



Understanding School Districts in a Charter School Context

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WHAT IS A LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCY?

Officially, a Local Education Agency (LEA) is “an education agency at the local level that exists primarily to operate public schools or to contract for public school services” (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES¹). Most of the time, an LEA is referred to as a school district, a term more familiar to most audiences.

School districts are an integral part of the U.S. education system. Every state in the nation guarantees citizens free public education. To ensure all students are served, the states divide their land into school districts intended to provide all students with reasonable access to a school near where they live. These districts exist as units of local administration over a particular geographic space. The boundaries of school districts may or may not overlap with county, city, or town boundaries.

Charter schools often operate independently from the local school district, so additional care is necessary when folding them into any district-based analyses. This white paper aims to explain the ways in which charter schools are captured in the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (National Alliance) data and explore ways to adjust the school district status to better understand how charter schools serve their local communities.

Nationwide, charter schools and networks can operate under the following statuses:

- ▶ as their own independent Local Education Agencies;
- ▶ as a part of a traditional school district that is composed of both district schools and charter schools;
- ▶ as a part of a charter district that is comprised of only charter schools (there is usually more than one charter school in a charter district).

WHERE DOES LEA DATA COME FROM?

As a clearinghouse of charter school data, the National Alliance charter school database holds millions of data points all the way back to 1992, when the first charter school opened in Minnesota. The National Alliance collects charter school data from a variety of sources, including the United States Department of Education, state education agencies, local partners, and individual schools, to make sure we capture the most accurate picture of the charter sector.

Two of our most vital data sources are the Common Core of Data (CCD) from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and state enrollment data files from state education agencies. Both CCD and state enrollment files include all public schools' official school districts as an available variable. The school district variable provided is typically presented as the official LEA. Each LEA is assigned with a unique LEA ID, making it possible for researchers to identify different school districts and conduct school-district-level analyses. Because charter schools often serve as their own LEA, many of these official LEAs in the federal and state data files consist of only one charter school. For those interested in seeing the impact of charter schools on their local district, the LEA IDs in the federal and state data files are a less helpful tool. Thus, adjusting for these charter districts is a necessary step.

The National Alliance Research Team created a new variable called the Geographic School District. A geographic school district refers to the school district where a public school is physically located. In other words, if a charter school operates as its own school district in the federal and state files, its school district or LEA will be defined as itself. In the National Alliance database, its geographic school district will be the broader traditional school district where the school is physically located.

WHY DOES A GEOGRAPHIC SCHOOL DISTRICT MATTER?

First, looking at families' demand and access to high-quality public schools requires one to examine access beyond just the official LEA. Researchers and policymakers need to look at all the public schools, including charter schools, located within the school district close to a household's accessible range, because charter schools are also public choice options that should not be ignored. By using geographic school districts to investigate access, researchers can capture all public choices available to parents within the school districts accessible to them. Second, knowing the geographic school district in which charter schools are located allows researchers to calculate charter school numbers and enrollment share and compare the academic performance of charter school students with that of students in nearby district schools. Using the geographic school district instead of the official LEA as the unit to conduct district-level analyses ensures that the charter side of the district is accounted for.

THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE'S GEO-SPATIAL METHODOLOGY

The National Alliance Research Team collects addresses for every public school (both charter and district school) from both Common Core Data (CCD) and our proprietary school-level data

collection process. After getting the accurate physical addresses (including street, city, state, and ZIP code) for public schools, we then use the geocoding tool on the Geocodio websiteⁱⁱ to obtain the county information, as well as latitude and longitude for each school.

At this point, we have the complete location information for all public schools. The team then uses ArcGIS software to plot schools' geographic information onto public school district shapefiles,ⁱⁱⁱ which the Census Bureau updates based on the information provided by states. The shapefiles used in this process only include regular school districts that are geographically defined. This also allows users to identify where charter schools would fall if they were coded as part of traditional school districts.

Researchers should also note that sometimes, elementary school districts and secondary school districts in the shapefiles overlap. It is almost always the case that the elementary school district is a part of the secondary school district. If a public school falls within elementary school district A, and A is a part of the bigger secondary school district B, then we code the school as belonging to the bigger school district B. This helps better compare the school's performance and enrollment with other schools in that area and to better assess charter school access and demand. Another thing to note is that virtual schools might need to be excluded when conducting geo-spatial analyses, since they can draw students from across the state.

For more information about charter schools, please visit the National Alliance's charter school data dashboard (updated annually) at: data.publiccharters.org.

Endnotes

ⁱ National Center for Education Statistics, Condition of Education Glossary: <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/glossary>

ⁱⁱ Geocodio: <https://www.geocod.io/>

ⁱⁱⁱ National Center for Education Statistics, Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates, School District Boundaries: <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/DistrictBoundaries>