

Charter School Summary

In 1996, the North Carolina House of Representatives ratified Bill 955, also known as the Charter School Act. This legislation permitted the “[authorization] of a system of charter schools” to expand the choices of educational opportunities for North Carolina students, to provide new opportunities for teachers, to encourage and model new teaching methods and techniques, to better target students who identify as being at risk of failure or academically gifted, and to improve the North Carolina public school system overall.¹

Charter schools differ from traditional public schools in that they are not governed by an elected board, have no curriculum requirements and class size restrictions, and are not accountable to the same standards as traditional public schools are (i.e. student transportation, free and reduced-price lunches, nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity) that work to provide an equal-opportunity learning environment.

Since the ratification of the Charter School Act, 201 schools have passed the State Board of Education's application process, which includes applying two years in advance of the school's intended start date; paying a fee of \$1000 (previously \$500); undergoing reviews by Department of Public Instruction's Office of Charter Schools (OCS) and the Charter School Advisory Board (CSAB); an interview by the CSAB; and final approval by the State Board of Education (SBE). Until 2012, there was a cap on the number of charter schools in the state: 100. Nowadays, there is no limit to the number of charter schools, and 148 charter schools are in operation today.

Table 1.

NC Charter School Enrollment ²							
Year	# of Charter Schools	# of Charter Students	% of Total Public School Students	Year	# of Charter Schools	# of Students	% of Total Public School Students
1996: HB 955, NC Statute 115C-238.29A	--	--	--	2006	93	29170	2.03%
1997	34	--	--	2007	98	30892	2.11%
1998	59	8555	0.70%	2008	97	34694	2.35%
1999	77	12691	1.00%	2009	96	38122	2.60%
2000	90	15506	1.21%	2010	99	41232	2.79%
2001	93	18199	1.40%	2011	100	44829	3.03%
2002	93	20404	1.54%	2012	108	48795	3.23%
2003	93	21903	1.63%	2013	127	58464 ³	3.91%
2004	96	25188	1.84%	2014 ⁴	148	--	--
2005	98	26473	1.94%	2015 ⁵	--	--	--

- 1 The OCS provides the complete and updated Bill 955 on its website, [available here](#). The quoted material comes from [§ 115C-238.29A, Purpose](#).
- 2 SYs 1997-98 through 1999-00 data derived from “Charter Schools in North Carolina” (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). SYs 2000-01 through 2012-13 data derived from the OCS website’s Facts and Figures pages, available [here](#). Average Daily Membership (ADM) spreadsheets for SYs 2013-14 is available for download [here](#).
- 3 Total enrollment of charter school students based on Month 4 Average Daily Membership (ADM)
- 4 SB 793 significantly modified the charter law, revising the approval and renewal deadlines, requiring charter schools to have open board meetings and abide by public record laws, and allowing schools to expand the number of grades offered without seeking approval from the Board of Education, amongst other things. This suggests that while the number of charter school applicants may decrease, the number of charter school students is bound to continue increasing. The OCS has provided the full text of SB 793 [here](#).

From 1997 to 2000, the number of charter schools in NC increased greatly as applicants took advantage of the new alternative school system. In 2000, 2001, and from 2004 to 2011, the number of charter schools remained in the 90s, though this number fluctuated over the years. Since 2012, the increase in the number of charter schools has returned to its pre-2000 rate; however, following the passage of SB 793 in 2014 (refer to Footnote #4), the number of charter school applications and the number of charter schools approved have decreased.

Concerning the fluctuating number of charter schools over the years, in no more than three consecutive years since the authorization of the charter school system has the number of charter schools been stagnant. In the last seventeen years, fifty-three charter have been approved and either not opened (14) or closed (39) for a number of reasons, including issues with governance, finances, and poor academic performance. Some schools have closed (or converted to private schools) because of their charters not being renewed, some have had their charters revoked, and others have voluntarily relinquished their charters, sometimes just months into the school year.

Of the charter schools that have closed, the average time spent in operation is 5.4 years. According to SB 793, the SBE will “review the operations of each charter school at least once every five years to ensure that the school is meeting the expected. . . standards.” This is half of the amount of time for which the SBE now grants and renews charters: 10 years, provided that a school requests its charter be renewed and

- Provides financially-sound audits for 3 years before it requests renewal;
- Has academic outcomes reflecting those of other public school in its LEA 3 years prior to renewal; and
- Abides by state law, federal law, the school’s bylaws, and the provisions of its charter.⁶

Overall, there are 148 charter schools in 57 of NC's 100 counties. It is worth mentioning that the Department of Public Instruction organizes schools by LEAs—Local Education Agencies—that tend to mimic the geographic boundaries of counties, with few exceptions. For example, in the table above, Buncombe County is listed as having five charter schools; it is composed of two LEAs, Buncombe (110) and Asheville City (111), which have four and one charter schools, respectively.

Concerning the number of LEAs that have charter schools, of NC's 115 LEAs, 60 have charter schools as of 2014. In 2012, only 48 LEAs had charter schools, reflecting not only increases in the number of charter schools and their students, but a geographic spread of charter schools across the state.

5 Pending information, but so far eleven schools have been approved to open in 2015 through the fast track process.

6 See Section 2 of SB 793 [here](#).

Table 2.

Charter Schools by County (2014-2015)	
#	County
22	Mecklenburg
19	Wake
11	Durham
7	Guilford
5	Buncombe, Forsyth
4	Iredell, New Hanover
3	Alamance, Cabarrus, Chatham, Columbus, Orange
2	Avery, Brunswick, Cumberland, Gaston, Granville, Moore, Person, Robeson, Rutherford, Vance, Wayne, Wilson
1	Beaufort, Bertie, Bladen, Burke, Carteret, Cherokee, Cleveland, Currituck, Edgecombe, Franklin, Halifax, Harnett, Henderson, Jackson, Johnston, Lenoir, Lincoln, Martin, Nash, Northampton, Onslow, Pamlico, Randolph, Rockingham, Stanly, Surry, Swain, Transylvania, Union, Warren, Watauga, Wilkes

Total: 148 schools in 57 counties

Table 3.

LEAs with an increase of 200 charter students or more from 2011-12 to 2013-14			
LEA Name	2011-12 ⁷	2013-14 ⁸	# ⁹
600-Char.-Mecklenburg	6,761	8,665	1,904
410-Guilford	1,819	3,685	1,866
320-Durham	3,379	4,950	1,571
360-Gaston	1,975	2,930	955
330-Edgecombe	0	899	899
920-Wake	6,552	7,423	871
490-Iredell-Statesville	2,203	2,938	735
130-Cabarrus	526	1,240	714
340-Forsyth	1,877	2,445	568
390-Granville	0	404	404
260-Cumberland	258	592	334
230-Cleveland	0	301	301
580-Martin	0	301	301
550-Lincoln	1,374	1,663	289
241-Whiteville City	594	834	240
510-Johnston	532	750	218
660-Northampton	689	907	218
190-Chatham	822	1,039	217
780-Robeson	111	318	207

7 Charter school enrollment is derived here from the Department of Public Instruction's Average Daily Membership (ADM) spreadsheets, which are available for download [here](#). Charter schools are listed as their own LEAs by the DPI; their LEA numbers are assigned based on which regular LEA they fall under. For example, Gaston County School's LEA number is 360; its two charter schools are listed as LEAs 36B and 36C. To calculate the number of students enrolled in Gaston County's (LEA 360) charter schools, the Final ADMs of LEAs 36B and 36C (as listed on the SY 2011-12 spreadsheet) were added.

8 For SY 2013-14 the above applies; however, the Final ADM is not yet available for that year, and so these numbers are derived from Month 4 ADM, as listed on the SY 2013-14 spreadsheet.

9 Charter school enrollment per LEA in SY 2013-14 minus charter school enrollment per LEA SY 2011-12

While it may not be surprising that the largest LEA in the state, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, also has the greatest increase in the number of charter school students, it is worth noting that since the lifting of the 100-school cap in 2012, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has gained 5 charter schools, with at least another 3 scheduled to open next school year, 2014-15. Moreover, of the 53 charter schools that have been either approved and never opened or closed, the 4 most recent are all Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools (StudentFirst Academy, Charlotte Charter High School, West Charlotte Charter High School, and Concrete Roses STEM Academy).

Table 4.

LEAs with the highest percentage of charter school students: 2013-14			
LEA Name	Charter Students	Total Students	%
660-Northampton	907	2958	30.66%
241-Whiteville City	834	3085	27.03%
690-Pamlico	424	1693	25.04%
862-Mount Airy City	532	2217	24.00%
730-Person	1081	5648	19.14%
810-Rutherford	1602	10112	15.84%
320-Durham	4950	38135	12.98%
330-Edgecombe	899	6971	12.90%
550-Lincoln	1163	13231	12.57%
910-Vance	937	7485	12.52%

Northampton County has 8 traditional public schools (4 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, 1 high school, and 1 alternative schools) and only 1 charter school; however, the charter school, KIPP Gaston College Prep, serves grades K-1 and 5-12. Similarly, Whiteville City Schools has 5 traditional public schools (2 elementary schools, 1 middle school, 1 high school, and 1 alternative school) and only 1 charter school; this charter school, which accounts for more than a fourth of the LEA's enrollment, is Columbus Charter School, and serves grades K-8.

Table 5.

LEAs with the highest number of charter school students: 2013-14			
LEA Name	Charter Students	Total Students	%
600-Char.-Mecklenburg	8665	150871	5.74%
920-Wake	7423	160640	4.62%
320-Durham	4950	38135	12.98%
410-Guilford	3685	75582	4.88%
490-Iredell-Statesville	2938	23835	12.33%
360-Gaston	2930	34110	8.59%
340-Forsyth	2445	55761	4.38%
550-Lincoln	1663	13231	12.57%
810-Rutherford	1602	10112	15.84%
010-Alamance-Burlington	1328	23910	5.55%

Unsurprisingly, the two LEAs with the highest number of charter schools students are Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Wake, the two LEAs with the greatest number of charter schools and the greatest number of public school students overall. For the most part, the LEAs in this table have at least two charter schools each; the exception is Lincoln, where Lincoln Charter School alone—with two campuses in Lincolnton and Denver—has a high enough enrollment to make it onto this chart.

Table 6.

LEAs with the highest number of minority students in charter schools, 2013-14 ¹⁰									
LEA Name	A	B	H	NA	PI	2+	Total # of Minority Students	Total # of Charter Students	% of Charter Students
600-Char.-Mecklenburg	316	3098	389	17	2	393	4215	8646	48.75%
320-Durham	118	2315	541	15	9	144	3142	4925	63.80%
920-Wake	534	1446	546	19	6	301	2852	7412	38.48%
340-Forsyth	18	1025	499	10	2	92	1646	2435	67.60%
410-Guilford	208	1087	174	17	5	103	1594	3660	43.55%
640-Washington	15	796	45	41	0	30	927	1213	76.42%
980-Wilson	1	477	260	0	1	10	749	762	98.29%
660-Northampton	6	695	21	7	0	13	742	904	82.08%
360-Gaston	34	369	115	9	1	72	600	2160	27.78%
490-Iredell-Statesville	133	200	109	5	1	71	519	2936	17.68%

**A = Asian B = Black H = Hispanic NA = Native American
PI = Pacific Islander 2+ = Two or more**

Since Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools is the largest LEA by enrollment, as well as the LEA with the greatest number of charter schools, it should be no surprise that charter schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg enroll the greatest number of minority—particularly, Black—students. Four of the top five LEAs that have the greatest number of minority students in their charter schools cover the four most populous counties in the state: Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Wake, Forsyth, and Guilford.

Overall, Black students are dominant minority group in NC's charter schools. Charlotte-Mecklenburg charter schools have enrolled the greatest number of Black students (3098 students); furthermore, Wake charter schools have enrolled the greatest number of Asian students (534 students) as well as Hispanic students (546 students).

¹⁰ Tables #6 and #7 data based on the SY 2013-14 Grade, Sex, Race spreadsheet, available for download [here](#). This spreadsheet uses ADM data from the end of the third school month, hence the difference in the numbers of charter students in Tables #6 and #7 and those in Tables #3, #4, and #5. Moreover, this spreadsheet, like other publications by the Department of Public Instruction, lists charter schools as individual LEAs; in the process of calculating the total number of students by race and ethnicity, the number of students in any particular racial/ethnic group per LEA is the sum of all students in that particular group enrolled in charter schools within the corresponding, traditional public school LEA.

Table 7.

LEAs with the highest percentage of minority students in charter schools, 2013-14									
LEA NAME	A	B	H	NA	PI	2+	Total # of Minority Students	Total # of Charter Students	% of Charter Students
540-Lenoir	1	236	3	0	0	0	240	241	99.59%
980-Wilson	1	477	260	0	1	10	749	762	98.29%
960-Wayne	0	194	1	0	0	0	195	199	97.99%
930-Warren	0	29	1	144	0	5	179	184	97.28%
670-Onslow	0	55	1	0	0	29	85	91	93.41%
660-Northampton	6	695	21	7	0	13	742	904	82.08%
260-Cumberland	6	8	64	352	7	20	457	594	76.94%
640-Washington	15	796	45	41	0	30	927	1213	76.42%
340-Forsyth	18	1025	499	10	2	92	1646	2435	67.60%
240-Columbus	0	63	8	4	9	0	84	130	64.62%

A = Asian B = Black H = Hispanic NA = Native American PI = Pacific Islander 2+ = Two or more

Perhaps the two most interesting aspects of this chart is the prominence of Native American students—a student group that is largely unidentified with in Table 6—in Warren, Cumberland, and Washington LEAs. Moreover, all but one of the LEAs listed, Forsyth, are located in more rural areas of eastern North Carolina.

Table 8.

Charter School EOG Results by Percent Level, 2013-14 ¹¹		
Percent Level	#	% = (#/115) x 100
Below grade level (1, 2)	46	40.00%
Grade level (3)	0 ¹²	0.00%
Career and college ready (4, 5)	69	60.00%

Total number of charter schools with EOG scores: 115

Total number of charter schools in data set: 121

The NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) presents EOG and test results in five categories, or “percent levels.” The highest achieving students score in percent level 5, and the lowest achieving students score in percent level 1. According to the DPI’s State District School Level EOG and EOC annual report, in SY 2013-14 the majority of students scored in either Level 2, just below grade level, or Level 4, just above it; this generalization holds true for both EOG and All Subjects scores, as the results in the two categories typically mirror each other.

11 Tables #8 and #9 data derived from DPI’s 2013-14 State, District, and School Level End-of-Course and End-of-Grade Assessments Report, available for download [here](#).

12 Of the 127 charter schools whose scores were analyzed, there was only one school in which a significant portion of the student populace scored at grade level: Water’s Edge Village School, in which approximately one-third of the students scored at grade level, Level 3. One-third of the school’s students earned Level 2 scores; this percentage, combined with the percentage of students that earned Level 1 scores, ultimately led to the school being classified as one that scored below grade level.

Table 8 provides the number of charter schools whose majority of students scored below grade level, at grade level, or above grade level—what the SBE identifies as “career and college ready”—on their EOGs. As the table illustrates, charter school students tend to either be below grade level or career and college ready. Considering that some schools counted as one category or the other may only have been so on account of a slight margin, 23 charter schools had 60% or more of their students score below grade level—half of the number of charter schools whose students mostly scored below grade level. 36 charter schools had 60% or more of their students score above grade level—slightly more than half of the schools that mostly scored above grade level.

Table 9.

Charter School All Subjects Results by Percent Level, 2013-14		
Percent Level	# of Charter Schools	% = (#/121) x 100
Below grade level (1, 2)	49.5	40.91%
Grade level (3)	0	0.00%
Career and college ready (4, 5)	71.5	59.10%

Total number of charter schools in data set: 121

Once again considering that some schools counted as one category or the other may only have been so on account of a slight margin, 24 charter schools had 60% or more of their students score below grade level; this is slightly less than half of the number of charter schools whose students mostly scored below grade level. 36 charter schools had 60% or more of their students score above grade level—slightly more than half of the schools that mostly scored above grade level. One school, Coastal Academy for Technology and Science had half of its students (50%) score below grade level and half of its students score above it (50%) in all subjects, hence the additional 0.5 in the number of charter schools.