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**BETTER CHOICES, BETTER OUTCOMES:
HOW CHARTER SCHOOLS ELEVATE
STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND
FAMILY OPTIONS**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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From 2015 to 2020, he worked with America Succeeds, a national network of business leaders focused on modernizing the nation's education system. He co-authored the report *The Age of Agility: Education Pathways for the Future of Work*. The initiative empowers business leaders, educators, and policymakers to better prepare students for the new workforce and economy.

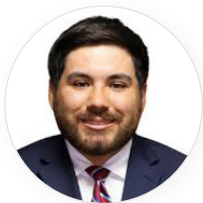
As a teenager and young adult, Jason had an unusually diverse set of professional experiences, being elected to the NAACP national board of directors at the age of 18, becoming a grassroots advocate and executive director of Hillside Neighborhood Association at age 19, and becoming youth director at the Pikes Peak Region Urban League at age 21.

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Cole Anderson – CSI Research Analyst

Cole Anderson is a CSI research analyst. Prior to CSI, Cole attended the University of Denver where he double majored in Economics and Public Policy. His work at CSI has covered a variety of topics including crime, healthcare, foster care, and workforce issues among other topics.



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About the Daniels Scholar Junior Fellowship

This competitive educational and leadership fellowship is awarded annually to four current Daniels Scholar upperclassman or recent Daniels Scholar graduates. Fellows spend the summer or semester working alongside a CSI fellow in developing original research.

ABOUT COMMON SENSE INSTITUTE

Common Sense Institute is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of Colorado's economy. CSI is at the forefront of important discussions concerning the future of free enterprise and aims to have an impact on the issues that matter most to Coloradans. CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the economy and individual opportunity.

TEAMS & FELLOWS STATEMENT

CSI is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI's commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is a belief in the power of the free enterprise system. Our work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit with academic freedom. Our team's work is informed by data-driven research and evidence. The views and opinions of fellows do not reflect the institutional views of CSI. CSI operates independently of any political party and does not take positions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Authors	1
About Common Sense Institute	2
Teams & Fellows Statement.....	2
Introduction: School Choice on the Ballot, Amendment 80.....	4
Key Findings.....	7
Attendance & Demographic Overview	8
Academic Outcomes.....	12
Postsecondary Outcomes.....	14
Conclusion	16

INTRODUCTION: SCHOOL CHOICE ON THE BALLOT, AMENDMENT 80

Since Colorado's law authorizing the creation of charter school was enacted in 1993, charters schools have been families' only universally accessible outlet for exercising school choice outside of the existing, district-led system. As shown in Figures 2 & 4, charters have proved a wildly popular option, with the number of schools and the number of students enrolled increasing steadily. This is especially notable in the post-Covid years. While district school enrollment has decreased in five of the past six years, charter enrollment has continued to climb.

Despite many attempts, neither Colorado voters nor legislators have expanded publicly funded school choice beyond charters to include other models, like vouchers, education tax credits, and Education Savings Accounts, as some other states (most notably Arizona) have done.

On this year's statewide November ballot, Amendment 80 would enshrine school choice in the state constitution. "The people of the state of Colorado hereby find and declare that all children have the right to equal opportunity to access a quality education; that parents have the right to direct the education of their children..." the initiative text reads. Choice as defined in the initiative language includes "neighborhood,

charter, private and home schools, open enrollment options, and future innovations in education."

As written, the ballot measure enshrines this new language into the state constitution, but full legal and financial implications are unknown. While this measure does not result in an immediate change to enrollment policies of local school districts, it could be a legal lever for families seeking more school options, including charter schools, in their districts. Based on data in this report showing improved academic and postsecondary outcomes for students in charter schools, this measure could provide a greater ecosystem of choice for Colorado students.

Analysis by the Colorado General Assembly's nonpartisan Legislative Council Staff vaguely states: "To the extent the bill changes the educational offerings available to some children, educational and economic outcomes for those students may change." The measure sets the conditions for change, but the real impact will be based on how the state legislature interprets the measure and gets further shaped by future litigation in the courts.

Given this statewide ballot effort to expand school choice, it seems timely to issue a report on the efficacy of charter schools. The charter sector overall has outperformed district-run schools, has produced higher college matriculation rates, and has narrowed gaps between more affluent, white students and low-income students and students of color. In addition, charter school students tend to fare better in their postsecondary achievement as well.

As Colorado citizens prepare to vote on such a substantive change to the state’s constitution concerning education, facts are more important than ever. This report uses Colorado Department of Education data to provide highlights of charter school performance in Colorado.

According to the Colorado Department of Education, a charter school is a public school that is tuition free and open to all students. It is a public school operated by a group of parents, teachers and/or community members. Charter schools operate under a charter (or contract) between the charter school and its authorizer, either a local school district or the Colorado Charter School Institute.

The Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI) is a state authorizer of charter schools. These charter schools are outside of the jurisdiction of local school districts but operate inside the geographic boundaries of local school districts.

This semi-autonomous public-school structure allows for specialization, experimentation, and importantly, community engagement in the educational process. A charter school generally has more flexibility than traditional public schools regarding curriculum, fiscal management, and overall school operations.

Charter schools receive state funding based on Per Pupil Operating Revenue (PPR), which is a formula for each student enrolled, just like traditional public schools. In Colorado there are 269 such schools serving 137,722 students of 15.6% of the state’s K-12 enrollment population.

Performance

In Colorado, district charter schools as a group consistently outperformed district operated schools on the state School Performance Framework. In 2022, 85% of students attending district charter schools earned a “performance” rating on the SPF, which is the highest of four proficiency levels. Only 66% of students attending district operated schools made that accomplishment.

FIGURE 1

Charter & Non-Charter English & Math Test Scores - 2022-23					
School Type	Enrollment	3rd-grade English	3rd-grade Math	8th-grade English	8th-grade Math
Non-Charter Schools	745,542	736.3	737.3	740	730.6
Charter Schools	137,722	739.3	741.5	746.6	735.2

Statewide in 2022, 37% of charter students met or exceeded grade level expectations in English Language Arts compared to 31% of third- through eighth graders in district-run schools, according to an analysis from the Keystone Policy Center. On the math test, 31% of students met or exceeded grade level expectations, compared to 27% in district-managed schools.

Accountability

Under Colorado law, public charter schools have no ability to exercise unfair selectivity in student admissions. While there are some allowable accommodations to help siblings attend school together, there is no mechanism for filtering students by academic performance, race, or income.

However, many charter schools are deliberate in their outreach and recruitment efforts to ensure broad diversity in the families that know about charter schools as an option and, consequently, the students who proactively enroll.

With the same accountability standards as all other public schools in Colorado, charter schools must meet state requirements regarding accreditation, adhere to content standards and graduation requirements, and participate in annual state testing for which results are made public.

KEY FINDINGS

- Charter schools are a popular and widely utilized educational option in Colorado. While serving high proportions of diverse students, charter schools, on average, have notably better academic outcomes than district-run schools.
- When measuring postsecondary attainment of high school graduates—though removing outliers like Alternative Education Campuses and Early College models to create a fairer comparison—**charter school students obtained a postsecondary credential at a rate of 41.8% compared to non-charter’s 32.8% for the 2016 cohort.**
 - › A previous CSI report showed that in 2016, the DSST Public School network (Montview & Green Valley) **graduated their FRL students at higher rates than DPS graduated non-FRL students for the 2016 cohort, and the share of students overall obtaining a credential was 2x for DSST as opposed to DPS for the 2016 grad base – 39% to 17% and 20% to 8% for non-FRL and FRL students respectively.**¹
- Since the Covid-19 disruptions of 2020 and 2021, chronic absenteeism has been a widespread challenge for schools of all types. **It is notable, however, that charters have significantly lower chronic absenteeism rates than district-run schools – 33% to 26.4% respectively in 2023.**
- The charter school sector in Colorado has grown every year—meaning more schools and serving more students—every year since the Charter School Act became law in 1993. **Since 2011-12, 86 new charter schools have opened in Colorado, a 47% increase.**
- **Students of color have represented a larger share of charter enrollment than non-charter enrollment since 2015-16.** Students of color comprise half of all charter school students. Over the past decade, the enrollment of students of color in charters has outpaced that growth in district-run schools.
- Since 2011, charters have educated more multilingual students than their district-run counterparts, though that gap has narrowed slightly over time.
- The academic performance of charter school students—as measured by the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS), **the state’s official K-12 assessment—were higher than those of non-charter school students at every grade level on both English Language Arts (ELA) and Math assessments in grades 3 through 8. This has generally been true in previous years as well.**

ATTENDANCE & DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

As charter schools continue to grow and capture an increasing share of the state’s public-school students, they are becoming more diverse as well – socio-economically, racially, and linguistically.

Since 2011-12, 86 new charter schools have opened in Colorado, a 47% increase. Demand for charters has showed

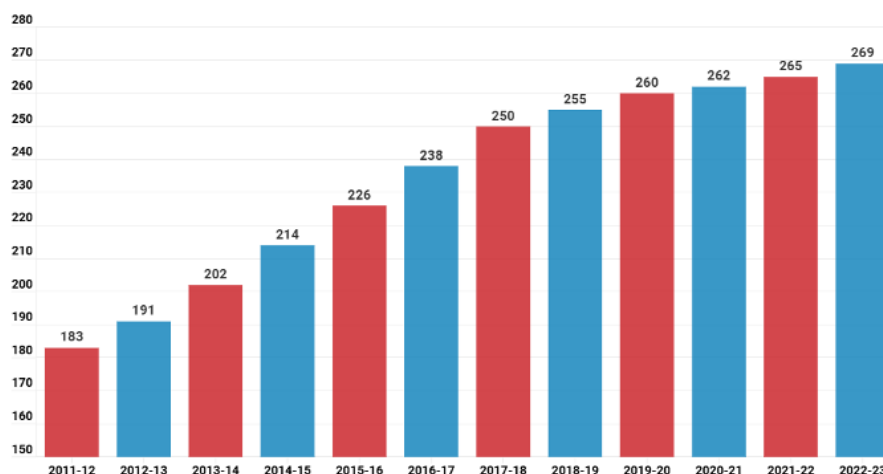
signs of plateauing, according to the Colorado Department of Education’s State of Charter Schools Report. “This results from a combination of fewer new charter schools opening each year along with more charter schools closing or consolidating.”ⁱⁱ The reasons for the slowdown in charter school growth could be influenced by several factors, including the historically excessive costs of starting a charter school, difficulty in finding affordable facilities to house the school, and the political division that often frames public charter schools as a threat to district-run public schools.

Charter enrollment increased by more than 5,000 students during the pandemic-disrupted 2020-21 school year. At the same time, non-charter enrollment fell by over 35,000. While charter enrollment growth slowed in the two ensuing years, district-run schools have lost another 5,442 students, while charters have gained 5,506. Although it is difficult to pinpoint where these students have gone, it is likely that a growth in homeschooling and an exodus to private schools (which generally closed for less time than public schools during the pandemic) are major contributors to the trend.ⁱⁱⁱ

FIGURE 2

Charter Schools in Operation in Colorado

Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the number of charter schools operating in Colorado has grown from 183 to 269, a 47% increase



Charter enrollment was at an all-time high of 137,722 in 2022-23, meaning charter students comprised 15.6 percent of all public-school students in Colorado that year. If all these charter schools were a single district, it would be the largest in the state, by far.

Twenty-two Colorado school districts have authorized three or more charter schools. Enrollment increased in 18 of those 22 districts between 2018-19 and 2022-23. Of the four districts that lost enrollment, only Denver Public Schools also saw a reduction in the number of schools. There were four fewer charters in DPS in 2022-23 than in 2018-19.

Authorizing new charter schools at the district level is the responsibility of the elected school board, and the launch of new charter schools relies on their respective votes. Although Denver authorizes the most charter schools (56), Byers 32j is the school district with the highest percentage of students enrolled in district-authorized charter schools – 91 percent.

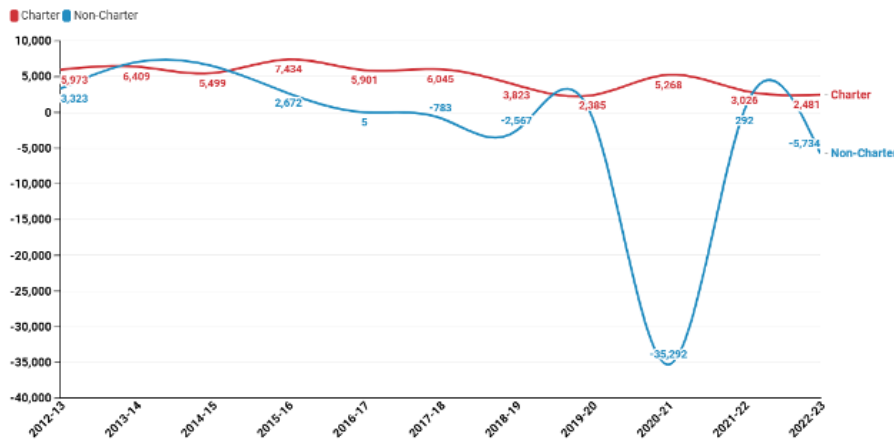
Students of color have represented a larger share of charter enrollment than non-charter enrollment since 2015-16. Students of color comprise half of all charter school students. Over the past decade, the enrollment of students of color in charters has outpaced that growth in district-run schools.

Since 2013, charters have educated more multilingual students than their district-run counterparts, though, as the graph above shows, that gap has narrowed slightly over time.

FIGURE 3

Change in Enrollment from Previous Year

Non-charter enrollment has declined 5 out of the last 6 years with the largest drop occurring in 2020-21. Notably, charter enrollment increased in the same year.



Source: State of Charter Schools Report 2019-23

FIGURE 4

Charter School Enrollment in Colorado

Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the number of students enrolled in charter schools in Colorado has grown from 83,478 to 137,722, a 65% increase

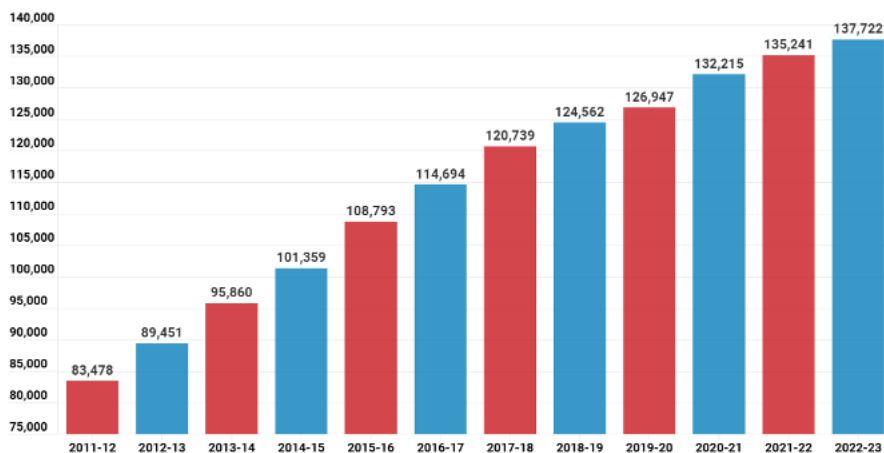


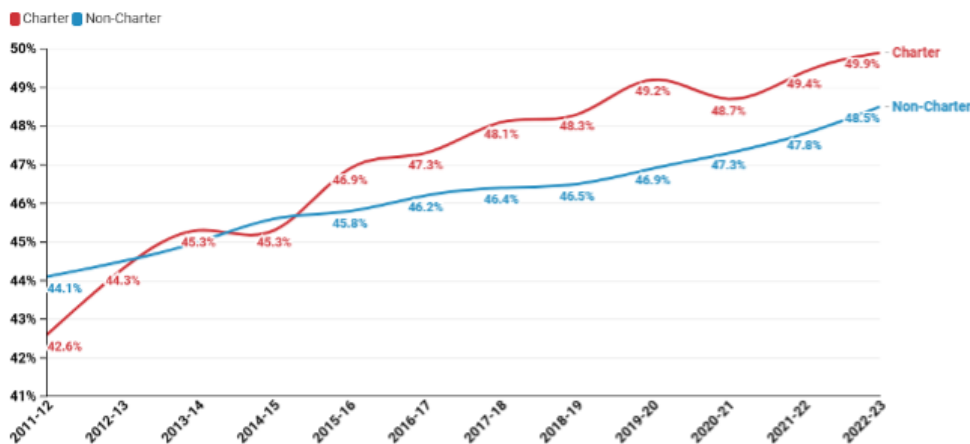
FIGURE 5

Change in Enrollment for Authorizers with Three or More Charter Schools from 2018-19 to 2022-23					
Authorizer	2018-19 Charter Schools	2018-19 Charter Enrollment	2022-23 Charter Schools	2022-23 Charter Enrollment	Change in Enrollment
Academy 20	5	4,242	5	4,255	13
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	4	3,616	4	3,784	168
Adams-Arapahoe 28J	9	5,265	12	6,505	1,240
Boulder Valley RE-2	5	2,359	5	2,378	19
Byers 32J	9	2,369	8	5,149	2,780
Charter School Institute	40	18,268	43	22,003	3,735
Cherry Creek	2	889	3	1,228	339
Colorado Springs 11	6	1,773	6	1,264	-509
Denver County 1	60	20,620	56	20,110	-510
District 49	7	8,866	9	11,309	2,443
Douglas County RE-1	20	16,207	18	15,787	-420
Greeley 6	6	5,416	6	5,073	-343
Harrison 2	5	2,345	9	4,224	1,879
Jefferson County R-1	19	9,052	19	9,215	163
Mesa County Valley 51	3	1,133	3	1,215	82
Montezuma-Cortez RE-1	3	313	3	350	37
Poudre R-1	5	2,443	5	2,816	373
Pueblo City 60	3	1,546	3	1,819	273
Pueblo County 70	3	937	6	1,685	748
School District 27J	5	3,951	6	4,112	161
St. Vrain Valley RE 1J	6	3,194	6	3,284	90
Weld RE-4	2	1,259	3	1,536	277

FIGURE 6

Students of Color as a Share of Total Enrollment

Since the 2011-12 school year, students of color have increased their share of charter enrollment by 7.3 percentage points compared to non-charter growth of 4.4 points



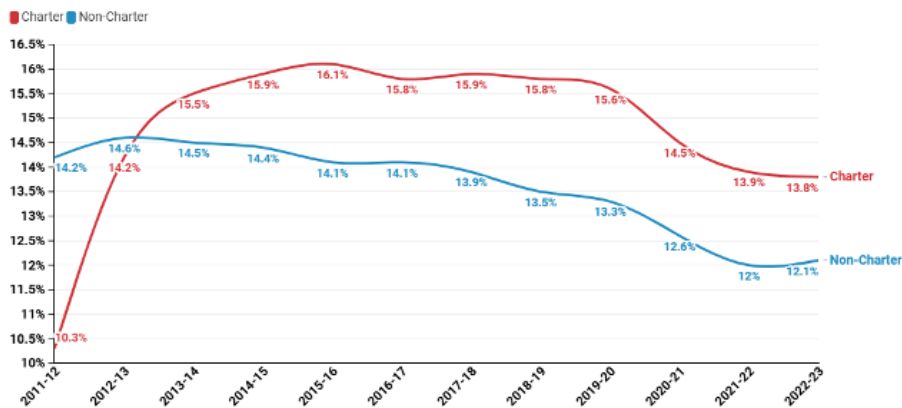
Source: State of Charter Schools Report 2019-23

While district-run schools have consistently served more students eligible for free or reduced-cost meals than have charters, the gap has narrowed from 9.3 percentage points in 2011-12 to 5.6 percentage points in 2022-23. Since 2011-12, the percentage of charter school students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch has increased by 2.9 percentage points, while the percentage of such students in district-run schools has dropped by 0.8 percentage points.

FIGURE 7

Multilingual Students as a Share of Total Enrollment

Since the 2011-12 school year, multilingual students have increased their share of charter enrollment by 3.5 percentage points compared to a decline for non-charter of 2.1 points

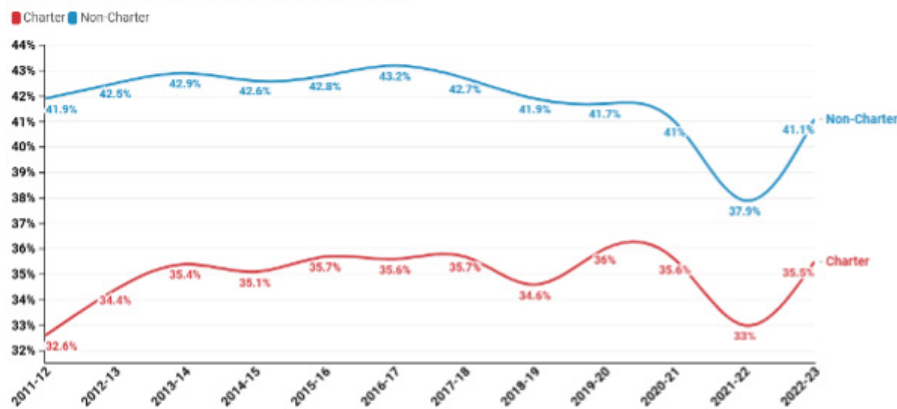


Source: State of Charter Schools Report 2019-23

FIGURE 8

FRL Eligible Students as a Share of Total Enrollment

Since the 2011-12 school year, FRL eligible students have increased their share of charter enrollment by 2.9 percentage points compared to a non-charter decline of 0.8 points



Source: State of Charter Schools Report 2019-23

ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

FIGURE 9

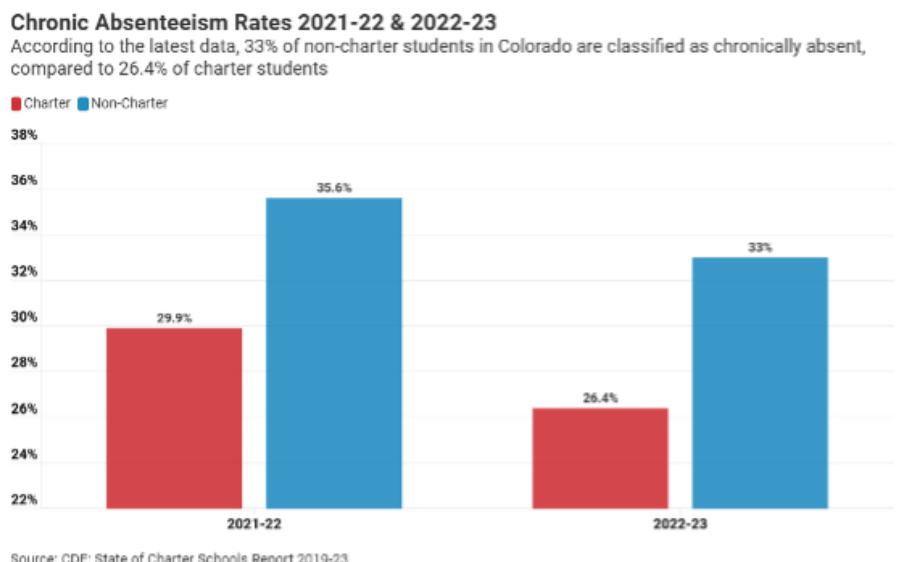
CMAS Math Performance 2022-23 by Grade Level					
Grade Level	Charter Mean Scale Score	Charter Participation Rate	Non-Charter Mean Scale Score	Non-Charter Participation Rate	Mean Score Difference
Grade 3	741.5	94.8%	737.3	93.6%	4.2
Grade 4	736.4	94.0%	732.6	93.4%	3.8
Grade 5	738.0	92.4%	736.7	92.3%	1.3
Grade 6	731.2	90.6%	728.8	89.0%	2.4
Grade 7	733.7	87.4%	729.9	84.6%	3.8
Grade 8	735.2	81.0%	730.6	78.7%	4.6

CDE found that “a clear trend does show charter schools’ scores are almost always higher than non-charter schools’ year after year across the grade levels assessed English Language Arts (ELA)/Evidence-Based Reading and Writing (EBRW) and Math.”^{iv} In 2022-23, the average Mean Scale Scores of charter school students on the Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) were higher than those of non-charter school students at every grade level on both English Language Arts (ELA) and Math assessments in grades 3 through 8. This has generally been true in previous years as well.

Since the Covid-19 disruptions of 2020 and 2021, chronic absenteeism has been a widespread challenge for schools of all types. It is notable, however, that charters have significantly lower chronic absenteeism rates than district-run schools.

Despite absenteeism rates dropping from 2022 to 2023, a third of non-charter students were chronically absent in the most recent

FIGURE 10



school year compared to just over a quarter of charter students. Schools looking to boost student outcomes will need to grapple with these elevated absenteeism rates.

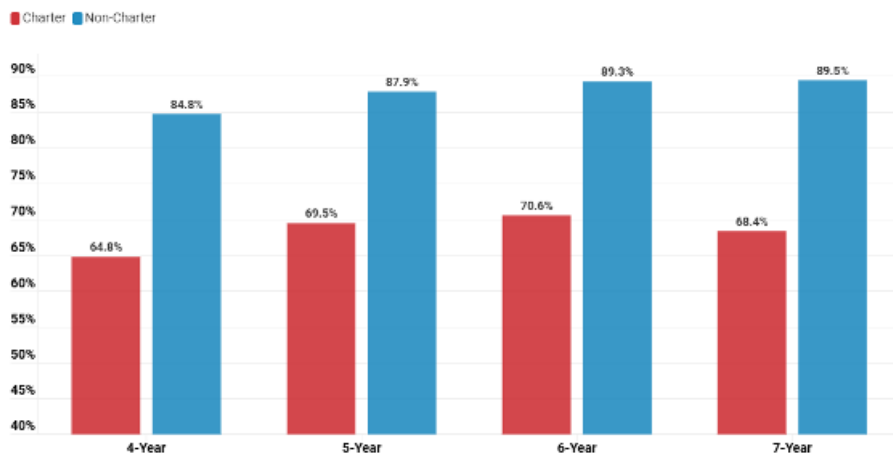
Charter schools have lower cumulative graduation rates than non-charters. One possible explanation for this is that some charter high schools employ the early-college model, under which students earn post-secondary credentials by staying in high school for at least five years instead of the standard four.

As Figure 12 shows, non-Alternative Education Campus (AEC) charter school five-, six- and seven-year graduation rates exceed those of district-run high schools.

Charter schools have a significantly higher percentage of high school students enrolled in Alternative Education campuses (AECs) -- 5.8 percent compared to 1.7 percent of students in district-run schools. This is significant because AECs as defined by CDE, "are those who have nontraditional methods of instruction delivery, who serve students with severe limitations, and whose student population is comprised of at least 90% "high-risk" students." This could partially explain the higher cumulative graduation rates for district-run high schools.

FIGURE 11

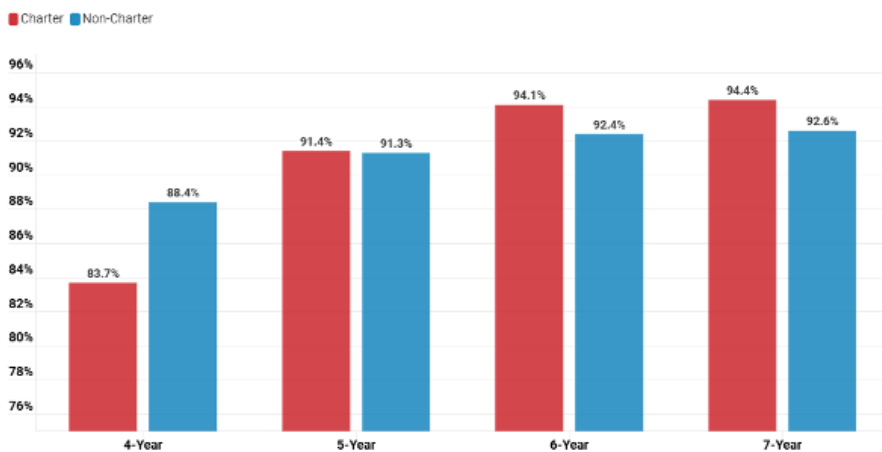
2021-22 Cumulative Graduation Rates



Source: CDE: State of Charter Schools Report 2019-23

FIGURE 12

2021-22 Non-AEC Graduation Rates



Source: CDE: State of Charter Schools Report 2019-23

FIGURE 13

Alternative Education Campus (AEC) Enrollment 2022-23			
	Number of Students Enrolled in AEC Schools	Number of Total Students Enrolled K-12	Percent of Students Enrolled in AEC Schools
Charter Schools	7,931	137,722	5.8%
Non-Charter Schools	12,788	745,542	1.7%

POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES

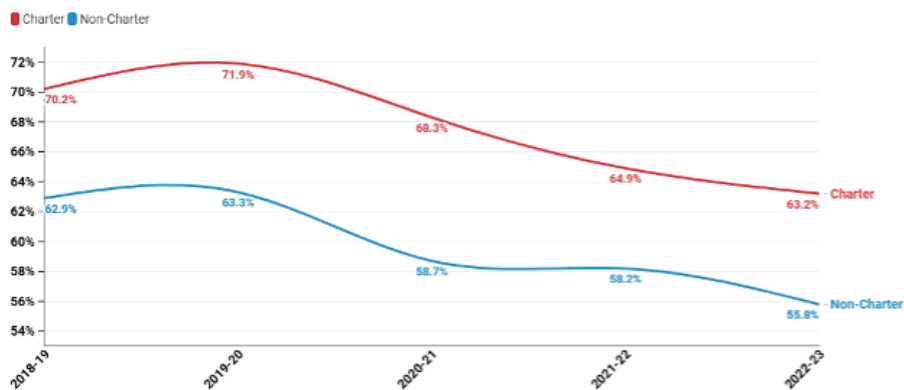
Non-AEC charter high schools have consistently outperformed district run high schools on matriculation rates. In 2022-23 the gap between charters and non-charters was 7.4 percentage points, not a trivial number. The matriculation rate is the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in a career and technical education program, community college, four-year institution of higher education or the military during the summer or fall term immediately following graduation.¹⁹ This is an important finding, because while a high school diploma is an essential credential to earn for future success, it alone is insufficient. It is hard to overstate the importance of acquiring a post-secondary credential.

The graph to the right shows the statewide share of charter schools and non-charter schools' 2016 final graduate base who obtained a post-secondary credential within

FIGURE 14

Matriculation Rates Non-AEC

Graph below shows the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in a career and technical education program, community college, four-year institution of higher education or the military during the summer or fall term immediately following graduation

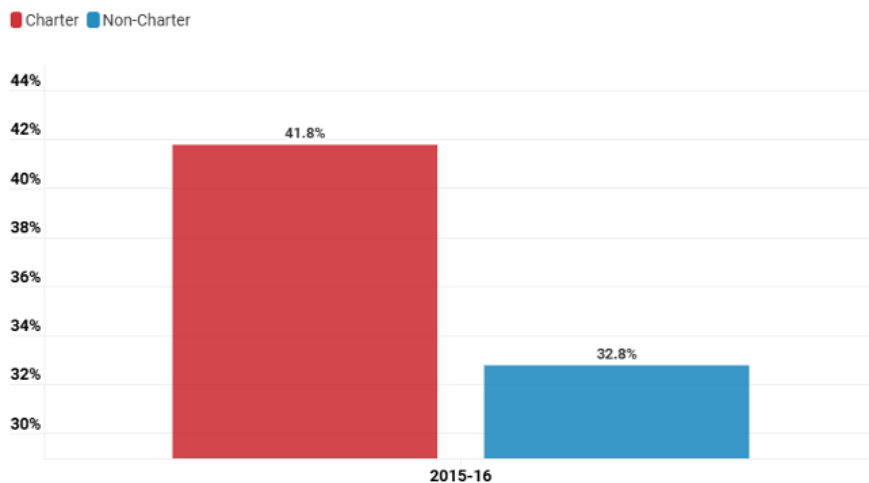


Source: State of Charter Schools Report 2019-23

FIGURE 15

Share of Final Grad Base that Received a Credential Within 6 Years - 2016

When removing Alternative Education Campuses (AECs), online schools, and early college schools, charters outperformed non-charters by 9 percentage points when comparing the rate of their final grad base obtaining a credential within 6 years of exiting high school.



Source: Pathways to Prosperity Dashboard, CDE

six years of exiting high school. The rates are calculated by taking the number of students who obtained a credential within six years and dividing this number by the final graduate base, which consists of students who are eligible to graduate, including those who did not, rather than just students who do graduate.

The results are statewide, and compare charters (minus AEC, online, and early college charters) against district-run schools (minus non-AEC, online, and early college).

The results show that when removing those outliers, charter students obtain a postsecondary credential at a noticeably higher rate than their non-charter peers.

FIGURE 16

6-Year Credential Attainment Rate by Region - 2016		
Region ^{vi}	Charter	Non-Charter
Metro	40.79%	35.60%
North Central	47.38%	29.93%
Pikes Peak	40.29%	28.56%

In the three most populous regions of Colorado, the same holds true: A significantly higher percentage of charter high school students obtain a credential after six years than do students in district-run high schools. CDE defines a credential as a certificate, associate degree or bachelor’s degree.

A previous Common Sense Institute report examined the outcomes of the DSST charter network, and the Denver Public School district at large for both free and reduced lunch eligible students and non-FRL students.^{vii} Figure 17 shows the outcomes for the 2016 final grad base and the DSST average which is representative of DSST: Montview and DSST: Green Valley, the only two DSST network schools with 6-year data in 2016.

The results showed that the DSST network significantly outperformed DPS for non-FRL students and produced even stronger results for FRL students.

FIGURE 17

FRL & Non-FRL Student Outcomes - 2016				
Non-FRL Students Only				
School	Graduation Rate	Postsecondary Enrollment Rate	6-Year Credential Attainment Rate of Those that Enroll	6-Year Credential Attainment Rate of 2016 Final Grad Base
DSST Average	83.7%	84.4%	55.6%	39%
DPS Average	67.2%	50.2%	50%	17%
FRL Students Only				
DSST Average	79.3%	81.9%	51.7%	20%
DPS Average	62.1%	44.5%	40.6%	8%

DSST graduated their FRL students at higher rates than DPS graduated non-FRL students for their 2016 graduation base, and the share of students obtaining a credential was over double for DSST as opposed to DPS for the 2016 grad base – 39% to 17% and 20% to 8% for non-FRL and FRL students respectively.

CONCLUSION

Amendment 80 aims to enshrine the full spectrum of school choice options into law. The state's long history with charter schools provides reliable evidence that Colorado students have greatly benefited from this specific form of school choice.

The number of families that send their students to charter schools in Colorado continues to grow. Importantly, because charter school enrollment is optional—requiring a parent to opt out of their district-assigned school and go through a registration process at the charter school—we know this is an in-demand form of school choice.

When compared to traditional district schools, charters serve a higher proportion of students of color and more multi-lingual students. In addition, they do not receive the state-funded transportation resources district schools do. These factors make it more remarkable that charters maintain steady enrollment growth, notably less chronic absenteeism, and still significantly outperform district schools in academic performance. Amendment 80, if passed by Colorado voters, could be used as a tool to encourage more school districts to authorize charter schools seeking authorization to open. Colorado should continue to build on the number of rigorous, diverse, and family friendly charter schools. Charter schools are a value-add to the state's educational ecosystem and should be expanded to accommodate growing demand from families.

SOURCES

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- vii. Higher Education Launch Pad: The Postsecondary Results of the DSST Public School Model | Common Sense Institute (commonsenseinstitute.org)