



Back to School: Colorado's Charter School Performance 2022

A REPORT BY KEYSTONE POLICY CENTER



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Introduction and Key Findings:

Much has been written about learning loss and widening learning gaps created by COVID-19-related disruptions. The release in August of 2022 Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS) and PSAT/SAT results from spring testing gives us the first data-rich information that allows us to quantify the impact of those challenges on Colorado students. Understanding how Colorado students are faring academically is particularly important given the release of national data that show that student achievement fell dramatically; 4th grade reading and math scores are their lowest since 2005, 8th grade math scores were the lowest since 2003, and 8th grade reading scores the lowest since 1998.¹

The Keystone Policy Center examined the data and analyzed how students in charter schools performed compared to students in district-managed² schools across Colorado as the state emerged from pandemic shutdowns and interruptions to in-person learning. There are currently 265 charter schools serving about 134,000 students in Colorado (15% of Colorado's K-12 public school student population), making it a non-trivial proportion of students that is important to learn from. For more detailed information on performance statewide, Keystone also produced a report and maps on the state of Colorado schools and districts entitled **Back to School: Colorado's Academic Performance 2022**.



85%

of charter school students attended a school with a “performance” rating on the SPF — the highest of four levels. Meanwhile, **66 percent** of district-managed students attended schools with a performance rating — a **19 percentage point difference**.

Several key findings emerged:

- **Charter schools outperformed district-managed schools on the state School Performance Framework.**
Eighty-five percent of charter school students attended a school with a “performance” rating on the SPF — the highest of four levels. Meanwhile, 66 percent of district-managed students attended schools with a performance rating — a 19 percentage point difference.
- **The gap was wider when looking only at schools serving large numbers of students from low-income families.**
This suggests charters are more successful with low-income students than district schools serving a similar socioeconomic demographic.
 - Two-thirds of charter students attending schools where at least 75 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were in performance (highest rated) schools.
 - Meanwhile, just 19 percent of students in high-poverty district-managed schools were attending performance schools.
- **Charter school students in grades 3-8 outperformed their peers in district-managed schools on both literacy and math tests.**
 - 37 percent of charter students met or exceeded grade level expectations in English Language Arts compared to 31 percent of third- through eighth-graders in district-run schools
 - 31 percent of students met or exceeded grade level expectations in math, compared to 27 percent in district-managed schools.

¹ <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/>

² For the purposes of this report, district-managed refers to all schools that are both public and non-charter, including innovation and innovation zone schools.

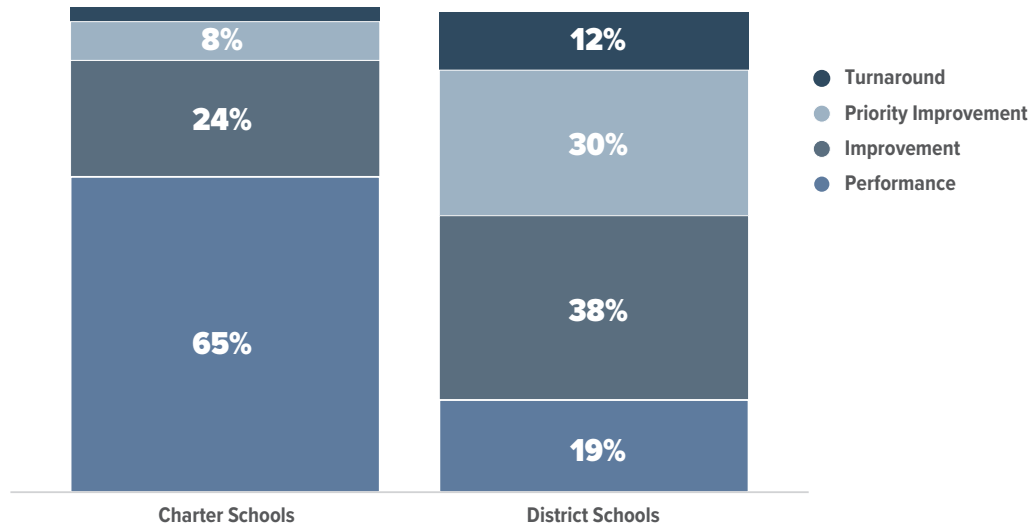
- **Critically, fewer than half of all students, regardless of school governance type, are meeting grade level expectations in either subject.**
- **It is also important to note that in charters and district-managed schools alike, troubling academic gaps persist between lower- and higher-income students.**
 - The gaps are somewhat larger in district-managed schools, but are high in both types of schools (between 15 and 20 percentage points for both ELA and math in charters, and 20 percentage points or more in district-managed schools.)
- **Charter schools serving grades 3-8 also showed more academic growth than their district-managed counterparts.**
 - 61 percent of charters demonstrated a median growth percentile (MGP) of 50 or above in English Language Arts. An MGP of 50 indicates that, on average, students in a school performed as well or better than 50 percent of their academic peers (students who have had similar assessment scores in past years). By contrast, 49 percent of district-run schools serving grades 3-8 in had an MGP of 50 or above in ELA.
 - In math, 57 percent of charter schools had a MGP of 50 or better, compared to 52 percent of district-managed schools.
- **Charter high schools performed less well,** according to SAT data, running even with or lagging behind district-run schools on status measures in both ELA and math.
 - 46 percent of charter 11th-graders met or exceeded academic grade level expectations on the SAT English Language Arts test, while 50 percent of students in district-run schools met or exceeded grade level expectations. In math, just a third of 11th grade students in both charter and district-managed schools met or exceeded grade level expectations.
- **On growth measures, charter schools significantly out-performed high-schoolers in district-managed schools**
 - In ELA, 57 percent of charter high schools showed a median growth percentile of 50 or better, while 42 percent of district-managed high schools met or exceeded the 50 percent threshold.
 - In math, 49 percent of charter high schools topped 50 percent MGP, while 38 percent of district-managed high schools met that benchmark.

Charter Schools

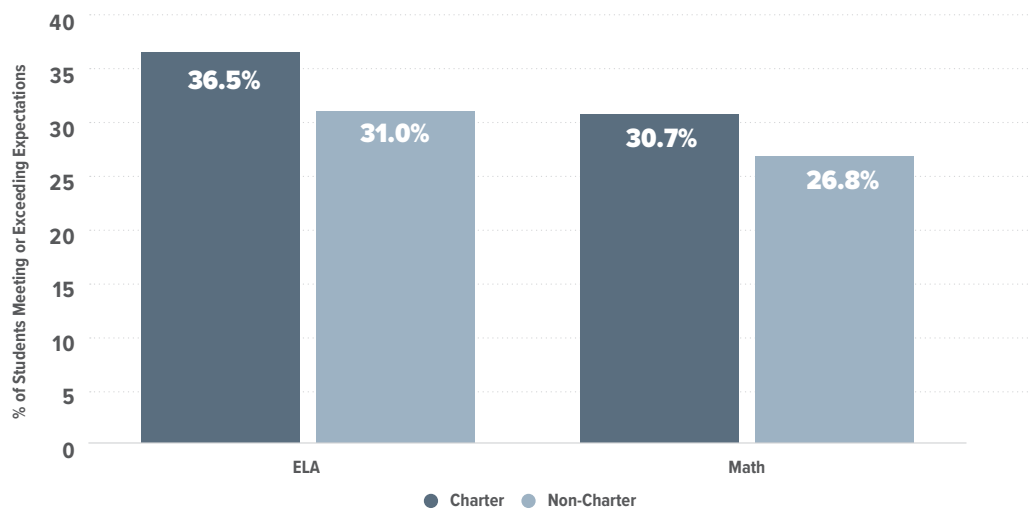
serving grades 3-8 also **showed more academic growth** than their district-managed counterparts.



Overall SPF Performance of schools serving mostly low-income students (greater than 75% FRL)



CMAS Performance



Takeaways

Students across the country and in Colorado have lost significant academic ground during and in the wake of the pandemic. Fewer students today are meeting grade level expectations in critical academic areas than they were in 2019, demonstrating beyond a doubt that the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and state and district responses to it exacted a heavy toll on students. However, charter schools in Colorado appear to have weathered the pandemic storm better than district-managed schools, and have shown signs of bouncing back by more effectively supported CO student learning. Charter schools tended to earn higher ratings on the state accountability system in 2022, they saw larger proportions of students meeting or exceeding grade-level expectations, and higher academic growth, particularly for low-income students, when compared to district-managed schools.

Why this is the case merits closer examination, but flexibility and nimbleness likely played a significant role, allowing charters to pivot more quickly.

While this report looks at statewide trends, there is wide variation in charter performance across the state, as well as in the demographics of students served. For example, less than 40% of charter high school students in Aurora are at or above benchmarks in literacy compared to over 80% in Jefferson County. In order to understand the lessons to take away from charter performance this must be further explored. More detail on this and other performance trends are also [available here](#).

Acknowledgments

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