

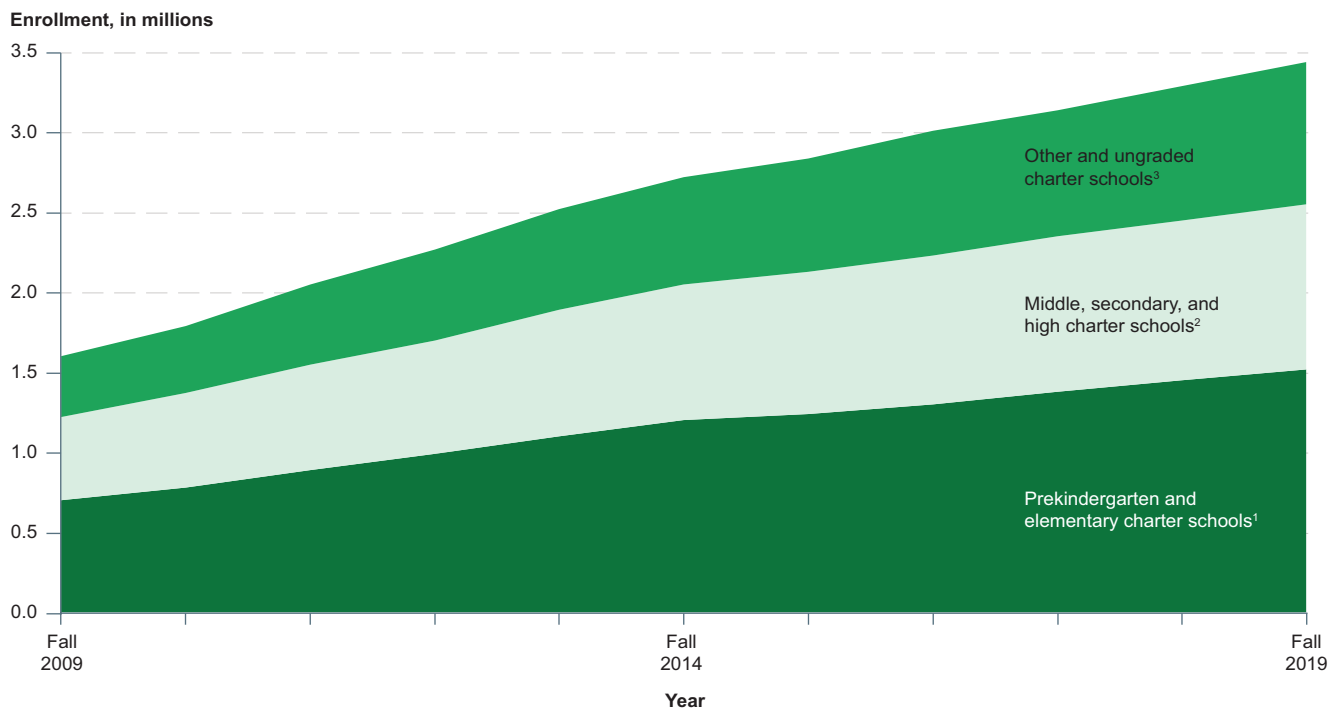
Public Charter School Enrollment

Between fall 2009 and fall 2019, overall public charter school enrollment increased from 1.6 million students to 3.4 million students and the number of public charter schools increased from approximately 5,000 to 7,500. 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 the conditions of the charter are

not met.¹ Between school years 2009-10 and 2019-20, 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 7,500. Meanwhile, the number of traditional public schools decreased from 93,900 to 90,900. Accordingly, 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 2019



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," 2009–10 through 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 216.20.

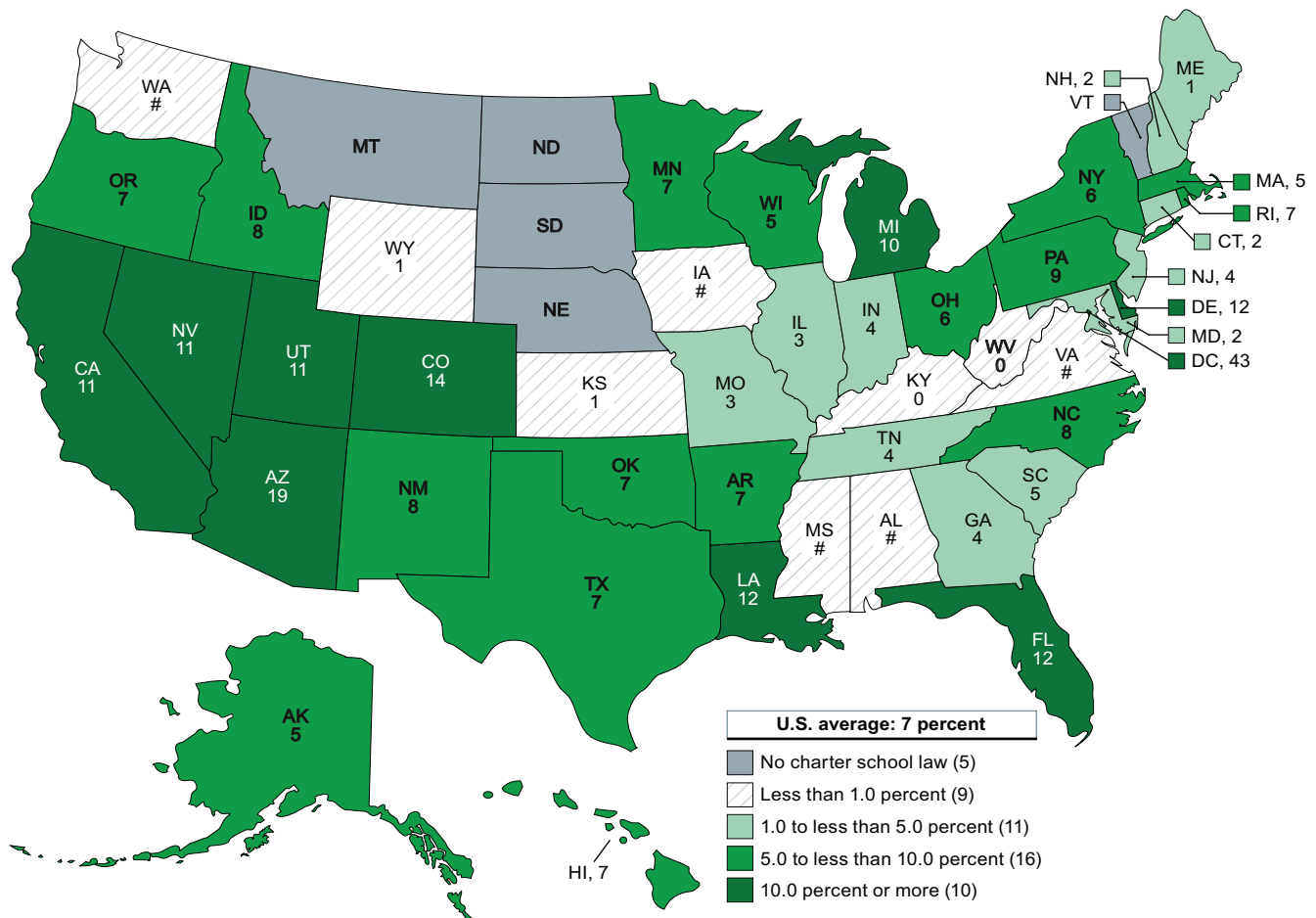
Between fall 2009 and fall 2019, public charter school enrollment more than doubled, from 1.6 million students in fall 2009 to 3.4 million students in fall 2019—an overall increase of 1.8 million students. In contrast, the number of students attending traditional public schools decreased by

0.5 million between fall 2009 and fall 2019. Accordingly, the percentage of all public school students who attended public charter schools increased from 3 to 7 percent over this period.

The number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased at all school levels between fall 2009 and fall 2019, though the distribution across levels varied over time. The percentage of charter school students enrolled in prekindergarten and elementary schools was 44 percent in both fall 2009 and fall 2019.² Meanwhile,

the percentage of charter school students enrolled in middle, secondary, and high schools decreased from 33 to 30 percent over this period.³ The percentage enrolled in other and ungraded schools increased from 24 to 26 percent.⁴

Figure 2. Percentage of all public school students enrolled in public charter schools, categorized into specific ranges, by state: Fall 2019



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," 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 216.90.

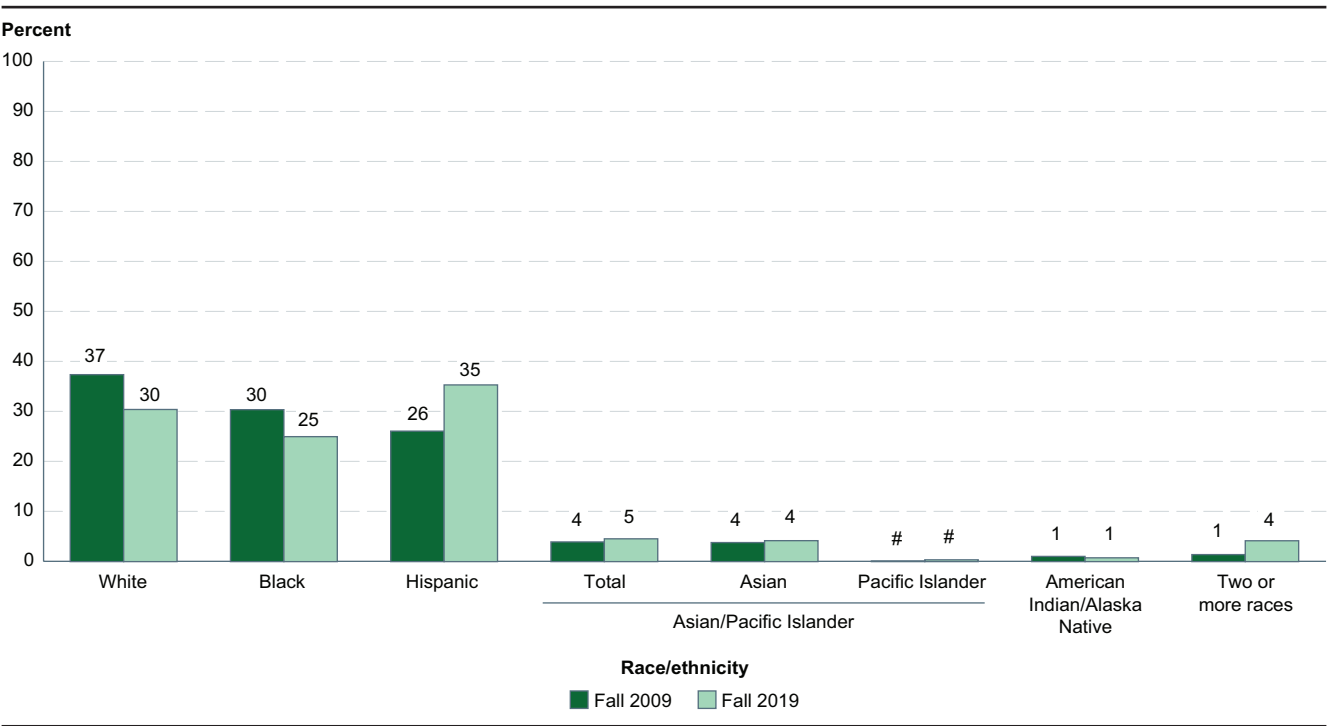
The first law allowing the establishment of public charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991.⁵ As of fall 2019, forty-five states and the District of Columbia had passed public charter school legislation.¹ The states in which public charter school legislation had not been passed by that time were Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont.

Of the 46 states/jurisdictions with legislative approval for public charter schools as of fall 2019, the District of Columbia had the highest percentage of public school students enrolled in charter schools (43 percent), followed by Arizona (19 percent). In an additional eight states, 10 percent or more of public school students were enrolled in charter schools. These states were Colorado, Louisiana,

Delaware, Florida, Utah, Nevada, California, and Michigan. Nine states, however, had less than 1 percent of their public school students enrolled in public charter schools in fall 2019. These states were Wyoming, Kansas, Mississippi, Washington, Alabama, Virginia, Iowa, West Virginia, and Kentucky.

Of the additional 1.8 million students enrolled in public charter schools between fall 2009 and fall 2019, about half (0.9 million) were enrolled in charter schools in California, Texas, Florida, and New York. Of the 44 states with any students enrolled in charter schools in fall 2019, charter school enrollment was higher in fall 2019 than in fall 2009 for 42 states. Charter school enrollment was lower in fall 2019 than in fall 2009 in Iowa and Kansas.

Figure 3. Percentage distribution of public charter school students, by race/ethnicity: Fall 2009 and fall 2019

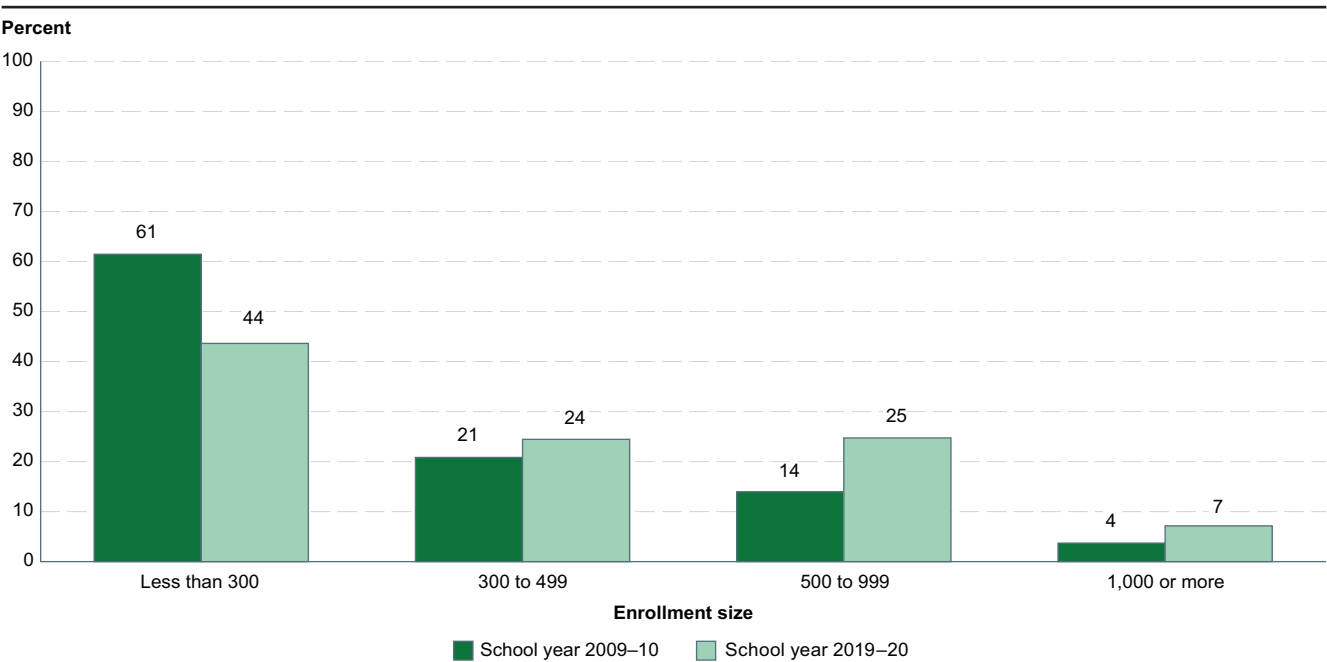


Rounds to zero.
NOTE: Data in this figure represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 2009–10 and 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 216.30.

Between fall 2009 and fall 2019, 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](#).) The percentage of public charter school students who were Hispanic increased (from 26 to 35 percent), as did the percentages of those who were of Two or more races (from 1 to 4 percent) and Asian (rounded to 4 percent in both years).⁶ In contrast, the percentage of public charter school students who were White decreased (from 37 to 30 percent), as did the percentages of those who were Black (from 30 to 25 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Native (rounded to 1 percent in both years).⁷ There was no measurable change in the percentage of public charter students who were Pacific Islander students between fall 2009 and fall 2019 (less than 1 percent in both 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.⁸ Those in which 25 percent or less of students qualify for FRPL are considered low-poverty schools. In fall 2019, some 34 percent of public charter school students attended high-poverty schools, which was higher than the 24 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 (21 percent).⁹

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of public charter schools, by enrollment size: School years 2009–10 and 2019–20



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 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 216.30.

The average enrollment size of public charter schools increased between 2009–10 and 2019–20. 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:

- 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 December 7, 2021, from <https://www.ecs.org/charter-school-policies/>.
- ² 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.
- ³ 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.
- ⁴ 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.
- ⁵ 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 December 7, 2021, from <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/pcsp-final/finalreport.pdf>.
- ⁶ The percentage of public charter school students who were Asian increased from 3.8 percent in fall 2009 to 4.2 percent in fall 2019.
- ⁷ 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 2019.
- ⁸ Includes students whose National School Lunch Program eligibility has been determined through direct certification.
- ⁹ In fall 2019, some 9 percent of public charter school students and less than 1 percent of traditional public school students attended schools that did not participate in free or reduced-price lunch or had missing data.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, tables 216.10, 216.20, 216.30, and 216.90; *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 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: Elementary school; Enrollment; Free or reduced-price lunch; Middle school; National School Lunch Program; Other/ungraded school; Prekindergarten school; Public charter school; Public school or institution; Racial/ethnic group; Secondary/High school; Student membership; Traditional public school