

Tennessee Charter School Enrollment During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic: Shifts, Trends, and Student Subgroups

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<https://bit.ly/charter-covid>

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INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public school enrollment patterns shifted dramatically across the United States. These changes varied across different types of public schools. Nationally, traditional public school (TPS) enrollment decreased by 4 percent during the pandemic (NCES, 2023). In contrast, between Fall 2019 and 2020, charter school enrollment increased by 7 percent across the U.S. (Jacobs & Veney, 2022). Post-pandemic, charter school enrollment continued to grow, driven in part by the increased enrollment of Black and Hispanic students (Jacobs & Veney, 2022; 2024), contributing to a narrative that families, especially those of minoritized students, turned to charter schools in response to pandemic disruptions.

These estimates, however, often did not consider pre-pandemic trends and varied widely by state and context. In some states, charter school enrollment grew significantly; in others, charter school enrollment decreased (Francis & Goodman, 2025; Jacob & Veney, 2024). In this policy brief, we examine student enrollment patterns in Tennessee, a state that has thus far been excluded in national reports (Jacob & Veney, 2022; 2024). We address two questions:

- 1) To what extent did Tennessee's charter school enrollment differ across prior-, during-, and post-pandemic?
- 2) Does this differ by school or student characteristics?

These findings contribute to a larger study that examines charter schools in Tennessee and Indiana amid the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

KEY FINDINGS

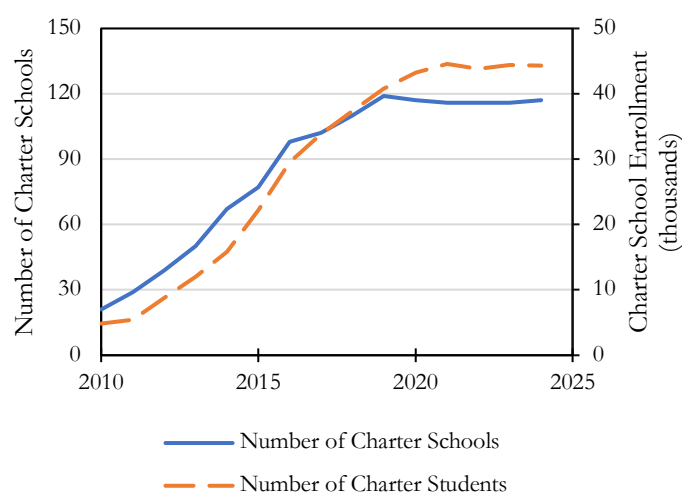
1. The COVID-19 pandemic had little meaningful effect on charter school enrollment in Tennessee. Charter enrollment increased slightly at the onset of the pandemic but subsequently continued to grow at approximately the same rate observed before the pandemic.
2. Enrollment shifts varied somewhat across student subgroups, but most differences were small. Students who were not economically disadvantaged exhibited the clearest evidence of increased, though still modest, charter school enrollment during the pandemic. Most other subgroup patterns remained broadly consistent with pre-pandemic trends.
3. Elementary, middle, and high schools all experienced small increases in charter enrollment during the pandemic. Post-pandemic, elementary charter enrollment resumed its pre-pandemic trends, middle school enrollment shifted from a small decline to small growth, and high school enrollment continued to decline, though at a slightly slower rate than before the pandemic.

¹ To see other findings from the project, including charter impacts on student achievement in Tennessee (Kho, Smith, & Zimmer, 2025a), see the project webpage: <https://bit.ly/charter-covid>

TENNESSEE CHARTER SCHOOLS

Since Tennessee's first charter school opened in 2003, the charter school sector has grown significantly, both in the number of charter schools and students. Figure 1 highlights that nearly 120 Tennessee charter schools currently serve approximately 45,000 students. These charter schools reside primarily in Tennessee's urban areas. In particular, over 90% of charter schools operate in the state's two largest urban regions, Nashville and Memphis, where approximately 1 in 5 students attend a charter school.

Figure 1. Tennessee's charter school sector grew substantially before the pandemic



Statewide, charter schools experienced a slight decrease in enrollment during the pandemic and a small increase thereafter. Our inquiry examines whether or not these trends were a result of the pandemic or related to broader changes in student populations during the same time period.

² Across all four of the geographic regions in our study, charter schools were generally authorized by the local school districts. However, in some cases, charter schools were authorized by the state or the Achievement School District. These charter schools reside within the geographical boundaries of local school districts; therefore, we include them in the study by assigning them to the respective geographic regions. See Kho, Smith, & Zimmer (2025b) for a more complete description.

³ Less than 0.5% of students made school transitions mid-March through the end of the school year.

DATA AND METHODS

To understand enrollment trends amid the pandemic, we use statewide, student-level longitudinal data from 2015-16 to 2023-24 provided by the Tennessee Department of Education. These data track individual students across years, allowing us to observe school transitions and enrollment patterns over time. Given our focus on charter schools, we limit our analyses to the four geographical regions that offered charter school options during the study period – Metropolitan Nashville, Shelby County (Memphis), Hamilton County (Chattanooga), and Knox County (Knoxville).²

Across the four regions with charter schools, we examine pre-pandemic enrollment trends consisting of school years 2015-16 through 2019-20, the immediate change associated with the onset of the pandemic into 2020-21, and post-pandemic enrollment trends consisting of transitions into school years 2021-22 through 2023-24. While the pandemic began in the Spring of the 2019-20 school year, student transitions between schools were uncommon in the last two months of the year³ suggesting that the pandemic's immediate effect on enrollment decisions would be at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. Schools in Tennessee primarily returned to in-person schooling in 2021-22, so we designate this as the start of the post-COVID period.

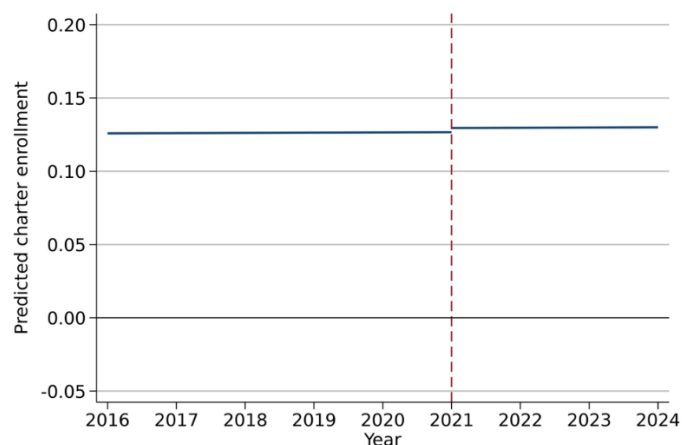
To better understand how enrollment changed across these periods, we estimated student fixed-effect models predicting the likelihood that a student enrolled in a charter school. We account for student characteristics, school level (elementary, middle, and high school), geographical region, local charter school availability, and pre-existing enrollment trends. Rather than comparing post-pandemic enrollment to a pre-pandemic average, our approach examines whether a student's likelihood of charter enrollment shifted relative to what prior trends would have predicted. We then estimate subgroup-specific patterns by gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, special education status, English learner (EL) status, and school level. Additional technical details are provided in the appendix.

RESULTS

Charter Enrollment Trends Amid the Pandemic

Figure 2 displays predicted overall charter school enrollment amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, charter participation was slowly increasing over time, with student probability of charter enrollment growing approximately 0.1 percentage points annually. At the onset of the pandemic, charter enrollment experienced a statistically significant but small increase of approximately 0.3 percentage points. Post-pandemic, enrollment trends closely mirrored pre-pandemic patterns, with charter enrollment continuing to increase at the same rate observed prior to the pandemic. Taken together, these findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic did not fundamentally alter overall charter school enrollment patterns in Tennessee. Rather, charter enrollment patterns within the four regions with charter schools remained largely stable during and after the pandemic.

Figure 2. The pandemic had little meaningful effect on overall charter school enrollment



Notes: This figure displays the predicted charter enrollment. We exclude 95% confidence intervals because they are not visually distinguishable from the estimated trend lines. The jump in enrollment in 2021 is statistically distinguishable from zero. The post-pandemic trend is not statistically different from the pre-pandemic trend

While statistically different than zero, these changes were small in magnitude.

Across the four regions of this study, Hispanic students experienced a 0.4 percentage point increase in charter enrollment after the onset of the pandemic in the 2020-21 school year. However, post-pandemic, the growth rate of Hispanic student enrollment in charter schools declined by 0.2 percentage points relative to pre-pandemic growth. This is similarly reflected in the post-pandemic growth rate of English learners' charter school enrollment with a decline of 0.4 percentage points relative to the pre-pandemic period. Despite these declines, the enrollment of Hispanic and English learner students continued to grow in the post-pandemic period, just at a slightly slower rate than observed before the pandemic.

For the remaining demographic subgroup analyses, estimated differences were generally limited. Some groups experienced either a small immediate change in 2020-21 or their growth rate post-pandemic changed slightly – no other groups experienced both an immediate and continual change.

Differences Across Student Subgroups

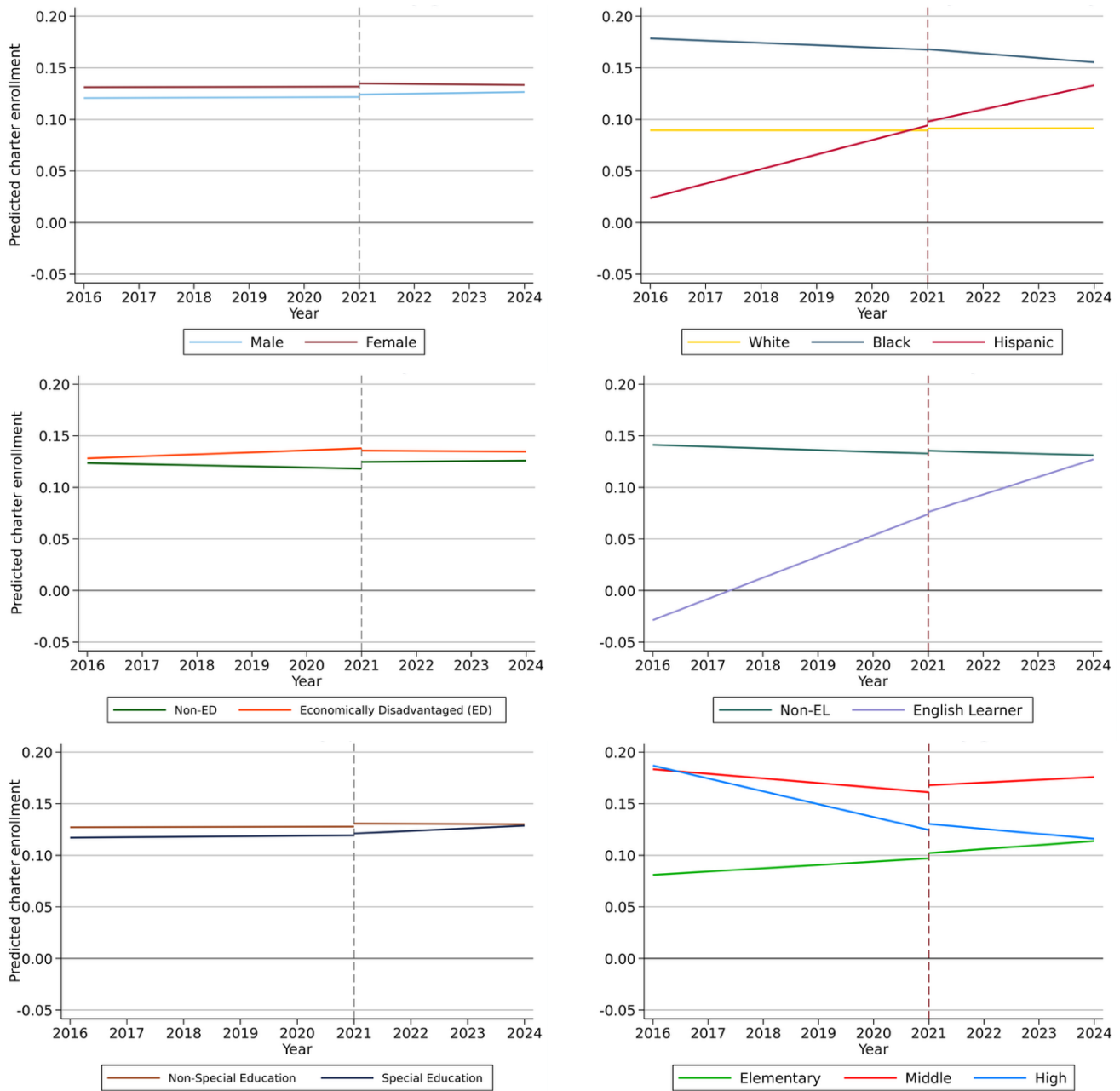
Figure 3 presents predicted enrollment patterns across student subgroups. Across most subgroups, pandemic-era changes were also small in magnitude. Gender, economic disadvantage status, special education status, English learner status, and school level were all associated with some statistically significant differences in enrollment patterns, but most estimated changes were relatively small in substantive terms.

Among demographic subgroups, the largest differences from pre-pandemic trends emerged for students who were not economically disadvantaged. Relative to pre-pandemic expectations, these students experienced an increase of approximately 0.7 percentage points in charter enrollment at the onset of the pandemic. They also exhibited an increase in post-pandemic enrollment growth rates relative to pre-pandemic trends – 0.2 percentage points per year. In contrast, economically disadvantaged students experienced an immediate 0.2 percentage point decline in charter school enrollment for the 2020-21 school year, a trend that persisted in the post-pandemic period.

Differences by school level were also statistically significant, though again small. Prior to the pandemic, charter enrollment was increasing among elementary students while declining among middle and high school students. At the onset of the pandemic, all three school levels experienced small increases, 0.5-0.7 percentage points, in charter enrollment relative to expected trends. Post-pandemic, charter elementary school enrollment continued the same growth trend as

pre-pandemic. High school enrollment continued to decline post-pandemic, although the rate of decline slowed relative to the pre-pandemic period. Middle school student enrollment reversed course and began seeing an increase post pandemic, though again, the change was small (from decreasing enrollment of 0.4 percentage points per year to an increasing enrollment of 0.3 percentage points per year).

Figure 3. Pandemic-related changes in charter enrollment were generally small across study subgroups



Notes: These figures display predicted charter enrollment by student subgroups. The y-axis is intentionally zoomed to improve visualization of subgroup differences. Most observed differences are substantively small. We exclude 95% confidence intervals because they are not visually distinguishable from the estimated trend lines. Specific estimates and their statistical significance levels are displayed in the appendix.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic substantially disrupted public education nationwide, but enrollment shifts within Tennessee's charter sector were relatively small. After accounting for pre-existing enrollment trends and student characteristics, we found that charter enrollment experienced a small jump at the onset of the pandemic but subsequently resumed a trajectory similar to that observed before the pandemic.

We also found that pandemic-era enrollment changes varied somewhat across student groups, although most differences were small in magnitude. Students who were not economically disadvantaged exhibited the clearest evidence of increased charter school enrollment during and after the pandemic relative to pre-pandemic trends. Differences also emerged across school levels, though differences were only fractions of percentage points and reflected small departures from pre-pandemic trends. For most other subgroups, observed differences were small and often reflected the continuation of existing enrollment patterns rather than substantial pandemic-related shifts.

National reports documented substantial growth in charter school enrollment during and after the pandemic. In contrast, our findings suggest that changes in Tennessee were generally small. Overall, charter enrollment was characterized more by continuity than change during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Enrollment patterns remained broadly consistent with pre-pandemic trajectories, suggesting that families' decisions to participate in the charter sector were relatively stable even amid a period of considerable educational disruption. Continued monitoring of enrollment patterns will be important for understanding whether the modest changes observed during this period persist over time.

REFERENCES

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To examine overall changes in charter school enrollment during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Research Question 1), we estimated a linear probability model predicting the likelihood that a student enrolled in a charter school. For this model, we restricted student records to one school per academic year, assigning students to the school that they spent the most time at in a given year. We modeled student probability of charter school enrollment as:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Charter}_{isrt} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Time}_t + \beta_2 \text{PostCOVID}_t \\ & + \beta_3 \text{Time_PostCOVID}_t \\ & + \beta_4 \text{SchLevel}_s + \beta_5 \text{NumCharters}_{rt} \\ & + X_{it} + C_r + \tau_i + \varepsilon_{isrt} \end{aligned}$$

The dependent variable is a binary indicator equal to 1 if student i enrolled in a charter school in school s , region r , and year t , and 0 otherwise. Time_t is a continuous measure of time that captures the pre-pandemic enrollment trend. PostCOVID_t is a binary indicator equal to 1 beginning with the 2020-21 school year and captures any immediate change in charter school enrollment associated with the onset of the pandemic. Time_PostCOVID_t is a continuous variable that measures time since the beginning of the post-pandemic period and captures changes in the enrollment trend following the pandemic. Together, these variables allow us to distinguish pre-pandemic trends, immediate pandemic-related shifts during COVID-19, and post-pandemic changes in enrollment trajectories.

The model utilizes student fixed effects, τ_i , to examine within-student changes over time, net time-invariant student characteristics. We also control for student-level covariates X_{it} , including economic disadvantage status, special education status, English learner status, gender, race/ethnicity, and school level, which is indicator for whether the student is in an elementary (K-5), middle (6-8), or high school (9-12) grade. While gender and race/ethnicity are time-invariant characteristics absorbed by the student fixed effect, we control for these characteristics due to a small portion of our sample that has different categories recorded over time. We also include local charter school

availability, NumCharters_{rt} , and region fixed effects, C_r , to control for time-invariant differences across local contexts. Standard errors are clustered at the student level.

To facilitate interpretation, we generated predicted probabilities from the estimated model and plotted pre-pandemic and post-pandemic enrollment trajectories.

Subgroup Analyses

To examine whether enrollment patterns differed across student subgroups (Research Question 2), we estimated expanded versions of the above model that interacted each individual subgroup indicator with Time_t , PostCOVID_t , and Time_PostCOVID_t . Each subgroup was interacted in a separate model to facilitate interpretation and ensure adequate computational power with small main effects. The subgroup models estimate whether students in different subgroups experienced different enrollment trajectories before the pandemic, different immediate enrollment shifts during the transition into the pandemic, and/or different post-pandemic enrollment trends. Predicted probabilities were generated from the estimated model and used to illustrate enrollment trajectories for each subgroup.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Predicted Changes at the Onset of the Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Relative to Pre-Pandemic

Group/Subgroup	Level Change at the Onset of the Pandemic	Slope Change Post-Pandemic
Overall	0.003*** (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
White	0.002*** (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
Hispanic	0.004** (0.001)	-0.002** (0.001)
Black	0.000 (0.001)	-0.002** (0.001)
Male	0.002** (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
Female	0.003*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.000)
Non-Economically Disadvantaged	0.007*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)
Economically Disadvantaged	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.002*** (0.001)
Non-Special Education	0.003*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.000)
Special Education	0.002 (0.001)	0.002* (0.001)
Non-English Learner	0.003*** (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
English Learner	0.002 (0.002)	-0.004*** (0.001)
Elementary	0.005*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.000)
Middle	0.007*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)
High	0.006*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.000)

Notes: These figures display the predicted charter enrollment for the specified student groups. Level changes represent immediate shifts in charter enrollment at the onset of the pandemic relative to pre-pandemic trends. Slope changes represent differences between post-pandemic and pre-pandemic enrollment trajectories. To interpret results as percentage-point changes, multiply estimates by 100. Standard errors are clustered at the student level and reported in parentheses. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, and ***p<0.001