

What Happened to the 1.3 Million Children Who Stopped Going to School?

School privatizers want you to believe parents are abandoning the public system, but that's not the whole story.

BY CAROL BURRIS

Between the fall of 2019 and 2021, 1.3 million children left the American public school system, [according to *Education Week*](#). For those who care about the welfare of children, this sharp decline is worrisome. We know that enrollment declines [were the steepest in large cities](#), where our neediest students reside and where COVID-19 was more devastating.

How many have dropped out, working in the underground economy or languishing at home without schooling? The honest answer is that there is no comprehensive accounting of where (or if) all of those 1.3 million children are now being schooled.

However, what should be a national concern centered on the welfare of children has instead become promotional material for those who wish to eliminate public schools. The libertarian right and its allies, including the [Center for Education Reform](#), have chalked up the decline to a story of unhappy public school parents [exercising school choice](#). But is it?

According to a 2020 [report](#) from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), “hundreds of thousands of families switched to charter schools during the first full school year of the pandemic.” On the surface, that is correct. But the report avoids the elephant in the room—the kinds of charter schools that gained enrollment during this period.

What should be a national concern centered on the welfare of children

The 2020 charter enrollment spike that NAPCS reported was largely due to increased enrollment in [low-quality online charter schools](#), as I detailed in an [analysis](#) for *The*

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Washington Post. Enrollment in these schools increased by 175,260 students during the 2020-2021 school year, representing more than 70 percent of the NAPCS's reported enrollment growth.

The increase in enrollment in online charter schools that occurred during the early years of the pandemic is part of a long-term trend. In 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) started tracking the online school sector. In the pre-pandemic years, between 2013 and 2020, online schools accounted for **25 percent** of charter enrollment growth, according to the center's data.

In 2022, NAPCS published another **report** that presented a dizzying array of data, some of which contradicted the previous year's report, to make the case that charters had retained the students they gained in the pandemic shift.

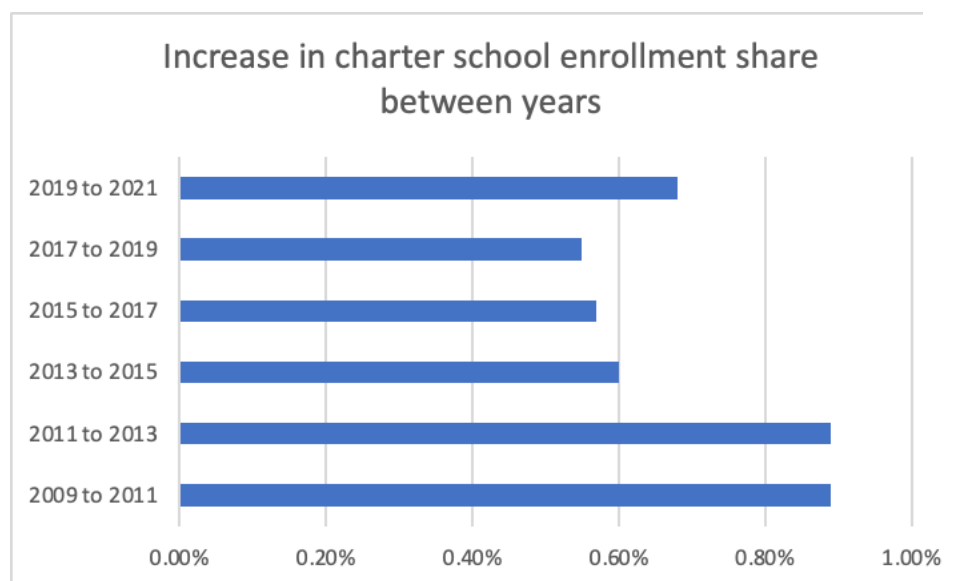
According to that report, in fall 2021, there were only 1,436 fewer students in charters compared to 33,308 fewer students in public schools than there were in fall 2020. The most recent NCES **numbers** tell a different story: According to that data, charter school enrollment dropped by 5,323 students in 2021, while public school enrollment *increased* by 83,323 students—small shifts but nevertheless important to note.

So, did charter school enrollment go up during the pandemic? Yes. Was this a seismic shift? No.

The best way to get a true accounting of the numbers of students

shifting from public schools to charter schools is to examine the **increase** in charter school students as a share of **all non-private school students**. Using this method controls for overall enrollment changes in the non-private school sector. In 2009, according to NCES data, that share was 3.26 percent. Twelve years later, after billions in federal start-up funding, that share was 7.43 percent.

The graph below using NCES data shows that the percentage increases have been relatively constant, and that there was no proportional surge during the two COVID-19 years.



Generated by the author using NCES data.

Did large numbers of families abandon public schools for private schools? Absent good NCES data, we don't know. The last time NCES published national private school data **was in 2019**.

Some states have strong reporting requirements—these include California, New York, and Florida. Between the 2019 and 2020 school years, California private school enrollment **dropped** 4.9 percent. New York's private schools **also shed** students during the pandemic, dropping about 3 percent in enrollment between the fall 2019 and fall 2021. Florida's private school enrollment **dropped** in 2020, followed by an increase of 4.5 percent in 2021 when

compared to 2019.

These changes could have resulted from population shifts. But until NCES releases national data on private schools, we will not have a national estimate of just how many students moved from public to private schools since 2019.

A final and more difficult question to answer is how many students are now being homeschooled. The Household Pulse Survey of the U.S. Census [reports](#) that 11.1 percent of households with school-age children said they were homeschooling in fall 2020—double the prior year’s rate. But this is an estimate from self-reports made at the height of the pandemic.

Homeschooling laws in nearly every state are so shockingly thin that it is impossible to ascertain if children are receiving an adequate education, even when taxpayers pay for it through voucher programs and [education savings accounts](#), or ESAs.

Leaders of the anti-public school movement promote bootleg homeschools and “micro-schools” as [innovative alternatives](#) to public schools, using declines in test scores as the rationale for abandoning the public system. Ironically, however, homeschoolers are not required to provide *any* evidence of student learning in most states. This includes Arizona, whose ESA voucher program is taxpayer-funded with no standards. Parents can [award](#) a high school diploma based on any criteria they want. According to *Ed Choice*, the average Arizona ESA account value on January 17, 2023 [exceeded](#) \$15,500 per year per student. (On January 18, the site [updated that figure](#) to \$11,332.)

This is akin to an insurance company giving the parent of an ill child a payout to spend on a cure—with no stipulation that the parent goes to a licensed physician or that anyone reports back on

the child's health.

Certainly, there are responsible homeschoolers who have developed sound programs to educate and socialize their child. But without requirements to provide sound evidence of learning, a sudden spike in homeschooling should be a cause for alarm, not celebration.

While libertarian advocacy groups call for a “[de-centralized network of schools](#),” to resemble what existed for American schooling in the nineteenth century, before [Horace Mann](#), the truth is that before it became a universal system of “government funded and operated schools,” schooling in America was an uncoordinated, free-for-all that left most children undereducated, which is exactly where the contemporary school choice movement is headed.

Instead, what we should be concentrating on is locating those 1.3 million children and ensuring they are both educated and safe.