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# 2020 CHARTER SCHOOL CAMPUS REPORT

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## INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows what a school is, but the question of what constitutes an individual school is more complex than one would expect. Because of this complexity, there isn't one standard definition of a school that is used across all federal and state laws and reporting requirements. As a result, federal, state, and non-public datasets vary when it comes to reporting educational data at the school level. Because of the lack of consistent definitions, different datasets can produce different results when asked for the total number of schools, as well as how many of those schools are charter schools. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (National Alliance) adjusts existing datasets to account for this lack of standardization in order to ensure our information about charter schools is as accurate as possible. Any dataset of charter school counts that does not make these adjustments is not going to be as accurate.

Because not all individual records that appear in state or federal data files are schools, this creates a persistent challenge for educational researchers. In order to ensure that we have an accurate accounting of charter schools, the National Alliance uses a [modified count system](#) when we count charter schools. We discuss in detail our methodology for counting schools in our December 2019 [Modified Count Report](#). To summarize this report, campus records are a subset of an individual school record. Only counting "school" records could result in undercounting the total number of schools and students. However, counting records and not schools, could result in overcounting the total number of schools. Although adjusting for these distinctions takes a significant amount of time, the result is a more accurate dataset that can better inform policymakers and other stakeholders.

Many school records in state or federal data files are actually “campus records” that have a “main site” counterpart. A “main site” represents what many would typically refer to as a school. Main sites appear, for all intents and purposes, to be standard educational facilities or entities that serves students in any combination of grades Pre-K-12. A campus record has an association with a main site but is not a school itself. The National Alliance typically looks at student pipelines to differentiate campuses and schools. If an elementary and secondary school are in the same building and students transition through all grades, then this would count as one school. However, as finding facilities is often a major issue for charter schools, we use a one-mile rule. For example, if a school has grades K-3 in one building and grades 4-5 in a building a few blocks away, we count this as one school and one campus.

This paper focuses on charter school campuses and explains why these records are found in datasets. Here are some of the reasons why a record might be considered a campus site rather than a main site.

## WHY ARE THERE CAMPUS RECORDS?

1. **STUDENT PIPELINE CAMPUS:** The most common type of campus record is one where a campus site adds additional grades to the main site. For example, the main site may serve students in grades K-3 and the campus serves students in grades 4-6. Since many charter schools grow by adding on additional grades, these campuses may reflect expansions. These campuses may exist either in the same building as the associated main site, perhaps on different floors, or within a mile of the main site. Because facilities pose a serious challenge to charter schools, the National Alliance established a one-mile rule to capture schools that may split up grade levels into multiple sites due to lack of physical space. If the site is more than a mile away it would be counted as a school, not a campus.
2. **PROGRAMMATIC CAMPUS:** Some schools offer different programs of study in the same building. For example, a vocational charter school might offer multiple tracks to the same student body but report each track separately to their state or local agency. Even though the grades may overlap and are therefore not compatible in these instances, one or more records may count as a campus.

3. **VIRTUAL CAMPUS:** Many virtual schools report their enrollment across multiple records. In some cases, this is used to delineate which school district or county the students are from. Because these schools operate only online, only one record in the National Alliance database counts as a main site, with all others counting as campuses.
4. **HYBRID CAMPUS:** Some schools operate as hybrid virtual schools, with students occasionally attending either a brick and mortar school or learning centers where they can receive in-person support as needed. These hybrid schools often have dozens of learning centers that students can attend, but as they are all part of the same hybrid school, only one school is counted as the main site, with the rest counting as campuses.
5. **ADMINISTRATIVE CAMPUS:** These records vary greatly depending on the particulars of the school's situation. Sometimes these administrative records capture enrollments for special populations such as students with disabilities, adult students, or students enrolled only part-time. Other times, multiple records for the same school will exist within a dataset without an obvious explanation.

## HOW DOES THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE USE CAMPUS RECORDS?

Campus records contain enrollment information; therefore, it is important for any enrollment-based analysis to include these records. However, whether they should be counted as part of a school count is a more difficult question.

As a reporting standard, the National Alliance typically uses the nuanced "schools and campuses" language in order to capture the on-the-ground experiences of students, families, and educators more accurately. This language allows us to depict the growing charter community more accurately while still acknowledging that not all the records are what typically would be called a school by the average person. When calculating new or closed schools, it can be helpful to include new or closed campuses to fully capture the growth or contraction in the charter sector, but it may also obfuscate the true story. For full transparency, the National

Alliance publishes official new and closed numbers without campuses as well to provide a more accurate picture of the changing charter sectors. Below are a few of the reasons why we publish both sets of numbers:

1. Adding additional grades or programs is not quite the same as opening a new school in its entirety. Similarly, if a school phases out certain grades, but remains open, the school may lose its campus record despite still serving students.
2. Virtual schools create or drop records for various reasons, but if the school remains open and continues to serve students, it should continue to count as a one school.
3. Hybrid schools open or close learning centers in order to better assist their students. Because these are not traditional brick and mortar facilities, they can easily move to different buildings in order to take advantage of differences in rents or to adjust for student fluctuations. Provided the hybrid model continues to operate, these changes in learning centers should not count as new or closed schools.
4. When a campus merges with or splits off from their main site, it can create the illusion that new schools are forming, or schools are closing. This is especially true when state or federal IDs disappear or are added. However, this can mean little more than a school acquired a larger space that could accommodate all students or needed additional space in order to continue to grow.

For more detailed breakdowns on charter records and to see our methodology, please see the [Data Digest](#).