

Enrollment Analysis: 2020–2022 Washington State

By Katherine Bateman

As we pass the two-year mark of a global health crisis, Covid-19 has changed and altered the delivery of educational services across the country. Over the course of the pandemic, schools have offered a variety of in-person, remote, and hybrid learning options. They've worked tirelessly to adjust and meet the unique needs of their students. Yet throughout this time students have experienced less than ideal learning conditions. In response to inconsistent or unresponsive schooling, many families have adjusted to meet the educational needs of their children by exploring new and alternative academic offerings. This has had sizable impacts on public school enrollment across the country.

In this study, CRPE sought to understand changes specifically in Washington state's charter school enrollment during the pandemic, relative to the enrollment changes in their corresponding districts, as well as the state. This analysis includes an examination of statewide data for grades K-12 in traditional public schools from September 2020 to May 2022, with a corresponding analysis of enrollments in charter, private, and home schools from September 2020 to September 2021. (See inset, Enrollment Data.)

Executive Summary

Our examination of public school enrollment trends finds that 16,371 fewer students were enrolled in Washington schools in 2021-22 than 2019-2022. This is in line with national enrollment losses reported in 2021-22. Washington state's enrollment impacts were distinct across its different school sectors.

Traditional public school enrollment: This study finds that, overall, Washington state traditional public school enrollment declined 2% annually from September 2019 to September 2021. However, Kindergarten enrollment grew by 7% average annual growth in both 2020-21 and 2021-22, and ninth-grade enrollment increased 1% year-over-year as well. All other grade levels experienced enrollment declines over either one or both years.

Non-public school enrollment: During this time, more Washington families enrolled in non-public school options in the two years since the pandemic began, including private school (where enrollment increased by 10% average annual growth) and homeschool (where enrollment increased by 27% average annual growth).

1 Washington state charter schools are publicly funded schools operated by non-profit, non-religious organizations.

Charter public school enrollment: Statewide charter public school growth continues to increase, overall. Charter enrollment experienced a 28% average annual growth from 2019–20 to 2021–22, due in part to more available seats as the number of schools doubled over the past two years. While charters' enrollment growth outpaced their corresponding districts' enrollment growth in the first year of the pandemic, charter enrollment slowed to less than that of their corresponding districts in 2021–22. Charters' enrollment gains were buoyed mostly by newcomers in early elementary grades, while their corresponding districts saw the greatest enrollment increases just in Kindergarten.

Gains in non-public and charter schools do not fully recapture the losses reported in traditional public schools. It's possible that families moved out of state or that the number of school-aged children declined overall in Washington. It is also possible that some students remained in state but are not attending school and not included in homeschool counts. This question cannot be answered until the state shares more detailed student-level data.

This study and its conclusions have limitations. The analysis relies on state-reported enrollment numbers for two years of disrupted schooling, when districts and schools may have struggled to accurately collect student enrollment and attendance data. Also, the charter schools studied represent a small portion of corresponding districts' enrollment (2.4%) and an even smaller portion of the state's overall enrollment (0.3%), which can make growth comparisons difficult given different differences in size.

This study's enrollment findings for traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and homeschools raises important questions about where and why children moved. A second brief will go into more detail about the implications of these findings specifically for the charter sector.

Enrollment Data

Data in this brief include multiple enrollment data sources. We used statewide enrollment data reported by OSPI to examine statewide enrollment trends, including traditional public school enrollment and home school enrollment. Statewide enrollment data on private schools were reported by the Washington State Board of Education.

This study's charter school sample includes three new schools that opened in 2020–21 (Catalyst, Impact Salish Sea, and Lumen) and one new corresponding district (Bremerton Public Schools). It does not include Innovation Charter School, which closed in spring 2021, or its corresponding district, Walla Walla Public Schools.

By law, charter schools are operated by non-profit, non-religious organizations. Charter schools serve as their own district. We compare year-over-year percent change in charter school enrollment to the equivalent enrollment change in the local district in which that charter school is located. To measure enrollment changes from September 2020 to September 2021 for our charter school sample relative to their corresponding districts, we restricted enrollment data to include just those charter schools and grade levels in operation during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic school years. To control for changes in growth across the charter sector, new schools and grade levels opening in the 2021–22 academic school year were not included in the analysis.

It should be noted that charter schools often enroll students from more than one school district, as there are no restrictions in the sector on student residence for enrollment.

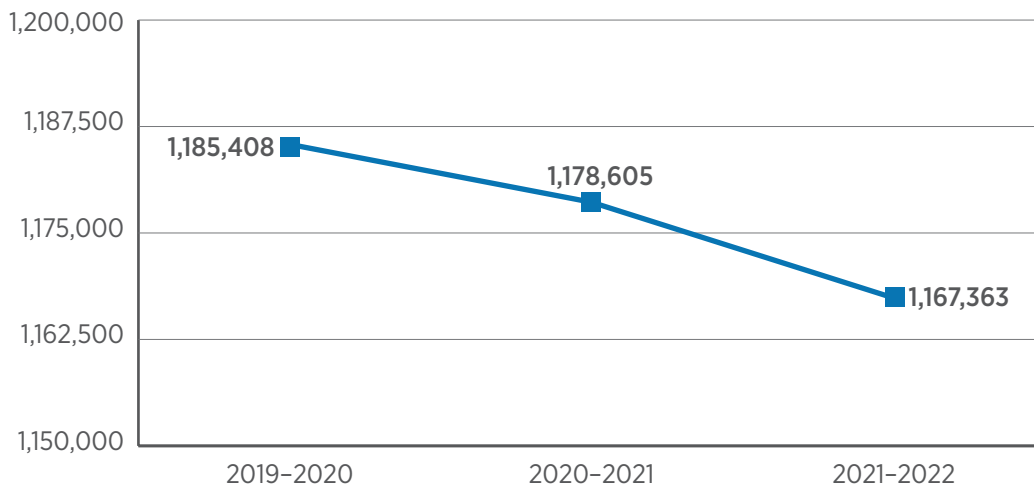
Charter schools included in this analysis, as well as their corresponding districts, include the following:

CHARTER SCHOOL AND GRADE LEVELS	CORRESPONDING DISTRICT
Catalyst (K, 1, 5–6)	Bremerton
Impact Puget Sound Elementary (K–3)	Tukwila
Impact Salish Sea Elementary (K–1)	Seattle Public
Lumen High School (9–12)	Spokane
PRIDE Prep (6–12)	Spokane
Rainier Prep (5–8)	Highline
Rainier Valley Leadership Academy (6–11)	Seattle Public
Spokane International Academy (K–8)	Spokane
Summit Atlas (6–12)	Seattle Public
Summit Olympus (9–12)	Tacoma
Summit Sierra (9–12)	Seattle Public

1. Declines in traditional public enrollment have been met with increases in charter, homeschool, and private schools

Washington state’s overall school enrollment has declined over the past two years, with enrollment dropping more sharply between fall 2020 and fall 2021 (-1.0%) than between fall 2019 and fall 2020 (-0.6%).

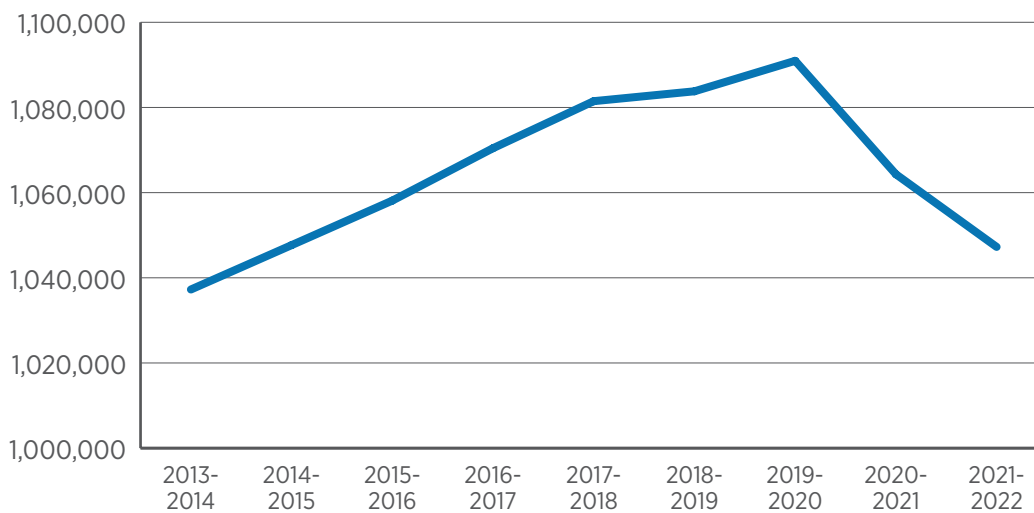
Washington State Enrollment in All Education Offerings, 2019–2022



Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI

The pandemic put a halt to Washington state’s steadily increasing public school enrollment. Leading into the pandemic, public school enrollment (including charter schools) increased from September 2013 to September 2019 at an average annual rate of 5%. In contrast, overall public school enrollment decreased by 2.4% from September 2019 to September 2020 and by another 1.6% from September 2020 to September 2021.

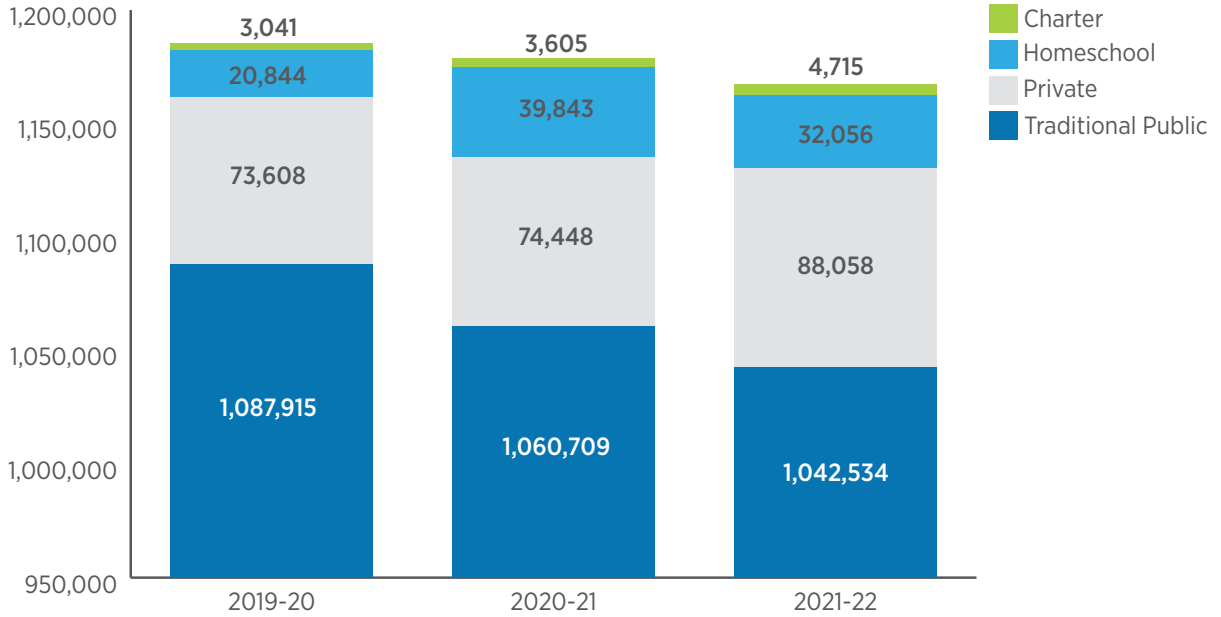
Washington State Public School Enrollment, 2013–2022



Note: Public school data in this figure include traditional public schools and public charter schools.
Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI

Declines are not uniform across all types of schools. Private schools, charter schools, and homeschools gained more students since the start of the pandemic, while traditional public schools experienced two years of enrollment declines.

Washington State Enrollment Change, Fall 2021–Spring 2022

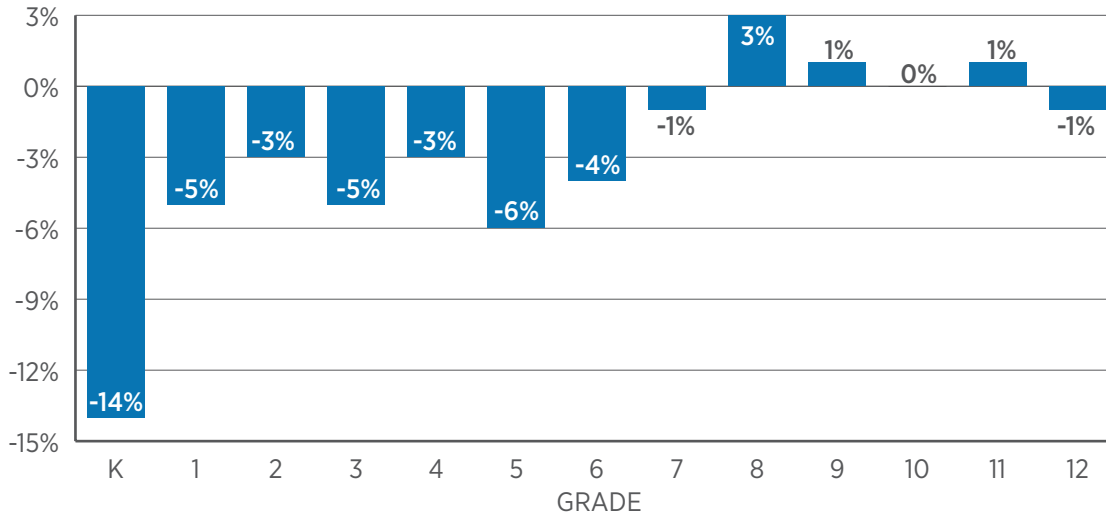


Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI; Home-based Instruction Annual Reports, OSPI; Private School Enrollment, Washington State Board of Education

2. Traditional public school enrollment declined during the pandemic, with biggest shifts in kindergarten and upper high school grade

Our previous analysis of Washington State enrollment during the first year of the pandemic found that the largest decline from September 2019 to September 2020 was in kindergarten (-14%), and losses ranged from 3 to 6 percent across other elementary grade levels.

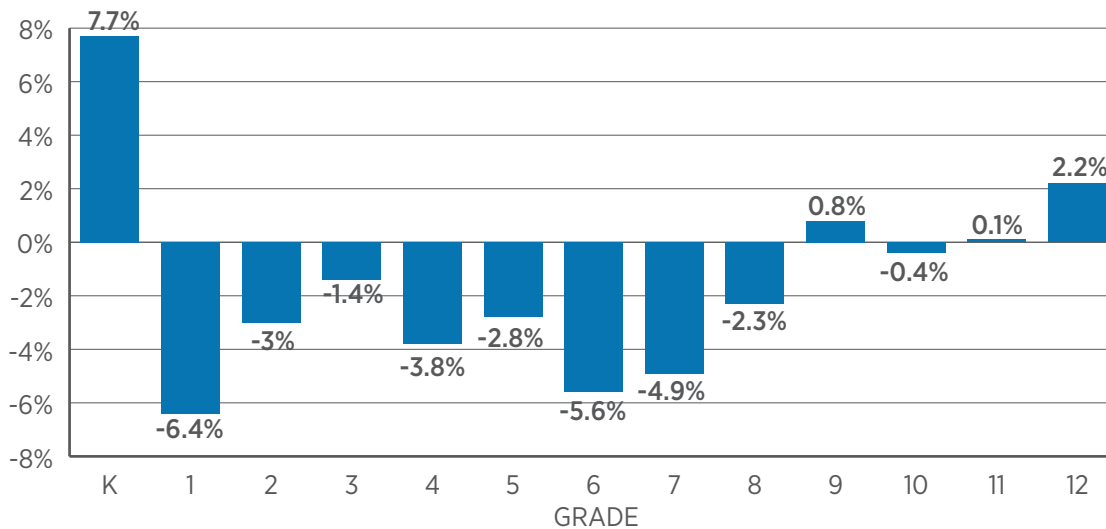
Washington State Enrollment Change By Grade, September 2019 – September 2020



Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI

In the subsequent school year, most of the decline from September 2020 to September 2021 can be explained by enrollment drops in first through eighth grades. Kindergarten and twelfth grade increased by 7.7% and 2.2% respectively, but enrollment gains in those grades were not great enough to make up for enrollment declines across all the other grade levels. Washington state’s kindergarten growth mirrors national trends, with schools presumably enrolling students who stayed out of school in 2020-21 but returned in fall 2021.

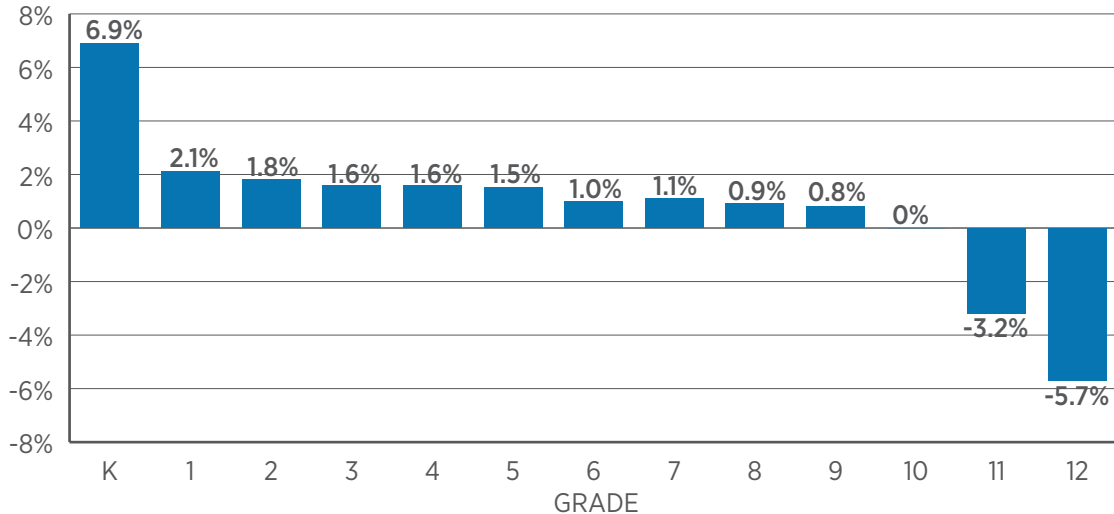
Washington State Enrollment Change By Grade, September 2020 – September 2021



Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI

Over the 2021–22 school year, the state saw continued increases in Kindergarten enrollment and small, but uniform, enrollment growth across elementary and middle school grades. However, enrollment in eleventh and twelfth grades dropped by 3.2% and 5.7%, respectively.

Washington State Enrollment Change By Grade, Fall 2021 – Spring 2022



Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI

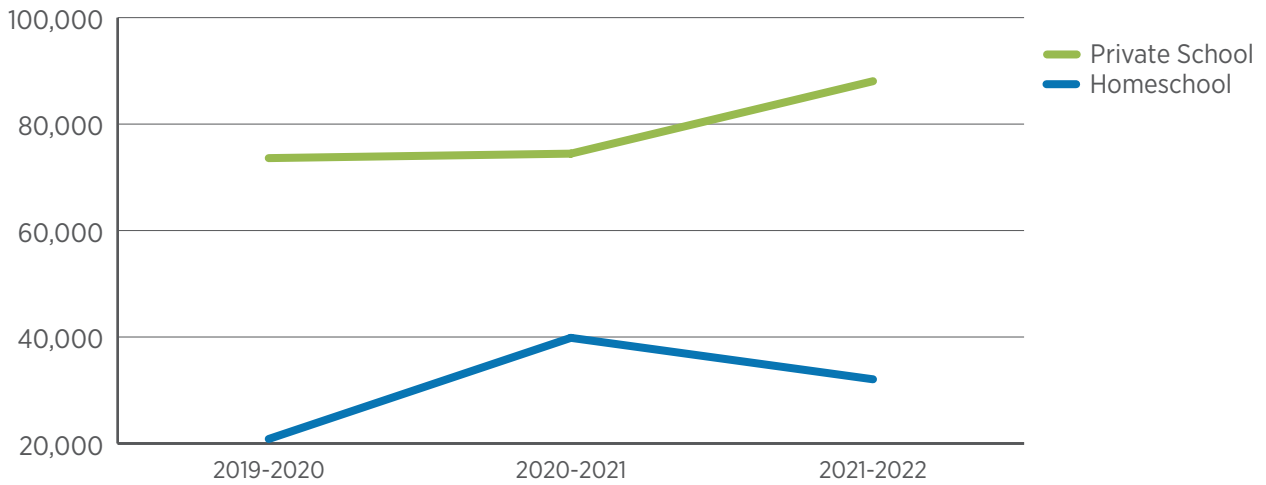
It is unclear what could be driving 2021–22’s enrollment decreases in secondary schools’ two highest grades. One possibility is that high school seniors in 2020–21 felt it was still possible to return to school and graduate with just one year of missed schooling, especially if their schools relaxed attendance, course credit, or grading requirements for graduation. However, by 2021–22, reentering the system may have felt more daunting for the next class of high school seniors, who would have had more than two years of disrupted high school. Juniors in 2021–22 may have felt similar barriers to graduating on time, as well. These students may have dropped out, exiting the education system entirely. Alternatively, these students may have acted on their risk of not graduating and enrolled in charter, private (including online private schools), or homeschool options to finish their high school careers.

3. More Washington families have been exploring non-public school options since the start of the pandemic

While enrollment in private schools and homeschool increased overall from September 2019 to September 2021, the enrollment trajectories differed. Homeschool enrollment nearly doubled, increasing by 91% (18,999 additional students) from September 2019 to September 2020 but then declined by 20% (7,787 fewer students) from September 2020 to September 2021. That resulted in a net gain of 11,212 homeschool students (27% average annual growth) over the two years.

Private school enrollment increased by just 1% (840 additional students) from September 2019 to 2020 and by 18% (13,610 additional students) from September 2020 to September 2021, resulting in a net gain of 14,450 students (10% average annual growth) over the years studied.

Washington State Homeschool and Private School Enrollment, 2019-2022

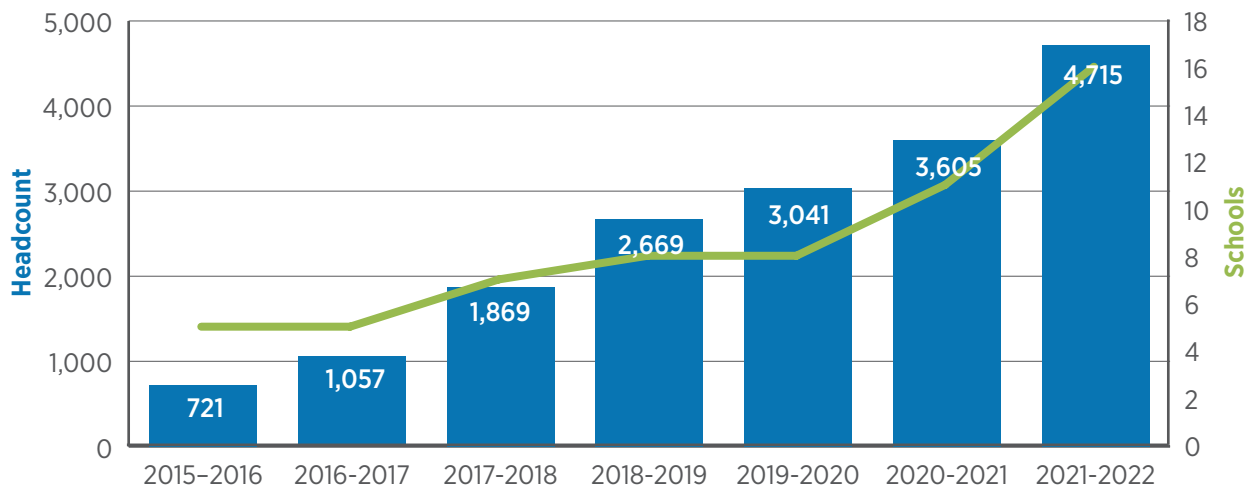


Source: Home-based Instruction Annual Reports, OSPI; Private School Enrollment, Washington State Board of Education

4. Charter school enrollment increased overall but grew at a slower rate compared to local districts

Enrollment in Washington charter schools grew steadily over the pandemic, by 19% from September 2019 to September 2020 and 31% from September 2020 to September 2021. The sector doubled its number of schools in that time, from eight schools operating in 2019–20 to 16 schools operating in September 2021, serving 4,715 students.

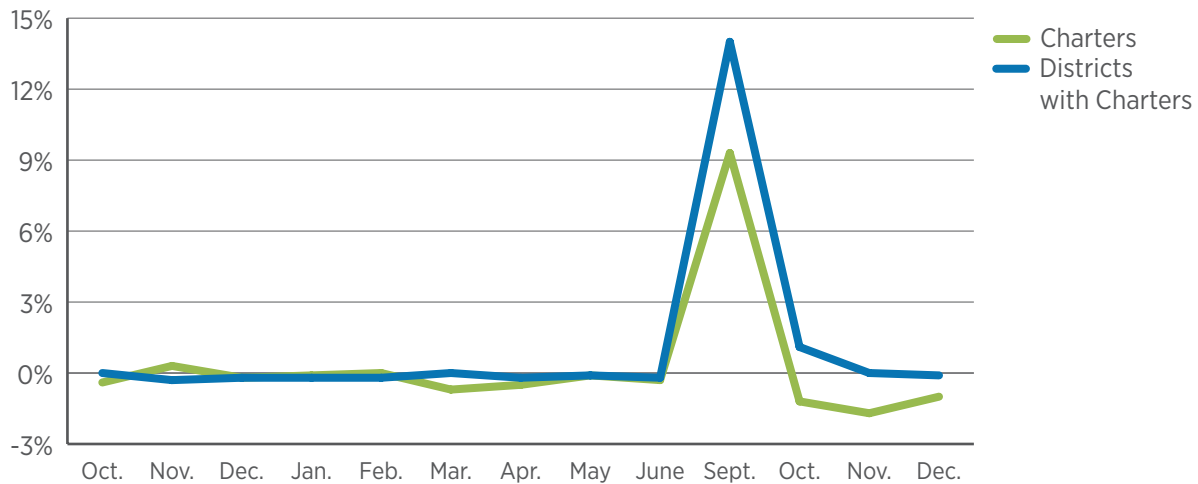
Washington State Charter School Enrollment, 2013–2022



Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI

However, when this analysis was constrained to existing charter schools and excluded any new grades added, we found that enrollment grew at about the same rate as nearby districts during the 2020–21 school year. Strong September growth suggests more students returned to both districts and charters from their 2020-21 schooling arrangements. Districts experienced another slight enrollment uptick in October 2021, while charters experienced a similar sized enrollment decline. In fall 2021, charter schools saw some students leave and return to their district schools or other non-district schools but generally maintained their enrollment bump. Overall, both this charter subsample and their corresponding districts gained enrollment this year.

Washington State Charter School Enrollment Change, October 2020–December 2021



Note: This chart compares charters in operation in 2021–22 and the corresponding districts where they are located. See data insert for more detail.

Source: Apportionment, Enrollment, and Fiscal reports, OSPI

Conclusion

Washington State’s enrollment patterns are not out of the ordinary; overall Washington’s rate of missing students is lower than the national average. Washington state’s 16,371 missing students reflect 1.5% of the state’s 2019-2020 enrollment. According to national 2022 enrollment data, more than a million American students left public schools since the start of the pandemic and reflect 2.5% of the nation’s 2019-20 enrollment. The pandemic essentially erased a decade of slow enrollment increases in our national public education system.

The state charter sector’s enrollment increases in Kindergarten and decreases in upper high school grades also reflect national trends. In 2020–21, declining national enrollment was primarily attributable to enrollment declines in the early grades, with families opting out of remote learning in the noncompulsory grades of pre-K and Kindergarten. Districts also reported historic numbers of high school students dropping out to pursue job opportunities.

Washington parents are continuing to explore new options following the pandemic, and apparently at higher rates than national averages. The national charter school sector saw 7% growth in newly enrolled students, while Washington’s enrollment grew by 30%. This is in part due to the state’s small total enrollment base and doubling of charter schools, but it is still notable.

And Washington’s private school enrollment increase (8% annual growth from 2019–21) outpaces the National Association of Independent Schools’ reported 1.7% growth in private, nonparochial schools over the two pandemic years. Washington’s homeschool growth mirrored national trends at the start of the pandemic, doubling from spring 2020 to fall 2020 and experiencing similar-sized national declines in 2021–22.

Kindergarten growth in both the district and charter sector indicates public schools are gaining new students. However, 2021–22 stagnation and enrollment declines in upper high school grades are a cause for concern. Teenage students across the country have been negatively affected academically and socially by the pandemic, and many have expressed high levels of mental health concerns and disillusionment with both public schooling and college. Teens in Washington are no exception. Keeping these students engaged and successful may require new approaches to how high school is designed and run.

More research is necessary to truly understand how parent and student preferences have driven pandemic-era enrollment shifts. In a time of great uncertainty, parents may have moved their children to new schools because of any number of factors, including building closures, desired academic offerings, their feelings toward health and safety protocols, or their level of comfort with the risk of virus spread. Though it may be difficult to draw wholesale conclusions about why families are exploring new options like charters, private schools, and homeschooling when they represent such a small share of the state’s enrollment market.

Exit interviews with families and students could illuminate reasons why parents chose new schools over old options, and it may also be revealing to study what issues mattered most to families willing to brave unfamiliar options during uncertain times. Interviews and further study of enrollment trends could also illuminate whether students and families are sticking with these new options or whether they will drift back to traditional public schools over time. In our accompanying brief, we will discuss some of the reasons students may have moved into and out of the charter sector—and the subsequent implications for charter school operators.