

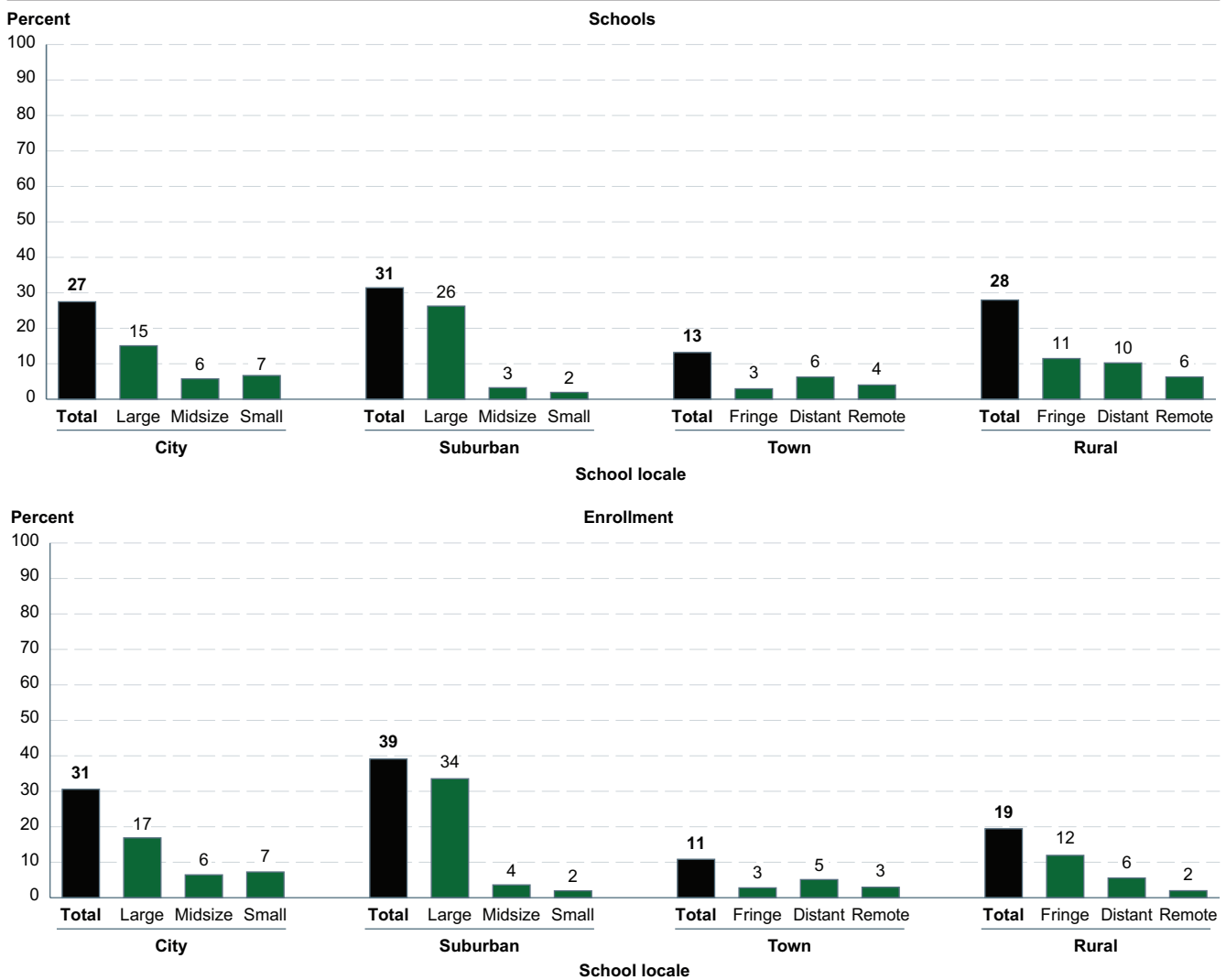
Enrollment and School Choice in Rural Areas

In 2019, public elementary and secondary schools in rural areas enrolled 9.8 million students, representing 19 percent of total public school enrollment.

Using data from the 2019 Common Core of Data (CCD), this indicator explores differences in overall public school enrollment by locale.¹ This indicator also looks at patterns of school choice for students whose families opt for enrollment in public charter schools, enrollment in private schools, and homeschooling, using data from the 2019 CCD, the 2019-20 Private School Universe Survey (PSS), and the 2019 National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES). School choice encompasses an array of elementary and secondary educational options available

to students and their families. Although the availability of school choice options has generally increased over time, not all options are available in all communities due to factors such as density of the student population as well as local and state policies.² Thus, families' participation in alternative schooling arrangements, such as enrollment in a school other than the public school to which a student is assigned, usually reflects both their own choices regarding their children's education and the availability of schooling options in their communities.

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary schools and student enrollment, by locale: Fall 2019



NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Although rounded numbers are displayed, figures are based on unrounded data.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2019-20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 214.40.

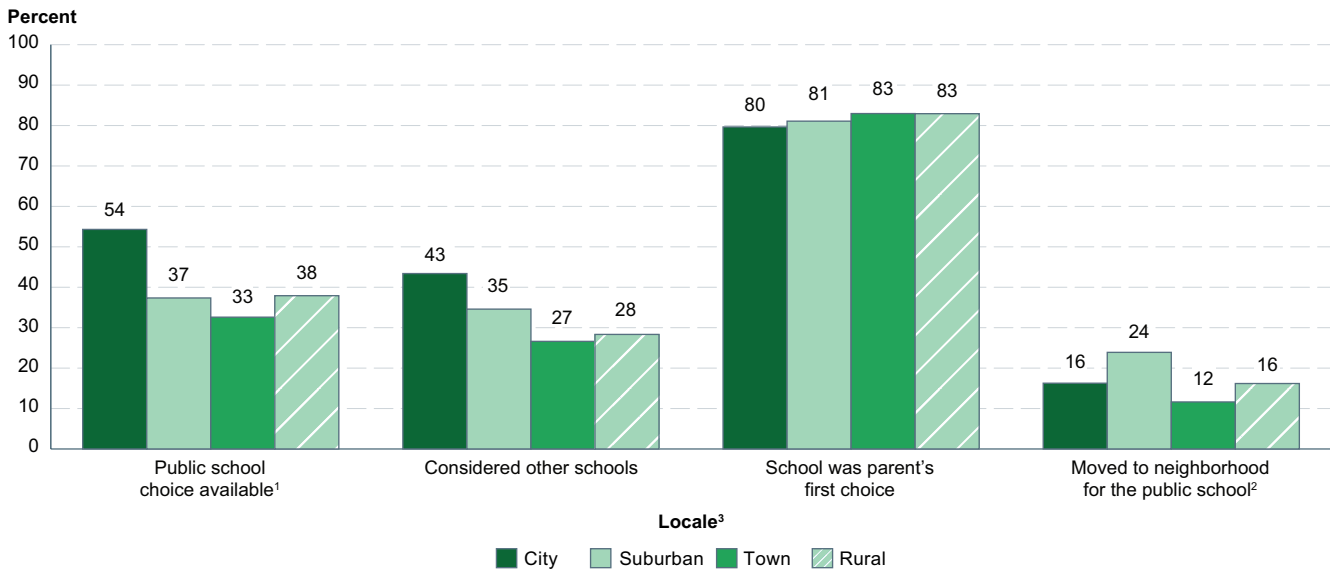
In fall 2019, public schools in rural areas represented 28 percent of all public schools in the United States, while they enrolled 19 percent of all public school students. In total, about 98,500 public elementary and secondary schools in the United States enrolled 50.4 million students. In that same year, there were about 27,500 public elementary and secondary schools in rural areas, enrolling 9.8 million students. Fewer students were enrolled in rural areas than in suburban areas (39 percent of total enrollment) and cities (31 percent). In contrast, more students were enrolled in rural areas than in towns (11 percent).

Rural areas can be classified into sublocales (fringe, distant, and remote) by distance from an urbanized area or urban cluster.³ Remote and distant rural areas differ from fringe rural areas in the proportions of schools and students enrolled. In fall 2019, public elementary and secondary schools in remote rural and distant rural areas enrolled smaller percentages of all students (2 and 6 percent, respectively) than public schools in fringe rural areas (12 percent). By comparison, schools in large suburban areas enrolled the largest share of

students, about one-third of all students in public schools (16.9 million students). An additional 17 percent of all students (8.5 million students) were enrolled in schools in large cities. A lower percentage of public schools were located in remote rural areas than in other types of rural areas. Six percent of all public schools were located in remote rural areas, 10 percent were located in distant rural areas, and 11 percent were located in fringe rural areas. By comparison, 26 percent were located in large suburban areas and 15 percent were located in large cities.

In fall 2019, the average enrollment size of public elementary and secondary schools varied by locale. The average school size in rural areas (368 students) was smaller than the average school size in towns (444 students), cities (588 students), and suburban areas (654 students). Average school sizes in remote rural areas (165 students) and distant rural areas (285 students) were smaller than those of all other geographic sublocales (ranging from 402 students in schools in remote towns to 671 students in schools in large suburban areas).

Figure 2. Percentage of students enrolled in grades 1 through 12 whose parents reported having public school choice, considered other schools, reported current school was their first choice, and moved to their current neighborhood for the public school, by locale: 2019

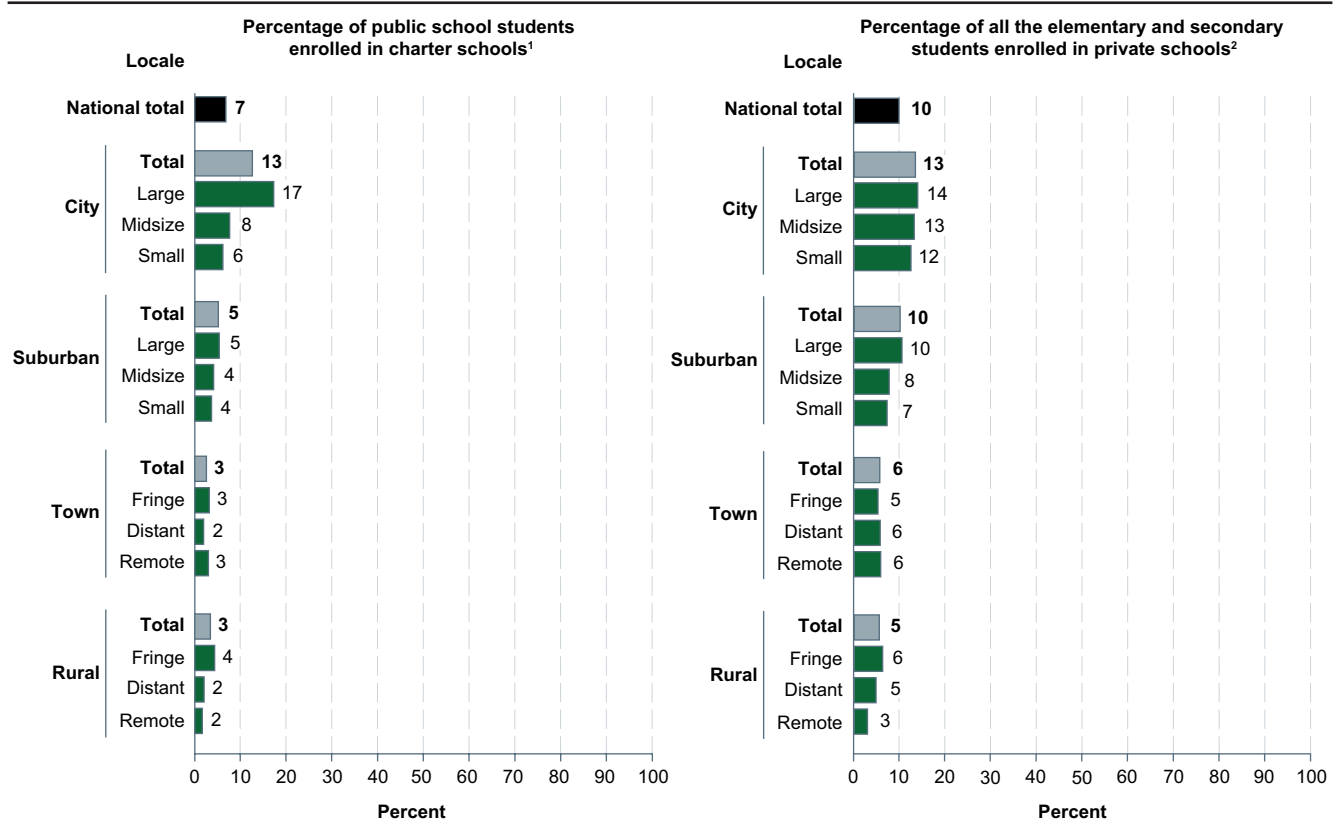


¹ Students who attended chosen public schools were automatically coded as “yes” for whether or not parents reporting having school choice.
² These bars show percentages of public school students only. Private school students are excluded from the analysis.
³ Based on ZIP code of the household.
 NOTE: For the 2019 administration of the National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES), the majority of data were collected using a web-based survey instrument that respondents accessed with credentials they received in a mailed invitation. Paper surveys were used for nonresponse follow-up and for a small experiment. Excludes students who were homeschooled and spent 24 or fewer hours spent in a physical school building.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program (PFI-NHES:2019). See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 206.40.

In 2019, parents’ reports of behaviors related to school choice differed by locale. The percentage of students whose parents considered other schools was lower in rural areas (28 percent) than in suburban areas (35 percent) and in cities (43 percent). Similarly, the percentage of students whose parents moved to their current neighborhood so

their children could attend their current public school was lower in rural areas (16 percent) than in suburban areas (24 percent). However, this percentage was higher for students in rural areas than for students in towns (12 percent).

Figure 3. Percentage of public elementary and secondary students enrolled in charter schools and percentage of all elementary and secondary students enrolled in private schools, by locale: 2019–20



¹ Enrollments are based on data reported by schools and may differ from data reported in tables that reflect aggregate totals reported by states.
² Includes special education, vocational/technical education, and alternative schools. Includes enrollment of private school students in prekindergarten through grade 12 in schools that offer kindergarten or higher grade.
 NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2019–20; Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE), "Public School File," 2019–20; and Private School Universe Survey (PSS), 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, tables 205.90 and 216.92.

Public charter schools are publicly funded schools that are typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract—a charter—with a state, district, or other entity. Charter schools are a public school option for families, but they are not available in all areas. In fall 2019, public charter schools enrolled 3 percent (about 334,500 students) of all public elementary and secondary students enrolled in schools in rural areas. This percentage was similar to the percentages of students enrolled in charter schools in towns (3 percent), but it was lower than the percentages in suburban areas (5 percent) and cities (13 percent).⁴ The percentage of public school students enrolled in charter schools was lower in remote rural areas (2 percent) than in all other sublocales, which ranged from 2 percent each in distant towns and distant rural areas to 17 percent in large cities.⁵

Some families choose to enroll their children in private schools rather than in public schools, depending upon availability in their area and their financial resources. Private schools are educational institutions that are controlled by an individual or organization other than

a government agency and are usually not supported primarily by public funds. In fall 2019, private schools enrolled 5 percent (about 570,400 students) of all elementary and secondary school students in rural areas. This percentage was not measurably different from the percentage of students enrolled in private schools in towns, but it was lower than the percentages in suburban areas (10 percent) and cities (13 percent). The percentage of students enrolled in private schools was lower in remote rural areas (3 percent) than in the other sublocales, which ranged from 5 percent in distant rural areas and fringe towns to 14 percent in large cities.

Rather than choosing enrollment in a public or private school, some parents choose to homeschool their children. In 2019, among children living in rural areas who were 5 to 17 years old (with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through grade 12), about 5 percent (or about 423,300 children) were homeschooled.⁶ The percentage of children in rural areas who were homeschooled was higher than the percentages for those living in cities, suburban areas, and towns (2 percent in each).

Endnotes:

¹ Please visit NCES's [Education Across America website](#) for the definition of locale.

² Wang, K., Rathbun, A., and Musu, L. (2019). *School Choice in the United States: 2019* (NCES 2019-106). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

³ Please visit NCES's [Education Across America website](#) for the definition of sublocale.

⁴ In fall 2019, the percentage of students in rural areas who were enrolled in public charter schools was 3.4 percent, compared with 2.5 percent for students in towns.

⁵ In fall 2019, the percentage of students in remote rural areas who were enrolled in public charter schools was 1.6 percent, compared with 1.9 percent for students in distant towns and 2.0 percent for students in distant rural areas.

⁶ For this indicator, students are considered to be homeschooled if (a) their parents reported them being schooled at home instead of at a public or private school, (b) their enrollment in public or private schools did not exceed 24 hours per week, and (c) they were not being homeschooled when surveyed only due to a temporary illness.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, tables 205.90, 206.10, 214.40, and 216.92; *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, tables 206.30 and 206.40

Related indicators and resources: [Homeschooled Children and Reasons for Homeschooling \[Condition of Education\]](#); [Private School Enrollment \[Condition of Education\]](#); [Public Charter School Enrollment \[Condition of Education\]](#); [Public School Enrollment \[Condition of Education\]](#)

Glossary: Homeschool; Locale codes; Private school; Public charter school; Public school or institution