

Public Charter School Enrollment

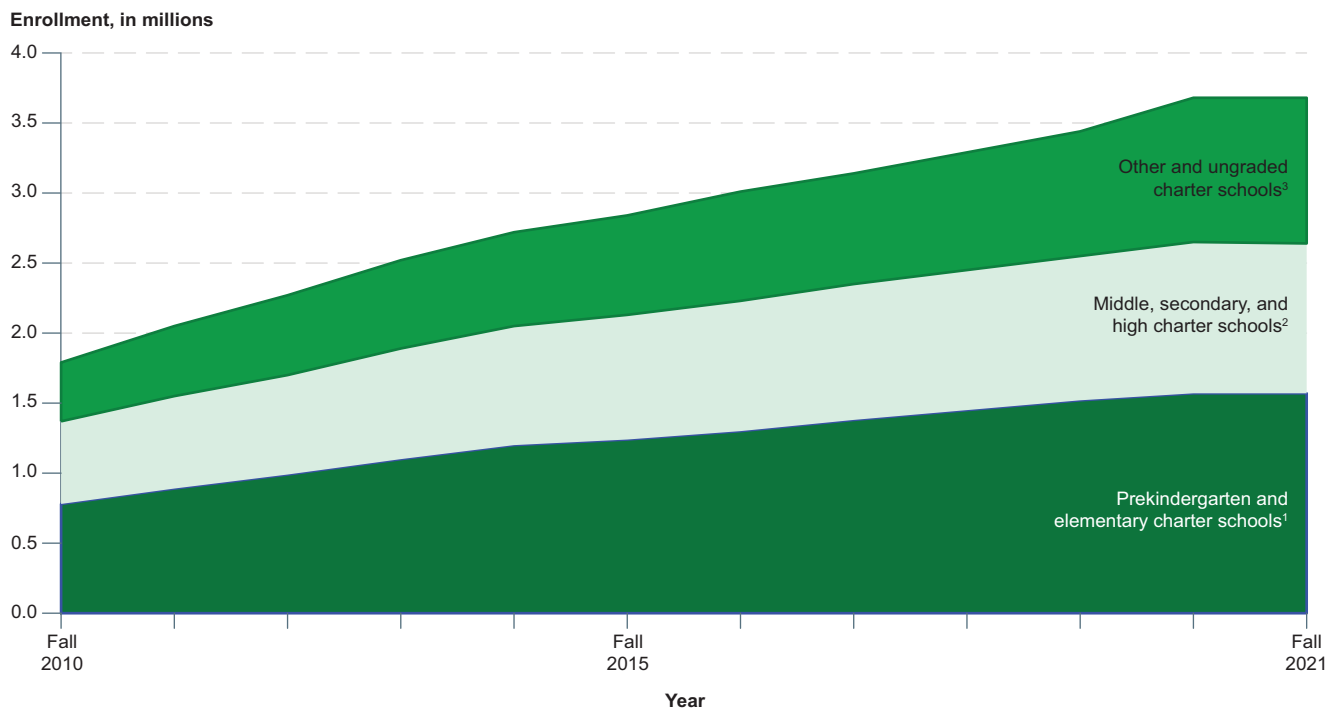
Between fall 2019 and fall 2020, a time period covering the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, public charter school enrollment increased by 7 percent, while traditional public school enrollment declined by 4 percent.

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 the conditions of

the charter are not met.¹ Between school years 2010-11 and 2021-22, 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 5,300 to 7,800. Meanwhile, the number of traditional public schools decreased from 93,500 to 91,400. Accordingly, the percentage of all public schools that were charter schools increased from 5 to 8 percent.

Overall Public Charter School Enrollment

Figure 1. Public charter school enrollment, by school level: Fall 2010 through fall 2021



¹ Prekindergarten schools are defined as schools that offer prekindergarten only. Elementary schools are defined as schools that offer more of grades K–4 than higher grades.

² Middle schools are defined as schools that offer more of grades 5–8 than higher or lower grades. Secondary/high schools are defined as schools that offer more of grades 9–12 than lower grades.

³ Other schools are defined as schools that offer all other combinations of grades, including K–12 schools. Ungraded schools are defined as schools that offer ungraded education only.

NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Some data have been revised from previously published figures.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 2010–11 through 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 216.20.

Public Charter School Enrollment

Between fall 2010 and fall 2021, public charter school enrollment more than doubled, from 1.8 million to 3.7 million students—an overall increase of 1.9 million students.² In contrast, the number of students attending traditional public schools decreased by 4 percent, or 2.0 million students, over the same period (from 47.4 million to 45.4 million students). Accordingly, between fall 2010 and fall 2021, the percentage of all public school students who attended public charter schools increased from 4 to 7 percent.

While enrollment patterns differed between charter schools and traditional public schools throughout the period from 2010 to 2021, this difference was particularly evident during the first school year of the coronavirus pandemic. Between fall 2019 and fall 2020, enrollment

Chapter: 2/Preprimary, Elementary, and Secondary Education
Section: Elementary and Secondary Enrollment

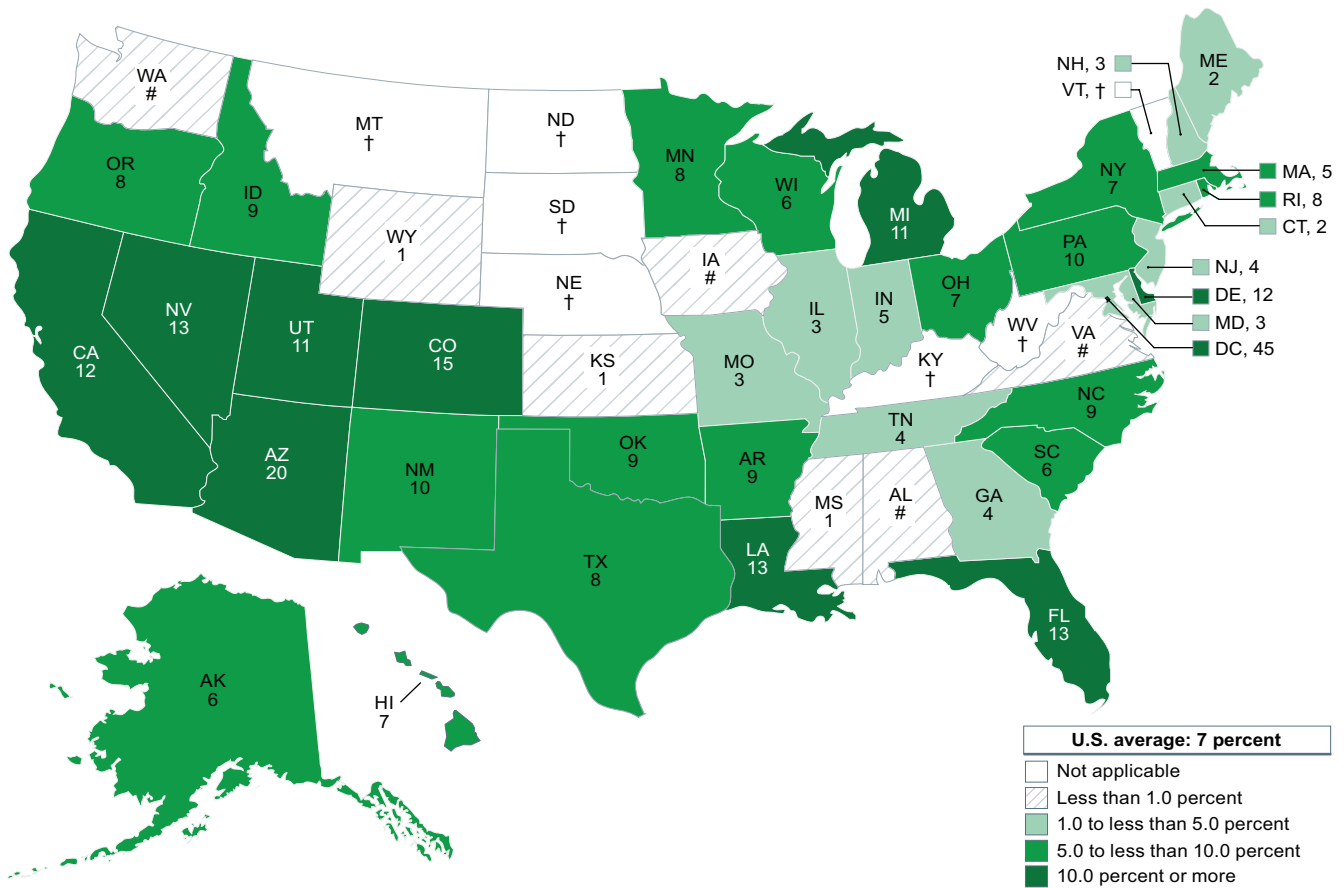
in traditional public schools declined by 4 percent, accounting for 83 percent of the total decline from 2010 to 2021. In contrast, public charter school enrollment increased by 7 percent between fall 2019 and fall 2020, the largest annual increase in percentage terms since fall 2014. However, in both types of schools, enrollments were relatively stable between fall 2020 and fall 2021.

Between fall 2010 and fall 2021, of students in charter schools, the percentage who were in

- prekindergarten and elementary school ranged from 43 to 44 percent;³
- middle, secondary, and high school decreased from 33 to 29 percent;⁴ and
- other and ungraded schools increased from 24 to 28 percent.⁵

State Charter School Enrollment

Figure 2. Percentage of all public school students enrolled in public charter schools, by state: Fall 2021



† Not applicable. State does not have charter school legislation or reported having no charter schools.

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," 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 216.90.

The first law allowing the establishment of public charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991.⁶ Forty-five states and the District of Columbia had passed public charter legislation as of fall 2021 (the exceptions were Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont).⁷

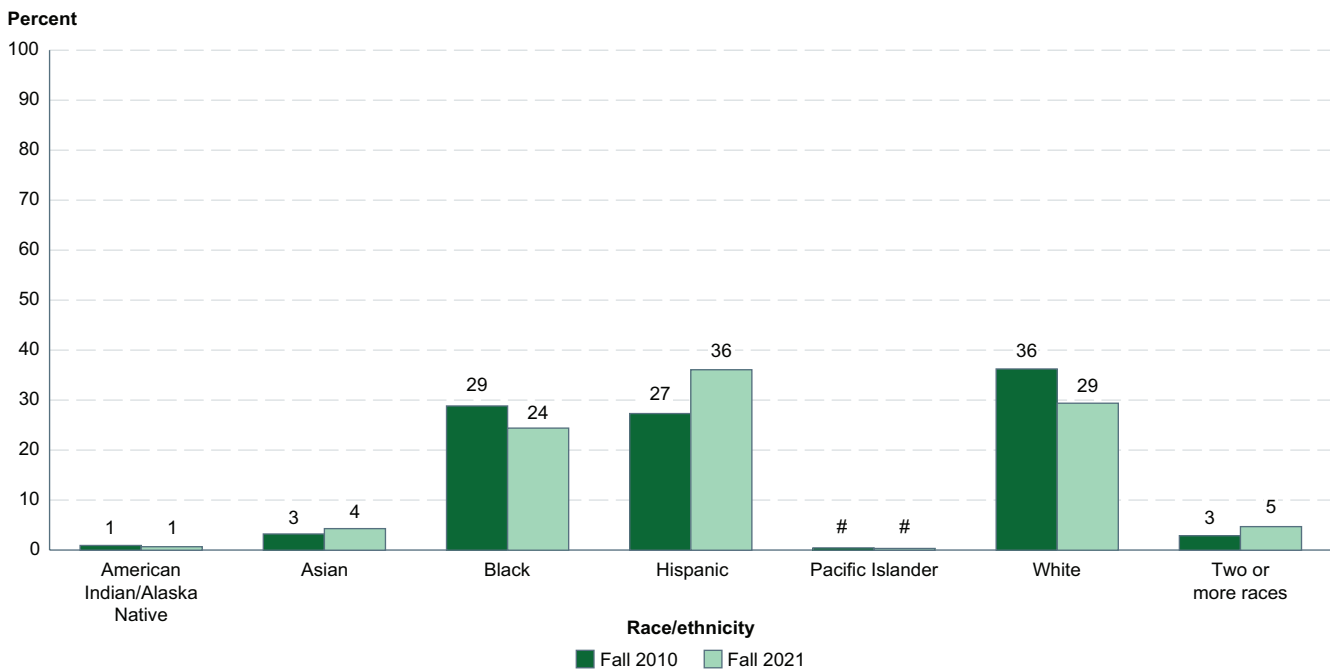
Of the 46 states/jurisdictions with legislative approval for public charter schools as of fall 2021, the District of Columbia had the highest percentage of public school students enrolled in charter schools (45 percent), followed by Arizona (20 percent). In an additional eight states—Colorado, Nevada, Florida, Louisiana, Delaware, California, Utah, and Michigan—from 10 to 15 percent of public school students were enrolled in charter schools. Seven states, however, had less than 1 percent of their public school students enrolled in public charter schools in fall 2021. These states were Wyoming, Mississippi, Kansas, Alabama, Washington, Virginia, and Iowa.⁸ Kentucky and West Virginia had no charter schools in 2021.

Enrollment of students in public charter schools in fall 2021 was 1.9 million greater than in fall 2010, and about

one-half (or 0.9 million) of this difference in enrollment could be attributed to enrollment increases in charter schools in California, Texas, Florida, and New York between the two years. Across all states/jurisdictions with students enrolled in charter schools in fall 2021 (43 states and the District of Columbia), charter school enrollment was generally higher in fall 2021 than in 2010, but patterns differed before and during the pandemic. Specifically,

- 41 states and the District of Columbia had higher charter school enrollments in fall 2019 than in fall 2010;
- 39 states and the District of Columbia had higher charter enrollments in fall 2020 than in fall 2019; and
- 26 states had higher charter enrollments in fall 2021 than in fall 2020.

Overall, 41 states and the District of Columbia had higher charter school enrollments in fall 2021 than in fall 2010. Charter school enrollment was lower in fall 2021 than in fall 2010 in Iowa and Kansas.

Characteristics of Charter Schools and Their Students**Figure 3. Percentage distribution of public charter school students, by race/ethnicity: Fall 2010 and fall 2021**

Rounds to zero.

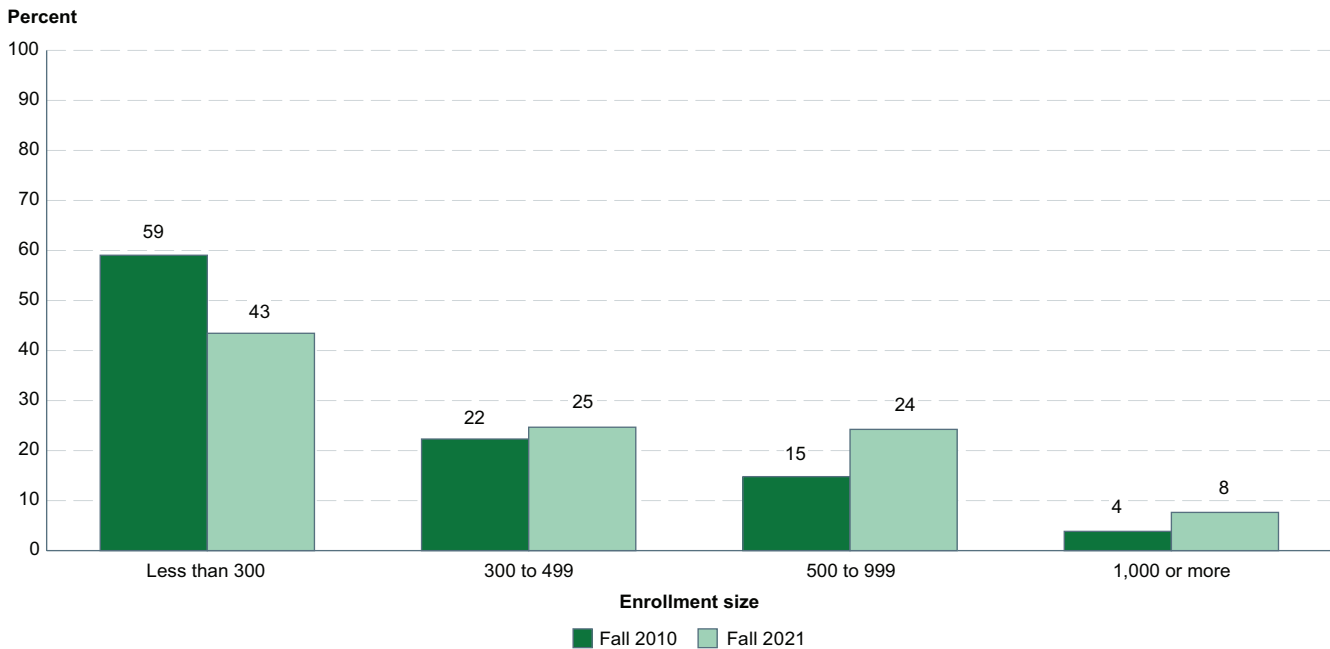
NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2010–11 and 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 216.30 and table 216.30a.

Between fall 2010 and fall 2021, trends in the demographic composition of public charter schools were similar to those seen in public schools overall (for more information, see the indicator [Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools](#)). Between the 2 years, the percentages of public charter school students who were

- Hispanic increased (from 27 to 36 percent);
- of Two or more races increased (from 3 to 5 percent);
- Asian increased (from 3 to 4 percent);
- White decreased (from 36 to 29 percent);
- Black decreased (from 29 to 24 percent);
- American Indian/Alaska Native decreased (from 0.9 to 0.7 percent); and
- Pacific Islander decreased (from 0.5 to 0.4 percent).

In fall 2021, a higher percentage of charter school students than of traditional public school students attended schools where a majority of their peers were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). For this indicator, schools in which more than 75 percent of students qualify for FRPL under the National School Lunch Program are considered high-poverty schools.⁹ Those in which 25 percent or less of students qualify for FRPL are considered low-poverty schools. In fall 2021, some 31 percent of public charter school students attended high-poverty schools, which was higher than the 21 percent of traditional public school students who attended high-poverty schools. The percentage of students attending low-poverty schools was lower for public charter school students (17 percent) than for traditional public school students (25 percent).¹⁰

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of public charter schools, by enrollment size: Fall 2010 and fall 2021

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," 2010–11 and 2021–22. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 216.30 and table 216.30a.

The percentages of public charter schools with 300–499, 500–999, and 1,000 or more students each increased between fall 2010 and fall 2021, while the percentage

of public charter schools with fewer than 300 students decreased.

Endnotes:

¹ 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 November 30, 2022, from <https://www.ecs.org/charter-school-policies/>.

² In this indicator, data on public charter school enrollment are collected at the school level, in the Common Core of Data (CCD) Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey. Enrollment is reported for "October 1 or the closest school day to October 1."

³ Prekindergarten schools are defined as schools that offer prekindergarten only. Elementary schools are defined as schools that offer more of grades K–4 than higher grades.

⁴ Middle schools are defined as schools that offer more of grades 5–8 than higher or lower grades. Secondary/high schools are defined as schools that offer more of grades 9–12 than lower grades.

⁵ Other schools are defined as schools that offer all other combinations of grades, including K–12 schools. Ungraded schools are defined as schools that offer ungraded education only.

⁶ 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 November 30, 2022, from <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/pcsp-final/finalreport.pdf>.

⁷ 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 December 19, 2022, from <https://www.ecs.org/charter-school-policies/>.

⁸ Although Kentucky and West Virginia had passed public charter school legislation as of fall 2021, these states did not report any charter schools or charter school enrollment in 2021.

⁹ Includes students whose National School Lunch Program eligibility has been determined through direct certification.

¹⁰ In fall 2021, some 8 percent of public charter school students and 3 percent of traditional public school students attended schools that did not participate in FRPL or had missing data.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, tables 203.50, 216.10, 216.20, 216.30, 216.30a, and 216.90; *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 216.30; *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 216.30; *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, table 216.30; *Digest of Education Statistics 2018*, table 216.30; *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*, table 216.30; *Digest of Education Statistics 2016*, tables 216.30

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: 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