Public Charter School Enrollment

Between fall 2000 and fall 2017, overall public charter school enrollment increased from 0.4 million to 3.1 million. During this period, the percentage of public school students who attended charter schools increased from 1 to 6 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. Between school years 2000–01 and 2017–18, the percentage of all public schools in the United States (defined in this indicator as the 50 states and the District of Columbia) that were charter schools increased from 2 to 7 percent, and the total number of charter schools increased from approximately 2,000 to 7,200.

Figure 1. Public charter school enrollment, by school level: Selected years, fall 2000 through fall 2017

The percentage of all public school students who attended public charter schools increased from 1 to 6 percent between fall 2000 and fall 2017. During this period, public charter school enrollment increased steadily, from 0.4 million students in fall 2000 to 3.1 million students in fall 2017—an overall increase of 2.7 million students. In contrast, the number of students attending traditional public schools increased by 1.3 million between fall 2000 and fall 2005, and then decreased by 0.7 million between fall 2005 and fall 2017, for a net increase of 0.6 million students. In each year from fall 2000 to fall 2017, larger numbers of public charter school students were enrolled in elementary schools than in any of the other three levels of charter schools: secondary schools, combined schools, and other levels of schools that were not classified by grade span.
The first law allowing the establishment of public charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991. As of fall 2017, charter school legislation had been passed in 44 states and the District of Columbia. 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 2017, California had the largest number of students enrolled in charter schools (approximately 627,000 students, representing 10 percent of all public school students in the state), and the District of Columbia had the highest percentage of public school students enrolled in charter schools (45 percent, or approximately 38,700 students). After the District of Columbia, Arizona had the next highest percentage of public school students enrolled in charter schools (17 percent, or approximately 189,700 students). Eight states, however, had less than 1 percent of their public school students enrolled in public charter schools in fall 2017: Alabama, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming.
Between fall 2000 and fall 2017, 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 19 to 33 percent), as did the percentage who were Asian/Pacific Islander (from 3 to 4 percent). In contrast, the percentage of public charter school students who were White decreased (from 43 to 32 percent), as did the percentages who were Black (from 33 to 26 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native (from 2 to 1 percent). Beginning in fall 2009, data were collected on students of Two or more races attending public charter schools; students of Two or more races accounted for 4 percent of public charter school students in fall 2017.

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. Those in which 25 percent or less of students qualify for FRPL are considered low-poverty schools. In fall 2017, 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).
The average enrollment size of public charter schools increased between 2000–01 and 2017–18. 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:

5 Separate data on students who were Asian and Pacific Islander were not available in fall 2000. In fall 2000, data for students who were Asian included students who were Pacific Islander.
6 Includes students whose National School Lunch Program (NSLP) eligibility has been determined through direct certification.
7 In fall 2017, some 6 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 2019, tables 216.20, 216.30, and 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