

# How Is School Enrollment in Washington State Shifting during COVID-19?

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Washington State schools were the [first in the country to close](#) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, many districts—including Seattle Public Schools—have still not resumed in-person learning.

As in other states, disruptions in schooling have impacted public school enrollment. In October 2020, Washington’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) [reported that](#) enrollment was down by 3 percent in the state’s public schools. Kindergarten enrollment declined by 14 percent.

To better understand the enrollment trends in Washington State, we assessed statewide enrollment data across grade levels, among public schools—both district and charter—and for students who receive specialized services (see inset, Enrollment Data).

Overall, we found that the greatest enrollment declines were among elementary students and those in special education. But enrollment patterns in the state’s nine charter schools differed from their local school districts. Charter school enrollment increased 35 percent since the start of the pandemic last spring, including increases for K-4 students, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

## Enrollment Data

This brief relies on two data sources. First, we use statewide enrollment trends [reported by OSPI](#) in October 2020 to examine changes in public school enrollment by grade level and for alternative learning environments. We use these statewide data to make comparisons between public school enrollment in fall 2019 and fall 2020.

Second, we use [statewide headcount data from the OSPI](#) to examine changes in enrollment for charter schools and the school districts where charter schools are located. These data allow us to examine month-by-month enrollment changes by grade level and student service type; they do not, however, include information on student race/ethnicity or family poverty status.

Interpreting shifts in charter public school enrollment is complicated. Only 3,600 students in Washington State are enrolled in charter schools, so even a large percentage shift in the charter sector equates to a relatively small number of students. Charter school enrollment is also more dynamic than that of district-run public schools. New charter schools open and existing schools add grade levels. Some schools close. With that in mind, we exclude charter schools and grade spans that opened in September 2020 from our analysis. Instead, we examine only enrollment in charter schools and charter school grade levels that have continuously enrolled students between September 2019 and November 2020. We also compare charter school enrollment to those in their local school districts as the best comparison available. It should also be noted that charter schools often enroll students from more than one school district boundary because there are no restrictions on student residence to enroll.

**Table 1. Charter Schools Included in This Analysis**

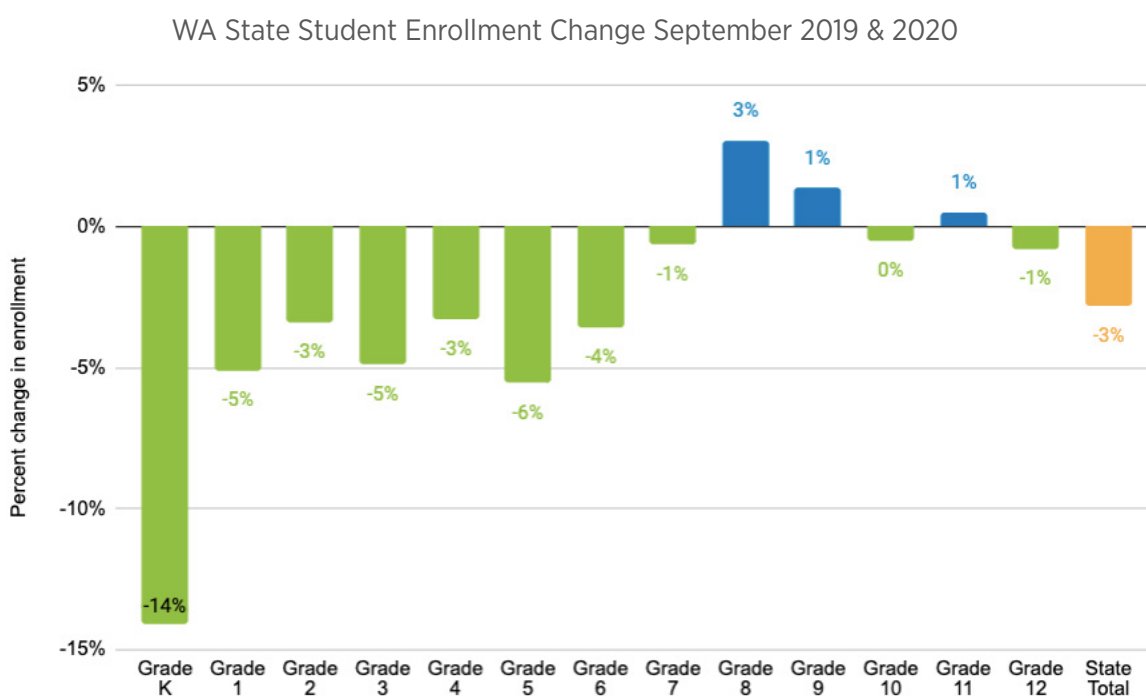
<b>Charter School &amp; Grade Span</b>	<b>District</b>
Impact Puget Sound (K, 1, 2)	Tukwila
Pride Prep (6-11)	Spokane
Innovation Charter School (6-8)	Walla Walla
Rainier Valley Leadership Academy (6-10)	Seattle
Rainier Prep (5-8)	Highline
Spokane International Academy (K-8)	Spokane
Summit: Atlas (6-11)	Seattle
Summit: Olympus (9-12)	Tacoma
Summit: Sierra (9-12)	Seattle

## Statewide enrollment dropped 3 percent in 2020 compared to enrollment before the pandemic

Washington State public school enrollment declined by 3 percent between September 2019 and September 2020, which translates to a decline of 5,238 students. The largest loss was in kindergarten, but losses ranged from 3 to 6 percent across other elementary grade levels (figure 1).

Washington’s data is similar to what other states are reporting—from a 3 percent decline in [Colorado](#) to 5 percent declines in [Arizona](#) and [North Carolina](#). Like Washington, these states report the steepest drops in kindergarten enrollment.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1. Elementary Grades Experienced the Greatest Enrollment Declines**



Source: “Preliminary Enrollment Numbers Show Families Delaying Kindergarten Start; More Alternative Learning,” *OSPI New Release*, October 7, 2020.

Note: Data presented in this chart include all district and charter schools in the state.

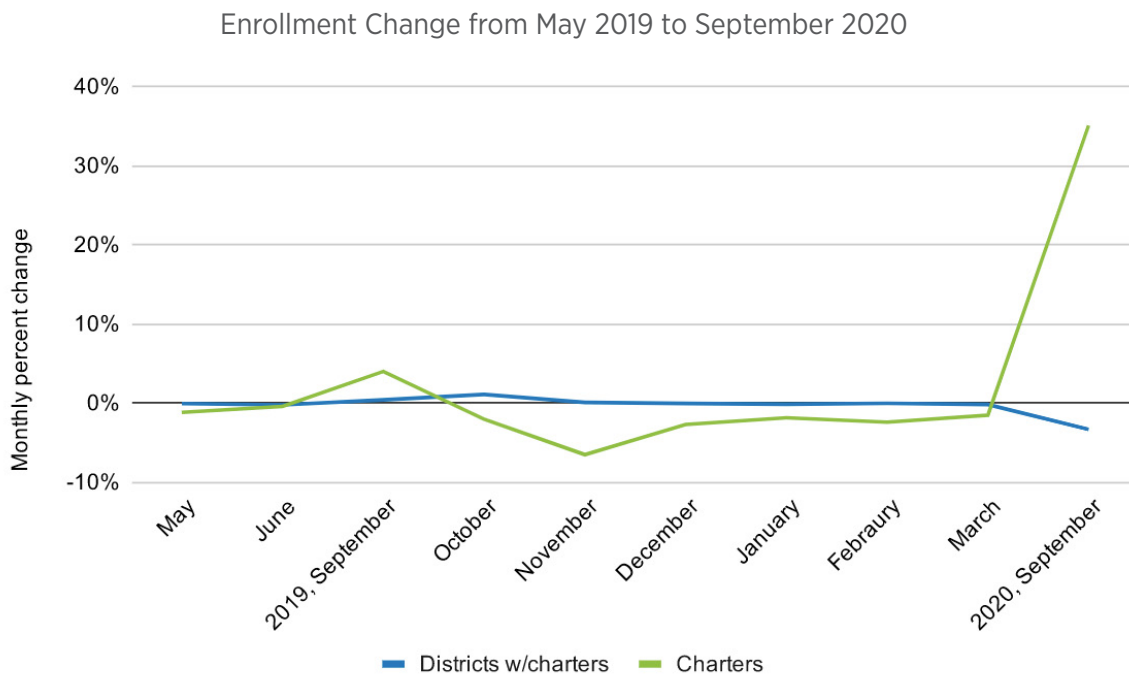
In contrast to elementary enrollment, middle and high school student enrollment was only slightly lower than in a typical school year. In the 2019–20 school year, enrollment for 7th to 12th grade increased by an average of 1.5 percent, while in 2020–21, enrollment in these grades increased by 0.08 percent.

<sup>1</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that some families are keeping kindergarten-aged children home rather than enrolling them in remote learning. Others may be opting for homeschooling and virtual schools; Washington state offers three free virtual school options.

## Charter school enrollment jumped 35 percent in fall 2020, while districts saw losses

Across the nine charter schools, enrollment increased by 35 percent from March 2020 to September 2020, compared to a loss of 3 percent in local districts (figure 2). We use enrollment data from May 2019 to November 2020 for charter schools and their local districts to factor out enrollment shifts that occurred during the 2019–20 school year prior to the pandemic.

**Figure 2. Charter School Enrollment Increased by 35 Percent from March 2020 to September 2020**



*Source:* 1251H Headcount, [OSPI Apportionment Documents](#), May 2019 to September 2020 for charter schools in existence since 2018 and the school district in which they are located.

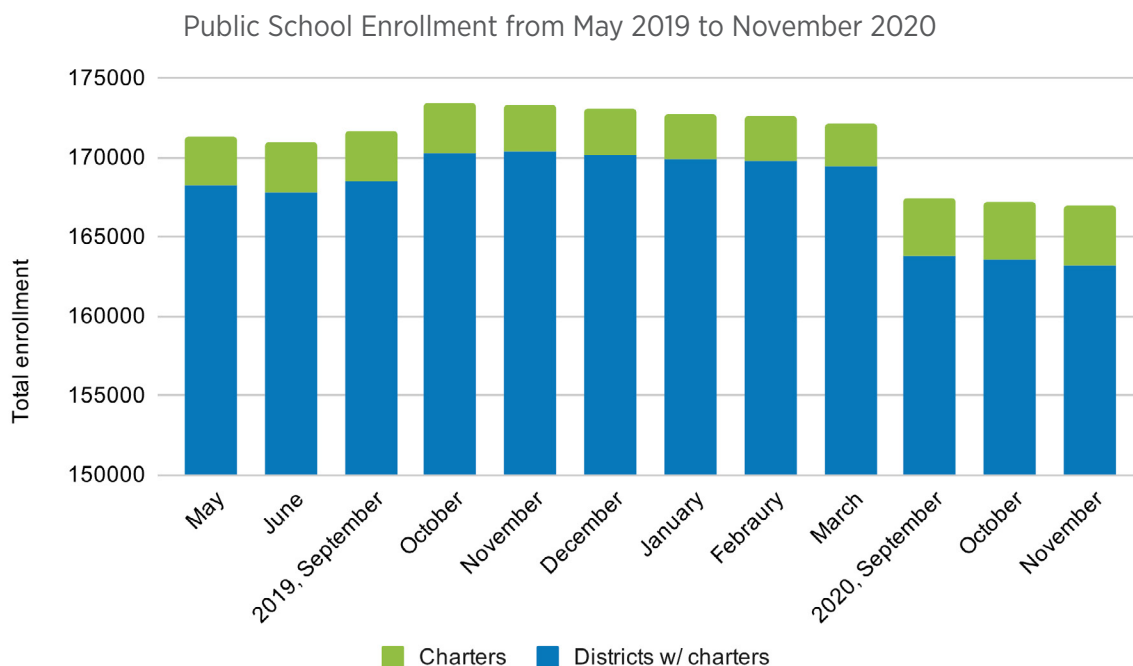
*Note:* Because of COVID-19, schools did not report monthly enrollment numbers for April 2020 to June 2020. Charter school students are not included in district enrollment totals.

The nine Washington charter schools we examined increased enrollment by only 4 percent between June 2018 and September 2019,<sup>2</sup> making this year’s enrollment increase a significant jump over last year’s. Washington State is not alone. In [Massachusetts](#), enrollment in district-run schools has also declined alongside increasing enrollment in charter schools and other alternatives.

<sup>2</sup> Many of these schools enrolled one or two fewer grade levels in 2018, so this comparison is somewhat different from our findings for March 2020 to September 2020.

It's important to note that these nine charter schools—even after a 35 percent increase in enrollment—only account for about 3,600 students, or just over 1 percent of the entire state's enrollment. The low baseline number of students enrolled in these schools means a relatively small number of new enrollees results in large growth in the percent change. This low enrollment indicates that the decline in local district schools is not fully explained by movement into charter schools (figure 3).

**Figure 3. Increases in Charter School Enrollment Do Not Account for Enrollment Declines in Local District Schools**



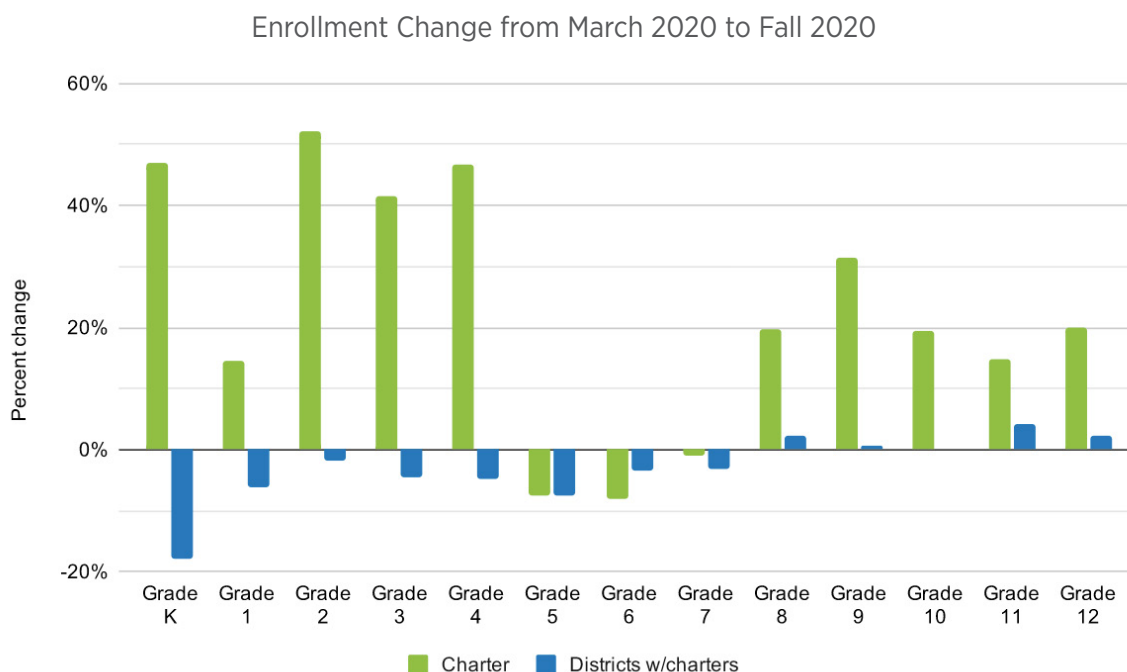
Source: 1251H Headcount, OSPI Apportionment Documents, May 2019 to November 2020 for charter schools in existence since 2018 and the school districts in which they are located.  
 Note: Charter school students are not included in district enrollment totals.

It is unclear why enrollment rose in charter schools. However, learning mode would not account for the increase. All Washington charter schools started the 2020–21 year with a fully virtual model, just as the districts where they were located did.

## Charter schools saw growth in grades where districts saw some of their greatest losses

The six districts where charter schools are located saw enrollment declines in the elementary grades, similar to trends statewide. In contrast, the nine charter schools in our sample increased enrollment in grades K-4 and 8-12 (figure 4).

**Figure 4. Charter School Enrollment Increased in All but Grades 5 to 7 in September 2020**



*Source:* 1251H Headcount, OSPI Apportionment Documents, May 2019 to November 2020 for charter schools in existence since 2018 and the school districts in which they are located.

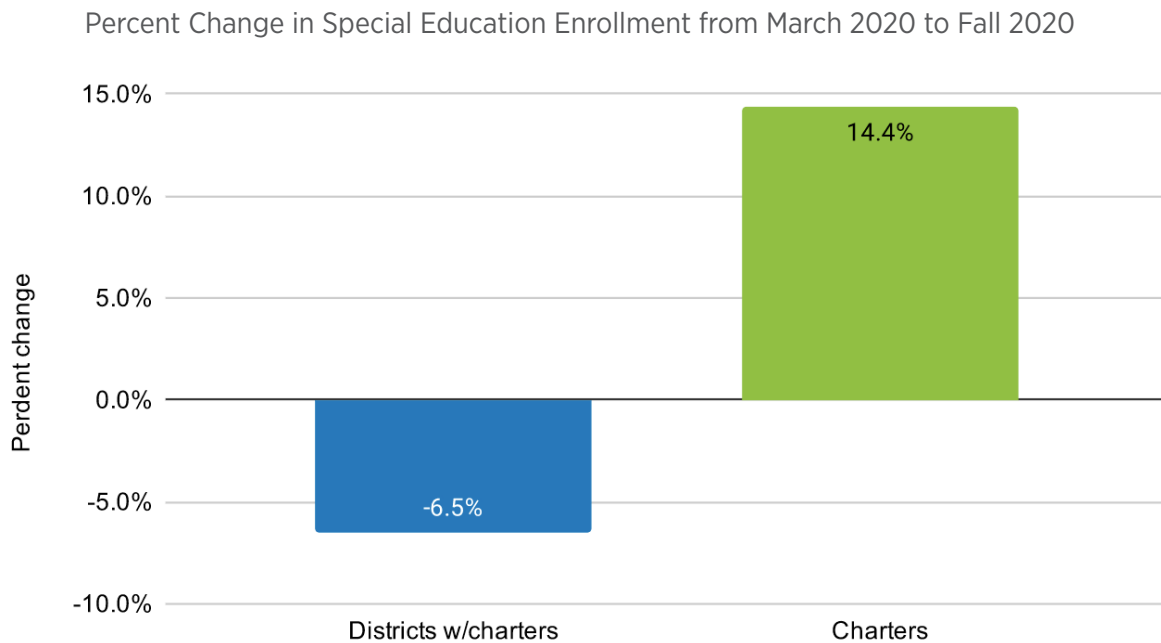
*Note:* Charter school students are not included in district enrollment totals.

The two elementary charter schools in our sample, Impact | Puget Sound Elementary and Spokane International Academy, account for the gains in elementary enrollment. Three of the four charter high schools are operated by Summit Public Schools, which already had a blended learning model before the pandemic.

## Charter school enrollment for students with disabilities grew more than 14 percent

For districts with local charter schools, enrollment for students with disabilities declined by 7 percent from March to September 2020. Meanwhile, charter schools increased their share of students with disabilities by just under 15 percent (figure 5).

**Figure 5. Enrollment for Students with Disabilities Increased by Nearly 15 Percent in Washington Charter Schools**



Source: 1735T Special Education, OSPI Apportionment Documents, March 2020 to November 2020 for all charter schools and their associated district LEAs; "Preliminary Enrollment Numbers Show Families Delaying Kindergarten Start; More Alternative Learning," OSPI New Release, October 7, 2020.

Note: Fall enrollment was calculated for charter schools and districts with charter schools as the average enrollment for the months of September, October, and November. Charter school students are not included in district enrollment totals.

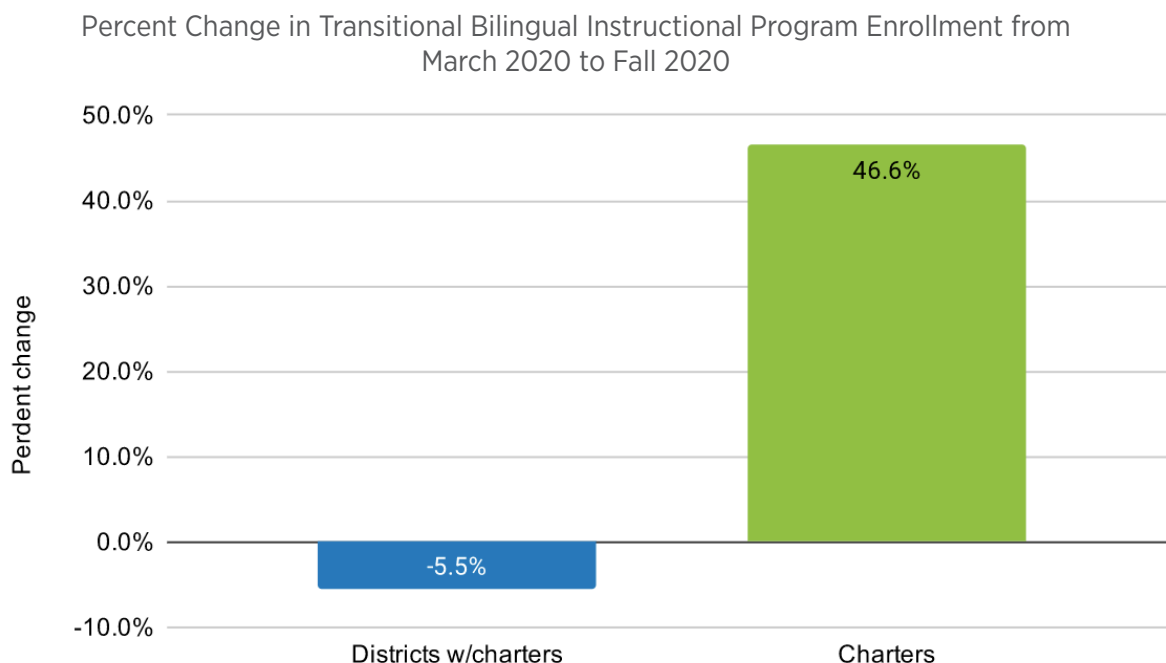
The enrollment decline in districts is likely due to students with disabilities not enrolling, combined with delays in identification. Between September 2020 and November 2020, districts containing charter schools have added about 300 more students with disabilities to their rosters.

We are not sure why special education enrollment in charter schools increased. It is important to note that while enrollment of students with disabilities increased by nearly 15 percent in the state's charter schools, that accounts for only about 60 students.

## English language learner enrollment fell over 5 percent in districts, but charter schools saw a nearly 50 percent increase

In districts with local charter schools, enrollment of students receiving transitional bilingual services (also called English language learners)<sup>3</sup> declined between March 2020 and September 2020. Charter schools, by contrast, saw almost a 47 percent increase (figure 6).

**Figure 6. Enrollment among Students Receiving Transitional Bilingual Services Increased by Almost 50 Percent in Washington Charter Schools**



Source: 1251H Headcount, OSPI Apportionment Documents, March 2020 to September 2020 for all charter schools and their associated district LEAs; “Preliminary Enrollment Numbers Show Families Delaying Kindergarten Start; More Alternative Learning,” OSPI New Release, October 7, 2020.

Note: Fall enrollment was calculated for charter schools and districts with charter schools as the average enrollment for the months of September, October, and November. Charter school students are not included in district enrollment totals.

We do not know what is driving increased enrollment in charter schools. As with students with disabilities, it could be that charter schools have more capacity than their local districts to identify students for services. Charter schools could also have successfully recruited new families over the summer or offered more effective remote learning experiences. It is important to note that this increase of 47 percent in enrollment translates to only 140 students.

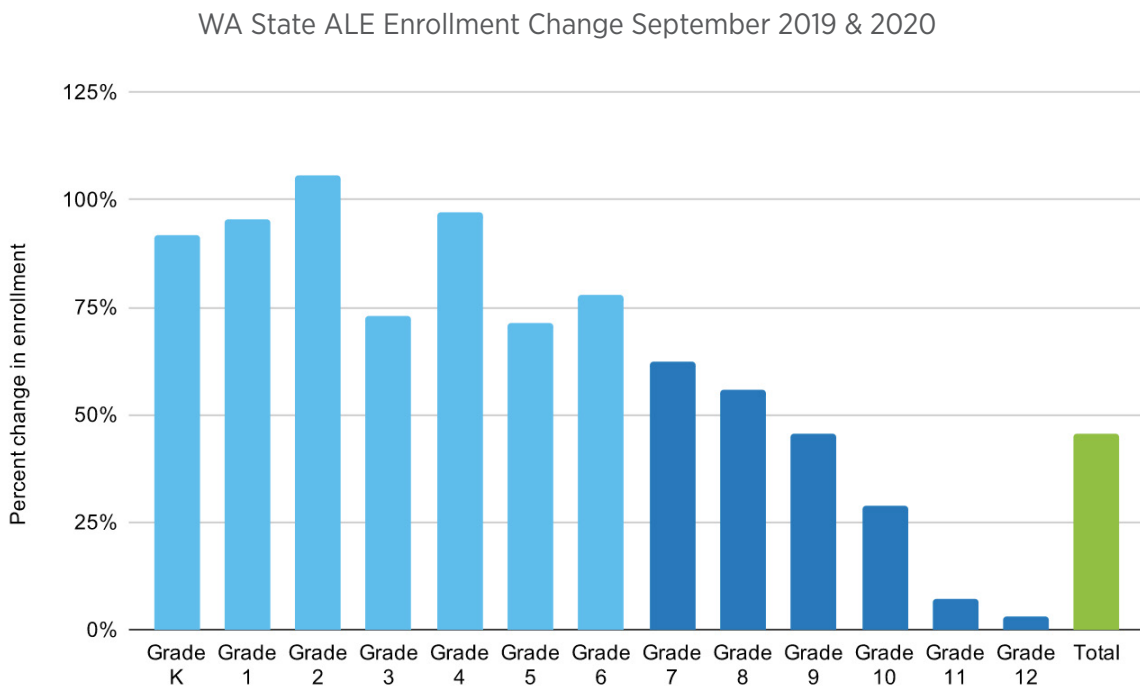
<sup>3</sup> Students in the state’s [Transitional Bilingual Instructional Program \(TBIP\)](#) receive specialized instruction to aid in their acquisition of English and/or maintenance of the student’s native language.



## Enrollment in district-run alternative programs grew by nearly 50 percent statewide

Districts in Washington State have the ability to offer [Alternative Learning Experiences \(ALEs\)](#), which can include independent study courses, drop-out recovery programs, or district-run virtual schools. Enrollment in these alternative options increased by 46 percent statewide between September 2019 and September 2020. The largest increases were in grades K-6 (figure 7). Washington’s Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction [instructed districts](#) not to create new ALEs just for the pandemic, so most increases in enrollment have occurred for previously existing programs.

**Figure 7. Alternative Learning Environments Saw Growth of Over 75 Percent in Most Elementary Grades**



Source: “Preliminary Enrollment Numbers Show Families Delaying Kindergarten Start; More Alternative Learning,” *OSPI New Release*, October 7, 2020.

Note: Data presented in this chart include all district and charter schools in the state.

Enrollment trends for ALEs reinforce the fact that families of elementary-aged children are more likely to seek alternatives to their district-run school this year.

## Implications

### ***Federal funding shortfall looms for district schools***

Washington State adjusts school district and charter school funding allocation based on monthly enrollment counts. State funding allocations are increasing in real time for school systems where enrollment is rising, and decreasing in schools where enrollment is falling.

Unlike state funding, federal funding is based on the prior year's enrollment. Enrollment declines in 2020 will mean less federal funding in 2021 for district-run schools. For charter schools, larger enrollment numbers in 2020 will not translate into federal funding increases until 2021. Federal funds account for a small percentage of a typical district's budget (about [9 percent](#)), but [can be much greater](#) for schools with large numbers of students in poverty and students with disabilities.

As state policymakers plan for the 2021–2022 school year, they must consider these possible impacts to federal funding. State policymakers should consider using CARES funds to cushion the impact of decreased federal funds next school year. Schools would have the resources they need to serve students who have been hard hit by the pandemic—students with disabilities, English language learners, and students living in poverty.

### ***Charter schools need additional support to continue educating large populations of students with disabilities***

Washington State only [funds up to 13.5 percent](#) of students with disabilities. Schools with special education enrollment over that cap will not receive state special education funding for additional students with disabilities who choose to enroll.

Six of the nine charter schools in our sample exceeded this cap as of September 2020: they do not receive any state funding to provide essential support to some of their students with disabilities. Policymakers should consider eliminating this cap so public schools of choice that attract higher concentrations of students with special needs have the resources they need to serve those students well.

### ***Many questions are left unanswered***

The pandemic has impacted the education of all students, but it is likely that [students with disabilities](#) and [English language learners](#) have been hit especially hard. Their education requires the continuation of specialized services and classes that may not translate well to a remote environment. Prior to COVID-19, these students already saw lower [graduation rates](#) and [achievement growth](#) than their Washington State peers.

Charter schools offered an educational experience that appears to have attracted families during the pandemic, particularly families of young children, students with disabilities, and English language learners, but we do not know why. Which charter schools drive these enrollment changes? Were charter schools better able to engage and communicate with families? Identify students for special education and bilingual services? Offer a high-quality educational experience? How do the trends we found vary across geographic regions in Washington?

It is critical to capture and share lessons from schools that have identified effective learning strategies for students with disabilities and English language learners. In 2021, CRPE will be conducting an analysis of how charter schools engaged families and addressed learning loss for students with disabilities and English language learners. The hope is that all schools may be able to learn important lessons about the strategies these charter schools used to educate students and engage families during the pandemic.

Policymakers and school district officials will likely face tremendous uncertainty as they plan for the 2021–22 school year. Many families did not enroll their elementary-aged children this school year, and some families shifted their children out of district-run schools and into charter schools and other alternatives. It’s unclear, however, to what extent these trends represent a short-term shift that will snap back once the crisis passes, or result in lasting changes to the state’s education landscape.

## Acknowledgments

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