

In Many Charter High Schools, Graduation Odds Are Slim



Teacher Samantha Griffith works with Kevin Vazquez at Christel House, a dropout-recovery charter school in Indianapolis.

—AJ Mast for Education Week

By [Arianna Prothero](#) and [Alex Harwin](#)

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At nearly 1,000 U.S. high schools, the chance of students graduating on time is no better than the flip of a coin. And **charter schools**—which were born to create more options for students—make up an outsized share of the number of public schools persistently graduating less than half of their students.

An analysis of federal data by the Education Week Research Center identified 935 public high schools with four-year graduation rates of less than 50 percent in 2016-17, the most recent year available. Of those, 54 percent are charter schools. That's one-quarter of all U.S. charter high schools, and nearly 3 percent of all public high schools.

These numbers aren't just a one-time blip. Many charter schools have suffered from chronically low graduation rates of below 50 percent since 2010-11.

And the number of charters with low graduation rates could be even larger than the *Education Week* analysis reveals. That's because some charter schools were excluded from the federal data set due to student privacy concerns. For its analysis, the Education Week Research Center also removed all schools labeled as "alternative" in the federal data.

"The data undercuts the idea that charters are a better option," said Robert Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University researcher who is a national authority on graduation-rate patterns. "If kids go to a charter high school where the norm is not to graduate, it's not delivering on the promise of creating better, more successful schools for kids in need."

But some charter advocates and experts argue that it's unfair to compare how charter high schools stack up against their traditional school peers when it comes to graduation rates.

For starters, the federal data collection doesn't take into account that some charter schools were set up to serve specific kinds of students who have greater needs and are harder to educate.

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That would include schools like Christel House DORS—which stands for dropout recovery school—that exclusively serves students in Indianapolis who are over 18-years-old, have aged out of the traditional district system, and want to go back to school to get a diploma. The school had a graduation rate of less than 15 percent in the 2016-17 federal data and operates under a special state designation and accountability regime.

"Every student we work with, we are reclaiming, they are in that group that has been disengaged," said the school's principal, Emily Masengale. "They are adults, they have children, so the demands of working and maintaining a household while also going to school can be a huge struggle for students and sometimes hard to balance."

Christel House DORS offers a flexible schedule and employs special support staff members who frequently call students and do home visits, even helping students pay their rent or get their heat turned back on. But those type of intensive supports aren't always enough to get students across the finish line, Masengale said.

Enlarge graphic.

Education Week's analysis is set against the backdrop of a larger, national debate over how graduation rates for all public schools are calculated. That adds a layer of complexity to the examination of charter high school graduation rates and why they lag so far behind other public schools.

Whatever the culprit —be it problematic data, disproportionate numbers of at-risk students, or simply the quality of the charter schools themselves—the numbers are troubling.

In an economy that **increasingly demands more training than just a high school diploma**, graduation is a crucial first step toward higher education, stable earnings, and social mobility. That reality has fueled a big push in the last decade to raise the nation's graduation rates. And it's been successful, at least on the surface: **84.6 percent of the high school class of 2016-17 earned their diplomas in four years, an all-time high.**

A Better Option?

Charter schools were created more than 25 years ago as an alternative to the traditional school district system. Since then, the charter sector has slowly grown to about 7,000 schools educating 3 million students in 43 states and the District of Columbia.

Underpinning the entire charter movement is the idea that with flexibility to innovate and compete for students, charter schools will deliver a superior education—one that's tailored to the individual needs of students and parents.

But with nearly a quarter-million students enrolled in charter high schools with an on-time graduation rate below 50 percent, it calls into question whether the sector is delivering on its mission.

The answer to that question hinges in part on what state you are in.

In Indiana, the majority of charter high schools graduated less than half their students at the end of the 2016-17 school year. In Ohio, it's even more extreme. The majority of students in nearly two-thirds of that state's charter high schools did not receive diplomas in four years.

Arizona, Minnesota, and Ohio have the largest share of charter schools that consistently fail to graduate half of their students year after year.

On the other end of the spectrum is Wisconsin. That state has a large charter sector, but a relatively low share of charter high schools with graduation rates below 50 percent.

Charter school authorizers—the groups given power under state law to approve new charter schools to open and oversee those that do—have been cracking down more on bad actors, said Karega Rausch, the vice president of research and evaluation at the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

"Over the last five years there have been over 1,000 charter schools that have closed, including a fair number that are high schools," he said.

"So the sector has taken a lot of steps to either close or replace ineffective schools. There is still more work to do."

But, Rausch said, authorizers also have to accommodate specialized programs where graduation rates may not capture a school's academic successes.

Wide Variability

The reasons why some states have many charter schools with low graduation rates and others don't is difficult to pin down.

Differences among the states in how they label alternative schools could be part of the issue. States have leeway in interpreting the word "alternative" when they report this data to the federal government. While the Education Week Research Center removed alternative schools from its analysis, it's worth noting that there are significant variations among states on the number of alternative charter schools they claim.

But it may also come down to the rules governing charter schools. They also vary a lot.

Balfanz noted that in some states, like Arizona, Michigan, and Ohio, charter laws don't include "strong performance mechanisms" that would shut a school down before its graduation rate gets too low.

"In some places, charter authorization is quite strong and they do close schools down," Balfanz said. "That might be unique to charters; [policymakers have] got to even out the authorization process so we don't have wild variations. Some places have quick hooks."

Other considerations are whether states allow for-profit companies to run charters and how much states provide in per-pupil funding to charters, said Michael J. Petrilli, the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-leaning think tank. **Some for-profit schools have come under scrutiny for poor academic outcomes for students.**

"[These states] are hospitable environments—the laws don't prohibit these sorts of schools from operating under the charter rubric," said Petrilli.

In Ohio, for example, where charter schools receive relatively low levels of per-pupil dollars compared to district schools, that can make running a rigorous, college-prep high school less feasible, said Petrilli, and large technology-based dropout-recovery programs more attractive.

Analyzing graduation rates, however, and using those rates as a metric for high school success, comes with many caveats.

Researchers who study charter schools point out that the schools are often smaller, so graduation rates can vary more from year to year. Charters may also be more likely to hold students back a year, which means a four-year graduation rate may not be capturing all of a school's graduates.

And then there's the question of whether charter schools educate a disproportionate number of at-risk students, and if that should even count as an excuse for low graduation rates.

SEE ALSO

["Calculating Grad Rates for Charter Schools: It's Complicated"](#)



Math teacher Samantha Griffith, left, talks with Crystal Jones-Cortez at Christel House DORS, a dropout-recovery school in Indianapolis.

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Among the experts and charter advocates interviewed by *Education Week*, there's consensus that finding the regulatory sweet spot for schools set up exclusively for high-needs or at-risk students is tough.

"Alternative schools do warrant a different accountability system that takes into account the kinds of students they educate and the time they have them," said Russell Rumberger, professor emeritus of education at University of California-Santa Barbara. "But on the other hand, we shouldn't let them off the hook. They still need to be accountable for the students they have and the time they have them."

Nor should alternative schools and programs become a way to circumvent responsibility, experts said.

For example, [an investigation by The Arizona Republic released last week found](#) that the state's oversight of alternative charter schools is lax and that schools used the alternative status to avoid closure for poor performance.

Questionable Tactics

In the high-stakes rush to raise graduation rates, schools—charter and traditional district schools alike—may funnel faltering students into credit-recovery programs to get them off their books, use credit-recovery programs of questionable quality to get diplomas into struggling students' hands, or dub themselves "alternative" to circumvent state accountability systems.

Those tactics illustrate some of the ways schools and states can still game their graduation rate numbers, despite a major move a decade ago to create more reliable reporting.

Federal regulations adopted in 2008 required states to calculate their graduation rates in a uniform way, reporting the percentage of 9th grade students who earn regular diplomas four years later. Those rules now have the force of law, since they're part of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

But that hasn't stopped states from **reporting incorrect data that inflate graduation rates**—sometimes because districts send them bad numbers, and sometimes because they're under pressure to look good for accountability. States have been caught counting diplomas with less-rigorous requirements, even though the law requires them to count only "regular" diplomas given to a "preponderance" of students. They've counted

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students who didn't earn enough credits, or who substituted credit-recovery courses for regular classes.

All that doesn't change the fact, though, that a far larger share of charter high schools are graduating less than half their students compared to other public schools.

"Folks will try to say, I bet at least half or more are truly alternative schools, even if they don't code themselves that way," said Balfanz. "Or maybe that they're small, over capacity, [or] don't keep track of data. Whatever you want to call it, you have an awful lot of schools that aren't graduating many kids."



Senior Contributing Writer Catherine Gewertz and Librarian Maya Riser-Kositsky contributed to this report.

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