

Key Facts About Charter Schools

Updated 2018



- What is a charter school?
- How many charter schools are there in the United States?
- How many students attend charters?
- 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?

- In 2016–17, about two-thirds of charter schools were 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
- In 2016–17, about one-third of charter schools were 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.
- 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. For more information on closures, see the [Governance and Regulation](#) section.

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 Ronald 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
- Some advocates view charter schools as one avenue for providing choices to parents seeking a better education for their children. Note that charter schools are different from other school choice programs such as vouchers and magnet schools.
- Vouchers enable children in the public school system to attend a private school of their choice, whereas magnet schools are public schools with a special theme or curriculum.
- Magnet schools are created by traditional school districts and 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?

As of January 2018, laws allowing the creation of charter schools have been passed in 44 states—plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam.⁶

The most recent data released by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a part of the U.S. Department of Education, estimate that there were 6,747 charter schools in the United States in 2014–15 and 6,855 in 2015–16.⁷ The proportion of charter schools to all public schools was 7 percent in the 2015–16 school year, an increase from the 2000–01 school year when the proportion of charter schools to all public schools was 2 percent.⁸ When more current data are released, they can be found on the [NCES](#) website. The following chart illustrates the growth in charter schools over time.

Number of charter schools, 2000–2016

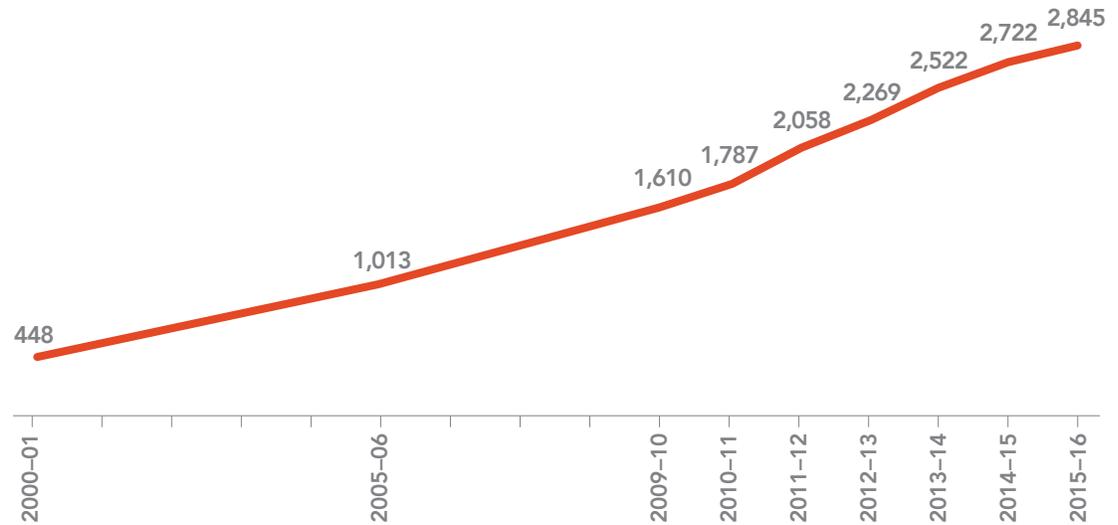


Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.20, “Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by School Level, Type, and Charter and Magnet Status: Selected Years, 1990–91 Through 2015–16,” Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

How many students attend charters?

According to the NCES, more than 2.8 million students attended charter schools in 2015–16, meaning that charter school students accounted for approximately 6 percent of all public school students.⁹ Student enrollment in charter schools grew more than 70 percent from 2009–10 to 2015–16.¹⁰ The following chart illustrates the growth in charter school enrollment over time.

Number of charter school students, in thousands, 2000–16



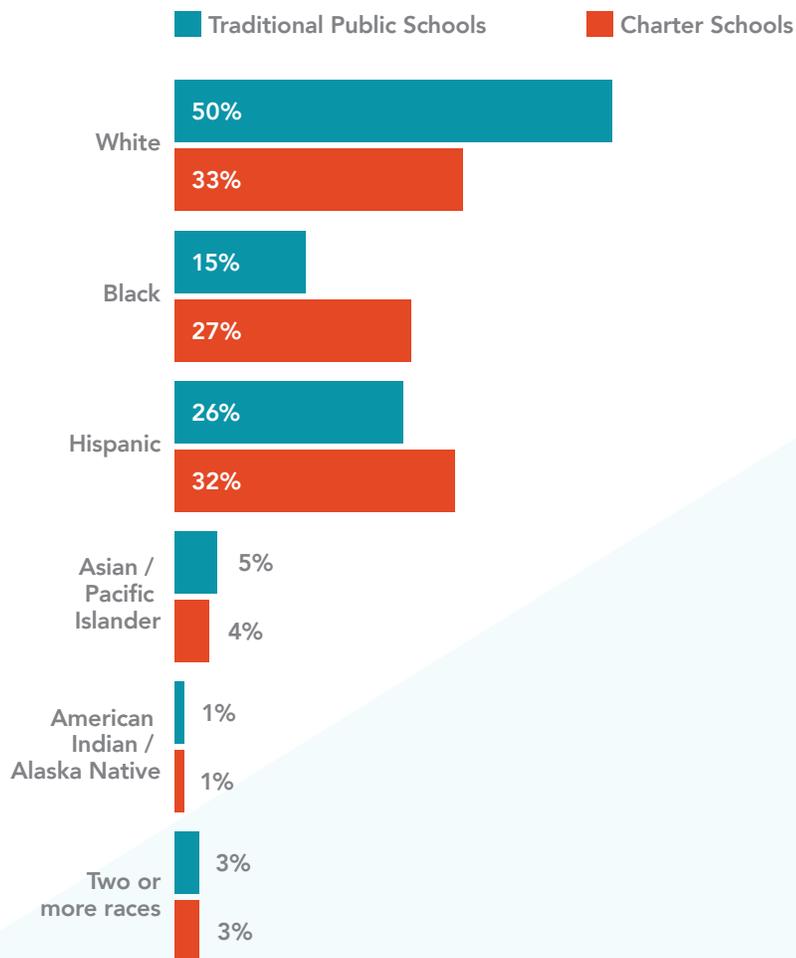
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.20, “Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by School Level, Type, and Charter and Magnet Status: Selected Years, 1990–91 Through 2015–16,” Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

What are the demographics of charter school students?

Charter schools nationwide tend to enroll a larger proportion of black students and students living in poverty than do traditional public schools nationwide.¹¹ Charter schools nationwide tend to enroll a similar proportion of English-language learners and special education students as do traditional public schools nationwide.¹² However, these demographics vary from school to school and district to district. The demographic picture becomes even more complex when comparing charter school students' demographics with those of their peers in nearby traditional public schools.

Student race and ethnicity

Percent of students enrolled in charter and traditional public schools, by race and ethnicity, 2015–16



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.30, "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2015–16," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

The NCES also has data on the percentage of children at charters and traditional public schools during the 2015–16 school year who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a common way of identifying low-income students. At 33 percent of charter schools, more than 75 percent of students are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. By contrast, at 24 percent of traditional public schools, more than 75 percent of students are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program.¹³

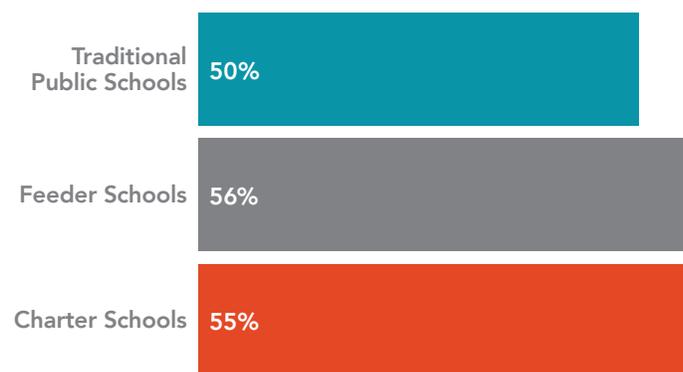
In 2013, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) study from Stanford University compared charter school and traditional public school populations in 27 states. In 2017, CREDO published an update in which they collected data for 3.7 million students across 26 states. The study includes data from traditional public schools, charter schools and what they call “feeder” schools—the traditional public schools from which local charter schools draw their student populations.¹⁴

A comparison of charter schools with all traditional public schools in these 26 states indicates that charter schools do serve a slightly higher proportion of low-income students. However, a comparison of charter schools with just the traditional public schools that their student population comes from—the feeder schools—shows that the proportion of low-income students is the same.

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](#) section.

Students from low-income households

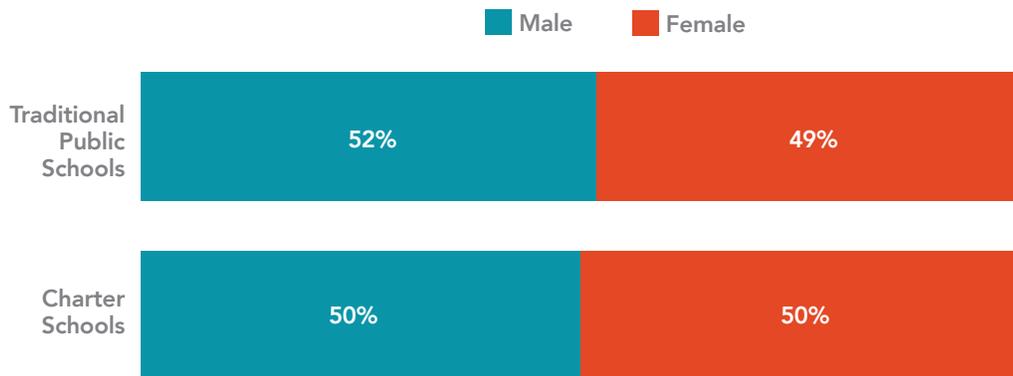
Percent of low-income students in 26 states, by school type, 2014–15



Source: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), “Charter Management Organizations 2017,” Stanford, Calif.: CREDO at Stanford University, 2017.

Student gender

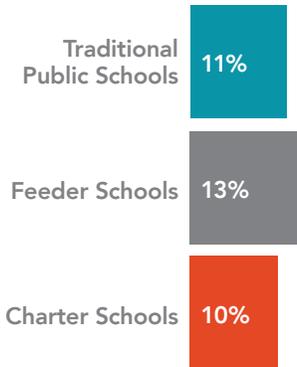
Percent of male and female students at charter and traditional public schools, 2015–16



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.30, "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2015–16," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

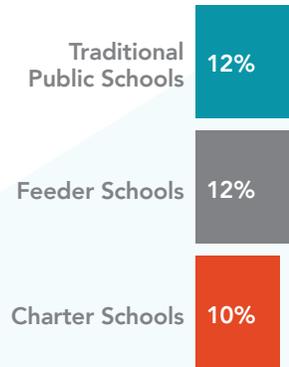
English-language learners

Percent of English-language learners in 26 states, by school type, 2014–15



Special education students

Percent of special education students in 26 states, by school type, 2014–15

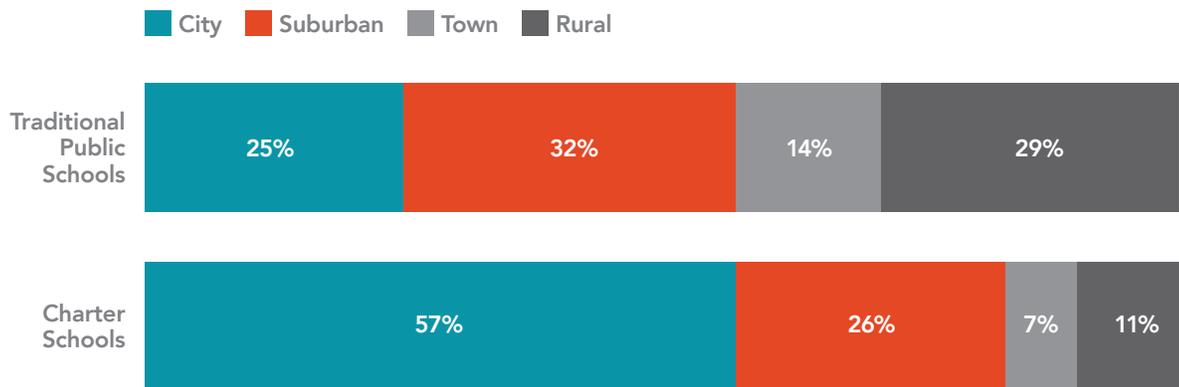


Source: Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), "Charter Management Organizations 2017," Stanford, Calif.: CREDO at Stanford University, 2017.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2015–16 over half of charter schools (57 percent) were located in cities. Twenty-six percent were in suburban locales, 7 percent were in towns and 11 percent were located in rural areas.¹⁸ 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, by locale, 2015–16

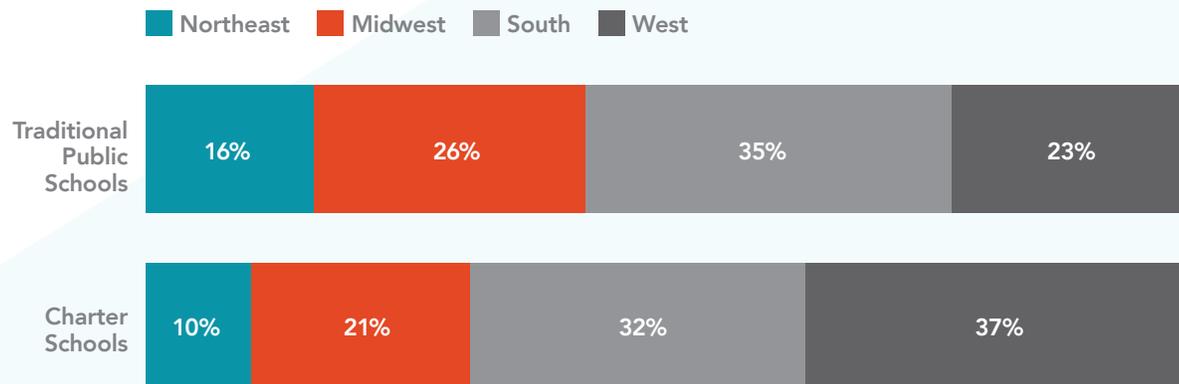


Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.30, "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2015–16," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

There are more charter schools in the South and West than in other parts of the country. Over a third (37 percent) of the country's charter schools are located in the West.¹⁹ 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, 2015–16

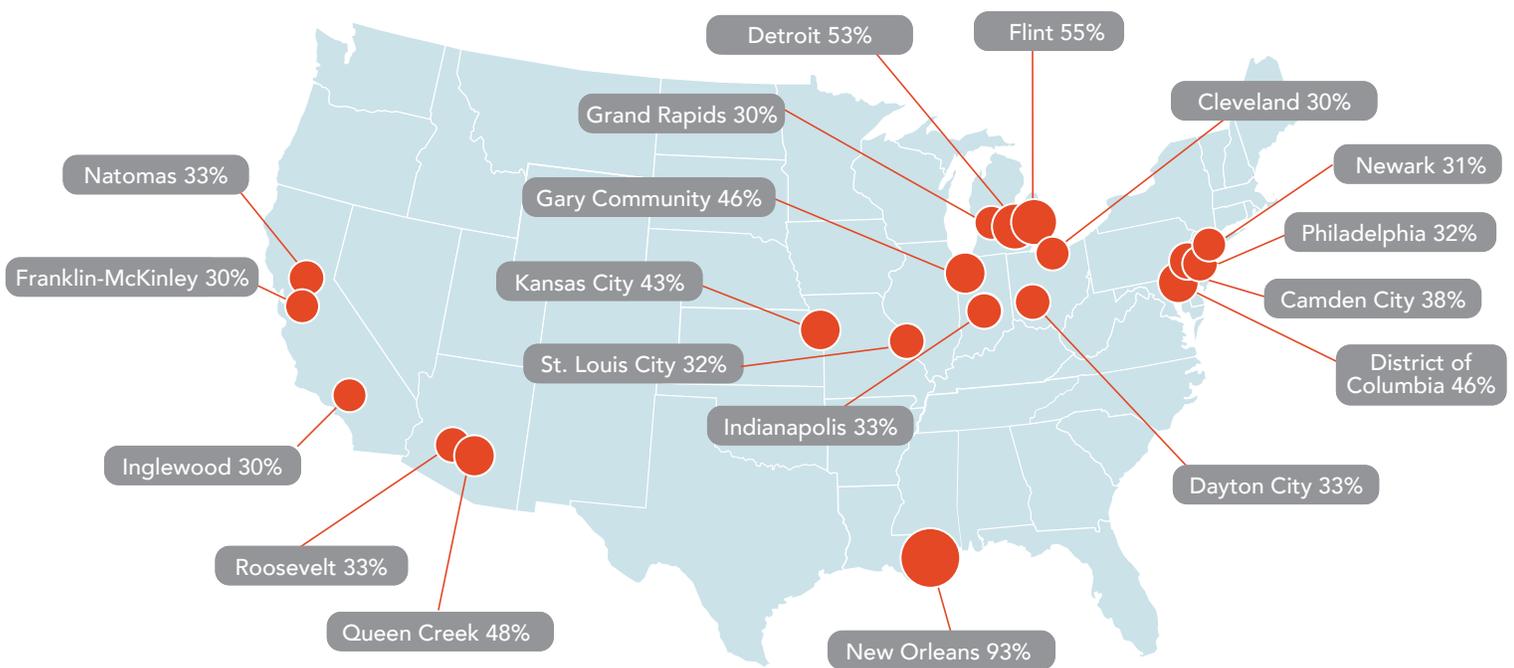


Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.30, "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2015–16," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

Charter schools are much more heavily concentrated in some states than others, and the proportion of charter schools to traditional public schools also varies from state to state and district to district. According to the NAPCS, California has the most charter schools, with 1,224 schools in the 2015–16 school year, which may account for the high percentage of charters located in the western region of the country. In 2015–16, Texas came in second, with 702 schools.²⁰

If treated as comparable to a state, the city of Washington, D.C., has the highest proportion of charter schools, at 49 percent of all public schools in 2015–16.²¹ Despite this, Washington, D.C., wouldn't make the top five list among U.S. cities in terms of charter school student population. New Orleans is the city where charter schools serve the highest percentage of students: 93 percent of New Orleans public school students attended charter schools in 2016–17. Flint had the next highest percentage: 55 percent of Flint public school students attended charter schools in 2016–17.²²

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



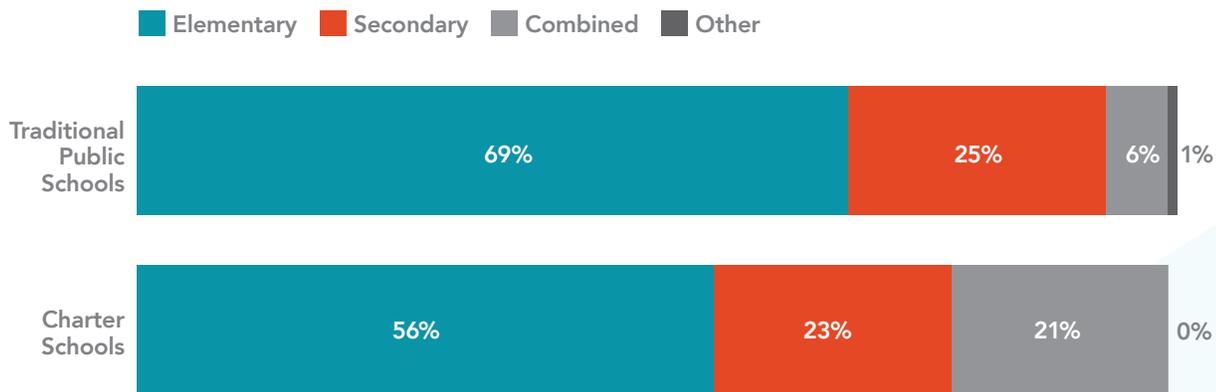
Source: Rebecca David, Kevin Hesla and Susan Aud Pendergass, "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Public Charter School Communities," Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2018.

Which grade levels do charter schools serve?

According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, in the 2015–16 school year over half of all charter schools were elementary schools (56 percent). This is lower than the percentage of traditional public schools that are elementary schools (69 percent).²³ 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, 2015–16



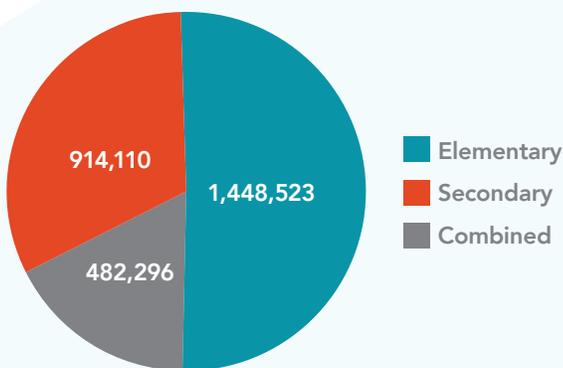
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.30, “Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2015–16,” Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

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 6,855 charter schools in 2015–16 according to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics. Of these, 3,854 were elementary schools, 1,576 were secondary schools, 1,576 were combined elementary/secondary and 19 were not classified by grade span. The following chart shows charter school enrollment by grade span.²⁴ ●

Most charter school students attend elementary schools

Number of charter school students, by grade level, 2015–16



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics and Common Core of Data, “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey, 2000–01 Through 2015–16.” See *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.30, Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017.

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. In 2015–16, 2,845,322 students were enrolled in charter schools. Students enrolled in schools not classified by grade span are not reflected in the chart above. There were 393 such students in 2015–16.

Notes

- ¹ Rebecca David, "National Charter School Management Overview, 2016–17," Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2018. <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/publications/national-charter-school-management-overview-2016-17>.
- ² David, "National Charter School Management Overview." <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/publications/national-charter-school-management-overview-2016-17>.
- ³ Ted Kolderie, "Ray Budde and the Origins of the 'Charter Concept,'" *Education Evolving*, Saint Paul, Minn.: Education Evolving and Center for Policy Design, 2005. <http://www.educationevolving.org/pdf/Ray-Budde-Origins-Of-Chartering.pdf>.
- ⁴ Jeffrey R. Henig, *Spin Cycle: How Research Is Used in Policy Debates: The Case of Charter Schools*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008.
- ⁵ Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, "Minnesota Issues Resource Guides Charter Schools," Saint Paul, Minn.: Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, 2018. <https://www.leg.state.mn.us/lrl/guides/guides?issue=charter>.
- ⁶ Education Commission of the States (ECS), "Charter Schools: How Is the Funding for a Charter School Determined?," Denver, Colo.: ECS, 2018. <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2C?rep=CS1716>.
- ⁷ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.20, "Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by School Level, Type, and Charter and Magnet Status: Selected Years, 1990–91 Through 2015–16," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.20.asp?current=yes.
- ⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, "The Condition of Education: Public Charter School Enrollment," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2018. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgb.asp.
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.20.asp?current=yes.
- ¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.20.asp?current=yes.
- ¹¹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.30, "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2015–16," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.30.asp.
- ¹² Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), "Charter Management Organizations 2017," Stanford, Calif.: CREDO at Stanford University, 2017. <http://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/CMO%20FINAL.pdf>.
- ¹³ 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." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.30.asp.
- ¹⁴ CREDO, "Charter Management Organizations 2017." <http://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/CMO%20FINAL.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ ECS, "Funding for a Charter School." <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2C?rep=CS1716>.
- ¹⁶ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Kentucky," Washington, D.C.: NAPCS, 2018. <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/kentucky>.

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Alabama," Washington, D.C.: NAPCS, 2018. <https://www.publiccharters.org/our-work/charter-law-database/states/alabama>.
- ¹⁷ ECS, "Funding for a Charter School." <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2C?rep=CS1716>.
- ¹⁸ 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." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.30.asp.

- ¹⁹ 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." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.30.asp.
- ²⁰ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2017*, chap. 2, table 216.90, "Public Elementary and Secondary Charter Schools and Enrollment, by State: Selected Years, 2000–01 Through 2015–16," Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2017. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.90.asp.
- ²¹ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, "Public Elementary and Secondary Charter Schools and Enrollment." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.90.asp.
- ²² Rebecca David, Kevin Hesla and Susan Aud Pendergass, "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Public Charter School Communities," Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2018. https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2017-10/Enrollment_Share_Report_Web_0.pdf.
- ²³ 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." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.30.asp.
- ²⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences and National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Enrollment of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools." https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.20.asp?current=yes