3 percent somewhat agreed that they were generally satisfied with being a teacher at their school.¹³

Charter school teachers are slightly less satisfied than traditional public school teachers are

Percent of teachers who strongly or somewhat agree to the following statement by school type, 2007-08:

"I am generally satisfied being a teacher at this school."



Overall, this means that 92.9 percent of traditional public school teachers and 89.8 percent of charter school teachers were generally satisfied with being a teacher at their school—a fairly narrow gap in satisfaction. The Schools and Staffing Survey asked about teachers' job satisfaction in 2011–12 but that data has not been analyzed yet. When the analysis is available, it will likely be posted on the Schools and Staffing Survey section of the NCES website.

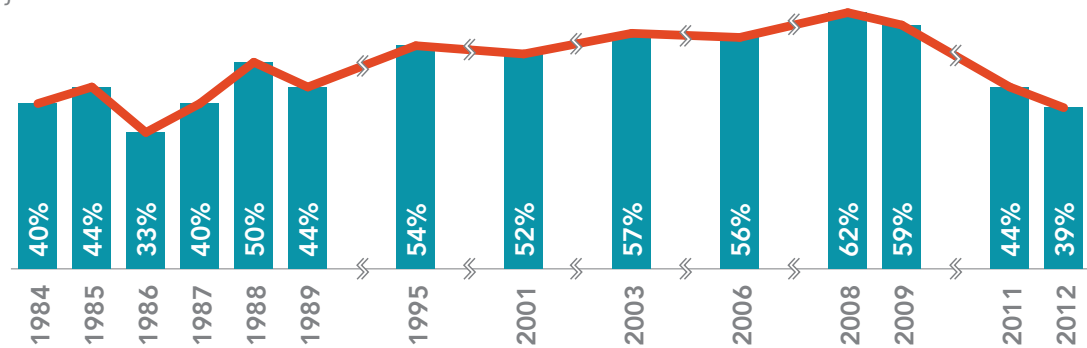
A peer-reviewed analysis of data from the 2003–04 Schools and Staffing Survey compared job satisfaction for charter school and traditional public school teachers. It found that teachers in both types of schools perceived their working conditions similarly in many ways. This included issues such as their autonomy in the classroom, their principals' leadership, community and collegiality, professional development opportunities and whether they had adequate supplies for teaching. Charter school teachers felt that they had more influence over school policy but heavier workloads than teachers in traditional public schools.¹⁴

Similarly, in a peer-reviewed study based on qualitative interviews, published in 2003, charter school teachers said they felt considerable freedom and flexibility over issues such as curriculum, instruction and purchasing materials—but acknowledged heavy workloads and noted their risk of burnout.¹⁵

Other surveys have found that teachers' job satisfaction in general has fluctuated over the years and that 2008 was a peak year for teacher satisfaction. The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher—which surveys public school teachers but does not specify whether it includes charter school teachers or not—asked about teacher satisfaction in its surveys from 1984 to 2012. The exact wording of the question has varied somewhat and in some years MetLife did not ask it at all. Forty percent of teachers said they were very satisfied with their job as a teacher in the public schools in 1984. Satisfaction was highest in 2008, when 62 percent of teachers said they were very satisfied with teaching as a career. By 2012, only 39 percent of public school teachers said they were very satisfied with their job as a teacher in the public schools.¹⁶

Teachers' satisfaction has fluctuated

Percent of public school teachers over time who say they are very satisfied with their job or career:



SOURCE: MetLife, "The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher," 2013.

Note: Question text in 2012, 2011, 2001, 1987, 1986, 1984: "All in all, how satisfied would you say you are with your job as a teacher in the public schools?" Question text in 2009, 2008, 2006, 2003, 1995, 1989, 1988, 1985: "All in all, how satisfied would you say you are with teaching as a career?"

Whether charter school teachers' satisfaction differs significantly from traditional public school teachers' satisfaction, and why that may or may not be the case, merits further research. Furthermore, whether stress levels for charter school teachers differ significantly from stress levels for traditional public school teachers merits further research, particularly given the aforementioned indications of higher workloads.

Research has shown that unionized workers in general—not teachers in particular—express more dissatisfaction with their jobs than nonunionized workers do, leading to a robust debate about whether unionized workers are more likely to stay in jobs that they find dissatisfying or more concentrated in fields that are less satisfying or whether they are more satisfied with their pay even if they are not satisfied about their jobs in general.¹⁷ Further research on unionized and nonunionized charter school teachers would help shed light on the relationships among teacher satisfaction, unionization, workload and autonomy.

How many charter school teachers are unionized?

Some charter school teachers are unionized. But exactly how many are unionized remains difficult to determine.

In 2009–10, 12.3 percent of charter schools were unionized, according to the most recently available data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), a nonprofit that describes itself as "committed to advancing the quality, growth, and sustainability of charter schools."¹⁸ By contrast, more than 37.1 percent of workers in "education, training, and library occupations" were members of unions in 2010, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, making education one of the most highly unionized professions in the country.¹⁹



The NAPCS reported considerable variation in charter school unionization rates:

- 100 percent of the charter schools were unionized in 2009–10 in Alaska, Hawaii, Iowa, Maryland and Virginia.
- None of the charter schools were unionized in 2009–10 in Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Washington, D.C., Georgia, Idaho, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah and Wyoming.²⁰

However, more recent figures could indicate a decline in unionization in charter schools. The Center for Education Reform (CER)—a nonprofit that advocates for charter schools—stated in its most recent report that unionization rates had fallen from 12 percent of charter schools in 2009 to 7 percent of charters in 2012. But the CER does not give a source for its data. And it believes that this reported decline in unionization is a “positive trend.”²¹

Comprehensive research is needed on the rate of unionization at charter schools. Journalists have reported on recent unionization efforts at charter schools in Chicago, Baltimore, the state of California, and other locations.²² Future research should address the success and failure of unionization efforts at charter schools, the contents of union contracts at charter schools, differences between unionized and nonunionized charter school teachers to each other or to traditional public school teachers and whether those differences correlate at all with teacher turnover, salaries or student achievement.

What types of teaching methods and administrative practices do charter schools use?

Generalizing about curriculum and teaching methods at charter schools is difficult because schools vary so much from state to state and district to district. To the extent that it is possible to generalize, research tends to show that charter schools use many of the same instructional and curricular practices that traditional public schools use.

Researcher Christopher Lubienski analyzed 56 previous studies of innovation at charter schools in many states, including but not limited to Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin, in 2003. Overall, he found that a “substantial” number of charter schools employed a traditional back-to-basics approach to instruction. However, he also pointed out that charter schools were using more innovative administrative practices that could have effects on the instruction.²³

Among the practices that Lubienski found charters to be using were:

- Pay raises based on teachers’ performance in the classroom
- Unique teacher licensure and hiring practices
- Extended classes and/or school day
- Mixed-age student groupings
- Smaller class size

Lubienksi credited these innovative administrative and organizational practices to the charter schools' more autonomous governance structure and not to competition from other types of schools.²⁴ A 2008 analysis of previous studies by a researcher with the Center on Reinventing Public Education—a research and analysis organization associated with the University of Washington Bothell that focuses on “innovative schools of choice” and that works to “develop, test, and support evidence-based solutions to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America’s schools”—found that charter schools were using thematic focuses on topics such as the arts, entrepreneurship or environmental education.²⁵

For more detail on charter schools' curricula and administrative practices, and how they compare with those used in traditional public schools, see the [Innovation](#) section.

Are charter school classes necessarily smaller than traditional public school classes?

Peer-reviewed research has shown that smaller classes in lower grades have a positive effect on students' academic achievement.²⁶ As noted above, there is evidence that some charter schools are experimenting with smaller class sizes. By contrast, some charter schools operated by Rocketship Education, a nonprofit organization that operates multiple schools, use technologies that allow them to have larger classes.²⁷

On average, charter school classes are not necessarily smaller than public school classes. At several grade levels, charter school classes are bigger, according to the U.S. Department of Education's 2011–12 Schools and Staffing Survey.

In primary schools on average nationwide, class sizes are about the same at both charters and traditional public schools. In middle school classes where teachers teach the same group of students for most of the day, traditional public school classes are actually smaller on average than in charter schools on average nationwide. But in middle school classes where teachers teach different groups of students throughout the day, charter school classes are slightly smaller on average nationwide.

In high schools, the pattern on average is similar: Traditional public high school classes where teachers teach the same group of students for most of the day tend to be smaller on average than classes in charter schools. But in high school classes where teachers teach different groups of students throughout the day, charter school classes are somewhat smaller on average nationwide. At schools that combine grade levels, traditional public school classes are on average smaller than charter school classes.²⁸

These are national averages, which do not capture variation from city to city, from charter operator to charter operation or from school to school. Nor do these figures necessarily indicate the teacher-to-student ratio in charter schools or traditional public schools. Classrooms with more than one teacher co-teaching or assisting might have relatively high numbers of students but relatively low teacher-to-student ratios. ●

Charter school classes are larger than traditional public school classes at several grade levels

National average class size by school type, school level and class grouping, 2011-12:

	Same groups of students most of the day	Different groups of students throughout the day
Primary Schools		
Traditional Public School	21.6 students 	26.2 students
Charter School	22.5 students 	26.9 students
Middle Schools		
Traditional Public School	16.7 students 	25.5 students
Charter School	21.9 students 	24.0 students
High Schools		
Traditional Public School	17.6 students 	24.2 students
Charter School	23.7 students 	22.2 students
Combined Grade Levels		
Traditional Public School	15.3 students 	18.2 students
Charter School	22.6 students 	22.7 students

SOURCE: NCES, "Results from the 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey," 2013.

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5

Innovation



- Why do researchers often focus on the question of charter schools and innovation?
- How do researchers define and measure innovation in K–12 education?
- Is there evidence that charter schools are more innovative than other types of schools?
- In what ways do charter schools innovate?
- What leads some charter schools to innovate?
- What are the consequences of innovation in charter schools?
- Do charter schools produce innovations that spread to traditional public schools?
- How are online charter schools growing? Is there evidence for their effectiveness?

Why do researchers often focus on the question of charter schools and innovation?

A core component of the basic argument in support of charter schools is the idea that they are able to be more innovative than traditional public schools. Some charter advocates might contend that charter schools, by existing outside the traditional state regulatory structure (which they criticize for its “one size fits all” approach to K–12 education), will provide the space for new educational models and services to emerge and develop. Other charter advocates might argue that by introducing “market mechanisms” such as competition and consumer choice into the public school system, charter schools will drive traditional public schools to innovate in ways that will boost student achievement and will better satisfy the educational needs of diverse student populations.¹ Advocates in both camps also maintain that successful innovations will spread from charter schools to traditional public schools or that traditional public schools will try to compete with charter schools by becoming more innovative, thereby improving the public education system as a whole.

On the other hand, opponents of charter schools and some skeptics might argue that charter schools are not more innovative than traditional public schools. Or opponents and skeptics might argue that new schools and new practices are not the solution to the current challenges facing K–12 public education. Rather than creating new charter schools to introduce innovative practices, they might prefer to see more resources and energy going toward improving traditional public schools so that they can better serve their students.

The research has focused on innovation in charter schools to determine if charter advocates are correct in their claims that charters foster innovation, both within charter schools and in the public school sector as a whole, and to determine if innovation produces positive outcomes in student achievement and other indicators of performance.

How do researchers define and measure innovation in K–12 education?

Studies vary in how they define, characterize and measure innovation.

Many academic studies have analyzed innovation in charter schools, but these studies vary in how they define, characterize and measure innovation. There appears to be a lack of consensus among educators and education researchers about how to evaluate

whether charter schools innovate, how they innovate and whether those innovations spread to traditional public schools or not.²

At the most basic level, charter schooling itself is an innovation, because charters operate outside of traditional public school systems. Charter schools are created by organizations independent of school districts and overseen by authorizers that may be school districts or that may be other types of entities, such as universities or independent state agencies. For more information on charter school authorizers, see the [Governance and Regulation](#) section. But beyond charters’ governance structure, many researchers have defined innovation in charter schools by their implementation of administrative or instructional practices that are not otherwise used at traditional public schools.³

For example, some charters use innovative administrative practices such as merit-based pay for teachers or direct community and parent involvement. Some use innovative educational practices such as more technology in classrooms or hands-on learning.⁴

A comprehensive review of the research on innovation notes that some studies in the literature define a charter school's practices as innovative only if they are not in use in traditional public schools in the charter's own district. Other studies define a practice as innovative if it is new relative to the *entire* public school sector nationwide. Some studies count practices as innovative even if they have been used traditionally in other public schools but are nonetheless being used in new ways in a charter school.⁵

Is there evidence that charter schools are more innovative than other types of schools?

In 2008, 72% of all state charter laws explicitly mentioned innovation.

However innovation is defined, state policies explicitly expect charter schools to be innovative. A 2008 summary of charter innovation research reported that 29 state laws authorizing charter schools—which at the time represented 72 percent of all states charter laws—explicitly mention that

charters should foster innovation or serve as “laboratories” of “research and development.”⁶ A large majority of the laws call for innovation in teaching and instructional approaches in particular.⁷

Much of the academic research that has been published so far indicates that charter schools overall have been generally successful in implementing innovations related to their administrative and organizational structure, and they have not been as successful in implementing innovative educational practices or curricula.⁸ Some charter schools have implemented certain practices that are innovative in their district because the nearby traditional public schools do not use those practices. However, there are fewer examples of charters implementing practices that are entirely new to the public education sector as a whole, such as instructional practices that have not yet been tried in traditional public schools.



The degree to which charters innovate and the types of innovations they implement vary considerably across charter schools. This variation is based on several factors. For instance, the degree of charter school innovation differs across grade levels. Charter elementary schools

There is a need for up-to-date research that assesses if charter schools' innovations are spreading to or affecting traditional public schools.

and middle schools are more likely than charter high schools to be innovative when compared with traditional public schools in their districts—for instance, in providing merit pay for teachers or in the use of mixed-age student groupings.⁹ Other studies have suggested that charter school innovation might differ based on the type of operator that the school is run by—charters that were converted from traditional public schools and were

run by the school district, for instance, were considered less likely to innovate in their administrative or instructional practices than charters run by mission-driven nonprofit operators.¹⁰

Overall, the research on charter schools and innovation is for the most part limited to older studies, which were undertaken five to 10 years after the first charter schools were opened. A 2003 meta-analysis of these studies by researcher Christopher Lubienski is considered the most comprehensive summary of the literature to date. There is a need for more up-to-date research, and there is especially a need for studies that specifically assess if charter schools' innovations are spreading to or affecting traditional public schools (see below).¹¹

In what ways do charter schools innovate?

Some researchers have categorized innovations in charter schools into two types: administrative practices and instructional practices. The categorization is not completely clean-cut, and there is some overlap between the types. There are also certain innovative practices that do not fit into either category.

Administrative practices

In 2003, researcher Christopher Lubienski analyzed and summarized 56 previous studies of innovation at charter schools in many states, including but not limited to Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin.¹² This type of comprehensive meta-analysis of the literature on innovation in charter schools has not been recently replicated. All of the studies Lubienski analyzed used different definitions of innovation and different methods to gather data and evaluate charter schools' practices. These methodologies included interviews and surveys of teachers, school administrators, parents or students; classroom observations; and self-reported practices from charter school authorizers. Before including the studies in his summary, Lubienski vetted them for methodological rigor and for bias for or against charter schooling or specific innovations. After narrowing the sample from around 190 studies, he evaluated 56 studies to determine if the charter school practices reported in the studies were innovative or not. He assessed the presence of innovation by comparing the reported practices with those in the public school sector as a whole, with practices in place in the same state and with practices in other schools in the same districts as the charters. A practice was categorized as innovative if it existed nowhere else in the sector, state or district; or if it existed in other schools in the district but originated in the charter school.

According to the summary's findings, there is evidence that many charters have implemented administrative and organizational innovations in the states studied, including the following:

- Pay raises based on teachers' performance in the classroom
- Unique teacher licensure and hiring practices
- Marketing
- Advertising and targeting particular populations of students

- Extended classes and/or school day
- Mixed-age student groupings
- Smaller class size
- Asking parents to sign contracts pledging to be involved in their children’s schooling
- Student uniforms

Lubienksi credited these innovative administrative and organizational practices to the charter schools’ more autonomous governance structure and not to competition from other types of schools.¹³

Many researchers agree that charters are innovative in their administrative practices.

Subsequent studies have largely corroborated Lubienksi’s analysis.

Many researchers agree that charters are innovative in their administrative practices. A 2008 analysis of previous studies by a researcher with the Center on Reinventing Public Education—a research and analysis

organization associated with the University of Washington Bothell that focuses on “innovative schools of choice” and that works to “develop, test, and support evidence-based solutions to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America’s schools”—found evidence that charters were successfully innovating in organizational and administrative ways, with unique approaches to staffing, scheduling and accountability.¹⁴ Other recent studies have noted that charter schools are also innovating in their marketing practices. They are often very adept at targeting and attracting particular populations of students.¹⁵

However, another recent study has called into question the degree to which charter schools’ administrative practices are indeed innovative. A 2012 academic study authored by Vanderbilt University and Notre Dame University researchers drew data from the 2007–08 Schools and Staffing Survey, which is administered to charter and public school administrators and teachers by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, to determine if charter schools across the nation were any more or less innovative in their practices than comparable traditional public schools in their own districts. The study looked at a total of 203 charter schools and 739 traditional public schools in 36 states. Overall, this 2012 study’s findings indicated that charters were *not* much more innovative than traditional public schools in the same district. These findings were consistent in the following areas:

- Academic support services, such as distance learning programs
- Staffing policies, such as merit pay
- Organizational structures, such as teacher “looping,” meaning that teachers stay with the same cohort of students through more than one grade level
- Governance, such as teacher or parent involvement in staff hiring

In each of these three areas of focus, only between 3.3 percent and 17.3 percent of the sample of charters had implemented a practice that was not being used at other traditional public schools within their same district. The one exception was tenure practices, where 92 percent of charters were considered innovative in their districts, because charters do not tend to offer tenure to their teachers.¹⁶ In addition, the authors found that innovation in charter schools was differentiated

across grade levels: Charter elementary and middle schools were found to be, on the whole, more innovative in the context of their local school district than charter high schools.¹⁷

However, unlike Lubienski's 2003 summary, which accounted for innovative practices originating in charter schools that were later disseminated to traditional public schools in the same district,¹⁸ this 2012 study did not investigate the source of a practice when it was found to be present in both charter and traditional public schools in the same district.¹⁹ In this way, it is unclear if the study's findings are evidence of charters' lack of innovation, or of increased dissemination of charter practices into traditional public schools (see below), or of other possible outcomes. This discrepancy reflects another aspect of the lack of consensus about innovation in charter schools and in K–12 public education in general—that is, where innovations originate.

Instructional practices

Despite the evidence that charters are innovating in their administrative practices, studies have found little evidence that charter schools have implemented innovative instructional practices or curricular approaches in the classroom, either at a district level, at a state level or across the entire public school sector. However, researchers acknowledge that there is overlap between the two categories of innovations that are typically used. For instance, some charter school innovations at the administrative level—such as extended scheduling, smaller class size and teacher “looping”—could be considered innovative at the classroom level as well, given that they impact instructional practices.²⁰

Lubienski in his 2003 summary cited one clear example of a *new* classroom innovation in charter schools: online technology in the classroom and virtual learning, which he found to be used more frequently and to a greater extent in charter schools than in traditional public schools (see below). Overall, however, he found that “rather than developing new educational practices, charter schools are embracing curricular and instructional approaches already in use in other public schools. Indeed, a substantial plurality of charter schools employ a traditional ‘basics’ approach to instruction.”²¹

Charters are, on the whole, not particularly innovative in their instructional practices.

Recent research largely confirms the analysis that charters are, *on the whole*, not particularly innovative in their instructional practices. The 2008 analysis of previous studies by a researcher with the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington Bothell did mention some innovative curricular

approaches that were not mentioned in Lubienski's summary, such as schools with thematic focuses on subjects such as the arts, entrepreneurship or environmental education.²² Overall, however, that study concluded that charters are not completely fulfilling the calls for innovation, given the lack of evidence of broader instructional innovations.

In addition, the 2012 study by Vanderbilt University and Notre Dame University researchers, based on 2007–08 data from the Schools and Staffing Survey, also found that charter schools were not much more innovative than traditional public schools in their same district in terms of certain instructional practices. For instance, the study found that only 13.6 percent of the charter schools in their study, or a total of 22 charter schools, were innovative in their district for offering

a distance learning program.²³ However, the study found that a higher percentage of total charter schools than total traditional public schools offered distance learning at all (17.9 percent of the sample of charters versus 12 percent of the sample of traditional public schools), which confirms Lubienski's finding that charter schools were leading the public school sector in offering virtual education (see below).²⁴ The 2012 study did not find charter schools to be significantly more innovative in their implementation of other instructional practices, such as work-based learning through internship programs or language immersion programs.²⁵

In general, contrary to expectations, the research has shown that charter schools have tended to replicate traditional instructional and curricular practices, as opposed to innovating and developing new ones.

Other innovative practices

There are some examples, however, of certain practices or groups of practices that are also considered innovative in their approach, or of charter schools that have been considered "highly innovative." Neither is easily categorized as administrative or instructional practices.

For instance, Doug Lemov of the charter school network Uncommon Schools recently undertook a lot of firsthand research in order to develop a common vocabulary among teachers in a particular subset of charter schools that use a "no excuses" approach to learning—that is, a group of charter schools with innovative curricula that are centered around strong behavioral expectations. The common vocabulary of teacher practices—which Lemov thought all charter teachers, no matter their skill, education or "excellence" level (that is, how good they are at teaching), could implement in their classroom to get the best out of their students and get through lessons most effectively—is an innovative approach to curricular cohesion.²⁶

Finally, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement released a report in 2004 detailing their visits to eight top-performing—and innovative—charter schools. The eight schools were located across the country and were representative of a variety of grade levels, student demographics, curricular approaches and types of authorizers and operators. All of the schools had one unifying aspect: Each had a clearly defined mission that drove all aspects of the school's curriculum, which in turn hinged on the school's freedom to experiment with practices that weren't offered within the school district's traditional public schools. In addition to administrative and curricular innovations that have been noted in the research, other innovative practices that many of the schools shared—and that are not easily categorized—included the following, among others:

- Professional development
- Hiring additional staff (part-time teachers, staff specialists) that met the schools' needs
- Personalized education plans
- Parent involvement, especially in governance
- Strong behavioral expectations
- Use of their flexible structure to adapt to changing circumstances or particular needs of students²⁷

The study highlighted what other researchers have also suggested, that charters that are mission-driven might also be more likely to be innovative.²⁸

What leads some charter schools to innovate?

Some research indicates that school choice and competition have reduced innovation.

There is no solid evidence showing that competition from other schools leads to innovation in charter schools—indeed, some research indicates that school choice and competition have reduced innovation. For instance, a researcher with the University of Tennessee, Knoxville argued in his 2009 study that competition creates a strong

incentive for charters to stick to proven curriculum and instruction practices, rather than to try new and risky practices that may not pay off.²⁹ This aversion to risk could explain Lubienski's conclusion that many charters have implemented back-to-basics instructional approaches, or traditional and long-established educational practices.³⁰

Rather than competition driving innovation in charters, further research has argued that the innovations found in charter schools are probably a result of the schools' different governance structure.³¹

What are the consequences of innovation in charter schools?

There is not much evidence that innovation in charter schools has led to increases in student achievement, which was what many charter advocates expected. Indeed, some studies have found that innovative practices might *negatively* impact efforts to improve student achievement. A 2010 academic study, authored by Vanderbilt University and Notre Dame University researchers, used 2005–06 testing data and surveys of teachers and school administrators to find out if there was a relationship between instructional conditions—such as time spent on tasks and the use of innovative practices—and student achievement gains on annual math exams that were administered in more than 2,000 districts in 40 states.³² Gains in student achievement were measured by comparing students' scores on the math exam administered in spring 2005 with their scores on the math exam administered in spring 2006. The authors measured innovation in instructional practices by surveying teachers in charter and traditional public schools about whether or not their school used practices that they considered innovative or unique or that were based on research evidence.

Overall, the study found no statistically significant difference between charter and traditional public school students and their achievement gains on the standardized math exam from one year to the next. However, the study did find that the use of innovative instructional practices at both types of schools had a significant negative correlation with student gains—the researchers' measure of innovative classroom practices was associated with lesser increases in students' scores from the 2005 math exam to the 2006 math exam.³³

Do charter schools produce innovations that spread to traditional public schools?

The evidence is mixed and inconclusive about whether or not charter school innovations have spilled over to or motivated innovations in traditional public schools. Researchers have speculated that these inconclusive results have stemmed from a lack of consensus regarding how to measure

competitive effects, as well as from the difficulty of comparing results across distinct local and state contexts.³⁴ In terms of the potential for competitive effects driving innovations in traditional public schools, the research has shown that there is a lot of variation depending on a district's size, if the district is also the charter school operator, and more.³⁵

However, two recent studies that surveyed traditional public school principals in charter districts found similar perceived effects of charter school competition on traditional public schools in those states. The first, a 2009 study from a University of Michigan researcher and a RAND Corporation researcher, surveyed principals in California charter and traditional public schools. The study found that in six districts with charter schools, about 40 percent of traditional public school principals reported implementing at least one change to their administrative operations. About 25 percent reported changes in instructional practices, and 11.8 percent reported changes in curricular practices.³⁶ The second, a 2014 academic study published by researchers at Boston College, surveyed Massachusetts traditional public school superintendents with charters in their district. Respondents in that study similarly said that they did feel a push to innovate in their schools, but mostly in administrative practices. The study found that nearly half of the superintendents said they were pursuing innovations in marketing and communications as a result of pressure from charter schools, while only 21 percent said charters had led them to implement new curricula and instruction.³⁷

Charters and traditional public schools are collaborating more often.

While there is mixed evidence that competition from charter schools spurs traditional public schools to innovate, there is evidence that charters and traditional public schools are collaborating more often. Currently, traditional public and charter schools are entering into “compacts” to

collaborate and share successful practices—such as teacher training, school culture and student success measures—in more than 20 school districts across the nation, including Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.³⁸ Many of these compacts have been spurred or expanded by grants that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which “seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life,” has awarded to compact cities and districts since 2010.³⁹

These compacts fulfill needs on both sides: Charters share practices that have worked for them, or that are unique to them, with struggling traditional public schools; and traditional public schools often provide buildings for charters to move or expand into.⁴⁰ In addition, compacts allow charter and traditional public schools to discuss and work together on areas of shared concern, such as funding from their districts and inclusion of special needs students.⁴¹ For more information on these areas of concern, see our sections, [Finances](#) and [Diversity and Inclusion](#). However, despite promising examples, these collaborations thus far remain rare.

How are online charter schools growing? Is there evidence for their effectiveness?

In the past decade, there has been significant growth in the number of students enrolled in virtual programs across the K–12 public school sector as a whole, not just in charter schools. In 2011, more than 1 million public school students—which includes charter and traditional public

school students—took at least some of their courses online.⁴² A 2013 report from the Evergreen Education Group—a private consulting group that “provides a range of education market advisory, research and analysis services to non-profits, government agencies and companies that are leading educational innovation through digital learning”—stated that 75 percent of the nation’s districts have at least some within-district online offerings for their students; at least 24 states and Washington, D.C., now have “blended” schools, which are full-time but incorporate online instruction; and 30 states and Washington, D.C., have fully online, multidistrict schools, which serve a total of 310,000 students nationwide. Florida has by far the most enrollments and most offerings in the online sector of any other state: In the 2012–13 school year, 240,000 Florida K–12 students took at least one course online.⁴³

The majority of the nation’s blended and fully online schools are charter schools. One of the largest charter school operators in the country offers exclusively fully-online schooling: K12 Inc. is the largest for-profit education management organization by number of students and serves more than 87,000 students in 26 states at 44 charter schools and 13 district schools.⁴⁴ For more on K12 Inc., see our section, [Charter School Operators](#). While charter schools are considered the “early adopters” of online and virtual educational offerings, traditional public school districts are rapidly expanding their online offerings as well.⁴⁵

Few rigorous studies have assessed the quality of online and virtual schooling, and there is little data available on the student outcomes of online learning in K–12 education.

Advocates of online and virtual charter schools argue that the online learning framework allows for the delivery of high-quality, interactive and personalized education and increases access for disadvantaged students, in particular to high-level or specialized courses that might not be otherwise available to them. Opponents, skeptics and some researchers, on the other hand, are concerned that the complexity and rapid growth of the online and virtual school sector will result in problems of accountability and oversight. As a 2011 feature in the journal *Education Next* noted, the federal and state

accountability systems that are in place to monitor brick-and-mortar charter or traditional public schools are able to extend their oversight only to fully online charter or traditional public schools—meaning that “there’s little data and few mechanisms for evaluating supplemental and blended programs.” Further, the feature noted that there was little consensus within the sector on standards to assess the quality of online and virtual schooling.⁴⁶

Few rigorous studies have assessed the quality of online and virtual schooling, and there is little data available on the student outcomes of online learning in K–12 education.⁴⁷ Some virtual charter schools have come under scrutiny, however. For instance, in 2013, K12 Inc. reached a settlement out of court with a group of investors who alleged that the for-profit management company had misled them by exaggerating their students’ academic performance and withholding accurate information about student-teacher ratios. K12 Inc. denied any wrongdoing.⁴⁸ School districts in Florida and California have raised questions about K12 Inc. as well.⁴⁹ ●


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6

Finances


- 
- How are charter schools funded?
 - Are charter schools receiving less public money per pupil than traditional public schools? And does it matter?
 - Do charter schools have negative financial effects on traditional public schools?
 - Do charter schools spend money differently from traditional public schools?

How are charter schools funded?

Understanding charter school financing requires a basic grasp of public school financing more generally.

Charter schools, like traditional public schools, are funded by taxpayers with public money. But charter schools are funded differently by each of the 43 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico that permit them.¹ Beginning to understand those differences in charter school financing requires a basic grasp of public school financing more generally.

Public schools receive two types of funding from states. The first type is called “base funding” or sometimes “foundation funding.” Base funding is the amount of money that is supposed to cover the basic educational needs of one student—although some advocates argue that those amounts are not actually sufficient to cover what each student really needs and are not equitable across municipalities.² The second type of funding is called “categorical funding.” Categorical funding finances programs such as special education, summer school or efforts to reduce class size. Some states have many programs financed through categorical funding, others have only a few.³

 The precise formulas for determining base funding vary from state to state and from municipality to municipality, depending on dynamics such as local property taxes, state policy decisions and state and local budgets. The formulas for determining base funding can also change from year to year, as can the number and size of programs financed through categorical funding.⁴ The nonpartisan Education Commission of the States has a useful primer on how base funding and categorical funding differ and how education funding varies from state to state and from municipality to municipality.⁵

The Education Commission of the States maintains a database with information about each state’s charter school funding formulas.⁶ The database shows that states determine the per-pupil base funding for charter schools in many different ways. In some states, such as Florida and Indiana, charter schools receive the same per-pupil base funding that traditional public schools in the district receive. Some states’ per-pupil base funding for charter schools is calculated from either the statewide average or the districtwide average of per-pupil base funding.⁷ In other states, it is based on the per-pupil revenue of the charter school’s authorizer.⁸

Funding can further differ between states and even within states depending on many other variables. For example, in some states, funding can differ depending on whether the charter school was started from scratch or was converted from a former traditional public school. In others, it depends on which entity authorizes the school. In some states, such as Kansas, charter school funding is largely at the discretion of the school district.

Furthermore, some states provide charter schools with funding for all of the categorical programs for which traditional public schools receive funding. Other states, such as California, provide charter schools with funding for most but not all categorical programs.

The nonpartisan National Conference of State Legislatures has a helpful primer that lays out the implications and trade-offs of states’ different approaches to charter school funding, including the potential to create per-pupil disparities in the amount of public money that charter schools and traditional public schools receive.⁹

Are charter schools receiving less public money per pupil than traditional public schools? And does it matter?

In the context of states' very diverse approaches to funding charter schools, controversy has emerged over per-pupil funding disparities between charters and traditional public schools. According to David Arsen and Yongmei Ni's peer-reviewed research on charter and traditional public school spending, "Available research indicates that in most states charter schools receive considerably less per-pupil revenue than traditional public schools."¹⁰ But there is disagreement over the relevance of per-pupil disparities. Furthermore, as we discuss below, there is also evidence that charter schools actually have negative financial impacts on traditional public schools.

Research indicates that in most states charter schools receive considerably less per-pupil revenue than traditional public schools.

The Walton Family Foundation, whose education programs include support for "the creation of public charters," funded a non-peer-reviewed report by a team of researchers from Ball State University and from several research and consulting firms.¹¹ That team analyzed data from 24 states and Washington, D.C., representing more than 90 percent of charter school students, for the 2006–07 school year.

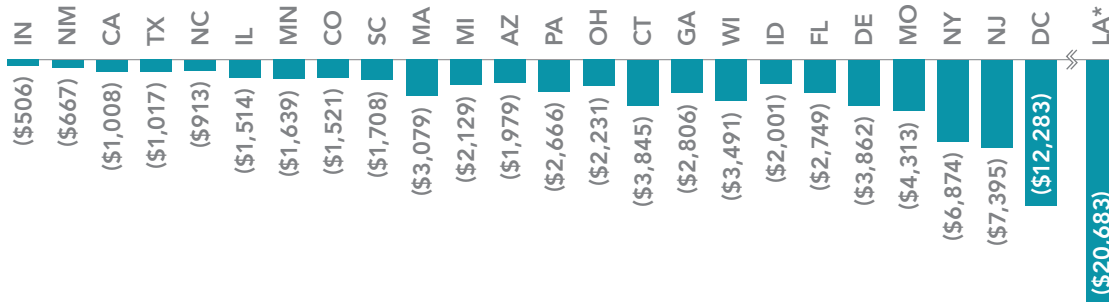
They found that in every one of those states, charter schools were receiving less public money per pupil on average than traditional public schools were. The researchers excluded Louisiana from their national average and did not rank the size of its funding disparity because they felt its funding situation in 2006–07 was highly unusual in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Charter schools across all the states they examined, except Louisiana, received an average of 19 percent less public money per pupil than traditional public schools received, or about \$2,247 less per pupil.¹²

They found that the funding disparity was most acute Washington, D.C., at 41.2 percent less public money per pupil, followed by New Jersey, at 37.3 percent less. They found that the funding disparity was least acute in Indiana, at 5.1 percent less public money per pupil.¹³

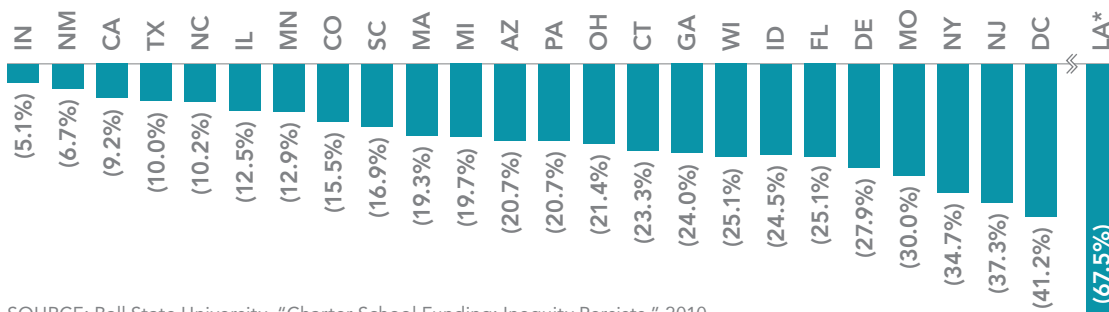
The charts below are supplied for illustrative purposes only. Because the researchers themselves expressed concern about a lack of consistent, easy-to-access, transparent data for making these financial comparisons, readers should not draw firm conclusions from these charts alone.

Charter schools receive less public funding per student than traditional public schools do

Dollar amount less of per-pupil funding that charter schools receive compared with the amount that traditional public schools receive, by state, 2006-07:



Percent less of per-pupil funding that charter schools receive compared with the amount that traditional public schools receive, by state, 2006-07:



SOURCE: Ball State University, "Charter School Funding: Inequity Persists," 2010.

*The researchers excluded Louisiana from their national average and did not rank the size of its funding disparity because they felt its funding situation in 2006-07 was highly unusual in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Other researchers have reached similar conclusions about per-pupil funding disparities. In 2010, Gary Miron, a professor at Western Michigan University, and Jessica Urschel, at that time a graduate student at Western Michigan, published a policy brief on charter schools' revenues and expenditures.¹⁴ The brief was made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, a think tank that receives funding from the National Education Association and other teachers' unions.¹⁵ Using 2006–07 data from

The sizes of per-pupil funding disparities vary between states.

average per pupil. Miron and Urschel found that the size of the per-pupil funding disparities vary considerably between states. They also noted the extreme difficulty of accurately compiling and comparing charter schools' and traditional public schools' revenue streams.

traditional public schools nationwide and from charter schools in 21 states and Washington, D.C., Miron and Urschel estimated that on average, charter schools reported revenue from state, federal and local sources comprising only 77 percent of the amount that traditional public schools reported, or \$2,980 less revenue on



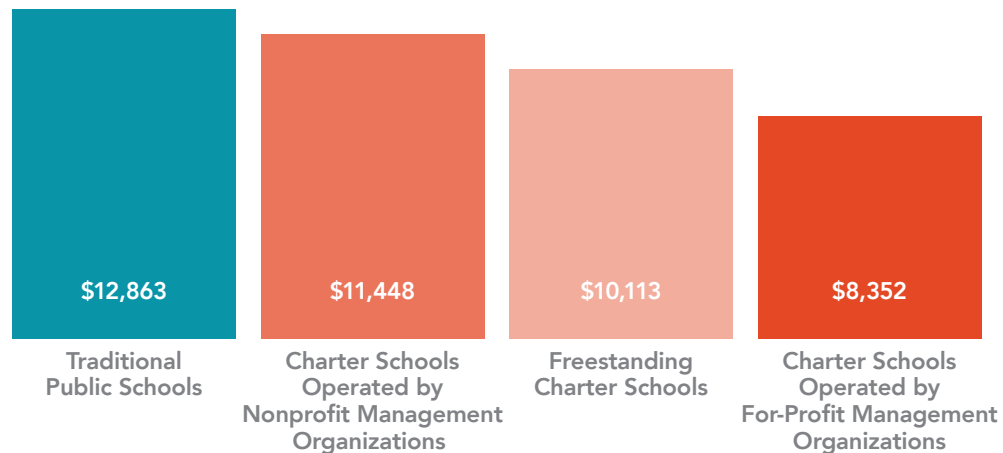
Miron and Urschel found that funding disparities differed depending on whether the charter school was freestanding or operated by an organization with multiple charter schools.

- Traditional public schools on average received \$12,863 in federal, state and local revenue per pupil.
- Charter schools operated by nonprofit management organizations received about \$11,448 in federal, state and local revenue per pupil.
- Freestanding charter schools received \$10,113 in federal, state and local revenue per pupil.
- Charter schools operated by for-profit management organizations received about \$8,352 in federal, state and local revenue per pupil.¹⁶

For more information about nonprofit and for-profit management organizations, see the [Charter School Operators](#) section.

Public funding differs by type of charter school

Combined per-pupil funding from federal, state and local sources, by school type, 2006-07:



SOURCE: Miron and Urschel, "Equal or Fair? A Study of Revenues and Expenditures in American Charter Schools," 2010.

There is ongoing debate over whether per-pupil funding disparities between charter schools and traditional public schools matter.

Several teams of academic researchers have tried to figure out why funding is not equitable between charters and traditional public schools.¹⁷ But the more controversial question is whether these per-pupil revenue disparities matter. Several legal cases have attempted to secure equitable funding for charter schools relative to traditional public schools, with mixed results. As one lawyer argued in a peer-reviewed overview of these cases, charter schools are public

schools and should therefore be provided with the same per-pupil funding as traditional public schools.¹⁸

However, others argue that comparisons of per-pupil revenue from public sources do not give a complete picture of charter and traditional public school finances. Several researchers, including Miron and Urschel, point out that traditional public schools typically deliver more services than

charter schools. Therefore, they argue, traditional public schools actually need more funding than charter schools do. These services include transportation and meals.¹⁹ A peer-reviewed study by researchers at the RAND Corporation, using survey data from 2002, found that charter school administrators in California did not necessarily know whether they were eligible for funds for these types of programs and did not necessarily apply for them.²⁰

Other researchers note that charter schools receive funding from private philanthropy that is not accounted for in tallies of per-pupil revenue from federal, state and local sources.²¹ According to research by the nonprofit Local Initiatives Support Corporation, charter schools in some states have limited access to public funding and financing for facilities but can access some capital and credit through foundations and nonprofits.²² Moreover, charter schools are eligible for state and federal grants, including federal grants for planning, designing and implementing new charter schools and for disseminating information about best practices.²³ These grants do not necessarily offset per-pupil operational expenses but can be another source of revenue for charter schools.

Overall, while the existence of per-pupil revenue disparities between charter schools and traditional public schools is recognized by many researchers, there is ongoing debate over the significance of those funding disparities. Given that the number of charter schools and the number of students they serve have been steadily increasing, questions and conflicts about funding may prove to be an increasingly common feature of charter school advocacy, critique, research and policymaking.

Do charter schools have negative financial effects on traditional public schools?

In addition to evidence of per-pupil funding disparities, there is evidence that charter schools have negative financial effects on traditional public schools. When a student enrolls in a charter school, the traditional public school that he or she would have attended or that he or she transferred from no longer bears the costs of educating that student. But traditional public schools still bear many fixed costs for staff, building maintenance, retiree benefits and other expenses.²⁴

Furthermore, some charter schools create additional costs for traditional public school districts in places where charter schools use district school buildings or rely on districts for special education assessments, health services, transportation or other programs. The sizes of these additional costs vary depending on whether charter schools pay districts for buildings and other services and how much they pay.²⁵

Overseeing charter schools can also require additional personnel time for district staff—particularly if the district is also a charter school authorizer that must approve new charter schools and monitor existing ones. However, in some states, districts are themselves authorizers and may receive funding for the work of authorization from the charter schools that they oversee.²⁶ For more about charter school authorizers, see the [Governance and Regulation](#) section.

Because of the additional costs, charter schools in some states have been found to have negative financial impacts on school districts. Academic researchers David Arsen and Yongmei Ni published a peer-reviewed analysis of statewide financial data in Michigan from 1994 to 2006 that showed that districts in which students enrolled in charter schools had lower overall financial balances. In Michigan, charter schools may have particularly adverse effects on traditional public school finances because per-pupil funding follows students as soon as they enter a new school and because, under Michigan state law, school districts have only limited abilities to raise additional funds.²⁷

Because of these negative financial impacts, some states, such as Massachusetts, financially compensate traditional public schools that lose students to charter schools.²⁸ New York State also provides some districts with aid meant to reduce the fiscal impacts of students enrolling in charter schools.²⁹ Nonetheless, peer-reviewed research showed that losing students to charter schools negatively impacted the finances of public school districts in Albany and Buffalo, New York, in the 2009–10 school year. The researchers estimated that as a result of charter schools, the Albany City School District lost between \$24.9 and \$26.1 million in 2009-10—or between 11.9 and 12.5 percent of total revenues. They estimated that Buffalo Public Schools lost between \$67.0 and \$76.8 million in 2009-10—or between 8.6 and 9.9 percent of total revenues.³⁰

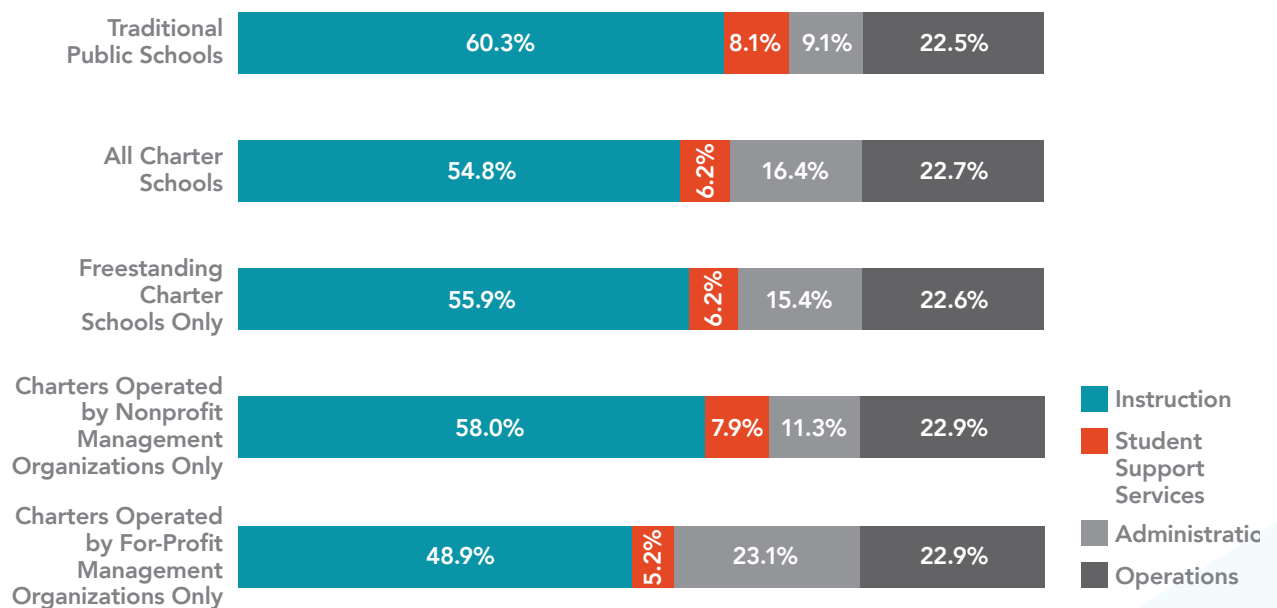
Do charter schools spend money differently from traditional public schools?

Comparing spending at charter schools with spending at traditional public schools is difficult because revenues vary considerably across states and municipalities and because transparent financial data are difficult to obtain reliably. However, the research that has been conducted thus far suggests that charter schools spend less on instruction and more on administration compared with traditional public schools.

Arsen and Ni’s peer-reviewed comparison of charter school and traditional public school spending in Michigan used data from 2007–08. Arsen and Ni noted that Michigan’s funding for charter schools is fairly high compared to other states. And they noted that, owing to the specifics of Michigan’s education funding policies, funding for operations is roughly equal at charter schools and traditional public schools.³¹

Different types of charter schools have different spending patterns


Percent of spending allocated to different functions by school type, 2006-07:



Note: Operations includes building maintenance, transportation, food, security and other services.
 SOURCE: Miron and Urschel, "Equal or Fair? A Study of Revenues and Expenditures in American Charter Schools," 2010.

Research suggests that charter schools spend less on instruction and more on administration compared with traditional public schools.

When they analyzed spending, Arsen and Ni found that Michigan's traditional public school districts devoted 61 percent of their spending to instruction, 10 percent to administration and the remainder to other functions. By contrast, they found that Michigan's charter schools devoted 47 percent of their spending to instruction, 23 percent to administration and the remainder to other functions. They noted that special education was an area in which Michigan traditional public schools spent significantly more than its charter schools.³²

 Using 2006–07 data from traditional public schools nationwide and from charter schools in 21 states and the District of Columbia, Miron and Urschel found that different types of charter schools had different spending patterns, with charter schools operated by for-profit management organizations spending more on administration and less on instruction than either charter schools operated by nonprofit management organizations or freestanding charter schools.³³

A peer-reviewed analysis using five years of Texas data ending in 2009 compared traditional public school districts with charter schools operated by institutions of higher education, governmental entities or nonprofit management organizations. It found that those types of charter schools spent about the same amount of money as traditional public school districts in Texas. But they found that the pattern of spending was different. Charter schools in Texas spent significantly more than traditional school districts on rent and supplies, and spent significantly less than traditional districts on personnel.³⁴

These differences in spending raise a number of questions: Is it necessarily a problem if charter schools spend less on instruction than traditional public schools? Or are measures of academic outcomes more important than measures of spending on academics? For more information about academic outcomes at charter schools and how they compare to outcomes at traditional public schools, see the [Student Achievement](#) section. ●

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7

Governance and Regulation

- 
- How do federal and state laws govern charter schools?
 - What do charter school authorizers do?
 - Who are charter school authorizers?
 - How many charter schools do authorizers approve and close?
 - Why are some states' charter laws more flexible than others?
 - Is there evidence that growth in charter schools leads to closures of traditional public schools?

How do federal and state laws govern charter schools?

The major federal education policies under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama—No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, respectively—both sought to expand and support charter schools.¹ For example, President Obama’s 2009 Race to the Top initiative approved several approaches to “turning around” traditional public schools deemed to be underperforming, including converting them into charter schools. Race to the Top also encouraged states to lift caps on the number of charter schools they allow.²

While encouragement may come from the federal government, ultimately it is up to individual states to decide whether to allow charter schools. In doing so, state policymakers must consider many questions about how charter schools should operate, be funded and be regulated. Some of these questions include the following:

- Will there be a limit on the number of charter schools allowed? If so, what should the limit be?
- How will charter schools be funded, and how will funding be distributed to them?
- What types of entities can apply to create a charter school, and how will the application process work?
- What types of entities will authorize, monitor and close charter schools?
- What should trigger charter school closures?
- Which state regulations that apply to traditional public schools should also apply to charter schools, such as rules about contracting and purchasing?
- Can charter school teachers unionize?
- What kinds of training or certifications should charter school teachers have?

State policymakers must consider many other issues, such as student transportation, responsibility for maintaining charter schools’ buildings, whether to allow online charter schools and whether charter school teachers can participate in public school teachers’ retirement systems. Our [10 Questions for Policymakers](#) is designed to help elected officials, administrators and staff members think through these and other questions about charter school policies in their jurisdictions.

What do charter school authorizers do?

While states set many of the rules for charter schools, authorizers interpret and implement those rules. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA)—an organization that describes itself as “committed to advancing excellence and accountability in the charter school sector and to increasing the number of high-quality charter schools across the nation”—estimates that there were 712 authorizers in 2008 and 1,045 authorizers by 2013.³

When an organization wants to create a charter school, it submits an application to the authorizer in its jurisdiction. The authorizer decides whether to approve the new charter school. If an application is denied, some states have processes that allow applicants to appeal. The specifics of these appeals processes vary from state to state.⁴ NACSA conducts an annual survey of authorizers. In 2012–13, NACSA collected surveys from 192 authorizers.

Acknowledging the concern that some applicants to create charter schools may seek to transfer their applications to less-demanding authorizers, NACSA found that the authorizers it surveyed reported only 27 applicants for charters had transferred their applications from another authorizer. NACSA noted that some of those transfers were mandated by state regulations. However, NACSA also noted that it may have undercounted actual transfers because many authorizers did not respond to its survey.⁵

If an application is approved, authorizers monitor the charter school to determine whether it is meeting the goals laid out in its charter. After a certain number of years, the authorizer reviews the school and decides whether its charter should be renewed. NACSA recommends that initial charter contracts come up for renewal after five years. However, NACSA estimates that only about 32 percent of charter school authorizers followed their recommendation to grant a five-year contract term.⁶

If the charter is not renewed, the school is closed. In some states, schools can appeal if their charter is not renewed or if it is revoked before their normal review period ends.

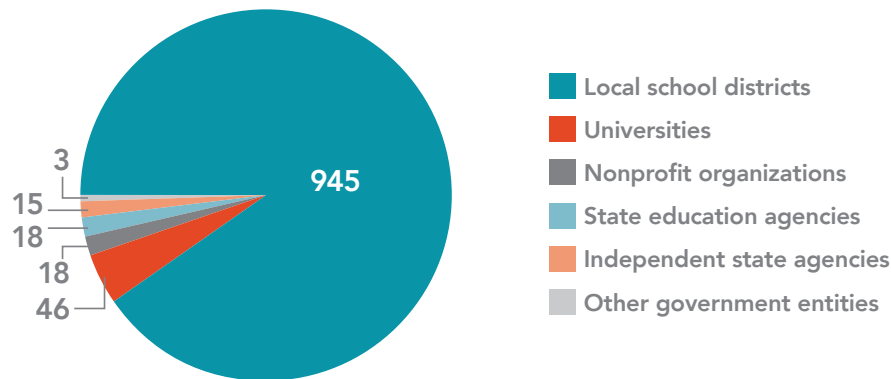
Who are charter school authorizers?



Just as charter schools vary in many ways, so do authorizers. Most authorizers are local school districts that also oversee traditional public schools, but some are universities, nonprofit agencies or government agencies. According to NACSA, about half of authorizers oversee only a single school. But eight authorizers oversee more than 100 schools each.⁷

Most authorizers are local school districts

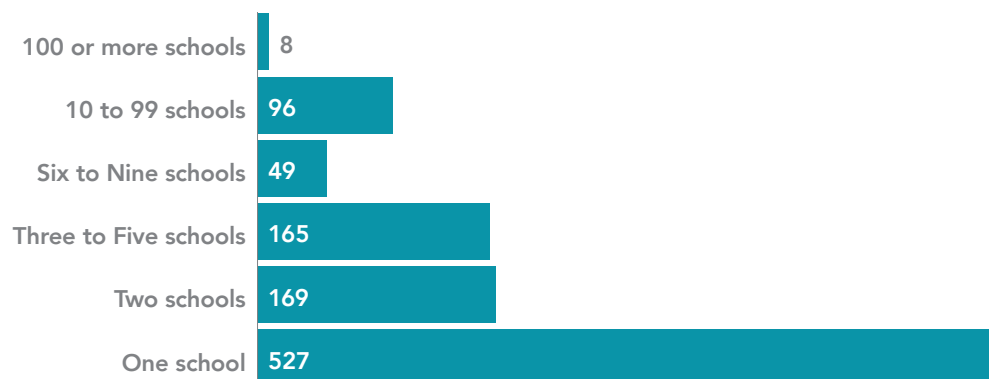
Number of charter school authorizers by authorizer type, 2012-13:



SOURCE: NASCA, "The State of Charter School Authorizing," 2013.

About half of authorizers oversee one charter school

Number of authorizers that oversee the following numbers of charter schools, 2012-13:



SOURCE: NASCA, "The State of Charter School Authorizing," 2013.

Note: 31 authorizers either oversaw no charter schools or were one of several authorizers overseeing a single school.

The work of authorizing takes time, personnel and therefore money. NACSA's survey found that authorizers' funds come from a variety of sources.



- 53 percent of authorizers receive fees that are deducted from charter schools' revenues.
- 33 percent receive funding as an appropriation from their state.
- 20 percent are funded as part of the regular operating budget of their parent organization.
- 15 percent receive grants from foundations.
- 11 percent receive state or federal grants.⁸

These numbers do not sum to 100 percent because authorizers often have multiple funding streams. Authorizers have an average staff of 3.3 full-time equivalent employees dedicated to charter school authorization.⁹

How many charter schools do authorizers approve and close?

NACSA estimated that authorizers approved about one-third of all charter school applications in both 2012–13 and 2011–12. Nonprofit organizations have the highest rate of approval, at 55.3 percent. Higher education institutions and state education agencies have the lowest rates of approval, at 20.3 percent and 20.8 percent respectively.¹⁰

When an authorizer approves a charter school, they approve it only for a specified number of years. After that point, the authorizer decides whether to renew the school's charter or close it. The charter school closure rate was 3.3 percent in 2012-13, and averaged 3.02 percent from 2008 to 2013, based on NACSA's annual surveys of authorizers.¹¹ The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) similarly found that about 3.4 percent of charter schools have been closed by authorizers annually from 2005 to 2013, based on data it compiles from each state's department of education.¹² NAPCS is a nonprofit that describes itself as "committed to advancing the quality, growth, and sustainability of charter schools."

The annual closure rate for traditional public schools is lower than the closure rate for charter schools. The closure rate for all traditional public schools was about 1.8 percent in 2010–11, the most recent year for which data are available, according to our calculations of data from the U.S. Department of Education.¹³

According to NACSA’s survey, of the charter schools that authorizers closed, about half were closed at the end of their initial charter period. The other half of closures occurred in the middle of the charters’ operating periods.¹⁴



Authorizers close charter schools for a variety of reasons. They may determine that a school has not enrolled enough students or that students are not doing well enough on standardized tests. They may decide that a charter school does not have enough money to continue operating or may find evidence of financial mismanagement.¹⁵ A report from the nonprofit Progressive Policy Institute notes that financial issues, mismanagement and poor academic performance are often intertwined, so it is difficult to make neat distinctions among those different reasons for closures.¹⁶

Research on how charter school closures affect students is limited. But as with other types of school closures, when charter schools close, parents must find new schools for their children. A peer-reviewed case study of a charter school closure in Florida described the instability that the closure caused for teachers and staff, who had to find new jobs after that school closed.¹⁷

Why are some states’ charter laws more flexible than others?

Some states have revised and changed their laws over the years. The non-partisan Education Commission of the States has a database of state charter policies that shows how much state laws vary on a range of issues, including funding and authorizing procedures.¹⁸



Over time, some states have given charter schools more flexibility—for example, by allowing them to open schools with a greater variety of curricula. A group of university-based and think tank researchers tried to figure out why some states’ charter laws are more or less flexible than others.¹⁹ Analyzing data from 1991 to 2006, they developed a statistical model showing that states with more teachers who were members of the National Education Association—a union representing teachers and school staff—and states with more Democrats in their legislatures tended to have less flexible charter laws. However, low high school graduation rates and low SAT scores were unrelated to how states designed and implemented charter school laws.²⁰ An academic study of the spread of charter schools from district to district in Florida similarly found that growth in charter schools was driven more by political dynamics than by any measurable educational needs among students.²¹

Perhaps surprisingly, three political scientists using data from 1991 to 2002 found that more charter schools were likely to open as state charter accountability rules became stricter. However, they also found that states that had made their application and authorization processes more flexible tended to have more charter schools.²² We do not know whether those associations between number of charter schools and accountability and application rules have persisted in the years since 2002.

Is there evidence that growth in charter schools leads to closures of traditional public schools?

Closure and consolidation of traditional public schools have often been justified as a way to reduce costs and improve teaching and learning.²³ Critics have for many years expressed concern that charter schools, vouchers and other choice programs threaten traditional public schools.²⁴ Most states that allow charter schools also allow traditional public schools to be converted into charters.²⁵ Some charter advocates have argued that failing urban traditional public schools should be replaced with charters.²⁶ Under President Obama's 2009 Race to the Top initiative, states and districts are encouraged to consider having charter schools take charge of the staff and leadership in traditional public schools that are deemed to be underperforming.²⁷ But as of 2013, no systematic empirical research done by means of observation or experimentation has looked at the closing and opening of public schools within a single district, let alone found a causal relationship between closing traditional public schools and opening charters.²⁸

However, closing traditional public schools can become occasions to create new schools of various types, including charter schools. After Hurricane Katrina closed New Orleans schools in 2005, many traditional public schools were closed permanently. Many charter schools subsequently opened, and several of those were located in refurbished buildings that had formerly housed traditional public schools.²⁹

From 1996 to 2010, the Chicago Public Schools district closed 44 schools that it deemed to be performing poorly. During the 2000s, 86 new public schools opened in Chicago, including a mix of charters, magnet schools and traditional public schools. Some of those new schools opened in buildings that had previously housed traditional public schools.³⁰ Qualitative research in Chicago in 2012 found that community organizers were wary of neighborhood schools being replaced with charter schools, which they believed would pull the best students away from traditional public schools.³¹ In 2013, the Chicago Public Schools district closed another 50 traditional public schools, citing a decline in enrollment. These closures sparked protests, particularly when the Chicago Public Schools district subsequently invited proposals to create new charter schools.³² ●

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8

Charter School Operators



- What is the process for creating a charter school? How many are approved?
- Who operates charter schools?
- How is the proportion of freestanding charter schools changing?
- Does the research suggest that students at charter schools run by management organizations perform better than students at freestanding charter schools?

What is the process for creating a charter school? How many are approved?

When an organization wants to create a charter school, it first has to identify which authorizer oversees charters in its municipality or state. Authorizers are the entities that decide whether to approve new charter schools, that monitor them and that can close them. Most authorizers are local school boards, but authorizers can be other types of entities as well, such as universities or independent state agencies. For more information about authorizers, see the [Governance and Regulation](#) section.

Authorizers' application processes vary from state to state and within states. Typically, authorizers want information about the proposed school's curriculum, the applicant's track record and capacities and the organizational and financial plans for the new school. Application processes include initial letters of intent, followed by long application processes and in-person interviews with representatives of the organizations applying. Some applicants also apply for federal or foundation grants to help them start charter schools, but they still must apply to their local authorizer to operate a school.

Authorizers approved about one-third of all charter school applications in the 2012–13 and 2011–12 school years, according to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA)—an organization that describes itself as “committed to advancing excellence and accountability in the charter school sector and to increasing the number of high-quality charter schools across the nation.”¹ Authorizers monitor each charter school to determine whether it is meeting the goals it laid out in its charter application. After a certain number of years, authorizers conduct reviews and decide whether each school's charter to operate should be renewed. If the charter is not renewed, the school is closed.



In its 2013 survey of charter school authorizers, NACSA found that only about 32 percent of charter school authorizers followed NACSA's recommendation to grant charters a five-year contract term. Some terms were shorter and others were longer, but NACSA's report on its survey does not indicate how much longer or shorter most charter terms were. NACSA's report does note that Louisiana authorizers required three-year terms, while some authorizers in Arizona and Washington, D.C., required 15-year terms and some Colorado authorizers awarded operators terms lasting 30 years.²

NACSA believes that five years gives operators enough time to work out start-up problems and gives authorizers enough data on which to base their decisions about renewal. Given that only about a third of authorizers followed NACSA's five-year recommendation, there appears to be a diversity of viewpoints on the appropriate length of charter contracts.

Who operates charter schools?

In 2011-12, about one-third of charter schools were operated by management organizations that run multiple schools, according to both the Commercialism in Education Research Unit of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado Boulder and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.³

Some of these management organizations are nationally known, such as KIPP. Others are better known in some regions than in others, such as Success Academy, Green Dot, Uncommon Schools and Rocketship Education.



Of these organizations that manage multiple charter schools, some are nonprofit and others are for-profit. The nonprofits are sometimes called charter management organizations (CMOs), while the for-profits are sometimes called education management organizations (EMOs).

The Commercialism in Education Research Unit of the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) at the University of Colorado Boulder—which has expressed concern that “mixing commercial activities with public education raises fundamental issues of public policy, curriculum content, the proper relationship of educators to the students entrusted to them, and the values that the schools embody”—reported that the largest management organizations in 2013 included:⁴

- K12 Inc., the largest for-profit education management organization by number of students. It serves more than 87,000 students in 26 states at 44 charter schools and 13 district schools. K12 Inc. provides online charter schooling, private schooling and individual online courses.
- Imagine Schools, the largest for-profit management organization by number of schools, with 89 schools serving more than 43,500 students in 13 states.
- KIPP, the largest nonprofit charter management organization, with 98 schools and more than 35,000 students across 21 states.
- Cosmos Foundation, the second largest nonprofit management organization, with 47 schools and almost 23,500 students, operating only in Texas.

By contrast:

- New York City has the largest public school district in the United States, serving more than one million students.
- Fulton County, Georgia, where Atlanta is located, is similar in size to K12 Inc. by number of students. Fulton County serves about 93,000 students, making it the 32nd largest school district in the country by number of students.
- Oakland, California’s school district serves just over 36,000 students, similar in size to KIPP. Oakland’s was the 103rd largest school district by number of students in the 2012–13 school year.⁵

The NEPC estimated that in 2011–12, about 36 percent of charter schools were run by either nonprofit or for-profit management organizations and about 44 percent of all charter students were enrolled at schools run by management organizations.⁶ The NEPC estimated that in 2011-12:⁷

- 1,206 charter schools were managed by nonprofit organizations and 445,052 students attended charter schools managed by nonprofit organizations.
- 840 charter schools were managed by for-profit organizations and 462,926 students attended charter schools managed by for-profit organizations.

Roughly similar estimates have been generated by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS)—a nonprofit that describes itself as “committed to advancing the quality, growth, and sustainability of charter schools.” The NAPCS estimated that 32.5 percent of charter schools were operated by management organizations in 2010-11, the most recent year for which it has data.⁸

While about one-third of charter schools are operated by organizations that run multiple schools, approximately 67.5 percent of charter schools were freestanding or independently operated in 2010–11, according to the NAPCS.⁹

These freestanding charter schools are operated by organizations that operate only one school each. One team of academic researchers has grouped the organizations that operate freestanding charter schools into five broad categories:¹⁰

- Groups of teachers and administrators who create new schools, including those who convert traditional public or private schools into charters
- Grassroots community organizations
- Local business organizations such as chambers of commerce or economic development authorities
- Nonprofits that provide other social services, such as job training or children’s services
- Faith-based organizations

How is the proportion of freestanding charter schools changing?

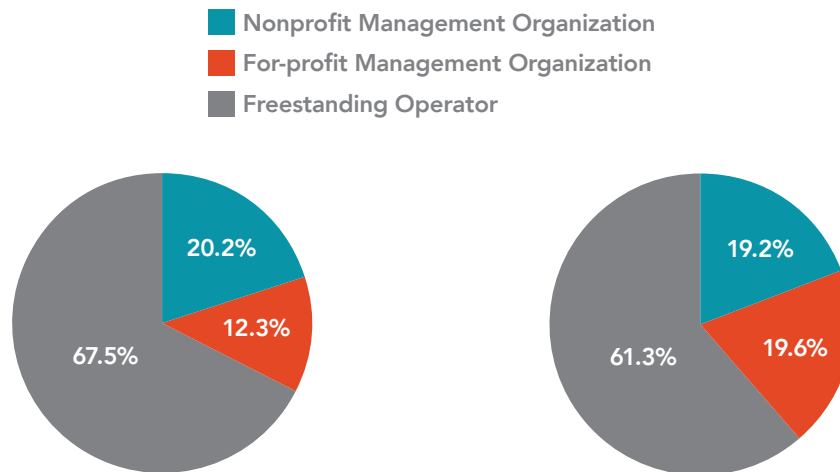
There are currently more freestanding charter schools than charter schools managed by organizations with multiple schools. However, data from the NAPCS show that the number of freestanding charter schools held fairly steady from 2007 to 2011. But there was growth in the number of schools managed by organizations with multiple schools.¹¹ Therefore, freestanding charter schools are now serving a smaller proportion of all charter school students.

In the 2007–08 school year, more than 78 percent of charter schools were freestanding and only 11.5 percent were managed by nonprofit organizations with multiple schools. By 2010–11, the number of all charter schools had grown, including the number of freestanding charter schools. But only 67.5 percent of charter schools were freestanding in 2010–11, while more than 20 percent were managed by nonprofit organizations with multiple schools. In 2007–08, freestanding charter schools served 74 percent of all charter school students. In 2010–11, freestanding charter schools served only about 61 percent of all charter school students.¹²

Most charter schools are freestanding

Percent of charter schools in 2010-11 that were run by a:

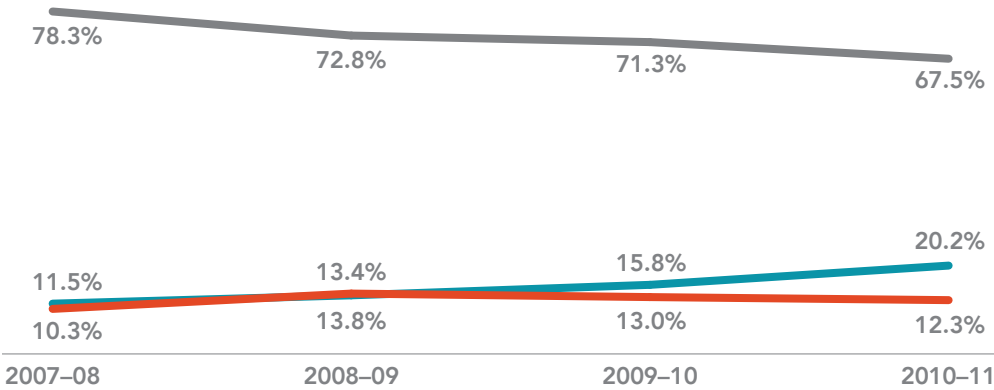
Percent of charter school students in 2010-11 who attended schools that were run by a:



SOURCE: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), “Schools by Management Organization, 2011,” Washington, DC: The Public Charter Schools Dashboard, 2014.

The proportion of freestanding charter schools is declining

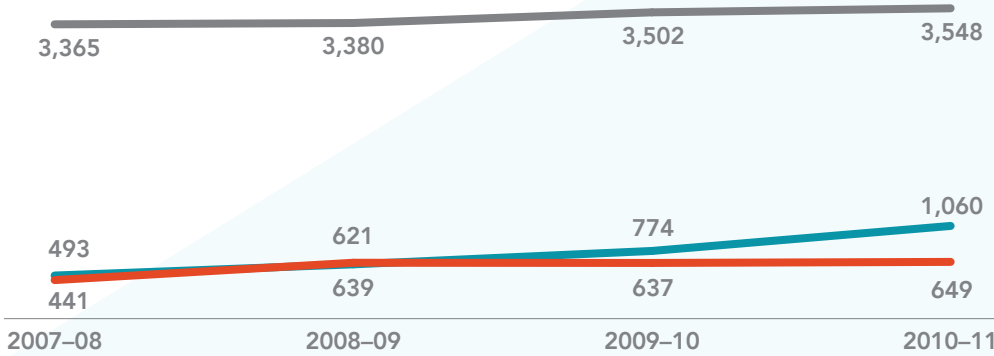
Percent of charter schools by operator type over time:



- Nonprofit Management Organization
- For-profit Management Organization
- Freestanding Operator

SOURCE: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Schools by Management Organization, 2011," Washington, DC: The Public Charter Schools Dashboard, 2014.

Number of charter schools by operator type over time:

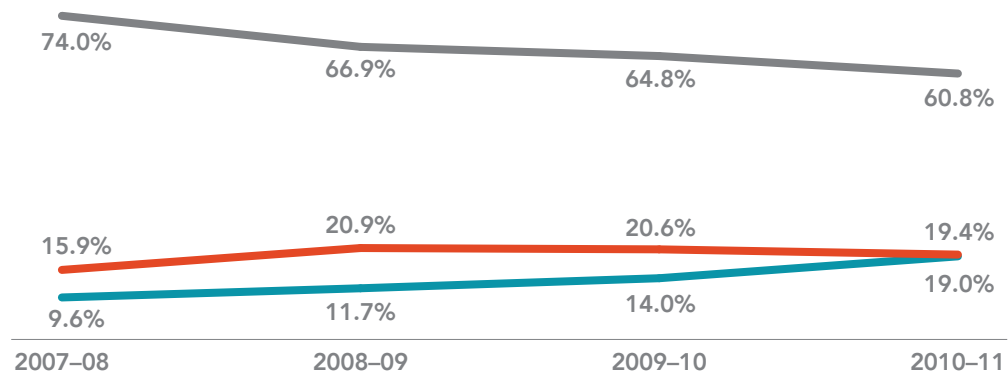


- Nonprofit Management Organization
- For-profit Management Organization
- Freestanding Operator

SOURCE: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Schools by Management Organization, 2011," Washington, DC: The Public Charter Schools Dashboard, 2014.

The proportion of students attending schools run by nonprofit charter management organizations is growing

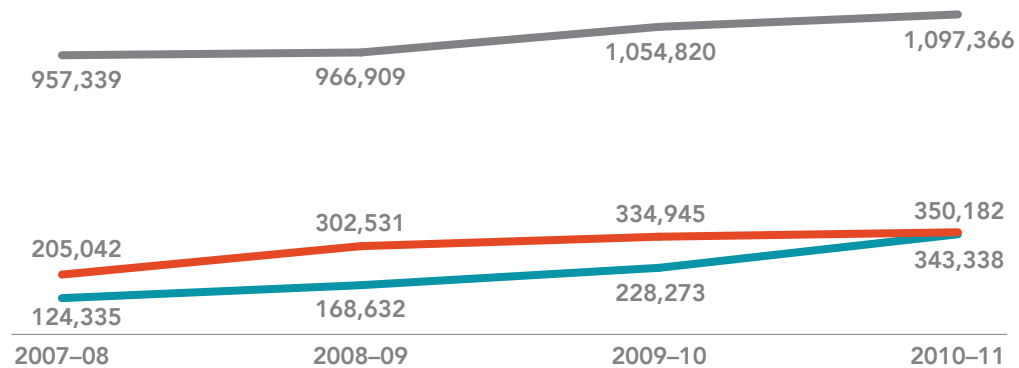
Percent of charter school students by operator type over time:



- Nonprofit Management Organization
- For-profit Management Organization
- Freestanding Operator

SOURCE: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Schools by Management Organization, 2011," Washington, DC: The Public Charter Schools Dashboard, 2014.

Number of charter school students by operator type over time:



- Nonprofit Management Organization
- For-profit Management Organization
- Freestanding Operator

SOURCE: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Schools by Management Organization, 2011," Washington, DC: The Public Charter Schools Dashboard, 2014.

The proportion of freestanding charter schools and students could be declining for a number of reasons. Freestanding charter schools face unique challenges, according to the Network of Independent Charter Schools, a nonprofit that describes its mission as helping “independent ‘mom and pop’ charter schools succeed.” Freestanding schools have limited access to financial capital compared with charter schools run by organizations with multiple schools. Their teachers and staff can be isolated from peers at other charter schools. They cannot draw on the expertise and other resources of large management organizations. They often attempt to address what they perceive as specific community needs, which can create strong pressure to succeed.¹³

Does the research suggest that students at charter schools run by management organizations perform better than students at freestanding charter schools?

It can be difficult to analyze student achievement at any one management organization because many of them operate multiple schools in multiple states with different systems for collecting and reporting data.

However, some researchers have asked whether students at charter schools run by management organizations perform better than students at freestanding charter schools. The 2013 edition of the ongoing CREDO study from Stanford University found no significant difference in reading and math score growth when it compared student achievement at freestanding charter schools with student achievement at charter schools run by management organizations from spring 2008 to spring 2011.¹⁴ For more detail, see the [Student Achievement](#) section.

CREDO studies charters and traditional public schools in 27 states, covering about 79 percent of public school students who had taken standardized tests and 95 percent of charter school students nationwide. Note that CREDO counts Washington, D.C., as a state and also counts New York City as a “state” separately from New York State. ●

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Families




- Who chooses charter schools?
- How do parents choose charter schools?
- How many charter schools use lottery systems, and how do they work?
- Does parental satisfaction with charter schools differ from parental satisfaction with traditional public schools?
- How do state laws use parental satisfaction to evaluate charter schools?
- Does parental involvement at charter schools differ from parental involvement at traditional public schools?


Who chooses charter schools?

Parents first “choose to choose” an alternative to their traditional public school.

Almost all parents who choose to send their children to charter schools actually make two choices. Researchers specify that in school districts with charters, parents first “choose to choose”—that is, they make the decision to look for an alternative to their traditional public (or “district”) school. Next, they choose which alternative school they want to enroll their child in.

Researchers have emphasized that both the initial choice to choose and the actual choice of school require parents to invest time and energy into making their choices.

 Different populations of parents have varying resources and access to information that affect their capacity and their likelihood to “choose to choose.” Factors such as socioeconomic status, level of education, and race have all been found to influence the likelihood that parents will exercise the option to choose or not. For instance, early research concluded that parents of higher socioeconomic status were more likely to choose.¹ Many researchers agree that disadvantaged populations of parents have fewer resources to choose a charter school, such as the time to devote to searching for a school, access to sufficient or reliable information about their options, access to transportation, language skills and more. Parents’ social capital and their social networks also largely influence the likelihood that they will exercise choice and influence the types of choices they make.²

 In addition to socioeconomic and other differences, the variation across different charter school districts and states also impact parents’ capacity and likelihood to choose. For instance, some but not all state charter laws require that school districts provide transportation to all charter schools for their students.³ For parents who do not have access to alternative transportation to take their children to school, this distinction would affect their ability to choose an alternative to their traditional “district” public school. At the district level, some school districts provide information to parents about their school options. For example, Chicago organizes fairs that showcase all public K-12 schools, including charters, whereas other districts do not offer the same amount of outreach or information to parents.

Lastly, in some charter school districts, parents’ actual choice of charter school is affected by the availability of seats and the level of demand for the school. In most states, but not all, a random lottery for seats is held if a charter school is in high demand and oversubscribed, as we discuss below.⁴

How do parents choose charter schools?

Advocates of charter schools often argue that when given the power to choose, parents will select the best school for their child. Some advocates contend that with choice, parents will act much like rational consumers in a marketplace. Other advocates support school choice as a means by which to equalize educational opportunities, especially for families with fewer resources who live in school districts with low-performing schools. Given the option of better schools, they argue, parents will move their children out of such schools. On the other side, opponents of charter schools reject the notion that school choice will automatically lead parents to choose the best school for their child. They contend that education is much more complex than

common consumer goods and that therefore parents who choose do so based not only on their knowledge of the quality of the school, but on their own values, priorities and other factors. The research shows that there is a difference between these parents' *stated* reasons for choosing charters and their *actual choice behavior*.

Studies have found that parents who choose to enroll their children in charter schools frequently cite educational or academic factors as their principal reasons for choosing the school—they often say that high academic performance is a top reason in choosing a charter school.⁵ A 1997 survey conducted by researchers associated at the time with the Hudson Institute asked parents at 30 charter schools in nine states to report the reasons why they chose their charter school. The leading answers were largely academic in nature: the smaller size of charter schools, higher standards, better teachers, a greater opportunity for parent involvement and a program that was closer to their educational philosophy.⁶ These findings have been largely corroborated in later studies,⁷ such as a 2007 survey of charter school parents in Indianapolis, Indiana, by researchers associated with the National Center on School Choice, a research organization at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education that focuses on "how school choice affects individuals, communities, and systems." The researchers found that 63 percent of the parents surveyed said that "academic quality" or "academic focus" was the most important reason they chose a charter school. In addition, the study found that parents who rated the academic quality of their child's previous school as average or below average were significantly more likely to report academics as a top priority in their school choice.⁸



Although much of the literature has found that parents most frequently cite academic reasons for choosing charter schools, it is important to note that these findings relate to a generalized picture of the entire charter landscape, and charter parents' priorities will vary between different families and different districts. For example, another state-level study found racial differences in parents' stated reasons for choosing schools. In a study published in 2002, researchers with the University of Houston conducted interviews with 1,006 charter school parents in Texas and asked them to rank their three top reasons for choosing their school: test scores, discipline, school racial or ethnic characteristics, location, the teaching of moral values or safety. The researchers wanted to know whether parent preferences differed across racial groups. They found that parents across the entire sample chose "discipline" and "the teaching of moral values" as two of their top three reasons. White parents were the only group that rated "test scores" most frequently as their most important consideration; African-American parents rated "test scores" second to "the teaching of moral values" as most important; and Hispanic parents did not rank "test scores" in the top three at all and rated "discipline" as most important.⁹ In a 2003 qualitative study, a researcher associated with the Educational Testing Service conducted longitudinal interviews across nine months with a group of 48 parents in Detroit about their choices in selecting a middle school or high school for their child. The researcher found that the majority of parents who chose a school other than their traditional "district" public school (36 of 48 parents) cited not only academic reasons (58 percent) for choosing a school, but also "holistic" reasons (69 percent), or reasons that focused on their child's overall well-being.¹⁰ In another study published using the same qualitative data, the researcher also noted that the majority of these parents (75 percent) also mentioned geography—both in terms of convenience and access, as well as the desirability of certain neighborhoods—as an important factor in their choice.¹¹

Furthermore, some researchers and scholars have argued that much of the literature on how parents choose charter schools is limited. Most studies, like those summarized above, focus on parents' *stated preferences* in schools and not on their *actual choice behavior*. When researchers have studied parents' actual choice behavior, they have found that charter parents' actual choices

in schools often do not fully align with their stated preferences.¹² For instance, in their 2007 study of Indianapolis charter parents, researchers with the National Center on School Choice found that there was no clear pattern to support the idea that parents were moving their children from

Research has found that charter parents' actual choices in schools often do not fully align with their stated preferences.

academically low-performing schools into higher-performing schools, even though that was their stated reason for changing schools. Although some families did move to academically high-performing charters, the study found that many others also moved from higher-performing traditional public schools to lower-performing charter schools.¹³ These findings might indicate that parents are considering other criteria besides academic quality or high test scores

in making their decisions. Or the findings might indicate that parents associate charter schools with being “better,” and as a result they do not make any comparisons between charters and traditional public schools.

Other researchers have raised concerns that although parents rarely explicitly report that a school's demographics or racial composition was a factor in their choice of charter school, there is evidence that their actual choice behavior may be influenced by racial preference.¹⁴ For instance, researchers with the University of Houston found in their analysis of Texas charter schools that a school's racial composition was the best predictor of families' choice of charter: African-American families chose charter schools in which the percentage of African-American students was on average 14.9 points higher than in their previous school, white families chose charter schools in which the percentage of white students was on average 8.1 points higher and Hispanic families chose charter schools in which the percentage of Hispanic students was on average 3.7 points higher.¹⁵ Opponents of charter schools have argued that these findings demonstrate the potential for school choice to lead to more racially segregated schools.

A recent study assessed New Orleans parents' actual school preferences following the reorganization of the Orleans Parish School District into an all-choice district after Hurricane Katrina. In New Orleans, parents apply to all schools using one application on which they rank which schools they would prefer, and admission is then determined by lottery. The study found that parents' actual ranked preferences depended on many factors in addition to schools' academic performance, and that parents' preferences revealed that they sometimes prioritized other factors more highly than schools' academic performance. Researchers with the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, associated with Tulane University, analyzed data on parents' actual school preferences from their applications for the 2013-14 school year, and found that geographic distance and extracurricular offerings often appeared to take precedence over academic performance. For instance, the researchers found that parents were more likely to select as their first choice a school that was around the corner but was a “C” grade in terms of academic performance than they were to select a “B” grade school that was more than three quarters of a mile away. The study also revealed significant socioeconomic differences in parents' actual choices. Low-income parents in New Orleans were much more likely to give preference to convenient location, extracurricular activities such as football and band (for high school preferences), or extended school days (for elementary school preferences) over academic performance than were higher-income parents.¹⁶

Some researchers have also postulated that most parents simply do not have enough resources to be the informed consumers that charter advocates believe them to be. This problem is particularly acute for low-income parents: they tend to make less informed choices in charter schools than do higher-income parents.¹⁷ On the other hand, the study in New Orleans suggested that even when parents were presented with clear academic performance data and other explicit information, they chose schools based on other factors.¹⁸ More research is needed to determine the cause of observed disparities between parents' stated preferences and their actual choice behavior.

How many charter schools use lottery systems, and how do they work?

In many school districts or cities, some charter schools are in such high demand that they must use a lottery to determine which families get seats in the school. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS)—a nonprofit that describes itself as “committed to advancing the quality, growth, and sustainability of charter schools”—released a report in 2014 that calculated the national charter school “waitlist”—that is, the number of student applications for charter school seats that were going to be determined by a lottery. In the 2013–14 school year, they estimated that a total of 586,511 individual students did not get into any charter school they applied to. Overall, the NAPCS estimated that 80.3 percent of charter schools nationwide had a waitlist for seats for the 2013–14 academic year, based on data gathered from state-level departments of education, state-level charter school support organizations and surveys administered to charter schools that don't otherwise report wait-list data.¹⁹

These numbers show that a large majority of charter schools have a waitlist for seats, many of which resort to a lottery system to decide how seats are allocated. Many researchers, including a team led by Caroline Hoxby that studied the lottery system in New York City, have pointed to evidence that these random lottery systems do work effectively; that is, they allocate seats in a fair and nondiscriminatory manner. Hoxby and her colleagues found that there are for the most part no demographic or other differences between the groups of lottery winners (those who get seats in charter schools) and lottery non-winners (those who do not) in New York City.²⁰

Lotteries for seats in charter schools have different rules and regulations in different states.

Lotteries for seats in charter schools have different rules and regulations in different states. In some state school districts, these lotteries are random and each family has an equal chance of “winning” a seat in a school that it applies for. In other state school districts, by contrast, charter school lotteries give more weight, or preference, to certain groups of students and families to give them a better chance of winning a seat in the school.



For instance, in New York City, where around 94 percent of charter school students are admitted into their charter school through the lottery system,²¹ the state law requires charters to give enrollment preference to returning students, siblings of students already enrolled in the charter school and students who live in the district where the charter school is located.²² In other states, the state law requires charters to give preference in the lottery to disadvantaged groups. In Arkansas, for example, priority is sometimes given to racial minorities, in order to comply with other state laws regarding school desegregation. In Nevada, some charters are required to give priority in their lottery systems to students deemed to be “at risk,”²³ such as students from low-income families, students with limited English proficiency, students who are at risk of dropping out of high school and students who do not meet minimum standards of academic proficiency.²⁴

In January 2014, the U.S. Department of Education weighed in on these different rules governing lottery systems and released nonregulatory guidelines for charter schools across the nation that have received additional financial support from federal grants and other funds through the department’s Charter Schools Program. These federal guidelines permitted charter schools receiving federal grants to give preference in their lottery systems to low-income or educationally disadvantaged students.²⁵

Does parental satisfaction with charter schools differ from parental satisfaction with traditional public schools?

Research has shown that a large majority of parents with children in charter schools are satisfied with their children’s schools. In general, charter school parents report higher levels of satisfaction with their children’s schools than do parents of children at traditional public schools.²⁶ But some researchers have argued that parents who have “chosen to choose” charter schools are more likely to report higher satisfaction only because they want to convince themselves that they made a good choice.²⁷ Parental satisfaction matters because, as noted below, some states use parental satisfaction to evaluate charter schools.

Surveys have recorded high parental satisfaction with charter schools since the early expansion of charters across the country. One of the earliest surveys of charter school parents’ satisfaction—conducted in 1997 by researchers associated at the time with the Hudson Institute and published by the Brookings Institution together with a series of other early evaluations of charter schools—asked parents from 30 charter schools in nine states to rate their level of satisfaction with different features of their children’s charter schools. A large majority of parents reported being “very satisfied” with each feature, especially with educational features, such as class size (75.2 percent), curriculum (71.6 percent), individual attention from teachers (70.8 percent) and teacher quality (56.6 percent).²⁸ The study found that parents of charter students with special needs reported high satisfaction as well.²⁹



These findings have been largely corroborated in more recent research, and across states and districts, in studies where parents were asked to grade their children's schools using letter grades from "A" to "F." As with most data on charter schools, it is important to keep in mind that parental satisfaction with charter schools varies a great deal across different states and in different school years. But the overall trend shows that charter school parents are very satisfied and are more satisfied than traditional public school parents.

- In 2001–02, researchers who at the time were associated with the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and with Stony Brook University surveyed parents of children in charters and traditional public schools in Washington, D.C. Charter school parents gave higher grades on all measures—such as the schools' teachers, principals or facilities—than parents of children at traditional public schools. For instance, 49 percent of charter school parents gave their child's school an overall grade of "A," whereas only 39 percent of traditional public school parents gave their child's school an overall grade of "A."³⁰
- Researchers at the University of Southern California administered a survey in 2006 to parents of children enrolled in 17 charter schools, located primarily in urban areas in Southern California. Seventy percent of the California charter school parents who were surveyed gave their child's charter school an overall grade of "A."³¹
- In New Orleans, researchers with the RAND Corporation in 2009 found that 41 percent of charter school parents gave their child's school a grade of "A" overall, whereas only 18 percent of traditional public school parents gave their child's school an "A" grade.³²

Despite these findings, researchers have noted that charter school parents could be reporting higher levels of satisfaction because people in general tend to ascribe positive attributes to the choices they make, a phenomenon that cognitive psychologists refer to as "choice-supportive bias."³³ In districts with charters, researchers specify that parents must first "choose to choose" an alternative to their district's traditional public school and then choose which alternative school they want to enroll their child in. Some researchers have argued that parents who have "chosen to choose" are more likely to report higher satisfaction with whatever school they choose—charter or not—because they want to justify the choice they made and reassure themselves that the search process was a good investment of time and energy.³⁴ By this logic, parents who send their children to the traditional public school in their neighborhood or district are less likely to report high rates of satisfaction, because they have not actively chosen their child's school.³⁵

To test this possibility, some studies have examined if parents' satisfaction with their children's charter schools remains high or if their satisfaction diminishes over time. In the study of Washington, D.C., charter and traditional public school parents' levels of satisfaction, researchers who at the time were associated with the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and with Stony Brook University used data from four rounds of parent surveys—conducted from 2001 to 2004—to see if charter school parents' and traditional public school parents' satisfaction changed over time. The researchers found that the differences between the levels of satisfaction of charter school parents and traditional public school parents did in fact diminish over time. After five years, charter school parents in Washington, D.C., were not any more satisfied with their schools' curriculum, teachers or facilities than traditional public school parents were.³⁶

How do charter authorizers use parental satisfaction to evaluate charter schools?

In addition to being a focus of the research on charter schools, some state laws require charter authorizers to use parental satisfaction as a metric to evaluate charter schools.³⁷ According to the database of charter authorizing laws managed by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), there are at least three states—Arkansas, New York and Texas—in which the charter laws require authorizers to consider parental satisfaction in the evaluation and renewal processes for existing charter schools.³⁸ In at least two other states—Georgia and New Hampshire—charter laws create mechanisms for parents to request the revocation of a school’s charter if they are very dissatisfied with the school or its performance.³⁹ For more information on charter authorizers, see our [Governance and Regulation](#) section.

Does parental involvement at charter schools differ from parental involvement at traditional public schools?

Members of the education community and researchers alike have emphasized for decades the importance of parental involvement in improving student performance. Charter advocates contend that charter schools allow for greater parental involvement than traditional public schools. Often, charter schools also specifically require more involvement from parents than traditional public schools do. However, there is substantial variation within each sector. For instance, in 2012 the Chicago Board of Education adopted a policy that will require traditional public schools to adopt plans to encourage greater parent involvement.⁴⁰

Many charters require parents to sign contracts when they enroll their children. These contracts ask parents to pledge their involvement in various aspects of their child’s schooling, such as helping with homework or attending parent-teacher conferences, and/or in various areas in the school, such as with volunteer hours or with governance decisions.⁴¹ In five states—Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, New Hampshire and Tennessee—and in Washington, D.C., charter authorizing laws require that charter schools involve parents in school-level governance.⁴² Some opponents of charter schools, on the other hand, have argued that parental involvement requirements could deter lower-income and minority parents from enrolling their children in charters, for fear that they would be unable to fulfill the requirements of the parent contracts.⁴³ In the past few years, however, many charter schools have relabeled these contracts as “parent-school contracts” or “home-school contracts” in an effort to emphasize that the responsibility of supporting students is shared by parents, teachers, and schools, so that the requirements of the contracts are not a burden on parents alone.⁴⁴ For more information on parent contracts, see our [Innovation](#) section.

The research has shown that charter school parents do tend to be more involved in their children’s schools and schooling than parents of children enrolled in comparable traditional public schools. A study by researchers with the University of Connecticut and Duke University examined data from the 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey, administered to charter and public school administrators and teachers by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics. The researchers tried to determine if school administrators’ ratings of parental involvement differed between charter schools and comparable traditional public schools. The study asked school administrators to rate how many parents participate in activities such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences, volunteering in school, signing contracts, and school governance. Controlling for school location and the demographic characteristics of students, the

study found that parent participation was consistently significantly higher in charter schools than in public schools for almost all of the activities included in the survey. The differences between charter school parental involvement and traditional public school parental involvement were most pronounced at the elementary and middle school levels. The exception was parent-teacher conferences, for which the differences in parent participation between charter and traditional public schools was not significant.⁴⁵

Some studies argue that due to their more autonomous governance structure, charter schools are able to have, and tend to have, more direct policies requiring parental involvement than do most traditional public schools,⁴⁶ although there is variation in each sector. Some charter schools' mission statements also directly prioritize parent involvement, although not all do so. Researchers with Columbia University, the University of Oregon, and the University of California at Berkeley recently concluded that as a result of charters' policies and activities around parent involvement, parents' engagement with their child's schooling was consistently higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools.⁴⁷

However, many researchers have noted the difficulty of comparing parental involvement in charter versus traditional public schools, because there might be numerous factors that are difficult or impossible to account for. Researchers note the potential for a "self-selection bias" among charter school parents, meaning that parents who make the effort to choose a charter school (what researchers call "choosing to choose") might have certain unobservable characteristics that also make them more inclined to be involved at their child's school. These researchers argued that this bias also could have an effect on comparisons between charter parents and traditional public school parents. Because samples of charter parents are not random—the parents are distinguished by having "chosen to choose"—it is difficult for researchers to control for the effects of these unobserved parent characteristics and to isolate the effect of school type (charter or traditional public school) on parental involvement.⁴⁸ There is research which shows that charter schools' lottery systems do assign seats fairly (that is, randomly) among families who have applied for seats (see above), such as in New York City⁴⁹ or Boston,⁵⁰ but the comparison is only between parents who have already "chosen to choose."

Many charter opponents and other observers have expressed concerns that charter schools report higher levels of parental involvement simply because charters attract parents who are already highly involved in their children's schooling. They argue that this siphoning off—or "creaming"—of involved parents could result in negative effects on the traditional public schools that lose these students and families to charter schools.⁵¹ There is some evidence in the research to support this. One early study, published in 1996, that examined parental involvement in San Antonio schools found that parents with children in "choice public schools"—a category that included, but was not limited to, charter schools—were more involved than parents at traditional public schools in the district. But the study also found that those choice public school parents had been more involved in their children's previous schools as well.⁵² For more information on "creaming," see our [Diversity and Inclusion](#) section.

Based on data from the Schools and Staffing Survey, University of Connecticut and Duke University researchers looked at changes in survey responses between the 1993–94 and the 1999–2000 surveys to determine if the introduction of charter schools in a school district had affected parental involvement at traditional public schools in that district. The study relied on traditional public school administrators’ responses to the survey questions about parental involvement. The researchers found that “schools located near charter schools are more likely than other schools [in charter school states] to see lack of parental involvement become a more serious problem between 1993–94 and 1999–2000.” In fact, school administrators at traditional public schools rated parental involvement significantly lower after charter schools had been introduced into their districts.⁵³ Although these findings cannot determine causation, they are notable. They could mean that highly involved parents are pulled away from traditional public schools and into charters. They could mean that the presence of charters makes traditional public school administrators less satisfied with the involvement of parents in their schools. They could mean that the presence of charters makes traditional public school parents less inspired to become involved. They could mean that administrators were dismayed about the introduction of charter schools in their districts and the possibilities of losing any parents to the new charters. Future research is necessary to follow up on this study in order to determine the cause of the researchers’ findings. ●

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Public Opinion



- What does public opinion polling indicate about issues in K-12 education in general, besides charter schools?
- What does polling indicate about public opinion regarding charter schools?
- How consistent is public opinion about charter schools?
- Is public opinion about charter schools well-informed?
- Does public opinion differ in locations with high concentrations of charter schools?

Passionate advocates and critics often engage in heated debates over the performance, financing and political implications of charter schools. But to what extent does this expert-level debate reflect a similar divide in opinions among the general public?

Polls show that about one-half to two-thirds of Americans express support for charter schools. But there are many signs that public opinion on this issue is not necessarily stable. Public levels of support for charter schools can change considerably depending on how questions are framed and whether people have the option of giving neutral answers. Polls also show that many Americans are misinformed about charter schools. Furthermore, very few people have any direct experience with charter schools. Nationwide, over 5 percent of all public school students attended a charter school in 2012-13.¹ Eight states did not have any laws permitting charter schools at all in 2012-13.² As we discuss below, patterns of support and opposition in cities and states with higher proportions of charter schools are fairly similar to nationwide patterns.

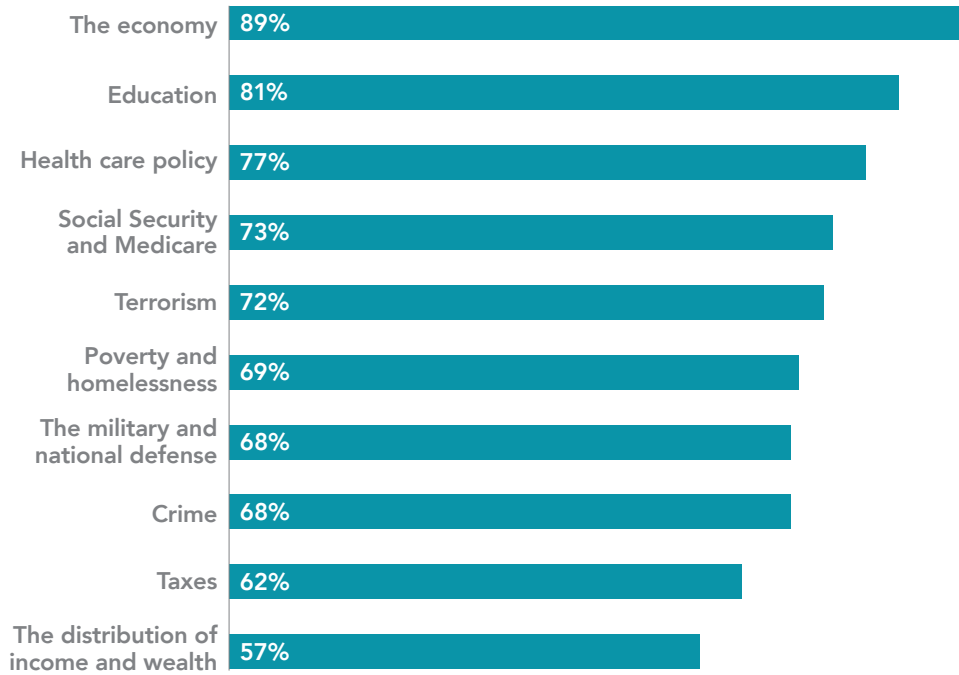
What does public opinion polling indicate about issues in K-12 education in general, besides charter schools?

Polls consistently indicate that education is a priority for Americans, who are generally dissatisfied with the state of public schools in the nation as a whole. However, polls also indicate that the general public is divided in their support for various proposals for change in education and, as we discuss further below, that most people oppose cutting funding for public schools. These views provide some context for understanding the mixture of support and opposition that people express for charter schools and the opposition they express when survey questions frame charters as a threat to traditional public schools' funding.

Gallup's January 2014 nationally representative survey found that 81 percent of American adults rated education as an extremely important or very important priority for the president and Congress to deal with in the following year. The economy was the only topic that more Americans rated as an extremely important or very important priority.³ This poll did not specifically distinguish K-12 from higher education.

Education is a high priority for Americans

Percent of Americans who say the following issues are either extremely or very important for the president and Congress to deal with in the next year, 2014:

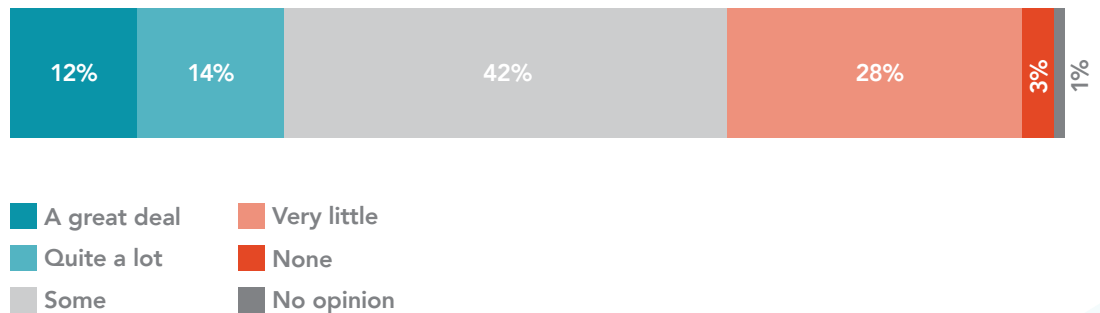


SOURCE: Gallup, "Americans Rate Economy as Top Priority for Government," 2014.

Gallup also found in 2014 that 28 percent of Americans expressed very little confidence in the nation's public schools and only 12 percent expressed a great deal of confidence. That lack of confidence was nearly unchanged from 1999, when 24 percent of Americans expressed very little confidence in public schools and only 14 percent expressed a great deal of confidence.⁴

Americans express little confidence in public schools

Percent of Americans who say they have a great deal, quite a lot, some, very little or no confidence in the public schools, 2014:



SOURCE: Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," 2014.

Phi Delta Kappa International (PDK), an organization of educators, conducts an annual poll with Gallup. The PDK/Gallup poll has found that, every year from 2010 to 2014, only 17 to 19 percent of Americans gave an “A” or “B” grade to public schools in the nation as a whole. However, people tend to have more positive feelings about the schools in their communities. During those same years, about half of Americans gave the schools in their communities an “A” or “B” grade.⁵

While polls indicate dissatisfaction, they also indicate divisions over proposals for change and inconsistencies in public opinion on a range of issues in K-12 education besides charter schools. For example, the 2014 PDK/Gallup poll found that:

- 42 percent of the general public and 44 percent of public school parents said that elementary schools in their community are not changing quickly enough. But equal numbers said that the elementary schools in their community do not need to change.
- 49 percent of the general public and 45 percent of public school parents said that secondary schools in their community are not changing quickly enough. But 32 percent of the general public and 36 percent of public school parents said the secondary schools in their community do not need to change.
- 58 percent of the general public said the school curriculum in their community needs to be changed to meet today’s needs, but 38 percent said it already meets today’s needs. 50 percent of public school parents said the school curriculum in their community needs to be changed to meet today’s needs, but 50 percent said it already meets today’s needs.⁶

What does polling indicate about public opinion regarding charter schools?

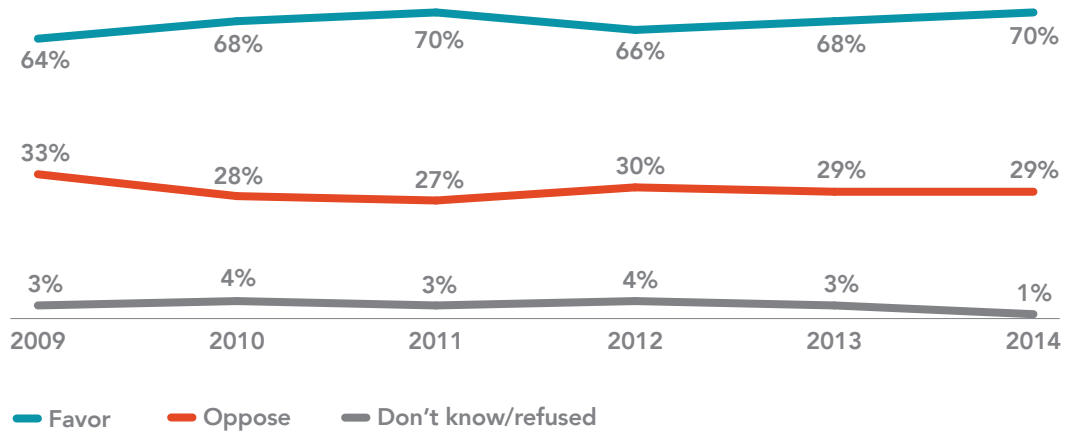
Local and national polling show that about one-half to two-thirds of the general public favor charter schools and one-third or less say that they oppose charter schools. However, when surveys give respondents the option to answer that their views are neutral or undecided, a substantial number of people say they have no opinion or are unsure and reported support falls somewhat. But support still outweighs opposition in those polls.

The PDK/Gallup survey has found that about two-thirds of the general public favor and one-third oppose charter schools. This pattern has not changed much over the past six years.⁷ Those who said “don’t know” had to volunteer their answers.

Support for charter schools outweighs opposition

Percent of Americans who say they favor or oppose the idea of charter schools after hearing the following statement, over time:

“Charter schools operate under a charter or contract that frees them from many of the state regulations imposed on public schools and permits them to operate independently.”



SOURCE: PDK/Gallup, “Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” 2014.

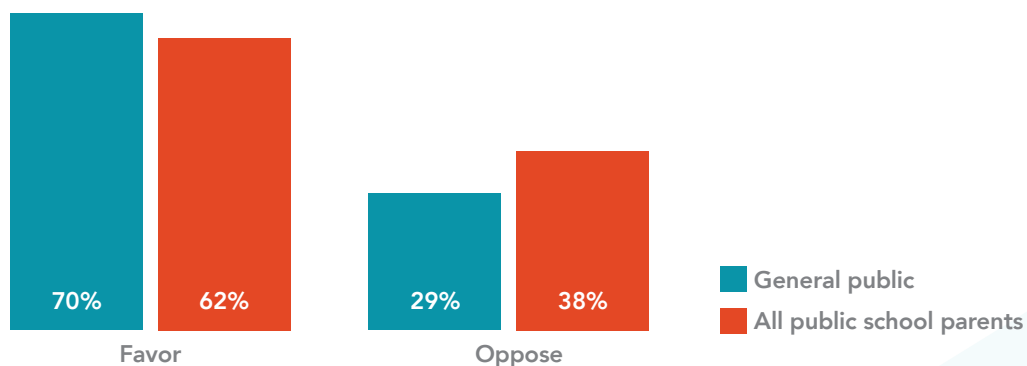
The PDK/Gallup poll yielded very similar results when half of the sample was not offered a definition of charter schools in 2014: 63 percent were in favor, 31 percent opposed and 6 percent said they did not know or refused to answer.⁸ Again, the PDK/Gallup survey did not explicitly offer respondents the opportunity to answer “don’t know” to these questions about charter schools but accepted it as a volunteered response.

The 2014 PDK/Gallup survey also found that most parents favored charter schools, but somewhat less than the general public.⁹

Parents’ views on charter schools differ somewhat from those of the general public

Percent of public school parents and the general public who say they favor or oppose the idea of charter schools after hearing the following statement, 2014:

“Charter schools operate under a charter or contract that frees them from many of the state regulations imposed on public schools and permits them to operate independently.”



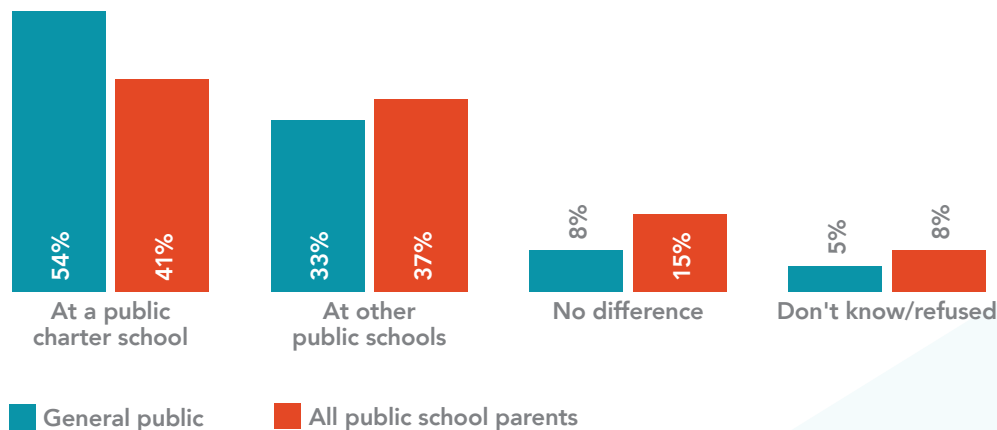
SOURCE: PDK/Gallup, “The 46th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” 2014.

The 2014 PDK/Gallup poll also asked whether charters or traditional public schools provide a better education. While both parents and the general public judged charter schools more highly than traditional public schools, parents were somewhat less positive about charters than the general public and were more likely to see no difference between charters and traditional public schools.¹⁰

To learn more about the views of charter school and traditional public school parents, please see the [Families](#) section.

Parents are somewhat more skeptical of charter schools than the general public is when asked to compare charters to traditional public schools

Percent of public school parents and the general public who say they believe students receive a better education at a public charter school, at other public schools, or who say there is no difference, 2014:



SOURCE: PDK/Gallup, "The 46th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 2014.

More nuanced results emerged from a survey by Education Next, which offered respondents the opportunity to give less polarized answers than just "favor" or "oppose." Education Next publishes a journal and other content about education. It is sponsored by the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Education Next describes itself as partaking "of no program, campaign, or ideology."¹¹

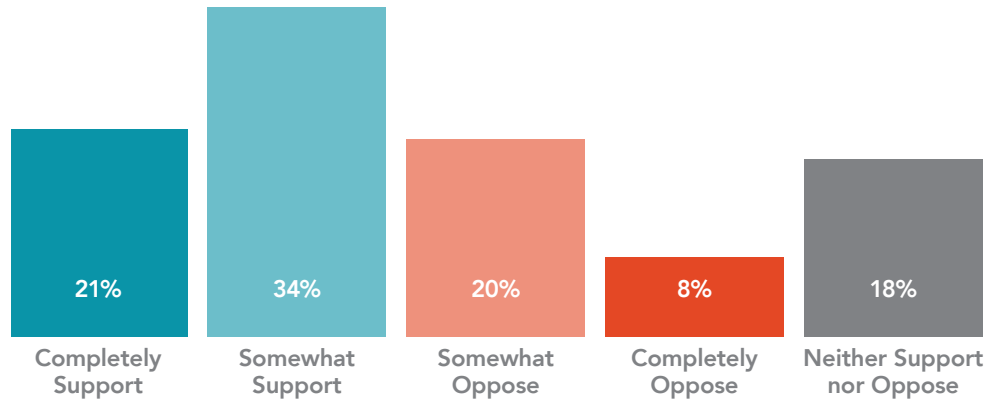
The 2014 Education Next survey allowed respondents to give answers on a four-point scale, ranging from complete support to complete opposition. In addition, it allowed respondents to say that they neither support nor oppose charter schools.¹²

With this broader range of possible answers, polls show more nuanced opinions about charter schools. Many respondents clustered in the middle-range answers—somewhat support and somewhat oppose. Eighteen percent of respondents said they neither supported nor opposed charters. Nonetheless, support still outweighed opposition.

Some polls reveal more nuanced views toward charter schools

Percent of Americans who say they favor or oppose the formation of charter schools after hearing the following statement, 2014:

“Many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations.”



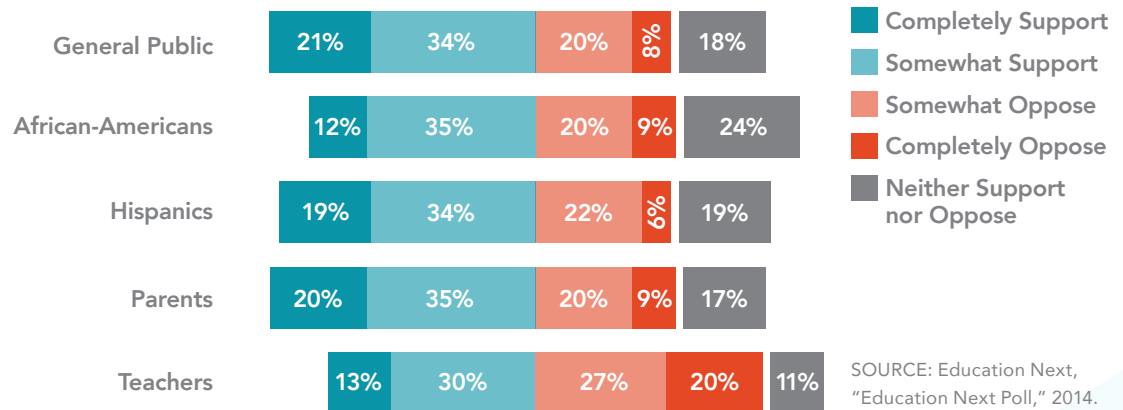
SOURCE: Education Next, “Education Next Poll,” 2014.

The 2014 Education Next survey yielded results for African-Americans and Hispanics that differed only somewhat from the general public views reported above.¹³ It found that public school parents’ opinions about charter schools were comparable to the general public’s views. One notable subgroup difference is among public school teachers, which the 2014 Education Next poll found were more opposed to charter schools than the general public or other groups.

Views of subgroups differ somewhat from those of the general public

Percent of Americans who say they favor or oppose the formation of charter schools after hearing the following statement, by subgroups, 2014:

“Many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt form many state regulators.”



SOURCE: Education Next, “Education Next Poll,” 2014.

How consistent is public opinion about charter schools?

While the polls above show that public support for charter schools outweighs opposition, people's responses are different when survey questions frame charters as a threat to traditional public schools' funding.

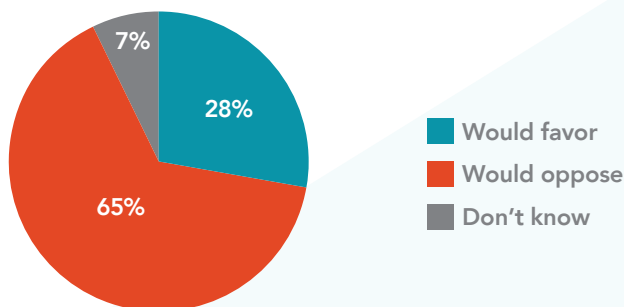
Most Americans reject reductions in federal funding for public education and favor proposals to increase funding. The nonpartisan Pew Research Center asked a nationally representative sample of adult Americans if they would increase spending, decrease spending or keep spending the same for a variety of programs. In 2013, 60 percent of Americans said they would support increases in funding for education. In fact, there was no area in which more Americans favored increasing spending.¹⁴

A 2013 survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard School of Public Health found that public education was the area in which Americans would be least willing to see reductions in federal spending in order to reduce the deficit. Sixty-one percent of Americans would not be willing to see spending reduced on public education.¹⁵

In this context of support for education funding, when survey questions frame charter schools as taking money away from traditional public schools, support for charters falls. PDK/Gallup in 2002 and 2005 asked whether people would support or oppose charter schools if doing so meant reduced funding for traditional public schools. Opposition far outweighed support.¹⁶

People are skeptical about charter schools when asked to consider impacts on traditional public schools' funding

Percent of Americans who say they favor or oppose charter schools in their community if funding them means reducing the amount of funds for the regular public schools, 2005:



SOURCE: PDK/Gallup, "37th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 2005.

PDK/Gallup has not asked this question since 2005. But the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a union of educators, asked a similar question in a 2013 poll only of parents.¹⁷ The AFT has resolved to emphasize solidarity between teachers at charters and traditional public schools.¹⁸ But its poll of parents emphasized competition for funding between charters and traditional public schools. When it used this framing, the AFT's poll elicited negative reactions in proportions roughly similar to those in PDK/Gallup's poll.

The AFT does not make the precise wordings or full responses to all its questions publicly available. But according to its report, it asked parents about a proposal to "reduce spending on regular public schools, increase spending on charters."

- 55 percent of parents strongly disapproved of this proposal.
- An additional 21 percent of parents somewhat disapproved of this proposal.
- The AFT did not report results on how many parents approved of this proposal or how many did not know.¹⁹

When the AFT asked parents about the effects of policies that "increase charters and spend less on public schools,"

- 53 percent of parents said these policies had a negative effect on the quality of education.
- 31 percent of parents said these policies had a positive effect on the quality of education.
- 16 percent of parents were not sure.²⁰

While these polling questions may be provocative, they indicate that support for charter schools does not hold stable when charters are framed as a threat to traditional public schools' funding.

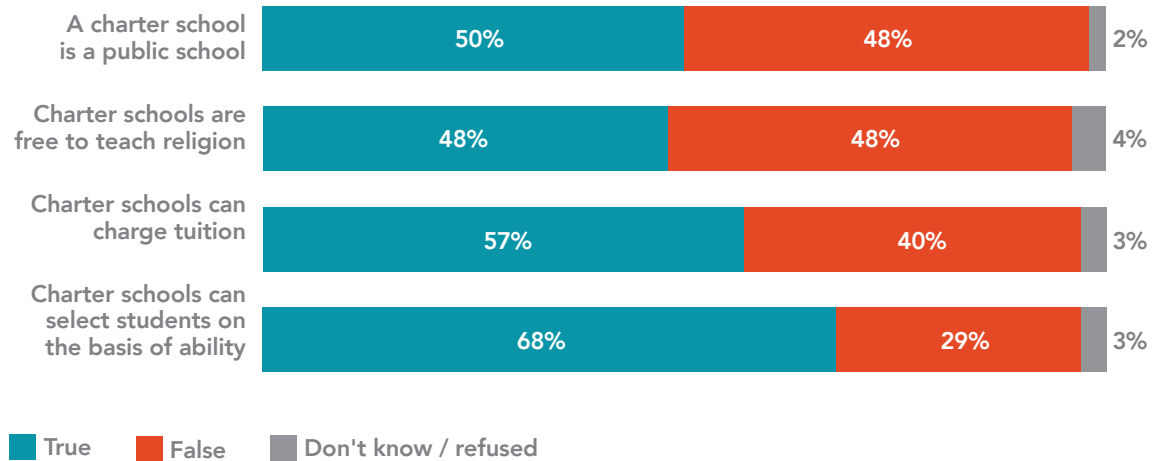
Is public opinion about charter schools well-informed?

Polling also indicates that many Americans are misinformed about charter schools. For example, polling conducted by two different organizations indicates considerable misinformation around whether charter schools are public (they are), how they are funded (by taxpayers), whether they can charge tuition (they can't), whether they can hold religious services or teach religion (they can't), and whether they can select students based on academic ability (they can't).

For example, the 2014 PDK/Gallup survey found that the public was misinformed on a number of key issues regarding charter schools, as the chart below demonstrates.²¹

Many Americans are misinformed about charter schools

Percent of Americans who say they think the following statements are true or false based on what they know or have heard about charter schools, 2014:



Note: Some charter schools in some states can in fact use certain non-discriminatory selective admissions practices if they are oversubscribed. For more detail on charter admissions and lotteries, please see the section on [Families](#).

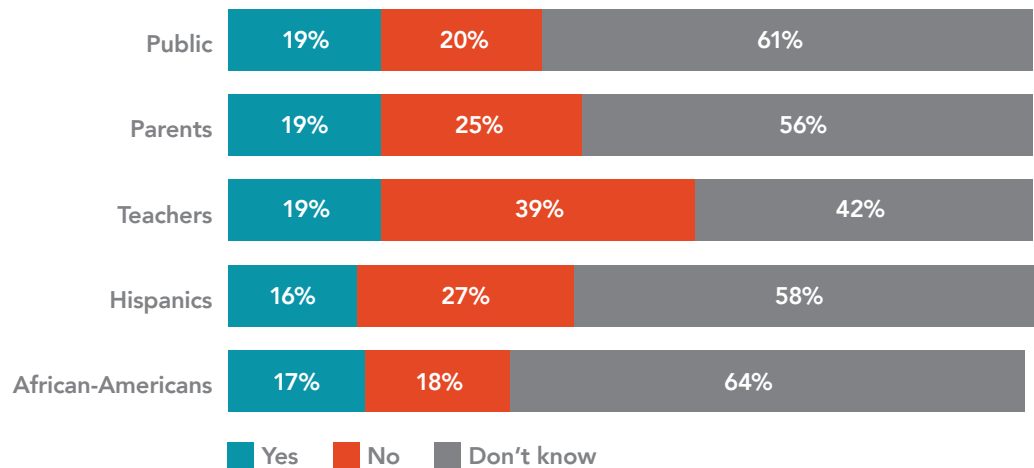
SOURCE: PDK/Gallup, "Try It Again, Uncle Sam: The 46th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 2014.

Similarly, the 2013 Education Next survey found less but substantial misinformation on many of these topics, including among parents and teachers. Moreover, Education Next found that a substantial number of respondents admitted they did not know the answers to these questions.²²

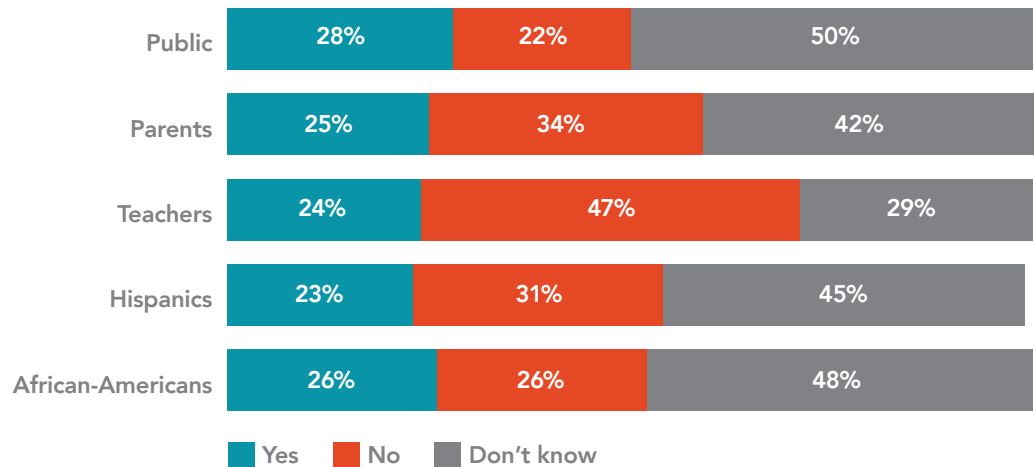
Many parents, teachers and other groups are misinformed about charter schools

Percent of Americans who respond yes, not or don't know to each of the following questions, 2013:

"To the best of your knowledge, can charter schools hold religious services?"



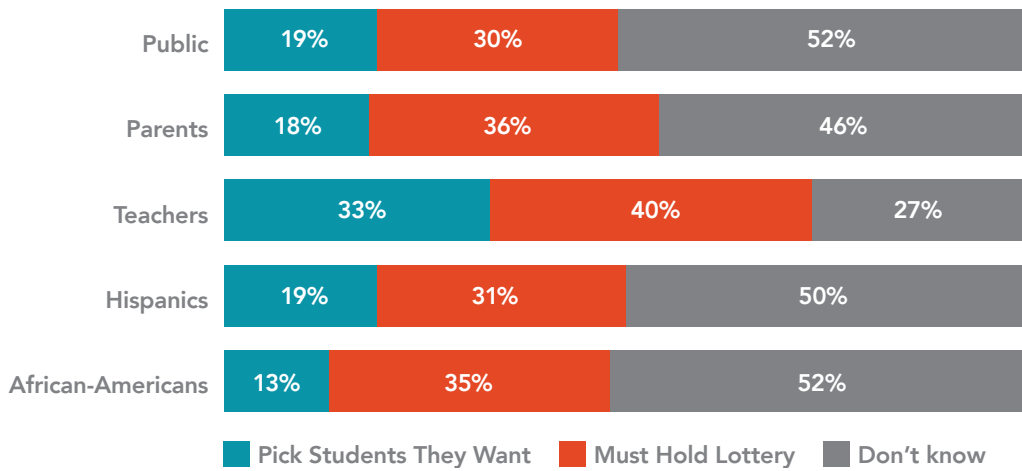
"To the best of your knowledge, can charter schools charge tuition?"



SOURCE: Education Next, "Education Next Poll," 2013.

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

“To the best of your knowledge, when more students apply to a charter school than there are spaces available, can the school pick the students they want to admit or must they hold a lottery?”



SOURCE: Education Next, “Education Next Poll,” 2013.

Note: Numbers may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

What is not clear from this polling is whether and how misinformation about charter schools affects people’s choices about schools and politics. Are parents less likely to send their children to charter schools if they believe that charters can hold religious services? How do voters who believe charter schools can charge tuition evaluate political candidates’ positions on education? Would better information about charter schools change some people’s opinions? Or are opinions shaped by other beliefs, experiences or pieces of knowledge?

Does public opinion differ in locations with higher concentrations of charter school students?

The concentration of charter school students differs from state to state and city to city. But survey results from places where concentrations of charter school students are higher than the national average do not differ much from national survey results. Below we discuss survey results from California, New York City, Kansas City, New Orleans and Michigan, each of which has a concentration of charter school students that is higher than the national average of 5.1 percent. The survey questions and the populations surveyed differed somewhat from place to place, but the patterns of response were generally similar – except in Michigan, where the survey question was very different.

In surveys from California, New York City, Kansas City and New Orleans, one-third or less of respondents oppose charter schools. About one-half to two-thirds of respondents favor charter schools in these local surveys. But as with national results, local results depend on whether surveys explicitly provide people the option to give uncertain or undecided responses. When explicitly provided with those options, a substantial proportion of respondents give uncertain or undecided responses. But support still outweighs opposition in California, New York City, Kansas City and New Orleans.

Most Californians feel favorably toward charter schools

Percent of Californians who feel favorably or unfavorably toward charter schools, or who haven't heard enough about them to say, 2011:²³



- Very or somewhat favorable
- Very or somewhat unfavorable
- Had not heard enough about charters to say

SOURCE: University of Southern California and the Los Angeles Times, "University of Southern California Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences/ Los Angeles Times Poll," 2011.

Note: In 2011–12, 6.7 percent of public school students in California attended a charter school.²⁴

Most New York City voters feel favorably toward charter schools

Percent of likely voters in New York City who say they support or oppose creating more charter schools, 2013:²⁵



- Support
- Oppose
- No answer (volunteered)

SOURCE: New York Times, "Voters on the Mayor's Race," 2013.

Note: In 2012–13, 5.7 percent of New York City public school students attended a charter school.²⁶

Most Kansas City public school parents favor charter schools

Percent of Kansas City metro area public school parents who favor or oppose charter schools after being read the following statement, 2013:

"Charter schools are public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff and curriculum and are free from many existing regulations."²⁷



- Favor
- Oppose
- Don't know (volunteered)

SOURCE: Public Agenda, "Ready, Willing and Able? Kansas City Parents Talk About How to Improve Schools and What They Can Do to Help," 2013.

Note: In 2012–13, 35.7 percent of students in the Kansas City, Missouri, school district attended a charter school, but laws allowed no charter schools in surrounding districts.²⁸

Nearly half of New Orleans voters agree with converting more traditional public schools into charter schools

Percent of likely voters in New Orleans who agree or disagree with converting Orleans Parish School Board's remaining directly-run schools into charter schools after being read the following piece of information, 2014:

"Next year, the Orleans Parish School Board, also known as OPSB, will have five public, direct-run schools. The rest of the schools in New Orleans will be independent, public charter schools."²⁹



- Strongly or somewhat agree
- Strongly or somewhat disagree
- Uncertain

SOURCE: Tulane University, "Voters' Perceptions: Public Education in New Orleans," 2014.

Note: In 2013–14, 91 percent of New Orleans public school students attended charter schools.³⁰ Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

By contrast, a poll conducted in Michigan shows that the way in which questions are framed can elicit different patterns of response in public opinion surveys. In 2014, the *Detroit Free Press* published an investigation of Michigan charter schools and found “wasteful spending, conflicts of interest, poor performing schools and a failure to close the worst of the worst.”³¹ A subsequent statewide survey of likely voters emphasized those findings in one of its questions, eliciting much more negative responses about charter schools. ●

A survey that reported problems with charter schools elicited a majority of unfavorable responses from Michigan voters

*Percent of likely voters in Michigan who favor or oppose a moratorium on any new charter schools being authorized until the reported problems with charter schools can be fully investigated by the Michigan Department of Education and the Legislature, with any regulations that are needed put into place before more charter schools are authorized to open:*³²



- Oppose a moratorium
- Favor a moratorium

*The survey did not report the responses given by these 9 percent of respondents. Nor did it report “undecided” or “refused” responses to this question.

SOURCE: Detroit Free Press, “State of Charter Schools,” 2014.

Note: In 2012–13, 8.4 percent of Michigan public school students attended a charter school.³³

Notes

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Questions for Future Research



Charter schools raise many research questions as they expand and change—not only about their impacts on students’ learning and achievement, but also about their teaching practices, financing, operations and labor relations, the policies that govern them, and their relationships with traditional public schools and communities.

Below, we pose a selection of the many important research questions that charter schools raise. Rather than trying to cover every potential question, we include those that researchers, educators, policymakers, journalists and other stakeholders have identified as most pressing. Answers to these questions have the potential to contribute productively to efforts to improve education for all students.

Student Achievement

- Which charter schools or management organizations are providing high-quality education opportunities that are shown to close achievement gaps?
- What are the practices that explain why some charter schools are doing better than others in educating their students? Which practices work best in which contexts and with which types of students?
- What are charters' impacts on academic outcomes other than standardized test scores, including long-term impacts on college entry, graduation, employment and earnings?
- How well are charter school students doing compared with traditional public school students on civic engagement outcomes, including civic knowledge, skills and participation?

Diversity and Inclusion

- Why are special needs students and students with limited English-language proficiency underrepresented in charter schools nationwide? Are some charter schools actively trying to attract those students and families? What strategies are they using, and how well are they doing?
- Is there evidence that charter schools are contributing to racial and ethnic segregation in neighborhoods and cities?
- Is there evidence that lower-achieving students are being discouraged from staying in charter schools?
- What, if anything, distinguishes students and families who choose charter elementary schools from those who do not? Is there any indication that traditional public schools are losing better-prepared elementary school students to charter schools?
- How effective are lotteries at randomly assigning students to charter schools? When lotteries are weighted to ensure that charter schools represent students living in poverty and students of color, how effective are they in achieving those demographic goals?

Teachers and Teaching

- Will the apparent decrease in teacher turnover at charter schools prove durable over the long term? Why is teacher turnover at charter schools apparently decreasing? Is decreased teacher turnover at charter schools associated with better student achievement or other outcomes?
- What can we learn from charter schools and management organizations with particularly low rates of turnover? How are these schools and organizations handling the financial challenges of meeting payrolls with more experienced teachers?
- How do charter school teachers' training and effectiveness compare with traditional public school teachers' training and effectiveness?

- How do management and leadership—including top-down leadership styles and more teacher-led styles—affect teaching, operations, learning and staff turnover at charter schools?
- To what extent do teachers in charter schools use instructional or pedagogical methods that are different from those used in traditional public schools?
- What metrics can researchers use to identify and compare curricula at charter schools—such as back-to-basics curricula or thematic focuses on arts or on science, technology, engineering and math—to learn more about the outcomes and difficulties of these approaches to teaching and learning?

Innovation

- What metrics can researchers use to identify and evaluate innovative practices in all schools, including charter schools? How can researchers include not only innovative practices in classrooms, but also organizational, administrative, financial and policy innovations?
- When charter schools and traditional public schools form “compacts” to work together, what challenges do they face and what successes do they achieve?

Finances

- Which state policies create better or worse financial outcomes for charter schools and for traditional public schools, and how are those related to students’ achievement?
- What costs and burdens do overseeing and authorizing charter schools place on public institutions such as school boards and higher education systems?

Governance and Regulation

- To what extent and how do state policies, including education financing policies, affect achievement in both charters and traditional public schools?
- What political dynamics affect the outcomes of efforts to cap or increase the number of charter schools that states allow?
- Given their roles as key governing bodies for charter schools, how do authorizers interpret and apply laws and regulations during the charter application, review and renewal processes?
- How do authorizers negotiate any tensions between charter schools and traditional public schools, particularly in cases when authorizers are also local school boards?

Charter School Operators

- How can data about finances, management and achievement from nonprofit and for-profit charter school operators be reported in ways that make it easier for researchers, journalists and policymakers to understand which operators are doing well and which need help?
- What educational, management and financial practices are different management organizations using? How do those practices affect students' achievement and schools' sustainability, particularly as management organizations scale up?

Families

- How many charter schools nationwide use lotteries each year to enroll students? Bearing in mind that one student might enter more than one charter school's lottery, how many individual students are seeking seats through lottery systems in all charter schools nationwide?
- What opportunities do charter schools and operators offer parents and community members for participation in school governance? How do parents and community members participate in charter school governance, what outcomes do they seek and what do they achieve?

Public Opinion

- How do misunderstandings about charter schools—such as mistaken beliefs that they can charge tuition or select only high-achieving students—affect parents' decisions to choose charter schools or enter their children into lotteries?
- Does the presence of charter schools in a community have any effect on the attitudes, choices and behaviors of parents whose children attend traditional public schools? ●

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