

# With boost from California, charter schools enroll 2 million students nationally | EdSource Extra!

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Charter schools enrolled 2 million public school students this fall, with California playing a major role in helping them reach that milestone, according to figures released today.

Some 200,000 students enrolled in 500 new charter schools across the nation, the largest increase in a single year, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

"It shows that charter schools have become part of the education tapestry of the country, not just a fringe marginal phenomenon affecting a small number of students," said Ursula Wright, the organization's interim CEO.

In some circles, California has been viewed [as being unfriendly](#) to charter schools, but the numbers tell a different story.

California accounted for 100 of the 500 new schools, and 47,000 new students, twice the number of Florida, with 23,500 new students, Texas with 22,000, and Ohio with 12,000.

California also enrolls a higher proportion of the state's public school students in charter schools — some 7 percent — compared to 4.5 percent of all public school students nationally.

As EdSource [reported last month](#), California now has 983 charter schools out of the 5,600 such schools nationwide. That compares with 520 charter schools in Arizona, the state with the next largest number of schools.

Despite the significant growth, more than 95 percent of public school students in the U.S still attend regular public schools. Ninety three percent do in California. Wright said from a historical perspective the growth was still significant. "It is a system that has been around for 200 years, and ours has only been around for 20 years," she said. And, she noted, growth has accelerated in recent years, with one-third of the expansion coming in the last 5 years.

She rebutted perceptions that charter schools have an advantage over regular public schools because they receive significant support from private foundations. "That is completely blown out of proportion," she said. A small number of schools do get a significant amount of philanthropic funding. But that is a "a small proportion" of charter schools. "The vast majority are working completely on funds they get from the state, and often it is not enough to operate on," she said.

The new enrollment figures come against a backdrop of at times [conflicting research](#) over the overall effectiveness of charter schools. One of the largest studies conducted so far, by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), looked at student performance in 15 states and the District of Columbia and found that:

Seventeen percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly

better than traditional public schools, while 37 percent of charter schools showed gains that were worse than their traditional public school counterparts, with 46 percent of charter schools demonstrating no significant difference.

Caroline Hoxby, an economist, also at Stanford, found [in a report](#) around the same time that New York City students who were admitted to a charter school in a lottery did better academically than those who applied but were denied admission and returned to the public schools.

The two reports led to a major public spat among the respective Stanford authors. But the dueling research reflected what is happening on the ground. As the Little Hoover Commission noted [in a report](#) last year:

Many charter schools in California have flourished; some now rank among the top performing schools in the nation ... At the same time, however, California has numerous poor-performing charter schools that continue to stumble.

An earlier EdSource report reviewed a range of charter school studies, and found they came to “very different conclusions depending on the schools, the time frame, and the performance measures they analyze.”

Wright said that when a high performing charter school has “all the right ingredients,” including a strong school leader and effective teachers, “remarkable things can be done.”

“As a sector we have to be honest with ourselves that there are some among us who are not serving students well, and we have to hold ourselves accountable,” she said. Those schools, she said, need either to “give back their charter,” or the districts that granted them the charter should “take actions that are in the best interest of the children,” including shutting the school down.