



The Washington State  
**BOARD OF EDUCATION**

## **2026 PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS REPORT**

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Submitted to the Office of the Governor and the Legislature as required by RCW 28A.710.250.

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# Introduction

The State Board of Education (SBE) is required to issue an annual report on the performance of Washington’s public charter schools (RCW [28A.710.250](#)). Now in its ninth year, this report includes information from annual charter school authorizer reports submitted to SBE as well as additional relevant data compiled by SBE for the 2024–25 school year. By law, the report must include:

- A comparison of the performance of public charter school students with the performance of academically, ethnically, and economically comparable groups of students in other public schools.
- The Board’s assessment of:
  - The successes, challenges, and areas for improvement in meeting the purposes of Washington’s charter school law,
  - The sufficiency of funding for public charter schools, and
  - The efficacy of the formula for authorizer funding (authorizer oversight fee).
- The number of noncertified instructional staff employed by public charter schools.
- Any suggested changes in state law or policy necessary to strengthen the state's public charter schools.

In addition, with support from the Gates Foundation, SBE contracted with Strobel Consulting to conduct a qualitative analysis in 2025 to better understand the student, parent, and educator experience in Washington’s public charter schools. Key findings are included in this report, and the full report is on [SBE's website](#).

## Background

### Washington’s Public Charter Schools

Washington’s charter schools enroll grades K–12 in three regions of the state: the Puget Sound region, the Spokane area, and Wenatchee. The state’s charter schools are public schools that are:

- Established in accordance with Chapter 28A.710 RCW;
- Open to all children free of charge and by choice (schools may not limit admission on any basis other than age group, grade level, or enrollment capacity);
- Operated separately from the common school system as an alternative to traditional common schools;

- Responsible for meeting state and federal laws and regulations as described in RCW 28A.710.020(4) and RCW 28A.710.040;
- Governed by a charter school board; and
- Operated according to the terms of a renewable five-year charter contract between the school and an authorizer.

Although Washington’s public charter schools must follow most state and federal laws, the state’s charter school law includes exemptions that give approved charter schools the flexibility to innovate in areas such as scheduling, personnel, funding, and educational programs to improve student outcomes and academic achievement. The law also encourages public charter schools to serve historically underserved student populations, with authorizers required to give preference to applications from charter schools that are designed to enroll and serve underserved student populations.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the law also makes it clear that charter schools may not be restricted to only those designed to serve historically underserved students.

## **Charter School Authorizers**

There are two charter school authorizers in Washington: The Washington State Charter School Commission (CSC), which oversaw 15 schools in the 2024–25 school year, and Spokane Public Schools (SPS), which oversaw two schools. Authorizers are responsible for the approval and oversight of public charter schools. CSC may authorize charter schools anywhere in the state while SPS may authorize charter schools within its district boundaries. Authorizers must submit yearly reports to SBE, which are incorporated in this annual report. In addition, SBE is represented on the CSC and approves and oversees school districts that want to be charter school authorizers.

## **Charter School History**

Public charter schools were introduced to the state via Initiative 1240, which was approved by voters in November 2012. After 12 schools were approved and SPS was approved as an authorizer, the initiative was ultimately found to be unconstitutional in 2015. In response, the Legislature passed the state’s current charter school law in April 2016 as shown in

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<sup>1</sup> RCW 28A.710.010 uses the deficit-based term “at-risk student” instead of the term “historically underserved student,” which more accurately reflects the systemic challenges these students face. The statute defines an “at risk student” as a student who has an academic or economic disadvantage that requires assistance or special services to succeed in educational programs. The term includes, but is not limited to, students who do not meet minimum standards of academic proficiency, students who are at risk of dropping out of high school, students in chronically low-performing schools, students with higher than average disciplinary sanctions, students with lower participation rates in advanced or gifted programs, students who are limited in English proficiency, students who are members of economically disadvantaged families, and students who are identified as having special educational needs.

Table 1. Twenty-three public charter schools ultimately opened in Washington under the law. The window to authorize new charter schools closed in April 2021.

**Table 1: Washington Public Charter Schools Timeline**

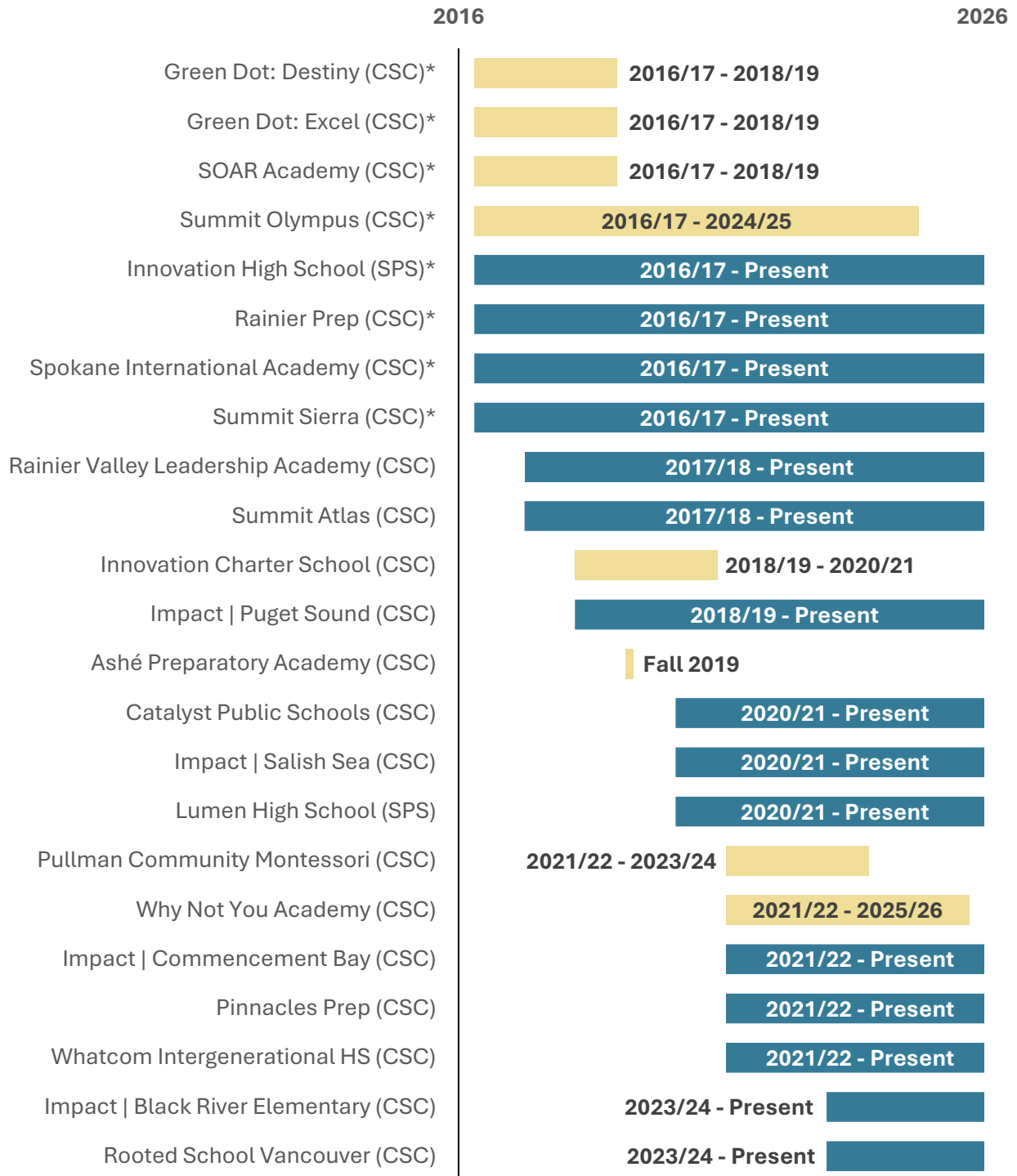
Date	Event
<b>November 2012</b>	Initiative 1240 is approved by Washington voters. It allows up to 40 public charter schools to operate in the state and establishes the Washington State Charter School Commission.
<b>October 2013</b>	SBE approves Spokane Public Schools (SPS) as a charter school authorizer for schools that want to operate in its school district.
<b>September 2014</b>	First charter school opens.
<b>September 2015</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eight new charter schools open.</li> <li>• Washington Supreme Court deems Initiative 1240 unconstitutional in <i>League of Women Voters of Washington v. State of Washington</i>.</li> </ul>
<b>December 2015</b>	The Court mandates that public charter schools stop operations. The eight schools that opened a few months earlier switch to home-based instruction or to an Alternative Learning Experience (ALE) through Mary Walker School District. The other school becomes a private school approved by SBE. Three additional schools that were not yet operating had their contracts invalidated.
<b>April 3, 2016</b>	Senate Bill (SB) 6194, which amends the unconstitutional parts of Initiative 1240, is passed and immediately goes into effect. <sup>2</sup> The law reenacts and amends Initiative 1240, as well as restarts the 40-school approval limit. The law allows schools with previous contracts to sign new contracts without having to re-apply for authorization. These schools also do not count toward the 40 schools allowed under the law.
<b>May 2016</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SBE re-approves SPS as an authorizer</li> <li>• 11 schools re-sign new contracts with their authorizers.</li> </ul>
<b>April 2, 2021</b>	The five-year authorization window closes for new charter schools. Twelve additional schools sign contracts; however, four schools also close during this period. See Figure 1 for dates of operation.

Out of the 23 charter schools that have opened since 2016, six have since closed voluntarily and one will close at the end of the 2025–26 school year. Another school had its charter revoked by CSC and subsequently closed at the end of the 2023–24 school year. Figure 1 shows the years of operation for charter schools that opened under the current law. It shows that most currently operating schools opened in the 2020-21 school year or later.

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<sup>2</sup> The primary changes were shared at SBE’s May 2016 board meeting. See the [meeting materials](#) for more information.

**Figure 1: Years of Operation for Charter Schools Approved under 2016’s Charter School Law, 2016–17 through 2025–26 School Years**



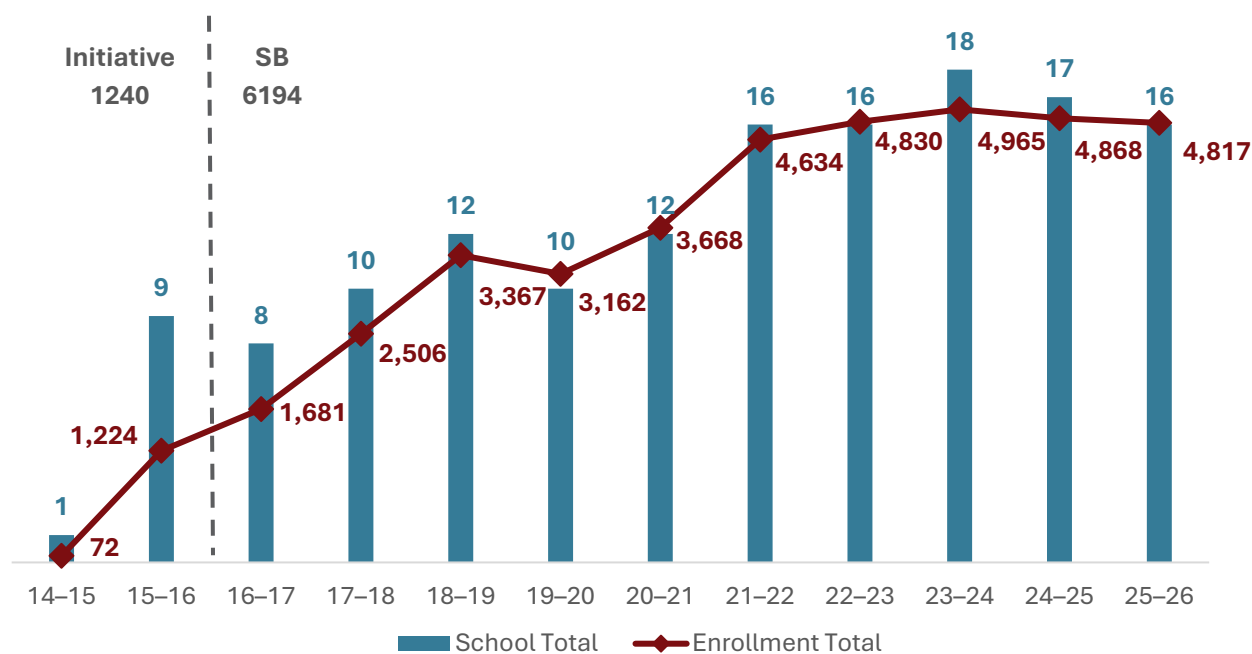
*\*School first opened in September 2015 under Initiative 1240 then transition to home school instruction or an ALE program in December 2015 after the initiative was found unconstitutional. The school re-opened for the 2016–17 school year under 2016’s new charter school law.*

## Enrollment

Public charter school enrollment has stayed between 4,800 students and 5,000 students since the 2022–23 school year, despite school closures, as shown in Figure 2. Enrollment loss due to school closures was somewhat balanced by increased enrollment at most continuing schools. Charter school students composed less than half-a-percent of total public K–12 enrollment in the 2024–25 and 2025–26 school years.<sup>3</sup>

In the 2024–25 school year there were 17 operating charter schools with a total enrollment of 4,868, which was 2% less than the previous year. One high school, Summit | Olympus, closed at the end of the school year in June 2025. This left 16 schools operating in 2025–26 with a total fall enrollment of 4,817, or 1% less than the previous year. Another high school, Why Not You Academy, will close in June 2026, leaving 15 schools to operate in the 2026-27 school year. See Appendix A for individual school enrollment and grade levels offered.

**Figure 2: Public Charter School Annual Enrollment and Total Operating Schools Per Year, 2014–15 through 2025–26 School Years**



*Enrollment Source: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Report Card, accessed January 9, 2026*

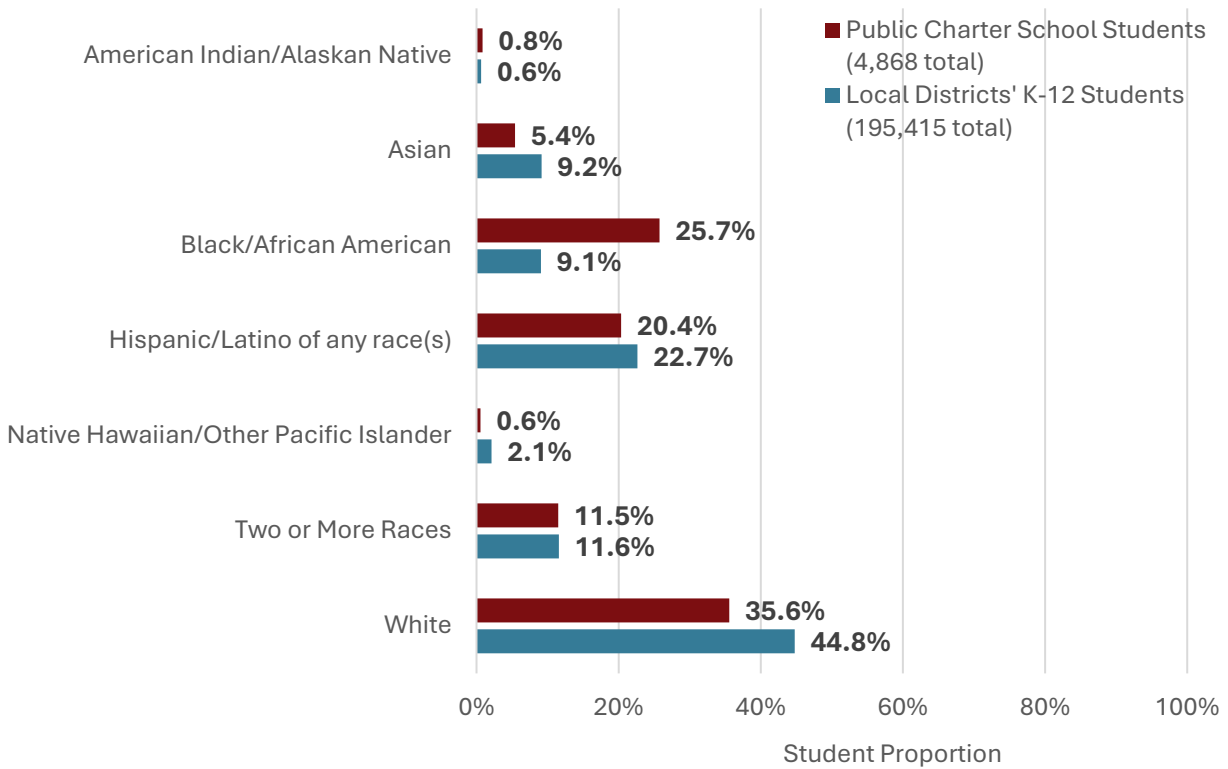
Compared to their local public school districts, charter schools had some notable demographic differences in the 2024–25 school year, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.<sup>4</sup> The two

<sup>3</sup> Source: SBE staff analysis of OSPI Report Card enrollment data, accessed January 9, 2026.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for each charter school’s local school district. Out of the 295 school districts in Washington, 11 have a charter school located within their district’s boundaries. Charter school students may come from districts other than their school’s local district.

figures show that charter schools served a higher proportion (at least one percentage point difference) of Black/African American students, low-income students (students eligible for the Free and Reduced Price Meal program), and mobile students (students with less than 150 days of school year enrollment). Alternatively, local school districts served a higher proportion (at least one percentage point difference) of Asian students, Hispanic/Latino students, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students, White students, English language learners, highly capable students, students experiencing homelessness, and students with disabilities compared to charter schools.<sup>5</sup>

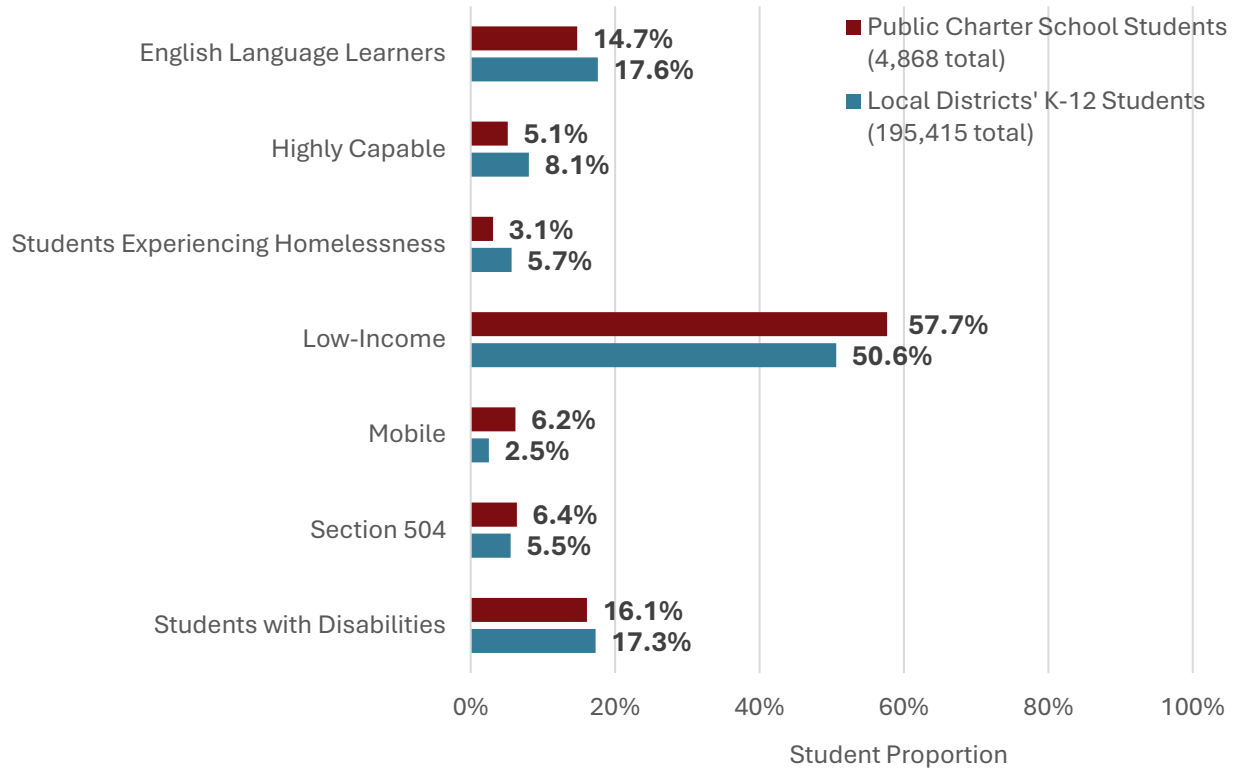
**Figure 3: Public Charter School Student Race and Ethnicity Compared to Local Public School District Students, 2024–25 School Year**



Source: OSPI Report Card, accessed January 9, 2026

<sup>5</sup> Populations not included in the figures: Female (48.1% charter schools, 48.0% local districts), male (50.8% charter schools, 51.4% local districts), Gender X (1.1% charter schools, 0.6% local districts), foster students (0.0% charter schools, 0.2% local districts), migrant students (0.5% charter schools, 0.6% local districts), students with military parents (2.3% charter schools, 1.5% local districts).

**Figure 4: Public Charter School Student Key Demographics Compared to Local Public School District Students, 2024–25 School Year**



Source: OSPI Report Card, accessed January 9, 2026

## Charter School Student Performance Comparison

Due to the timing of student performance data availability, the student comparison section will focus on the 2023–24 school year. It was also included in SBE’s 2025 Charter School Report. The analysis for the 2024–25 school year will be available by October 2026.

In each of the previous annual reports, SBE found that, as a group, students at Washington’s public charter schools perform as well as or better than students at other public schools on traditional educational outcome measures. Most of the previous reports also found that charter school students in specific demographic groups outperformed their other public school (OPS) peers in various measures depending on the year. These findings are consistent with other charter school research conducted by nationally recognized organizations and researchers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> One example includes Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes, which wrote a [2020 report](#) on charter school performance in Washington State (and a [more recent national report](#) in 2023). Another resource is a [2019 report](#) from The Future of Children at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.

For the 2023–24 analysis, SBE contracted with the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) to compare public charter school student performance with the performance of academically, ethnically, and economically comparable OPS students. WSAC found that, as a group, 4th–8th grade charter school students slightly outperformed their comparable peers in math and English Language Arts (ELA) assessments. However, individual grade performance varied, as did performance by different demographic groups.<sup>7</sup> WSAC submitted a more detailed technical report that is available on [SBE's website](#). The report’s methodology and findings are summarized in this section.

## Methodology

WSAC used a one-to-one matching approach called Mahalanobis matching (otherwise referred to as a covariate match) to build a comparison group of OPS students that are observably similar across individual characteristics to charter school students.<sup>8</sup> The matched characteristics were race, gender, student’s primary language, Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) eligibility status, as well as previous year standardized test scores where possible. WSAC also matched grade levels, as standardized tests have different scores by grade.

After the two student groups were matched, the analysis compared standardized test score performance to estimate charter school effectiveness.<sup>9</sup> Table 2 shows the standardized tests that were used in the analysis, including the grades the tests are administered and scoring information.

**Table 2: Standardized Tests Used to Estimate Charter School Effectiveness**

Standardized Tests	Grades Taken	Scoring Scale	Proficiency Cut Score
Math and ELA Smarter Balanced Assessment (SBA)	3rd–8th grades; 10th grade	Approximately 2000-3000	<b>ELA:</b> 2432-2577 depending on grade  <b>Math:</b> 2436-2614 depending on grade
Washington Comprehensive Assessment of Science (WCAS)	5th, 8th, and 11th grades*	Approximately 345-1190	700

\*Analysis does not include 11th grade score comparisons

Source: [OSPI's state assessment website](#). The minimum scores listed under Level 3 for each test are the proficiency cut (threshold) scores needed to meet grade level expectations.

<sup>7</sup> These are similar findings to those in SBE’s [2024 Charter School Report](#).

<sup>8</sup> The best method for comparing the two student groups would have been a randomized control trial where students are randomly assigned to a public charter school or an OPS and then compared. Because this was not possible, WSAC chose the matching methodology.

<sup>9</sup> Because unobservable differences such as motivation, external resources, and parental support cannot be matched, there is a possibility of upward bias in WSAC’s estimated findings. As such, the report results should be treated as the upper bound of potential public charter school effects on test performance.

WSAC’s background research found that using prior year test scores in the matching process provides a more reliable estimate of charter school effects (rather than only matching demographic characteristics). The math SBA and ELA SBA tests are the only tests where a student may have prior year test scores because the tests are taken over several consecutive years. Students first take the tests in third grade, skip ninth grade, and last take the tests in 10th grade. This report focuses on WSAC’s findings for 4th–8th grade student performance on Math and ELA SBA tests since they are the only grades that have prior year test scores.<sup>10</sup> For both subject tests, WSAC evaluated the estimated effect of charter school attendance (compared to OPS attendance) on two measures:

1. Test scores and
2. The proportion of students who meet the proficiency cut score for their grade.

WSAC analyzed 4th–8th-grader test performance as a group, by individual grades, and by specific demographic characteristics. For the test score comparison, WSAC standardized all 2023–24 school year test scores because score calculations and minimum cutoff scores are different across grades. Standardizing the test scores allows WSAC to report a value (standard deviation) that represents the effect of charter school attendance on test performance across all grades.<sup>11</sup> WSAC then used Abadie & Imbens robust standard errors to estimate if the value was statistically significant. A statistically significant finding means that charter school attendance is a highly likely reason for the reported outcome.

## **Data and Study Sample**

WSAC used student-level data from the Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) for the comparison. CEDARS has student enrollment, test performance, and program participation data reported by each school district to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

The 4th–8th grade study sample consists of students from 9 of the 18 public charter schools that operated in the 2023–24 school year and their matched OPS counterparts (Table 3).<sup>12</sup> OPS students were drawn from any OPS, so long as they matched the grade

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<sup>10</sup> Comparisons of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade SBA scores and 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade WCAS scores are available on [SBE's website](#). The analysis of the additional grades and tests showed that charter school students performed the same or better compared to OPS students. However, because of the lack of prior year test scores, there is a lower confidence in the findings.

<sup>11</sup> Standardizing the test scores means finding the average score on a specific subject within a specific grade and making it equal to 0 with a standard deviation of 1.

<sup>12</sup> WSAC’s full analysis examined only 14 of the 18 operating charter schools. Impact: Black River and Rooted School were not included since they did not enroll grades that were required to take math, ELA, or science assessments. In addition, Lumen High School was not included because no students had recorded test scores in CEDARS and Innovation High School was not included because it reported no days of attendance to CEDARS for any student. However, WSAC created tables showing the difference in outcomes if Innovation

level, previous year test scores, and other observed demographics of their charter counterpart. Students who were missing demographic information, had no days of attendance, had a missing score in the subject and/or grade being matched, or who were missing their previous year’s score are not included in the data.

**Table 3: Public Charter Schools Included in 2023–24 Student Comparison Analysis**

School Name	Grades Served in 2023–24
Catalyst Public Schools	K-8
Impact: Puget Sound Elementary	K-5
Impact: Salish Sea Elementary	K-4
Pinnacles Prep	6-9
Pullman Community Montessori	K-7
Rainier Prep	5-8
Rainier Valley Leadership Academy	6-12
Spokane International Academy	K-11
Summit Atlas	6-12

Due to test data availability, the sample used to compare SBA math score outcomes is slightly smaller than the sample used to compare ELA score outcomes, although most of the same charter school students are found in both samples.<sup>13</sup> The math sample compares 1,394 public charter school 4th–8th grade students and 1,394 matched OPS students. The ELA sample compares 1,402 public charter school 4th–8th grade students to 1,402 OPS peers.

## Findings

As shown in Table 4 and Table 5, WSAC found that, as a group, 4th–8th grade public charter school students earned scores that were .115 standard deviations higher than OPS students on the math SBA test and .081 standard deviations higher on the ELA SBA test. Both findings are statistically significant, meaning that charter school attendance is the likely reason for the higher scores. The tables also show that these findings may be driven primarily by 5th-grader performance, whose scores were more than 0.2 standard deviations higher on both tests. The average scores for each group are also included in the tables to show that, although there were some statistically significant differences, the actual scale scores were fairly close for most grades. Furthermore, the proficiency cut

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High School’s students were matched to OPS students. WSAC found no substantive difference in the estimated effect of charter school attendance between the sample with 14 schools and the sample with Innovation High School students. The findings that include Innovation High School’s data are available on [SBE's website](#). Finally, out of the 14 schools in the full sample, only nine had some combination of 4th – 8th grades.

<sup>13</sup> Their OPS counterparts are not necessarily the same students due to the larger pool to draw from.

score for each test and grade combination is included to show that, starting in 5th grade for math, and 6th grade for ELA, both student groups' median scores were lower than the SBA cut scores.

**Table 4: Estimated Effect of Charter School Attendance on Math SBA Scores by Grade, 2023–24 School Year**

Grade	Estimated Effect (Standard Deviation from 0)	Proficiency Cut Score	Charter School Average Score	OPS Average Score
Grade 4	0.099*	2485	2489	2478
Grade 5	0.293*	2528	2526	2494
Grade 6	0.001	2552	2516	2516
Grade 7	0.117*	2567	2532	2517
Grade 8	0.116*	2586	2555	2539
All Grades	<b>0.115*</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>

\*Statistically significant at 5%.

Source: SBE staff analysis of WSAC's technical report and [OSPI's state assessment website](#).

**Table 5: Estimated Effect of Charter School Attendance on ELA SBA Scores by Grade, 2023–24 School Year**

Grade	Estimated Effect (Standard Deviation from 0)	Proficiency Cut Score	Charter School Average Score	OPS Average Score
Grade 4	0.014	2473	2473	2471
Grade 5	0.229*	2502	2524	2499
Grade 6	0.046	2531	2526	2522
Grade 7	-0.014	2552	2542	2543
Grade 8	0.163*	2567	2564	2545
All Grades	<b>0.081*</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>

\*Statistically significant at 5%.

Source: SBE staff analysis of WSAC's technical report and [OSPI's state assessment website](#).

WSAC also found that charter school attendance had a statistically significant effect on meeting proficiency cut scores for both tests. Table 6 and Table 7 show that the proportion of 4th–8th grade charter school students who met the math proficiency cut score was 6.1 percentage points higher than their OPS peers. Further, the proportion of charter students who met the ELA proficiency cut score was 5.2 percentage points higher than their OPS peers. Again, 5th grade outcomes appear to be a major reason for this finding, with fifth graders having double digit percentage point increases in both subject tests. The tables also show the proportion of charter school and OPS students who met the tests' proficiency cut scores.

**Table 6: Estimated Effect of Charter School Attendance on Meeting Math SBA Proficiency Cut Scores by Grade, 2023–24 School Year**

Grade	Estimated Effect on Meeting Cut Score (Percentage Point Difference)	Proportion of Charter School Students Who Met Cut Score	Proportion of OPS Students Who Met Cut Score
Grade 4	3.3	54.3%	51.0%
Grade 5	15*	56.0%	41.0%
Grade 6	1.2	40.0%	38.8%
Grade 7	6.8*	41.5%	34.8%
Grade 8	6.5*	43.9%	37.4%
<b>All Grades</b>	<b>6.1*</b>	<b>46.2%</b>	<b>40.1%</b>

\*Statistically significant at 5%.

Source: SBE staff analysis of WSAC’s technical report and OSPI’s Report Card. The estimated effect for each grade may not equal the difference between the two student groups due to rounding.

**Table 7: Estimated Effect of Charter School Attendance on Meeting ELA SBA Proficiency Cut Scores by Grade, 2023–24 School Year**

Grade	Estimated Effect on Meeting Cut Score (Percentage Point Difference)	Proportion of Charter School Students Who Met Cut Score	Proportion of OPS Students Who Met Cut Score
Grade 4	-0.4	49.4%	49.8%
Grade 5	10.9*	63.3%	52.4%
Grade 6	7.2*	53.9%	46.7%
Grade 7	-0.3	47.9%	48.2%
Grade 8	8.3*	53.4%	45.1%
<b>All Grades</b>	<b>5.2*</b>	<b>53.1%</b>	<b>47.9%</b>

\*Statistically significant at 1%.

Source: SBE staff analysis of WSAC’s technical report and OSPI’s Report Card. The estimated effect for each grade may not equal the difference between the two student groups due to rounding.

WSAC also analyzed the test outcomes of specific student populations and found that almost all charter school student groups performed the same or better than their OPS peers. These results are found on the SBE website.

## Successes, Challenges, And Areas for Improvement

As charter schools become more established in the state, there are several diverse resources to inform SBE’s reporting on the sector’s successes, challenges, and areas of improvement.

## Studying the Charter School Experience

In 2025, two reports aimed to expand the state’s knowledge of the charter school experience. Both reports found that charter schools provide a positive and inclusive experience, while pointing out challenges attributed to resource limitations.

### Charter School Qualitative Data Project

To better understand the student, parent, and educator experience at some of the state’s charter schools, SBE contracted with Strobel Consulting to conduct qualitative research in Fall 2025 with financial support provided by the Gates Foundation. The analysis focused on 11 charter schools with grades 6–12. Through focus groups, interviews, and an online survey of students, families, and educators, Strobel Consulting made the following key observations, based on what participants shared about their experience and perceptions:

- 1. Teacher/staff to student ratio, including smaller class sizes and overall enrollment at some public charter schools, is both a positive and challenging aspect of the charter school experience.** On one hand, many positive key findings are specifically related to a perceived higher teacher/staff to student ratio, lower enrollment and reported smaller class size (sense of community, customized learning, individual attention from teachers and support staff, etc.), while at the same time, many of the biggest perceived challenges reported also arise from smaller enrollment and class size (lack of funding, lack of extracurricular activities, lack of transportation, less anonymity, lack of staff to implement Individualized Education Programs, minimal electives, etc.).
- 2. Overall participants report that the most positive attribute of the charter school experience is a distinct sense of community.** Smaller total enrollment and smaller class size allows for personalized learning experiences where students feel “seen” by adults and peers who “genuinely care” about them. This includes opportunities for customized learning where learning challenges are quickly identified, and necessary supports and interventions are provided, helping students stay on track and ensuring they are not “lost in the shuffle.” Staff expressed a sense of working as a team, and students shared that they felt a strong connection with their peers, teachers, and counselors.
- 3. In general, all types of participants indicated that they feel their charter school offers better educational opportunities** including academics, mentoring opportunities, prevalence of hands-on learning activities, access to advanced classes, better preparation for post-graduation, and higher academic expectations in general, though students also cited higher academic expectations as a challenge (see 6. below).
- 4. A positive school climate was reported as one of the strengths of the charter school experience.** Specifically, that diversity amongst the staff and student body helps create a positive culture where students, staff, and families feel accepted and included. Additionally, participants expressed that they felt physically and

emotionally safe, though students reported they sometimes felt a lack of anonymity leading to increased emotional stress.

5. **Perceived funding issues were reported by the majority of participants as the biggest challenge for their charter school.** Specifically, participants attributed the following challenges to insufficient funding:
  - a. Decreased pay for staff leading to higher turnover and less experienced teachers (i.e. more experienced teachers were unwilling to be paid less)
  - b. No access to transportation, creating enrollment inequalities, and barriers to experiential learning opportunities such as field trips
  - c. Lack of extracurricular activities
  - d. Limited elective classes
  - e. Lack of accountability and staff to fully implement and support Individualized Education Programs
  - f. Lack of classroom resources
6. **Student respondents shared that academic expectations caused additional effort and increased workload, sometimes leading to stress and anxiety,** even while they appreciated the higher academic expectations and the associated benefits (better educational and post-graduation opportunities).
7. **Additionally, students reported that dress codes, which often included a uniform, limit their ability to express their personal style,** though a smaller number of student participants reported the dress code helped foster inclusion by reducing the pressure to meet stressful social standards and expectations.
8. **Data from educators reflect a frustration that they are paid less than their other public school counterparts while being expected to “do more”** and that this leads to burn out and feeling “stretched too thin.” The majority of educators respondents expressed that they were required to “wear many hats” and that while they liked having the flexibility to customize their teaching and contribute to various aspects of school day planning and activities, they felt burdened by the expectations of having to fulfill various roles.

Strobel Consulting also shared the following recommendations for any future research that compares Washington’s public charter schools to other charter schools:

1. Collect the same data from other public schools that was collected from charter schools in this study so that a viable analysis can be done and comparisons made.
2. Follow up with additional data collection that looks at heterogeneous effects (including academic performance) among different types of charter schools, organizational frameworks, and the instructional conditions under which they operate, ensuring a large enough sample size to compare and contrast subgroups; this might include site visits to participating schools.
3. Questions for additional research might include:

- a. Why do charter school students, as a group, perform slightly better than their counterparts in other public schools (based on observable characteristics, such as grade level and prior test scores) on standardized tests?
- b. How do unobservable characteristics in charter school students, staff, and family members such as motivation, family support, sense of belonging, etc. affect academic performance in charter schools?

The full report is on [SBE's website](#).

## **Identifying and Supporting Underserved Students Report**

In a November 2025 report, the State Auditor’s Office evaluated how four charter schools identified and supported students experiencing homelessness, English language learners, and students with disabilities in the 2024–25 school year. The audit focused on whether the four schools met state and federal requirements to ensure that the three student populations were adequately identified and supported.

The audit found that the schools met almost all requirements related to identifying and serving the student populations. However, the audit also found that schools could improve their process documentation, including having required plans and improving written guidance regarding service agency and transportation coordination. The audit also found that the schools were using many promising practices for their work that may be useful for other schools, including promoting a culturally responsive learning environment and implementing a multi-tiered system of supports. The Auditor also spoke with students and families in focus groups and found similar results to the Strobel report. Namely, that the schools provided supportive, inclusive environments and that families had positive relationships with teachers and other staff. Families also discussed resource constraints.

The full report is on the [State Auditor's website](#).

## **Washington State Recognized Schools**

In May 2025, the state’s annual school recognition program highlighted two public charter schools, Rainier Prep and Summit: Atlas, as demonstrating exceptional progress in key areas of student success for the 2023–24 school year.<sup>14</sup> Rainier Prep was also recognized in 2024 for the 2022–23 school year. SBE, OSPI, and the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) manage the recognition program.

See [SBE's website](#) for more information about the program.

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<sup>14</sup> Pullman Community Montessori, which is authorized by CSC, was also honored, but it closed at the end of the 2023–24 school year.

## **Mastery-based Learning Collaborative (MBLC)**

SBE leads the MBLC, which is a state-funded program that aims to support high-quality competency-based education (CBE), also called mastery-based learning, in Washington. Three charter schools—Catalyst Public Schools, Rainier Valley Leadership Academy, and Pinnacles Prep—received MBLC grant funding for the 2024–25 and 2025–26 school years as part of a second cohort (“Cohort 2”) of MBLC schools. The grant funding, along with expert coaching and strong MBLC networking opportunities, supports participating schools in adopting effective CBE practices. The charter school participants make up 13% of the Cohort 2 grantee schools, indicating that charter school flexibility allows interested schools to pursue a CBE model.

See [SBE's website](#) for more information about the MBLC.

## **Charter School Authorizer Updates**

The following updates are based on charter authorizer reports and meeting minutes.

### **Charter School Commission**

CSC’s strategic vision for chartering is rooted in modern authorizing—an approach that holds high expectations, centers equity as daily practice, and treats charter schools as full partners within Washington’s public education system. In the last two years, the Commission implemented an equity-centered policy agenda, including developing Transition to Kindergarten, Relocation, and Continuity in Education policies. These policies were developed to reduce disruption for students, remove unnecessary barriers for schools, and respond to real community needs—while maintaining clear accountability and public oversight.

In addition, the Commission strategically leveraged technical assistance funding to proactively support schools, investing in early intervention, capacity-building, and continuous improvement rather than reactive compliance. These resources were used to strengthen governance, academic systems, and financial sustainability, reinforcing the Commission’s belief that strong authorizing pairs high expectations with meaningful support. Through clearer expectations, earlier technical assistance, and more consistent communication, the Commission has seen a 90 percent reduction in formal complaints and a 90 percent reduction in public records requests.

### **Operating Status of Authorized Charter Schools**

During the 2024–2025 school year, all 15 authorized charter schools operated pursuant to the terms of their charters and applicable state law. CSC maintained active oversight throughout the year, responding to emerging challenges with a focus on student safety, continuity of education, and organizational sustainability. At the end of the school year

Summit: Olympus, a high school with 117 students, closed due to the inability to financially maintain its facility.

CSC also renewed charters for Catalyst Public Schools, Impact | Puget Sound Elementary, and Impact | Salish Sea Elementary. CSC affirmed that these schools met the academic, financial, and organizational standards required for continued operation. Renewal decisions reflected a comprehensive evaluation of school performance over time, aligned to evolving best practices in authorizing and accountability.

In addition, CSC approved the expansion of Impact | Puget Sound Elementary to include middle and high school grades beginning in the 2026-27 school year, recognizing demonstrated academic outcomes, operational readiness, and the school's capacity to responsibly scale high-quality public educational opportunity. This approval reflects the Commission's commitment to growth where performance, demand, and community impact are clearly established.

### **Academic and Financial Performance Overview**

Across CSC's portfolio, charter schools continued to advance their academic missions while operating within established financial and governance expectations. The CSC strengthened its performance and renewal infrastructure during this period, reinforcing a shift toward growth-oriented accountability, one that maintains rigor while supporting continuous improvement. Financial oversight also remained a central focus, supported by strengthened internal systems, completion of operational and financial audits, and ongoing monitoring of school fiscal health. These efforts reflect CSC's responsibility to steward public funds while ensuring long-term sustainability for authorized schools.

The Commission also reworked its authorizing frameworks, particularly the Academic Performance Framework (APF), which is being intentionally repositioned as a dynamic tool for learning and improvement, not a punitive measure. The APF's goal is to provide schools with timely, actionable feedback, offer families clearer and more meaningful information, and allow the Commission to support growth and intervene earlier—before challenges escalate. In this model, accountability is active and constructive, not retrospective.

At the time of reporting, academic and financial data for the 2024–25 school year was not yet available. Instead, CSC shared 2023–24 school year data, which showed that most schools generally met or exceeded standards in the authorizer's APF and Financial Performance Framework, with some exceptions. For example, Rainier Valley Leadership Academy and Why Not You Academy fell below most academic standards. Both schools also did not meet all financial performance measures in 2023–24 and enrolled fewer students in the 2024–25 school year than the previous year. As a result, Why Not You Academy will close at the end of the 2025–26 school year due to enrollment and fundraising challenges. In addition, Whatcom Intergenerational High School was in

probationary status for the 2024–25 school year with three Corrective Action Plans (CAPs). The school entered the 2025–26 school year with one CAP related to compliance submissions.

## **Spokane Public Schools**

During the 2024–25 school year, two district-authorized charter schools were in operation. SPS provided oversight, technical assistance, and measured accountability for each charter school using three performance frameworks (academic, financial, and operational). The authorizer also monitored for compliance with state and federal laws in collaboration with OSPI and the State Auditor’s Office. Finally, SPS invested in and used a web-based tool which assists both the district and its authorized charter schools in meeting targeted benchmarks and compliance deadlines.

SPS reported that both schools met academic standards through their overall academic framework score (despite some metrics being not yet available or unreported due to insufficient sample size), but that both schools fell below some individual standards. For example, SPS found that although Lumen High School students exceeded the standard average time to graduate (less than 4.5 years), the school’s graduation rate compared to schools with similar students fell far below standard. Alternatively, Innovation High School’s graduation rate exceeded the standard (compared to schools with similar students) while their regular attendance compared to the district did not meet the standard.

Furthermore, SPS noted challenges with collecting data for its current Academic Performance Framework (APF). The APF uses measures from the statewide accountability framework, the Washington School Improvement Framework (WSIF). However, the WSIF has limited data for small schools due to an insufficient number of students, making some parts of the APF inapplicable. In addition, WSIF data is generally not available until after authorizer reports are due to SBE each January. SPS alleviated these issues through adding the NWEA Measure of Academic Progress, a student growth measure, to the APF. The new measure is in alignment with the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA)’s most recent Academic Framework guidance.

The authorizer included additional information about each school below.

### **Lumen High School**

Lumen High School has created strong community partnerships in support of their mission to “offer educational pathways for teen parents leading to high school graduation, positive parenting, and future life success.” Lumen continues to support social and emotional learning strategies with therapeutic supports to keep students engaged and attending school. A tiered intervention system of support to improve attendance was implemented and improved. In addition to Early Childhood Education classes, students participate in

internships and are assisted in pursuing post-secondary opportunities. Lumen has a social worker who supports students' needs and refers vulnerable students to counseling and other services. Lumen's small schools' funding and grant awards continue to support a solid financial performance. Lumen's charter contract was renewed in July 2025 for five years, which is reflected in the fact that they met all organizational performance standards in the 2024–25 school year.

### **Innovation Spokane Schools**

The 2024–25 school year is the first year in which Innovation Spokane Schools served only grades 9-12, compared to the 6-12 model that the school, as Pride Prep, had served in past years. Revenue dropped significantly due to the reduced enrollments from closing the middle school program and continued downward trends across each school year. Expenditures were not reduced relative to the revenue loss during the school year, and as a result, Innovation spent roughly half of its available fund balance in 2024–25 and did not meet the majority of sustainability metrics on the financial performance framework. Innovation's remaining fund balance will sustain the school in the near term, but quick action is needed to reduce expenditures relative to the revenue loss to ensure ongoing sustainability. Due to Innovation's financial and enrollment struggles, SPS issued a Notice of Perceived Problem in January 2025 with Corrective Action Plan terms delivered in August 2025 for increased authorizer oversight and school implementation during the 2025–26 school year. Innovation also met almost all organizational performance standards except for meeting financial (issues compiling fund financial statements) and governmental (issues with special education reporting compliance) reporting and compliance requirements.

### **Sufficiency of Charter School Funding**

Both CSC and SPS reported that they believe charter schools do not receive sufficient state funding in comparison to other public schools, especially related to facilities, operational support, and start-up costs.<sup>15</sup> CSC went on to say that charter schools are often expected to deliver outsized results with fewer resources while disproportionately serving students from historically underserved communities. The Commission further said that underfunding creates conditions where inequity is misread as underperformance and where outcomes are judged without regard to access or opportunity.

### **Charter Schools Public Funding Model**

Like other public schools, charter schools receive a state allocation through OSPI based on average, full-time student enrollment and the prototypical school funding model. However,

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<sup>15</sup> There were no new schools that opened in the 2024–25 school year, although two schools were in their second year of operation.

unlike other public schools, charter schools do not receive funding through school district enrichment levies approved by local residents.

As a temporary solution to the lack of levy dollars, the Legislature has provided funding through budget appropriations in the current and previous biennia, allocating approximately \$7.8M each biennium from the Washington Opportunity Pathways Account for charter school enrichment.

Another funding challenge related to levies is the apportionment distribution schedule that OSPI follows as required by RCW 28A.710.220. Like other public schools, charter schools receive their apportionment payments unevenly across 12 months according to the schedule in RCW 28A.510.250. School districts receive a lower amount from the state in November and May because they receive tax levy dollars in those months. The lack of levy funds during the lower apportioned months creates a cash flow challenge for public charter schools.

### **Per Pupil Expenditures**

Despite the difference in public funding, public charter schools had a higher per pupil expenditure (\$21,997) compared to all public K-12 schools (\$19,347) in the 2024–25 school year. One likely reason for the higher per pupil expenditure is because some charter schools rely on philanthropy or receive grant funding from external organizations to address funding gaps or to implement specific programming. Appendix B shows individual charter school per pupil expenditures.

### **Capital Funding**

Charter schools also do not have access to local bonds or state capital funds typically used to finance the purchase of land and school construction. As a result, charter schools generally acquire leased space paid for through their operating budget. Both CSC and SPS note that inability to access capital funding creates a substantial challenge for public charter schools.

### **Authorizer Funding**

Charter school authorizers are also funded by the state through an authorizer oversight fee. The Legislature also provides annual funding beyond the oversight fee to the CSC, but does not provide additional funds to SPS. SPS shared that it continues to meet the requirements of a 2023 law (HB 1744) that expanded authorizer duties without additional legislative funds to cover the added expense.

### **Authorizer Funding Formula Efficacy**

In accordance with RCW 28A.710.110, SBE establishes a statewide formula for the authorizer oversight fee, not to exceed four percent of each charter school's annual funding

allotment. The fee is currently three percent for both charter school authorizers. The authorizer must use its oversight fee exclusively for fulfilling the authorizing duties listed in RCW 28A.710.100.

As part of the charter school law, SBE is required to review the authorizer fee annually in consultation with the authorizers (WAC 180-19-060). Neither authorizer requested a fee change, so SBE has determined that no fee changes are needed for the current year. However, both authorizers agreed that increased funding for high-quality authorizing is important and that the fee should be used for more tasks than are currently allowed by law. Further, the CSC does not want to see increased authorizer financial support shift resources away from schools via the allotment process.

## Noncertificated Instructional Staff

Charter schools are required to employ certificated instructional staff (RCW 28A.410.025). However, RCW 28A.710.040 states that charter schools "may hire noncertificated instructional staff of unusual competence and in exceptional cases as specified in RCW 28A.150.203(7)." Charter schools must report the number of noncertificated staff hired in the current and preceding school year to SBE for inclusion in this report.

CSC reported that three of its 15 authorized schools employed a total of five noncertificated teachers in the 2024–25 school year (with three becoming conditionally certified midyear) and one in the 2025–26 school year. All were supervised by a certificated teacher. SPS reported no noncertificated instructors for both school years. See Appendix B for more information.

## Suggested Changes to Strengthen Charter Schools

SBE does not have recommendations for 2026. However, each authorizer has recommendations to strengthen charter schools as described below.

### Charter School Commission Recommendations

To strengthen Washington's charter schools and the public education system as a whole, the Commission encourages consideration of the following:

- **Equalized funding and facilities access**, so schools are judged on outcomes rather than resource disparities.
- **A strengthened authorizer funding formula** that supports proactive, modern authorizing through increased flexibility without shifting resources away from schools.
- **Policy alignment around relocation and continuity**, allowing schools to respond to community-identified needs responsibly.

- **Sustained investment in performance frameworks**, such as the APF, as tools for continuous improvement.
- **Restoring the ability to authorize new charter contracts**, with clear standards and guardrails, to meet future community demand.

## **Spokane Public Schools Recommendations**

SPS continues to advocate for the following charter school law amendments that the district believes would strengthen the state's charter schools and authorizing practices.

### **Authorizer Fee Flexibility**

SPS recommends increasing the flexibility in the allowable use of the authorizer fee (which is used only for those duties listed in RCW 28A.710.100) to enable the authorizer to assist the charter schools in areas of mutual benefit to both the authorizer and the school.

### **Apportionment Timing**

As described in the previous section, the timing of state apportionment has lower payments in the months that levy dollars are received by other public school districts. Given that charter schools do not receive levy dollars, this creates cash flow challenges in the months of May and November. SPS recommends evaluating and adjusting the payment schedule that is required in RCW 28A.710.220(2) to account for this issue.

### **School Facility Funding**

Both charter schools that SPS authorizes had previously reported their facilities lease as an operating lease. With the introduction of the Governmental Accounting Standards Board Statement No. 87, each charter school was required to capitalize their operating lease. This has greatly increased the long-term debt reported by each charter school. SPS recommends additional funding for school facility construction or acquisition, as this would greatly assist with charter school fiscal stability.

## **Conclusion**

The 2026 Public Charter Schools Annual Report highlights the ongoing efforts and developments within Washington's charter school system over the last decade. Despite facing unique funding challenges that have caused some schools to close in recent years, charter schools continue to provide diverse educational opportunities for Washington students.

Both authorizers repeated recommendations from previous years that they believe will improve the charter school experience, particularly related to increased sustainability and equity. Most recommendations are centered on the state's funding model and how it does not provide a permanent solution to charter schools' lack of local levies and capital funding.

Finally, two 2025 reports help the state better understand the charter school experience for the students, families, and educators who choose this alternative pathway to a K–12 education. The reports describe qualitative findings about how some charter school students benefit from their enrollment. However, more research focused on the similarities and differences between charter schools and other public schools is needed to determine whether student/family choice and charter school design supports student success.

## Appendix A: 2024–25 and 2025–26 Enrollment, Operating Public Charter Schools

School	Authorizer	Local School District	2024–25 Grades	2024–25 Enrollment	2025–26 Grades	2025–26 Enrollment
Catalyst Public Schools	CSC	Bremerton	K–9	▲ 509	K–10	▲ 522
Impact   Black River Elementary	CSC	Renton	K–3	▲ 214	K–4	▲ 272
Impact   Commencement Bay Elementary	CSC	Tacoma	K–4	▼ 235	K–5	▲ 264
Impact   Puget Sound Elementary	CSC	Tukwila	K–5	▲ 507	K–5	▲ 524
Impact   Salish Sea Elementary	CSC	Tukwila	K–5	▲ 396	K–5	▲ 443
Innovation High School	SPS	Spokane	9–12	▼ 235	9–12	▼ 169
Lumen High School	SPS	Spokane	9–12	▲ 33	10–12	▼ 25
Pinnacles Prep	CSC	Wenatchee	6–10	▲ 235	6–11	▼ 220
Rainier Prep	CSC	Highline	5–8	▲ 360	5–8	▲ 362
Rainier Valley Leadership Academy	CSC	Seattle	K, 6–12	▼ 120	K–1, 6–12	▼ 107
Rooted School Vancouver	CSC	Evergreen (Clark)	9–10	▲ 59	10–11	▲ 66
Spokane International Academy	CSC	Mead	K–12	▲ 830	K–12	▲ 868
Summit Atlas	CSC	Seattle	6–12	▲ 568	6–12	▲ 629
Summit Olympus (closed June 2025)	CSC	Tacoma	9–12	▼ 112	n/a	n/a
Summit Sierra	CSC	Seattle	9–12	▼ 215	9–12	▼ 169
Whatcom Intergenerational High School	CSC	Bellingham	9–12	▲ 108	9–12	▲ 112
Why Not You Academy (closing June 2026)	CSC	Highline	9–12	▼ 132	9–12	▼ 65
<i>Total Charter Enrollment</i>				4,868		4,817
<i>Total Public K–12 Enrollment</i>				1,078,633		1,069,399

Source: OSPI Report Card, accessed January 9, 2026.

▲ More than previous year  
▼ Less than previous year

## Appendix B: 2024–25 Per-pupil Expenditure, Class Size/Ratio, and Instructional Staff Information

School	Per-pupil Expenditure (24/25)	Average Class Size	Student -to-Teacher Ratio	Teacher Count	Average Years Teacher Experience	Non-certificated Instructional Staff
<i>Statewide (all public schools)</i>	\$19,347	19.7	16.4 to 1	67,441	13.4	-
<b>Catalyst Public Schools</b>	\$19,592	27.5	12.1	42	0.8	3 (Special Education)
<b>Impact   Black River Elementary</b>	\$25,015	30.8	15.3	14	2.1	0
<b>Impact   Commencement Bay</b>	\$23,701	24.8	13.1	18	1.5	0
<b>Impact   Puget Sound Elementary</b>	\$18,759	31.5	14.5	35	2.4	1 (Special Education)
<b>Impact   Salish Sea Elementary</b>	\$17,790	Not reported	15.8	25	3	0
<b>Innovation High School</b>	\$24,227	15.6	10.6	22	7.7	0
<b>Lumen High School</b>	\$78,178	11.8	5.5	6	7.2	0
<b>Pinnacles Prep</b>	\$21,329	21.1	22	19	5.3	1 (World Languages)
<b>Rainier Prep</b>	\$19,464	22.8	13.3	27	6	0
<b>Rainier Valley Leadership Academy</b>	\$44,791	15.4	7.7	15	5.2	0
<b>Rooted School Vancouver</b>	\$39,225	20.1	11.8	5	4.8	0
<b>Spokane International Academy</b>	\$17,095	20.7	14.6	57	8.2	0
<b>Summit Atlas</b>	\$21,758	25.1	16.3	35	5.2	0
<b>Summit Olympus</b>	\$38,747	18.3	9.3	12	5.2	0
<b>Summit Sierra</b>	\$22,980	22.3	14.4	15	3.5	0
<b>Whatcom Intergenerational HS</b>	\$24,055	32.5	6.7	10	9.8	0
<b>Why Not You Academy</b>	\$26,945	15.1	10.2	13	1.2	0
<b>All Charter Schools</b>	<b>\$21,997</b>	<b>23 (CSC) &amp; 14.9 (SPS)</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>370</b>	<b>4.4 (CSC) &amp; 7.6 (SPS)</b>	<b>5 (1.3% of all teachers)</b>

Source: Staff analysis of OSPI Report Card and related files, accessed January 27, 2026. Noncertificated instructional staff numbers were reported by charter school authorizers.