

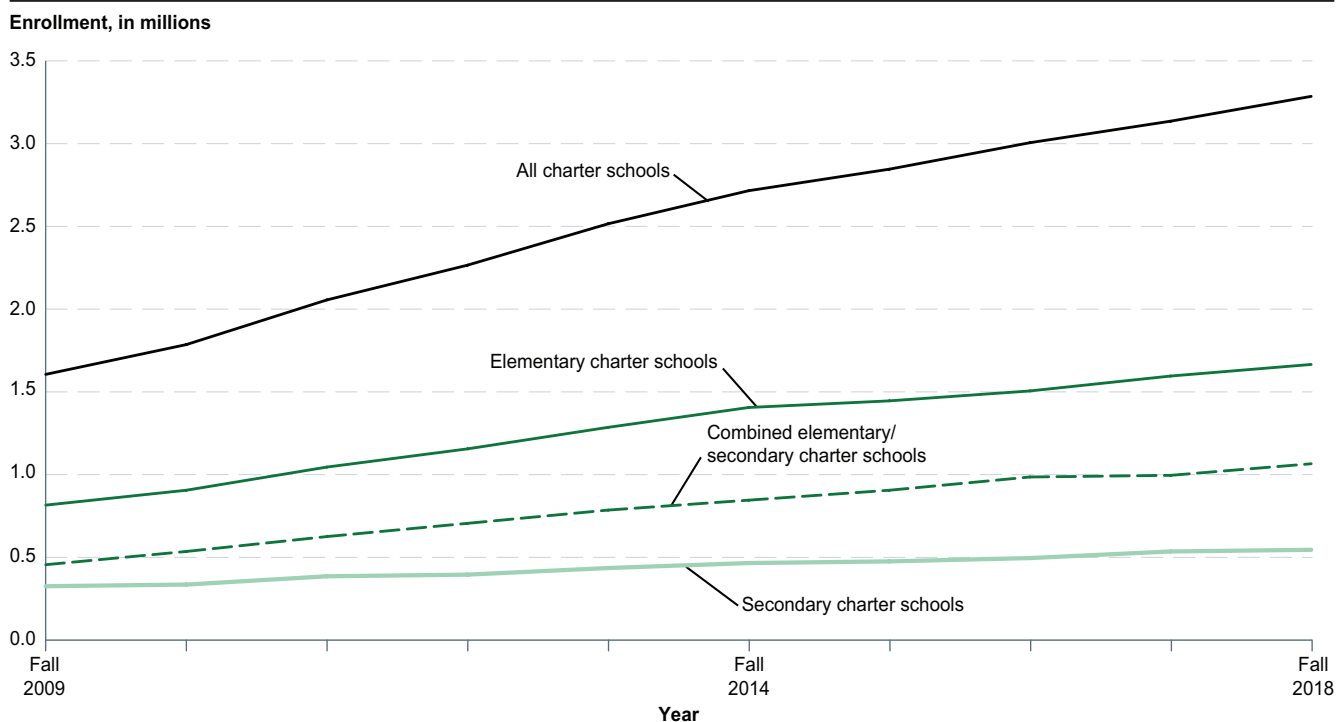
## Public Charter School Enrollment

*Between fall 2009 and fall 2018, overall public charter school enrollment increased from 1.6 million students to 3.3 million students. During this period, the percentage of public school students who attended charter schools increased from 3 to 7 percent.*

A *public charter school* is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract—a charter—with the state, the district, or another entity. The charter exempts the school from certain state or local rules and regulations. In return for flexibility and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards outlined in its charter. A school's charter is reviewed periodically by the entity that granted it, and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or if the accountability

standards are not met.<sup>1</sup> Between school years 2009-10 and 2018-19, the number of public charter schools in the United States (defined in this indicator as the 50 states and the District of Columbia) increased from approximately 5,000 to 7,400 while the number of traditional public schools decreased from 93,900 to 91,300. As a result of these concurrent trends, the percentage of all public schools that were charter schools increased from 5 to 8 percent.

**Figure 1. Public charter school enrollment, by school level: Fall 2009 through fall 2018**

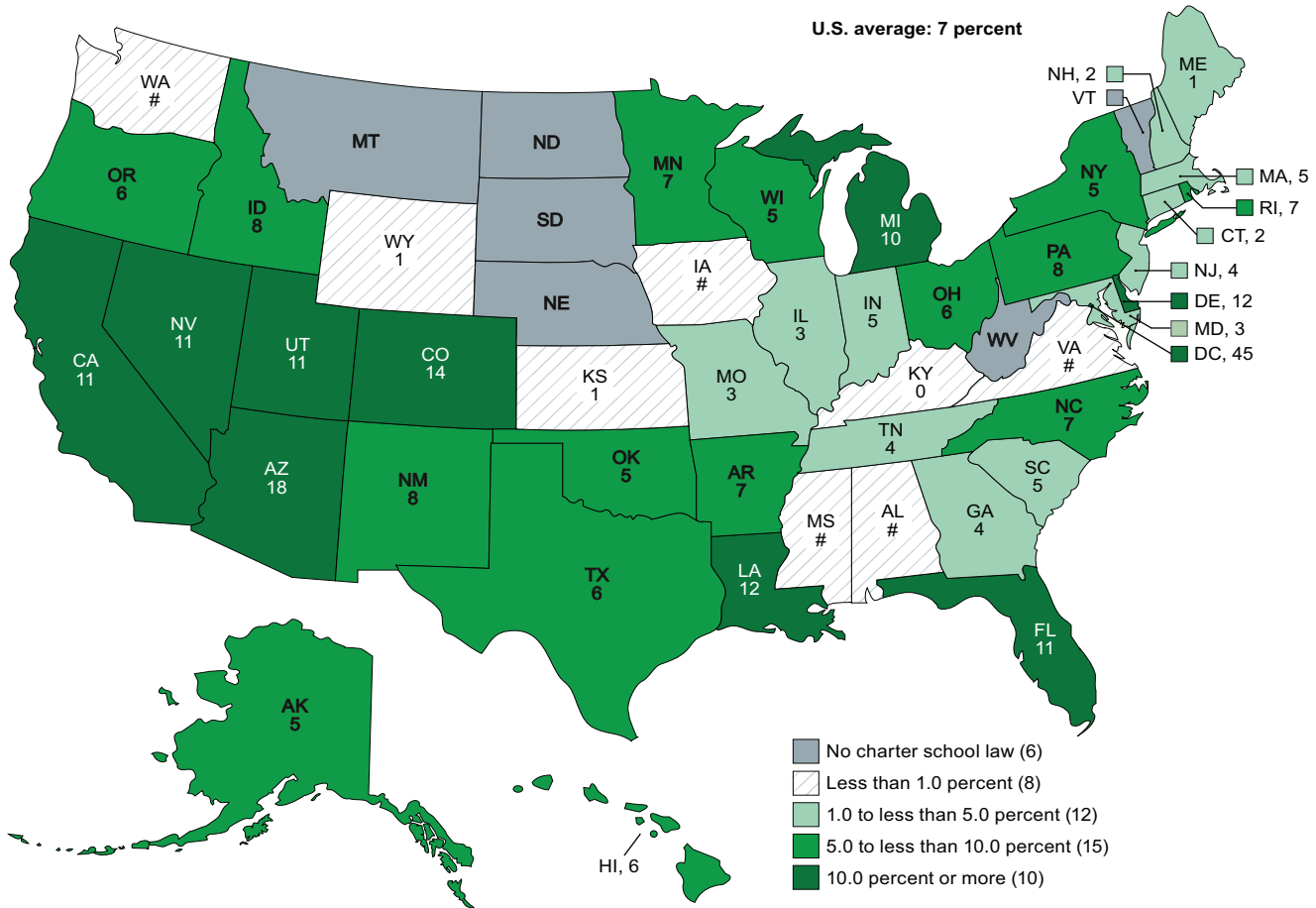


NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. "Elementary" includes schools beginning with grade 6 or below and with no grade higher than 8. "Secondary" includes schools with no grade lower than 7. "Combined elementary/secondary" includes schools beginning with grade 6 or below and ending with grade 9 or above. Other schools not classified by grade span are included in the "All charter schools" count but are not presented separately in the figure. SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2009-10 through 2018-19. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020*, table 216.20.

Between fall 2009 and fall 2018, public charter school enrollment increased steadily, from 1.6 million students in fall 2009 to 3.3 million students in fall 2018—an overall increase of 1.7 million students. In contrast, the number of students attending traditional public schools decreased by 0.4 million between fall 2009 and fall 2018. As a result of these concurrent trends, the percentage of all public school students who attended public charter schools increased from 3 to 7 percent over this period.

Between fall 2009 and fall 2018, the percentage of charter school students enrolled in elementary schools fluctuated between 50 and 52 percent. During the same period, the percentage of charter school students enrolled in secondary schools decreased from 20 to 17 percent while the percentage enrolled in combined elementary/secondary schools increased from 28 to 32 percent.

**Figure 2. Percentage of all public school students enrolled in public charter schools, by state: Fall 2018**



# Rounds to zero.

NOTE: U.S. average in this figure represents the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Categorizations are based on unrounded percentages.

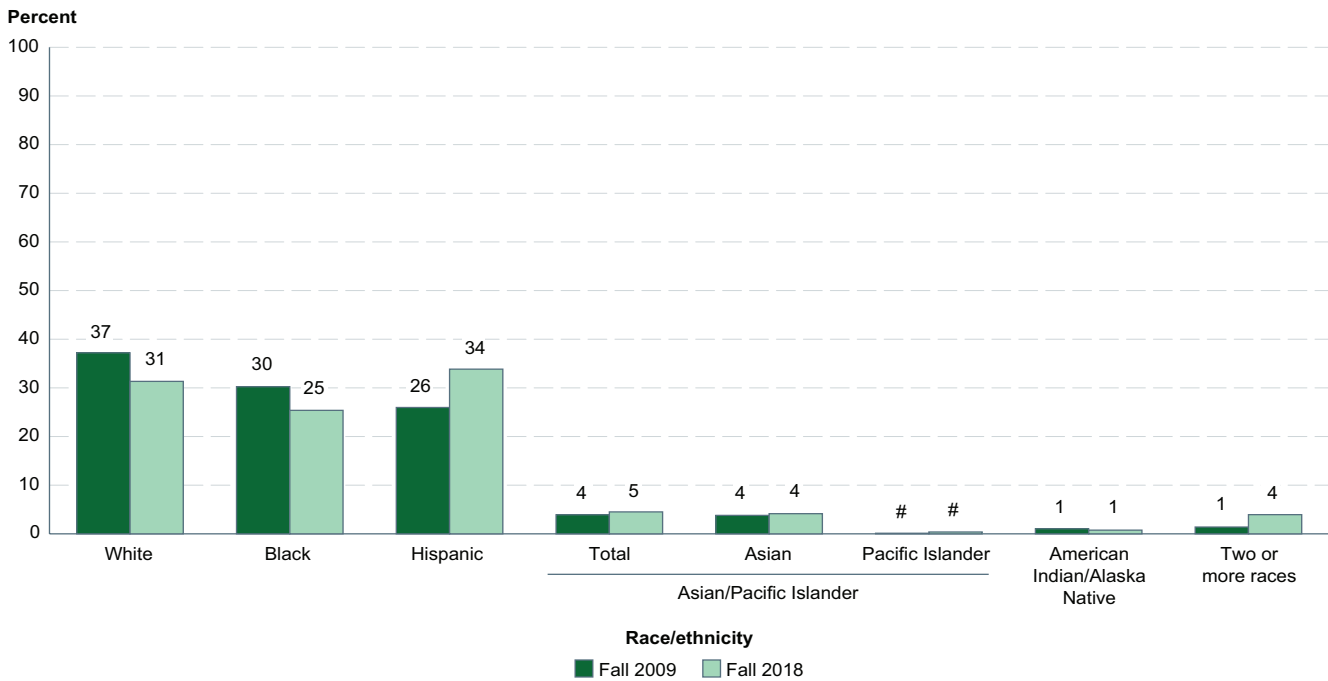
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2018–19. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 216.90.

The first law allowing the establishment of public charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991.<sup>2</sup> As of fall 2018, charter school legislation had been passed in 44 states and the District of Columbia.<sup>3</sup> The states in which public charter school legislation had not been passed by that time were Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia.

Of the 45 jurisdictions with legislative approval for public charter schools as of fall 2018, the District of Columbia had the highest percentage of public school students

enrolled in charter schools (45 percent). The state with the highest percentage of public school students enrolled in charter schools was Arizona (18 percent); in an additional eight states, 10 percent or more of public school students were enrolled in charter schools (California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Nevada, and Utah). Eight states, however, had less than 1 percent of their public school students enrolled in public charter schools in fall 2018: Alabama, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming.

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of public charter school students, by race/ethnicity: Fall 2009 and fall 2018



# Rounds to zero.

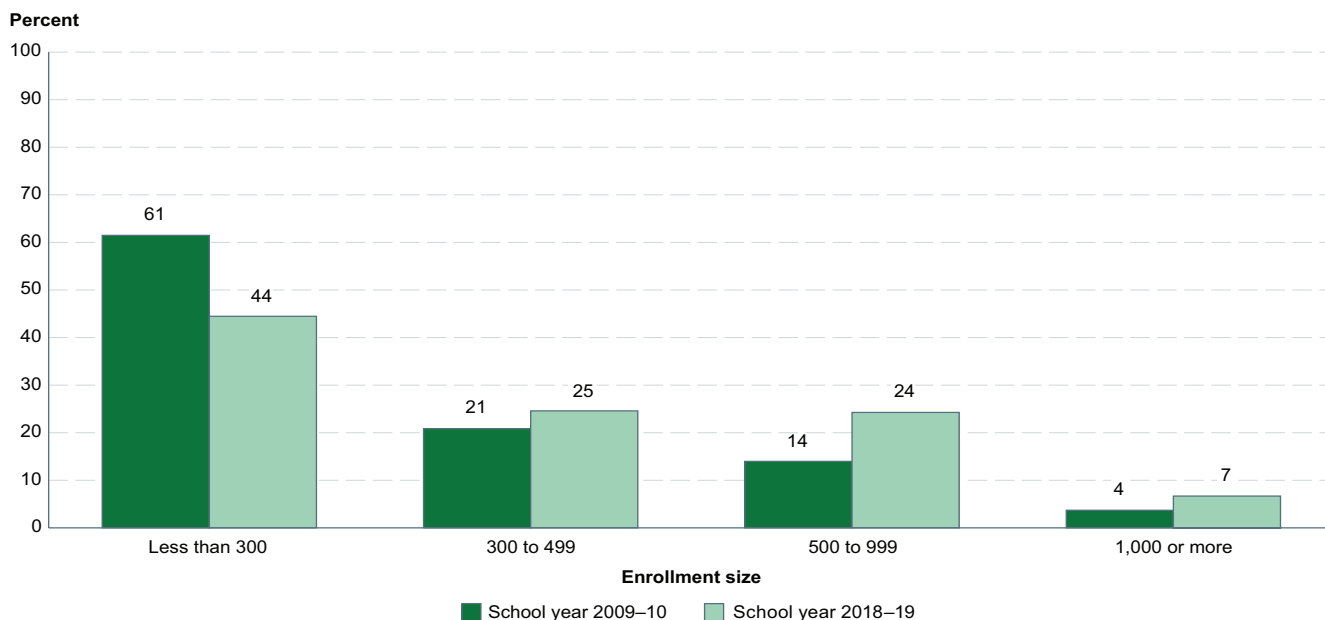
NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 2009–10 and 2018–19. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016* and *2020*, table 216.30.

Between fall 2009 and fall 2018, public charter schools experienced changes in their demographic composition similar to those seen in public schools overall. (For more information on racial/ethnic enrollment in public schools, please see the report *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups*.) The percentage of public charter school students who were Hispanic increased (from 26 to 34 percent), as did the percentages who were of Two or more races (from 1 to 4 percent) and Asian.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the percentage of public charter school students who were White decreased (from 37 to 31 percent), as did the percentages who were Black (from 30 to 25 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native.<sup>5</sup> There was no measurable increase or decrease in the percentage of public charter students who were Pacific

Islander students between fall 2009 and fall 2018 (less than 1 percent in all years).

Schools in which more than 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) under the National School Lunch Program are considered high-poverty schools.<sup>6</sup> Those in which 25 percent or less of students qualify for FRPL are considered low-poverty schools. In fall 2018, some 35 percent of public charter school students attended high-poverty schools, which was higher than the percentage of traditional public school students who attended high-poverty schools (24 percent). The percentage of students attending low-poverty schools was lower for public charter school students (18 percent) than for traditional public school students (21 percent).<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 4. Percentage distribution of public charter schools, by enrollment size: School years 2009–10 and 2018–19**

NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.  
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2009–10 and 2018–19. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2016* and *2020*, table 216.30.

The average enrollment size of public charter schools increased between 2009–10 and 2018–19. The percentages of public charter schools with 300–499, 500–999,

and 1,000 or more students each increased, while the percentage of public charter schools with fewer than 300 students decreased.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Rafa, A., Erwin, B., Kelly, B., and Wixom, M.A. (2020). *50-State Comparison: Charter School Policies*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved October 8, 2020, from <https://www.ecs.org/charter-school-policies/>.

<sup>2</sup> Finnigan, K., Adelman, N., Anderson, L., Cotton, L., Donnelly, M.B., and Price, T. (2004). *Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program: Final Report*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Deputy Secretary. Washington, DC: Policy and Program Studies Service. Retrieved October 8, 2020, from <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/pcsp-final/finalreport.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Rafa, A., Erwin, B., Kelly, B., and Wixom, M.A. (2020). *50-State Comparison: Charter School Policies*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. Retrieved October 8, 2020, from <https://www.ecs.org/charter-school-policies/>.

<sup>4</sup> The percentage of public charter school students who were Asian increased from 3.8 percent in fall 2009 to 4.1 percent in fall 2018.

<sup>5</sup> The percentage of public charter school students who were American Indian/Alaska Native decreased from 1.0 percent in fall 2009 to 0.8 percent in fall 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Includes students whose National School Lunch Program (NSLP) eligibility has been determined through direct certification.

<sup>7</sup> In fall 2018, some 5 percent of public charter school students and less than 1 percent of traditional public school students attended schools that did not participate in FRPL or had missing data.

**Reference tables:** *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, tables 216.20, 216.30, and 216.90; *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, tables 216.20 and 216.30; *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, tables 216.20 and 216.30; *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*, tables 216.20, 216.30, and 216.90; *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, tables 216.30 and 216.90; *Digest of Education Statistics 2015*, table 216.90; *Digest of Education Statistics 2014*, table 216.90; and *Digest of Education Statistics 2013*, table 216.90

**Related indicators and resources:** [Characteristics of Elementary and Secondary Schools](#); [Elementary and Secondary Enrollment \[Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups\]](#); [Private School Enrollment](#); [Public School Enrollment](#)

**Glossary:** Combined school; Elementary school; Enrollment; Free or reduced-price lunch; National School Lunch Program; Public charter school; Public school or institution; Racial/ethnic group; Secondary school; Student membership; Traditional public school