



The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog
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A Changing Landscape: Examining How Public Charter School Enrollment Is Growing in DC

By Peter Tuths

Enrollment in the District of Columbia's public charter schools has leapt from a quarter of all DC students a decade ago to nearly half in the 2015-2016 school year. While the speed of growth between DC Public Schools and public charter schools has narrowed in recent years, the charter sector is still growing faster, according to a [new report](#) from DCFPI.

These findings highlight the importance of better coordination and planning between the DC public school and public charter school sectors. As enrollment in public charter schools continues to grow, efforts to ensure that students across the city have good access to schools is important.

Key findings from the report include:

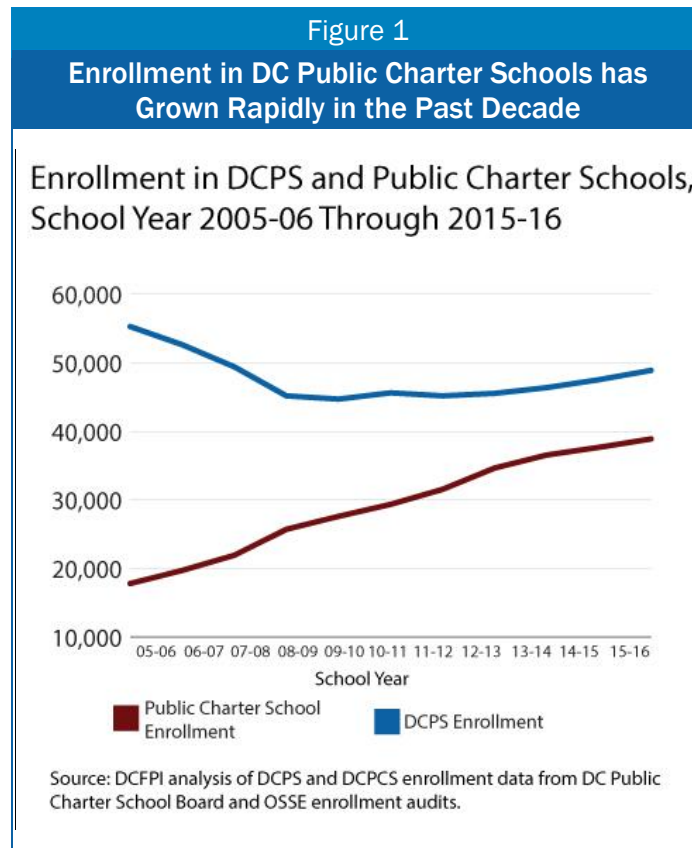
- **The share of DC students enrolled in public charter schools has nearly doubled since the 2005-06 school year.** Ten years ago, 18,000 students were enrolled in a public charter school, just one-third of the 55,000 students in DCPS. In 2015-16, the 39,000 students in public charter schools was much closer to the 48,000 students in a DC Public School. (See **Figure 1.**)
- **The growth rates of traditional public schools and public charter schools have narrowed greatly in recent years.** From 2005-06 to 2010-11, public charter enrollment grew 65 percent while DCPS enrollment *fell* 17 percent. In the most recent five years, by contrast, the charter sector grew 32 percent compared with 6 percent for DCPS. (See **Figure 2.**)
- **Enrollment in Ward 5 and Ward 8 public charter schools has grown the fastest in recent years.** Enrollment in both Ward 5 and Ward 8 public charter schools increased about 50 percent between the 2011-12 and 2015-16 school years, while enrollment in Ward 1 charter schools shrank 16 percent.
- **Public charter school enrollment is growing fastest among elementary and Pre-Kindergarten grades.** Enrollment in public charter elementary school grades grew at more

than triple the rate of middle school grades in the last four years, and seven times the rate of high school grades.

- **“At-risk” students are a majority of the student population in nearly all Ward 8 and Ward 7 public charter schools.**¹ More than half of the students in each of the 19 public charter schools in Ward 8 are low-income or otherwise at-risk. Nearly all Ward 7 public charter schools also enroll mostly at-risk students. By contrast, almost no public charter schools located in Wards 1 and 4 had a majority at-risk student body.

Our report also found that improvement is needed in access to information related to public charter school enrollment, despite recent steps taken by the DC Public Charter School Board. Better information is needed, for example, on each public charter school’s grade termination dates – i.e., when a charter school LEA will expand to its highest authorized grade level. In addition, charter school application files prior to 2011 should be posted online, as well as more charter renewal files than the limited number that are currently available.

To read the full report, click [here](#).

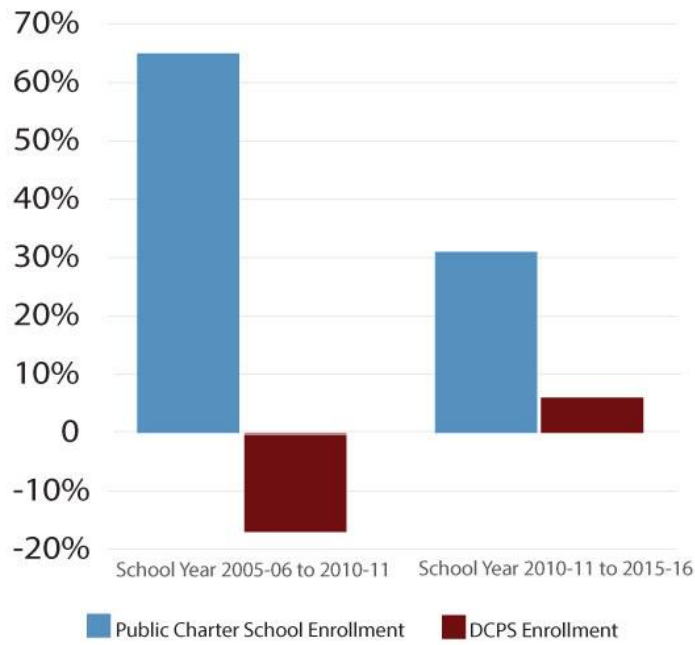


¹ This finding does not include Adult and Alternative Education public charter schools, which do not qualify for at-risk funding.

Figure 2

Enrollment Growth in DC Public Charter Schools Has Outpaced DCPS, But the Gap Has Narrowed Over Past Decade

Change in DC Public Charter School and DCPS Enrollment, 2005-06 to 2010-11 and 2010-11 to 2015-16



Source: DCFPI analysis of DCPS and DCPCS enrollment data from DC Public Charter School Board and OSSE enrollment audits.