

Charter schools grow while more than 9 out of 10 students stay in regular public schools | EdSource Extra!

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Charter schools now enroll 7 percent of the state's public school students, according to just-released figures.

"Charter schools are able to take on an expanding level of responsibility for public school education in the state," said Jed Wallace, president of the California Charter Schools Association. Some 100 charter schools opened their doors this year, as EdSource [reported last week](#).

The nearly 1,000 charter schools in California now serve 412,000 students, up from 364,000 students

last year, [according to the association](#). The 48,000-student jump in statewide charter enrollment in a single year is equivalent in size to a large urban school district.

But despite that robust growth charter schools will, for the indefinite future, likely serve a relatively small proportion of California's young. The vast majority of the state's children—some 93 percent—are still enrolled in regular public schools, underscoring the need to continue to implement reforms that benefit all students.

Michael Kirst, president of the State Board of Education, described charter schools as "one of the most vibrant" sectors on the education landscape, but said "it may take some time to accumulate a significant percentage of students statewide." One reason charters don't serve as many students relative to the number of charter schools in the state is that enrollments in individual schools tend to be smaller, and in some cases, far smaller than regular public schools.

At current levels, it could be another decade or two for the total enrollment in charter schools to comprise some 15 percent of California's student population. The Charter Schools Association's Wallace said it "remains to be seen" what proportion of California's public school students will eventually enroll in charter schools. But he said that about 100 schools opening each year is the "general trajectory" and "looking at the pipeline going forward, we expect in general terms growth along these lines."

However, the pace could pick up if individual philanthropists and investors, along with foundations, increase their levels of support, or if popular support builds and the state and federal government continue to promote the interests of charter schools. By the same token, growth of charter schools could be hampered by the continuing fiscal crisis in California, and by cuts in school funding which affect charter schools as much as regular public schools. There are signs that some of the leading charter school organizations in the state are exploring possibilities for expansion outside of California as challenges mount here.

But regardless of the pace, charter schools will continue to grow. Kirst noted that the demand by parents for charter schools appears to exceed the supply. "The growth is a response to local interests in wanting to grow these schools," he said. "In that sense it is responsive to what is coming up from the bottom, it is a way we can adjust the education system to meet local expectations."

Charter schools have been a central dimension of school reforms over the past two decades. They

have been the recipients of generous foundation grants. Successive White House administrations have promoted them heavily.

And California has been at the leading edge. It approved the second charter school law in the nation in 1992, and California has by far the largest number of charter schools of any state.

As described in the original Charter School Act, the goals of charter schools were described variously as “to improve student learning,” to “increase learning opportunities for all students,” to “encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods,” and to “provide vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvement in all public schools.”

The 1992 law placed a cap of 100 charter schools in the state. Successive legislation lifted the cap, which now allows up to [1,450 charters in the state](#). With 982 schools currently, there is still several years of growth that will be possible under the current cap.

Kirst pointed out that the 7 percent charter school enrollment figure doesn’t say anything about where charters schools are located, and that their influence is felt far more deeply than the numbers would suggest. Charter schools are not as well represented in rural or suburban districts, he said, but have been most heavily concentrated in urban areas, where the demand for them has been greatest.

In fact, the greatest growth by far of charter schools over the past year has been in Los Angeles County, where some 30 new charter schools opened this fall—some as part of a new “[public school choice](#)” initiative voted in by Los Angeles Unified’s school board.