

# Many Online Charter Schools Fail to Graduate Even Half of Their Students on Time



—Getty

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If you're attending a full-time online charter high school, the chances are pretty high that the majority of your classmates are not going to earn a diploma on time.

Nearly three-quarters of students enrolled in virtual charters are attending a high school where fewer than half graduated in four years, according to an analysis of the most recent federal data by the Education Week Research Center.

Nationally, half of all virtual charter high schools had graduation rates below 50 percent in the 2016-17 school year. Thirty-seven percent of schools had graduation rates at or above 50 percent. Graduation data for the remaining 13 percent of schools was masked for various reasons, such as to protect student privacy. There are about 163 virtual charter schools educating over 30,000 seniors nationally as determined by the adjusted cohort graduation rate, according to federal numbers.

Out of the 163 schools, in some states, such as Indiana, not a single virtual charter school operating in 2016-17 had a graduation rate over 50 percent in the past four years. In others, such as Wisconsin, the outlook for the graduating cohort in online charters was better. Only two Wisconsin virtual charters, out of 17 that had available graduation rate data, graduated less than half of their students for the 2016-17 school year.

*Source: Education Week Research Center analysis of EdFacts and CCD data, 2019*

Online charter schools, which are run mostly by for-profit companies, have long struggled with poor academic outcomes—from test scores, to academic growth, to graduation rates, to attendance rates. The most high-profile study, done by economists at Stanford University in 2015, found that **students attending an online charter school made so little progress** in math over the course of a year that it was as if they hadn't attended school at all.

Findings such as that, as well as **numerous media and government investigations** into gross mismanagement of schools, has led some prominent charter school advocacy groups to start pushing for increased regulation of virtual schools.

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*Education Week's* analysis of graduation rate data found that many online charter schools have graduation rates that have fallen below that 50 percent benchmark for several years in a row.

Out of the schools we identified, about 100 online charter schools have been open and reported their graduation rates since the 2013-14 school year, which is as far back as the federal data goes for this particular type of school. At least 42 of those schools have had graduation rates below 50 percent every year through the 2016-17 school year—the most recent year data is available.

Ohio had 13 such schools, far more than any other state (although, we should note that the largest and most high-profile of these schools, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, **has since been closed**). There were only four out of the total of 23 schools in Ohio where the majority of students graduated year-over-year.

 A Flourish data visualisation

## **Are Online Charter Schools Driving Low Grad Rates Among all Charters?**

Among all charter high schools—both those that educate students online and in physical buildings—nearly one quarter fail to graduate even half of their students on time.

That's compared to 3 percent of all other public high schools.

But while virtual schools appear to contribute to the overall number of charter schools with low graduation rates nationally, according to the Education Week Research Center's analysis, they are by no means the sole driver. The vast majority of charter schools graduating less than half of their students are brick and mortar schools—online charters make up about 12 percent.

However, because virtual schools have the capacity to enroll large numbers of students, they account for roughly a quarter of all students attending charter schools with graduation rates below 50 percent.

Virtual charter school management companies and advocates contend that many of the students who opt to attend these schools are doing so because they have struggled in more traditional schools and are often academically behind. But some experts question whether online education is the best environment for students who are already academically struggling.

While virtual charter school advocates say the schools enroll large portions of credit-deficient students, very few online charter schools were labeled as alternative schools in the federal data. Generally speaking, alternative schools are set up specifically to serve students at risk of failing in a more traditional school. However, that designation is **not uniformly applied among states** when reporting data to the federal government.

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