Charter School Enrollment

Between school years 2003–04 and 2013–14, overall public charter school enrollment increased from 0.8 million to 2.5 million. During this period, the percentage of public school students who attended charter schools increased from 1.6 to 5.1 percent.

A public charter school is a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a legislative contract (or charter) with the state or jurisdiction. 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 (typically every 3 to 5 years) by the group or jurisdiction that granted it and can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or if the accountability standards are not met.

The first law allowing the establishment of charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991. As of school year 2013–14, charter school legislation had been passed in 42 states and the District of Columbia. The states in which charter school legislation had not been passed by that year were Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia. Despite legislative approval for charter schools in Mississippi and Washington, none were operating in these states in 2013–14.

Between school years 2003–04 and 2013–14, the percentage of all public schools that were public charter schools increased from 3.1 to 6.6 percent, and the total number of public charter schools increased from 3,000 to 6,500. In addition to increasing in number, charter schools have generally increased in enrollment size over the last decade. From 2003–04 to 2013–14, the percentages of charter schools with 300–499, 500–999, and 1,000 or more students each increased, while the percentage of charter schools with fewer than 300 students decreased. Similar patterns were observed from 2012–13 to 2013–14.

### Figure 1. Percentage distribution of public charter schools, by enrollment size: School years 2003–04 and 2013–14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment size</th>
<th>2003–04</th>
<th>2013–14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 300</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 to 499</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 to 999</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 or more</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of students enrolled in public charter schools between school years 2003–04 and 2013–14 increased from 0.8 million to 2.5 million. During that period, larger numbers of charter school students were enrolled in elementary schools than in any of the following types of charter schools: secondary, combined, and other types that were not classified by grade span. The percentage of public school students who attended charter schools increased from 1.6 to 5.1 percent during this period, following an increase of 1.7 million in the number of charter school students and a decrease of 0.4 million in the number of traditional public school students (see the Public School Enrollment indicator). Between 2012–13 and 2013–14, the number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased from 2.3 million to 2.5 million.
In school year 2013–14, California had the largest number of students enrolled in charter schools (513,400, representing 8 percent of total public school students in the state), and the District of Columbia had the highest percentage of public school students enrolled in charter schools (42 percent, representing 33,200 students). After the District of Columbia, Arizona had the next highest percentage (18 percent) of charter school enrollment as a percentage of total public school enrollment.

Between school years 2003–04 and 2013–14, charter schools experienced changes in their demographic composition similar to those seen at traditional public schools. The percentage of charter school students who were Hispanic increased (from 21 to 30 percent), as did the percentage who were Asian/Pacific Islander (from 3 to 4 percent). In contrast, the percentage of charter school students who were White decreased from 42 to 35 percent. The percentages decreased for Black (from 32 to 27 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native (from 2 to 1 percent) charter school students, as well. Data were collected for charter school students of Two or more races beginning in 2009–10. Students of Two or more races accounted for 3 percent of the charter school population in 2013–14.
In school year 2013–14, the percentage of students attending high-poverty schools—schools in which more than 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) under the National School Lunch Program—was higher for charter school students (37 percent) than for traditional public school students (24 percent). In the same year, 20 percent each of charter school students and of traditional public school students attended low-poverty schools, those in which 25 percent or less of students qualify for FRPL.

Endnotes:

Reference tables: Digest of Education Statistics 2015, tables 216.20, 216.30, and 216.90
Related indicators: Characteristics of Traditional Public and Public Charter Schools

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