

Public Charter Schools



The Big Idea:



Every child deserves a great school, but this remains out of reach for too many students. High-quality public charter schools provide additional opportunities to serve the needs of these students and families.

What are charter schools?

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools. While they are public schools, there are a few key differences between charters and district schools. Charters have greater flexibility over their curriculum and requirements than district schools, and they are held to higher standards. The main differences between charter schools and district schools include:



Governance: Charters are governed and run by independent boards. These are , separate from Local Boards of Education that govern district schools. Charters make independent decisions regarding their curriculum, scheduling, and hiring practices in order to adjust and meet the needs of their students. District schools must follow state guidelines.



Choice: Charters provide a choice for students that may not otherwise have access to high-quality schools in their district or unique schools, such as Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School. District schools enroll the students in their local areas, but charters can enroll students from across the state. Preference is given to students who live in the district where the charter school is located.



Enrollment Processes: Charters are tuition-free, just like district schools. Students apply to charter schools they would like to attend. If there are more applicants for a charter school than there are seats available, a random lottery determines who enrolls. Local students are typically given preference in a lottery, but charters may request to prioritize students from a certain neighborhood or “catchment area.” District schools enroll only the students within their local area



Funding: Charters are tuition-free for students. Charters are funded through federal dollars, state dollars, and private funds. In Alabama, local funds aren’t used for charter schools. District schools are funded through federal and state dollars, too, but also receive funding from local tax dollars. Due to this difference, charters receive up to \$4,000 less per student than their district counterparts.



Facilities: Charters pay for their own facilities, which can cost between \$600,000 to \$2 million. District schools typically pay these expenses with local revenue, which charters do not receive.



Accountability: Charters are held to higher accountability standards than district schools. If a charter does not achieve their benchmarks, they can be closed.

Impacts on Alabama Students

The Alabama Public Charter School Commission anticipates about 4,762 charter school spots for students during the 2025-2026 school year. Charter schools in Alabama have demonstrated positive impacts for students since they opened in Alabama.

- **Demographics:** Alabama charter schools serve disproportionately higher amounts of students living in poverty and students of color as compared to state averages. 72% of charter school students receive free or reduced lunch, as compared to 56% of Alabama's student population. 74% of students attending charter schools are Black, while only 32% of Alabama students are Black statewide.
- **Academic Growth:** Alabama charter schools are outperforming their local district counterparts in academic growth. In 2024, Acceleration Preparatory Academy outperformed Mobile County Schools in academic achievement, and i3 Academy i3 achieved an incredible 18.9% increase in achievement.
- **ACAP Reading and Math Proficiency:** 5.6% more of Alabama's charter school students are proficient in reading and math than local district school counterparts. 75% of charter schools are outperforming their local LEAs in English Language Arts, and 30% are outperforming the state. Black, Hispanic, low-income, special education, and ELL students enrolled in Alabama charter schools are outperforming their district school peers by about 10 percentage points.
- **Specialized Focus for Unique Needs:** Alabama has charter schools that specialize student experiences in various topics. The Alabama Aerospace and Aviation High School focuses on careers in aerospace engineering and aviation, and Breakthrough Charter focuses on service and project- based learning.

Alabama's Charter School Landscape

In 2015, Alabama passed the School Choice and Student Opportunity Act, which established the two types of charter schools that may operate in the state. Start-up charter schools can be created by nonprofit organizations that enter a contract with a charter authorizer, which governs charters in the school's local area. In Alabama, local school districts that opt-in and the Alabama Public Charter School Commission (APCSC) are the only authorizers. Separately, conversion charter schools can be created by local school districts that would like a separate organization to operate and govern a school within the district.

What are the recent changes to the charter law?

In 2023, the Alabama legislature updated the charter law to allow the APCSC to better support their schools and increase their autonomy. The changes shifted the appointment process to the commission, extended commission terms, required training for commissioners, allowed them to hire staff, and allowed charters serving majority at-risk students to give preference to students in certain geographic areas during the enrollment process.

As of 2025, Alabama operates 17 charters across the state, including three conversion charter schools within Montgomery Public Schools. These schools serve over 8,500 students, representing about 1.1% of the state's student population.

A+ Policy Recommendation

Close the \$4,000 funding gap between charter schools and district schools.

- The 2025 RAISE Act begins to close the \$4,000 gap between charter and district school students by establishing a charter student weight. In the first year of the program, the weight is \$150 per student. We recommend increasing funding for charter school students to help close the gap.
- To fully close the gap, the legislature should establish an ongoing Education Trust Fund line-item that provides charter schools with a per-pupil allocation or funding for charter school facilities, so that other funds may go towards enrolled students.
- Another option to close the funding gap is for the Legislature to give charter schools access to local revenue via an amendment to the statute.