

Shifting students: Pandemic-era enrollment changes present challenges and opportunities for Washington’s public charters

By Bree Dusseault and Nadja Michel-Herf

As the Covid-19 pandemic shut down schools across the country in 2020, Washington state’s emergent charter sector was growing. During this time, charter enrollment was growing by 28% each year, on average, and the number of schools in operation doubled from eight to 16.

The new schools that opened were planned long before the pandemic. But even preexisting charter schools grew between 2020 and 2022, suggesting that more families opted into charter schools, possibly due to dissatisfaction with remote learning offerings in district schools. However, charter schools’ rate of growth in 2021–22 has tapered slightly: two CRPE studies of Washington charter enrollment found that [charter schools’ growth outpaced](#) that of their corresponding districts the first year of the pandemic but [fell slightly short of their districts’ growth](#) in the second year.

The increase in Washington charter school enrollment holds promise for charter operators to shape a “new normal” following pandemic disruption. The increase in demand shows Washington charters can be responsive to student and family needs. But research shows the nascent schools also faced challenges during the pandemic that could have prevented them from attracting and retaining more students. These challenges are understandable due the small and nascent attributes of the sector but could be avoided in the future by adopting emerging innovations.

Washington charter schools reduced offerings during the pandemic

A [2022 CREDO study](#)¹ of the Washington charter sector shows that in March 2020, Washington schools universally reopened (in remote learning) in a matter of days, when nationally districts needed weeks or months.

However, by the 2020–21 school year, Washington’s charter sector had scaled back its academic offerings, according to the same CREDO study. Of the charter schools in Washington, 42% reported they dropped core courses, and about half said they “reduced core content.” The most common courses cut were electives, including arts, foreign language, PE, and coding. Reduced access to electives may have made charter schools less attractive to families looking for an academic program that could reengage and support their students with broad areas of study.

Washington charter schools appeared to struggle with this more than traditional districts. In comparison to [national averages](#), just 17% of districts nationally reported decreasing instructional minutes for core courses in 2020–21. More Washington charters also shortened the school day in 2020–21, compared to [the national district average](#) (43% of Washington charters versus 30% of districts nationally).

¹ CREDO’s survey covered two time periods: March–June 2020 and the 2020–21 school year. 100 % of charter schools in operation in 2021 completed the survey to inform CREDO’s results.

Washington charter schools also saw shifts in [how teachers spent their time in 2020–21](#). About half reported that teachers decreased time spent supporting extracurricular activities.

These trade-offs and challenges are understandable. In 2021–22, schools were open but [grappling with community infection](#) and [complicated quarantine policies](#). Washington's charter schools were in various stages of growth and without central offices, and they may have struggled to maintain stable student and staff attendance and course offerings. In general, as one-school or small, multischool sites, it may have been challenging for Washington charter operators to maintain comprehensive instructional and socioemotional systems of support that appealed to a diverse range of learners.

However, despite all these challenges, Washington charter schools have still expanded grade levels and grown enrollment during the pandemic.

Looking forward, charters can capitalize on their flexibility to meet the new needs of this moment

Heading into the 2022–23 school year, Washington charter schools are at a pivotal point in their development. Like all schools across the country, they must come up with new solutions to accelerate student learning, authentically engage families and communities, and provide a learning environment that heals and supports the well-being of both students and staff. They are structured to be able to innovate more quickly than their surrounding districts, and this moment more than ever calls for innovation. But because Washington's charter schools are in the early stages of growth and expansion, they must focus on expansion while also maintaining the trust and buy-in from families who took a bet on something new during the pandemic.

Washington schools will need to provide quality, reliable learning environments next year to keep and attract new students. Partnerships with districts or other area charter schools, private schools, or homeschools may help them to provide a greater range of courses and student supports than larger districts. So will investments in what they are designed to do well: flexing to meet students' needs, building proactive and responsive relationships with stakeholders, and piloting new approaches to staffing, teaching, and learning.

Here are some suggested courses of action for charter operators to harness opportunities in 2022–23.

1. Offer new school delivery options, especially for older students.

Moving forward postpandemic, [students want flexibility](#) in how, where, and when learning happens.

Students value having flexibility to complete assignments on their own time, as well as the ability to fit school in alongside jobs and family obligations. A [small but significant percentage of families](#) still voice preference for remote learning, and more than [half](#) of teenage students say they would like to learn at home at least one day per week; [hybrid learning is just as popular as full-time in-person schooling](#).

Charter operators, who have flexibility in structuring school days, could consider offering more variable schedules to older students in alignment with their learning and career goals. Alternative schedules could include providing “on days”/“off days” that blend on-campus learning with

remote courses taken off-site or floating time in the mornings or afternoons that allow students to go off campus for internships or college courses. Building partnerships with area universities, other K-12 schools, and businesses could result in off-site learning opportunities that match students' interests and uniquely distinguish a school from other area options.

Charter school models must also accommodate new, creative options for credit recovery, including online programs, to support students at risk of or considering dropping out. [A recent study of Washington public schools](#) found that 11th and 12th graders were most likely to leave their schools last school year, which indicates that students are either dropping out or choosing other school alternatives. Charter schools may be able to attract these students, and prevent losing their own upper-grade students as well by providing access to online courses, scaled-back in-person requirements, and closer relationships with peers and wraparound support staff.

SCHOOL PROFILE

PARAMOUNT SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE AND PHALEN LEADERSHIP ACADEMIES, Indianapolis, Indiana

Several charter schools used their autonomy during the pandemic to quickly put together high-quality virtual instruction and hybrid virtual/in-person instruction and support options. Kristin Grimme, senior vice president of strategy at The Mind Trust in Indianapolis, cited charter operators [Paramount Schools of Excellence](#) and [Phalen Leadership Academies](#) (PLA) as examples of “nonprofit operators [who] waded into virtual education and launched much higher quality virtual schools to respond to shifting parent preference.”

Tommy Reddicks, CEO of Paramount, noted that while [he has been skeptical](#) of virtual schooling in the past, he and his staff applied for and launched a virtual charter school to meet parent demand. Their goal was to provide high-quality instruction to more diverse families, including those who do not typically enroll in online schools. Teachers at Paramount Online Academy (POA) [want to give families](#) the sense of an “in-person setting virtually.” They reach out to parents on a weekly basis, providing them with updates about how their children are performing academically and snapping screen shots of them participating in their lessons. School year 2020–21 data showed promising results for POA:

- 97% of families report that the resources provided by POA meet or exceed expectations
- 88% of families indicated that academic support meets or exceeds expectations
- 93% of families reported that daily communication meets or exceeds expectations
- POA maintained a 94.2% daily attendance rate, a key marker of family satisfaction

[Phalen Virtual Leadership Academy](#) offers students a blend of online coursework and options to engage in extracurricular activities at a local PLA campus. Its [Summer Advantage](#) program helps prevent summer learning loss for students in grades K-8, and [PLA University](#), a free workforce-development program launched in 2020, supports adults within the PLA community. The program is free to any family member of PLA scholars. In its first year of operation, students outperformed the Indianapolis Public Schools district average by 19% in math and 13% in ELA on state standardized tests. About 90% of students indicated that they believe PVLA staff cared about them, and 87% of parents said their experience at PVLA exceeded or significantly exceeded their expectations.

SCHOOL PROFILE

GREAT HEARTS ONLINE, Arizona and Texas

The [Great Hearts network](#), with brick-and-mortar schools in Texas and Arizona, applied its classical education model to [Great Hearts Online](#) (GHO), a new online school it launched in 2020. The online school provides both virtual learning and an optional in-person and tuition-based [microschool](#) that complements the virtual program with outdoor activities, field trips, and theater.

Like Great Hearts Academies, the online school offers a tuition-free, rigorous, classical liberal arts curriculum, including advanced math and science, robust arts, and foreign languages. It currently serves grades K-8, and there are plans to open a virtual high school by 2024-25.

Kurtis Indorf, chief innovation officer at Great Hearts America, admits that GHO may not appeal to all families. It works best for families looking for “[homeschool light](#),” he said, meaning that parents want to keep their children at home but also want access to high-quality curriculum and content delivery. In practice, researcher Robert Pondiscio [notes](#), “Where most large charter networks have tended to concentrate in low-income urban neighborhoods, Great Hearts’s classical curriculum and pedagogy have proven particularly popular with middle-class suburban families.”

Following the first year of the pandemic, [90% of Great Hearts parents](#) reported being happy with their children’s online lessons. In fact, students attending GHO [slightly outperformed](#) their peers at Great Hearts brick and mortar: 79% of GHO students scored above the 50th percentile in NWEA MAP reading and 72% above the 50th percentile on NWEA MAP math. Teachers also [seem to be eager](#) to work remotely within the Great Hearts model, with over 1,400 applying to fill forty online teaching slots.

[Research before the pandemic](#) showed poor results, on average, for students attending online charter schools. And academic performance data compiled by [CRPE and a panel of experts](#) during the pandemic demonstrated “there is little doubt that, on average, more in-person instruction produced more learning.” But research from [CRPE](#) showed a marked increase in virtual school enrollment during the pandemic. It will be important to continue to track demand for and student performance at these schools to determine if the innovative models they are testing prove to be sustainable public options for families.

2. Provide meaningful coursework and a culturally responsive, student-centered culture.

Academics and relevant topics of study matter to students, too. More than half of Washington middle and high school students worried about falling behind in their schooling or learning during the pandemic, according to a [state survey](#). Two-thirds of students found schoolwork harder to do than before the pandemic, the same survey showed, and only about one in four said they found schoolwork meaningful or felt frequently praised by their teachers.

Nationally, students report valuing [more student-centered and less teacher-centered learning environments](#) since the start of the pandemic. They also voice a desire to give more input in their schools' policies and practices. And they report that they have had [limited access to challenging, relevant, and individualized learning during the pandemic](#).

While Washington charters have narrowed courses during the pandemic, returning to a broader curriculum that is responsive to students' current preferences in 2022–23 will be critical. New school delivery models that enable online or hybrid learning, such as those mentioned above, may help charters with lean staffing still diversify offerings. Given that the state's sector experienced [enrollment declines in grades 7–9 during the pandemic](#), charter schools serving those grades will especially want to understand what their secondary students prioritize and need in order to stay engaged and enrolled at school.

Charters are well positioned to meet student-centered learning needs and should both showcase and invest in strategies that put students at the forefront of decision-making in their schools. Student-centered learning is a tenet of many charter school mission statements, and student leadership—including shaping the policies and norms of a school—is a natural component of launching brand new schools. Such work does require investment and training to shift adult mindsets and practices, but this aligns with charters' capacity to provide robust professional development experiences for staff.

It is also important for charters to continue to establish connective and nurturing cultures that keep students engaged and feeling seen. This is especially the case for reengaging students of color who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and historically inequitable school systems.

[Recent research](#) into community-based learning structures shows how student-centered learning experiences led to student success and satisfaction. Community leaders served as educators, designing programs that intentionally sought to address traditional school shortcomings that reinforce educational inequality. This included hiring staff of color, avoiding

SCHOOL PROFILE

MAGIC CITY ACCEPTANCE ACADEMY, Homewood, Alabama

The founders of Magic City Acceptance Academy (MCAA) listened to youth and responded to data demonstrating their desire for more safe learning spaces for LGBTQ youth in Alabama. They sought approval three times before finally being granted approval in November 2021 to serve grades 6–12. The school identifies as an “LGBTQ-affirming learning environment,” according to its mission statement. MCAA works to implement its mission school-wide. For instance, [according to the school's newsletter](#), the librarian created a new search category called “our voices” so students can quickly and easily find books by diverse authors or with diverse characters. According to its profile in the [New York Times](#), MCAA anticipates growing its student body from 240 to 350 in 2022–23 and expanding its foreign language and Advanced Placement class offerings.

punitive discipline practices, adopting culturally relevant pedagogy, and supporting student and family well-being. Parents reported huge changes in their children—including sparking students' passion for school and autonomy—and broad satisfaction with the programs.

Such approaches foster an engaged culture across a school and its community. Charter school cultures that catalyze their community's assets through diverse program offerings and local staffing will help reengage students disenfranchised by the pandemic. Schools should also lead with transparency in their communications to families and engage families as partners to problem solve their children's needs.

3. Clarify mental health and well-being support to students and staff.

Charter operators should be thinking about deeply investing in social-emotional supports, given that parents want them and kids need them. National polls show that a [caring environment and emphasis on social-emotional learning](#) matters more to parents now than prepandemic, and parents [continue to prioritize](#) schools' need to address mental health and student well-being.

This aligns with what we know has taken place over the past three school years. In [June 2020](#), 14% of caregivers reported “worsening behavioral health” for their children. That fall, students reported [anxiety and depression](#) had become their top barriers to learning. Students said they struggled with [motivation and engagement](#). District leaders reported small conflicts escalating quickly into general brawls in classrooms and school grounds.

According to [recently released data](#) from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 66% of high school students responding to a nationally representative survey indicated that schoolwork became more difficult to complete after schools shifted to remote learning in March 2020. [Many factors were at play](#), including parental job loss, personal job loss, homelessness, hunger, and an uptick of emotional or physical abuse at home.

Critically, students who felt close to someone at school had [significantly lower prevalence](#) of feelings of sadness or hopelessness, having seriously considered attempting suicide, and having attempted suicide.

SCHOOL PROFILE

UPLIFT EDUCATION, Dallas, Texas, and GESTALT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS, Memphis, Tennessee

During the pandemic, both Uplift and Gestalt charter networks prioritized mental health by implementing new programs for faculty, staff, and students.

Gestalt started a program in January 2021 that offers individual and family counseling, along with weekly activities centered on self care. The program, “Known, Loved and Educated,” also brings families and children together for stress-coping activities like journaling and yoga. They started a special team to carry forward the school's new social-emotional learning work. A key output of this work is the [Teacher Zen Room](#), a safe place for teachers to relax and recharge throughout the day.

Uplift Education, Texas, takes a data-driven approach to emotional wellness. During the 2021-22 school year, Uplift [implemented *Rhithm*](#), a daily check-in tool that asks students to rate their feelings and includes videos on emotional regulation. [According to the school's director of well-being](#), Uplift has seen evidence that students have internalized these self-management tools and can share them back with teachers and administrators.

While the need for mental health and social-emotional support is clear, exactly how to provide it is not. This past year, [confusion has mounted](#) in some places about what social-emotional learning, or SEL, is and how, exactly, schools can implement social-emotional supports in sustainable, effective, and consistent ways.

A [pandemic-era review](#) of social-emotional practices—including surveys on social-emotional learning, findings from social-emotional experts, and data and practices from a national sample of school systems—indicates that schools must set clear definitions and expectations for these practices and communicate them to stakeholders.

These definitions must come from leadership and cut across a school, including clarification of what healthy classroom environments and prosocial teaching looks like, what school-wide initiatives will support classrooms' focus on social-emotional learning, staff and administrative roles in the work, and what problems social-emotional supports are trying to solve.

Recommendations include schools being to be clear about what social-emotional learning is and isn't and making sure it is integrated into all aspects of a school, including academics and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. They should also develop a system to monitor what's needed and what works and ensure staff also receive support in adult social-emotional learning and well-being.

4. Redesign teacher recruitment and roles.

[Labor shortages have been exacerbated by the pandemic](#), and students' learning in 2021-22 was just as disrupted by missing or absent staff as it was by virus surges. Educators leaving the profession cited mounting stress over quarantine protocols and lack of substitute teachers, low pay, and the appeal of other jobs that may feel more flexible and feasible than classroom teaching.

SCHOOL PROFILE

ONE CITY SCHOOLS, Madison, Wisconsin

After a trial run during the 2021-22 school year, all instructional staff at One City Schools, a charter network in Madison, Wisconsin, will begin working a four-day work week when school starts in September 2022. Students will continue to attend school five days a week. The shift is possible because instructional staff will continue to put in 40 hours a week, through longer days, and grade-level teams will communicate to determine how to rotate which days they are out to ensure coverage.

One City's head of schools Devon Davis initially proposed the four-day work week as a strategy to address pandemic-induced stressors. The school's leadership hopes that giving teachers an extra day to rest and recharge will better prepare them for serving a high-needs student population. Ciera Carey, a third-grade teacher who participated in the pilot program, said she was initially skeptical but realized weeks later the schedule change allowed her to take better care of herself, according to the *Capital Times* newspaper. "The kids aren't going to be good if I'm not good," she said, according to the [story](#).

One City hopes the shift will provide much-needed relief to current instructional staff and provide a unique benefit to attract new staff members. Ciera Carey, a third-grade teacher who participated in the pilot program, told the *CAP Times* that she was initially skeptical of the plan. After a few weeks and logistics planning with her partner teacher, she noted about her additional day off, "I'm taking care of me and I'm putting me first and I know that the kids aren't going to be good if I'm not good...I need to be taken care of in order for them to learn."

SHIFTING STUDENTS: PANDEMIC-ERA ENROLLMENT CHANGES PRESENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WASHINGTON'S PUBLIC CHARTERS

Charter schools already offer more personalized and relational learning environments with educators who can respond quickly to student needs. Maintaining a strong bench of teachers, support staff, and emerging school leaders will be critical to the sector's long-term success. Investment in these areas could include grow-your-own pipelines and redefining educator roles to include more flexibility or a wider range of responsibilities.

Charter operators and organizations who support charter schools may consider pursuing the following:

Creating a formal talent pipeline that attracts a broader, more diverse pool of talent. Many charters informally develop their own talent through internal staff advancement, but the sector could benefit from a formal program—perhaps in partnership with a local or remote university program—that trains and certifies new staff equipped to meet the unique needs of Washington charter students. To broaden and diversify their candidate pool, schools must create pathways for new employees who may not meet state certification thresholds to start as hourly staff and progress into school and central office leadership roles as they gather experience, certifications, and responsibility. Such a program could provide introductory courses in high school, paid summer internships in college, and financial incentives to recruit graduates back to work in the schools they once attended. Given the small size of the sector, this could be a statewide effort to serve all the state's charter schools.

Reconfigure the role of the teacher. [Arizona State University and its partner districts](#) are reconfiguring the role of a singular teacher into coordinated teams with specialized positions, reflecting the diverse array of skills needed to holistically support the whole child. Because charters have more flexibility to scope teacher and student support roles, they have the opportunity to redesign more creative teaching, support, and counseling roles and to invite “community educators” to the table. Such roles may attract new educators who have informally served as teachers during the pandemic, as well as retain current educators who have developed new preferences and might otherwise leave their classrooms.

Support state-level advocacy that reduces barriers to entering the teaching profession. Schools need more flexible teacher certification requirements and school-day scheduling options. While well-intentioned, rigid instructional minute and daily schedule requirements can prevent charter operators from shaping a work environment that offers the autonomy and flexibility more teachers and students say they desire. Certification standards should reflect an updated understanding of what teachers must know and be able to do to provide students with a well-rounded and holistic education. State certification requirements should especially acknowledge the work logged by “informal educators” who stepped in during the pandemic—community organization staff and parents who led their children's education outside the classroom or in learning pods.

Research is virtually nonexistent on the educational or emotional impact of a hybrid four-day week where students continue to attend five days a week. Schools in [Texas](#), [Idaho](#), and [Michigan](#), among other states, approved plans for four-day school weeks for all students and staff. It's too soon to tell if this kind of radical schedule redesign will serve as an effective recruitment tool for new staff or if it would hold wide appeal for new families. But with American education at an inflection point, charters are especially well positioned to be pursuing these kinds of wholesale changes to respond to the needs of students and staff. Done well, they may not only help more students succeed but also put charters on track to keep expanding their reach.