• 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Traditional public school teachers</th>
<th>Charter school teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent of teachers</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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
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. 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. 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.
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.\textsuperscript{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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Charter Schools</th>
<th>Traditional Public Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remained at the same school</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>77.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved to a different school</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left the principalship</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status unknown</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.\textsuperscript{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
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. 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.” 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.
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.

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.”

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. 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.

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. 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.

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. 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.

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.

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:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Grouping</th>
<th>Same groups of students most of the day</th>
<th>Different groups of students throughout the day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Public School</td>
<td>21.6 students</td>
<td>26.2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter School</td>
<td>22.5 students</td>
<td>26.9 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Public School</td>
<td>16.7 students</td>
<td>25.5 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter School</td>
<td>21.9 students</td>
<td>24.0 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Schools</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Public School</td>
<td>17.6 students</td>
<td>24.2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter School</td>
<td>23.7 students</td>
<td>22.2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Combined Grade Levels</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Public School</td>
<td>15.3 students</td>
<td>18.2 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter School</td>
<td>22.6 students</td>
<td>22.7 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* NCES, “Results from the 2011-12 Schools and Staffing Survey,” 2013.
SECTION 4: TEACHERS AND TEACHING

Notes


