

Educational Practices During & After the Pandemic: Evidence from Tennessee Charter and Traditional Public Schools

Ron Zimmer
Adam Kho
Danielle Duffy Chipman
University of Kentucky

Nicolas Pardo
Margaret Dawson-Amoah
Shelby L. Smith
University of Southern California

 Martin School of Public Policy and Administration

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

August 2026

KEY FINDINGS

1. Schools across both charter and traditional public school sectors experienced lasting challenges during and after the pandemic. Student behavior concerns, staffing challenges, and chronic absenteeism among both students and staff remained elevated throughout the pandemic and into the post-pandemic period.
2. Schools in both sectors adopted many of the same strategies to respond to pandemic-related disruptions. Across charter schools and traditional public schools, schools expanded tutoring, summer programming, communication with families, and alternative meal distribution.
3. Charter schools reported greater use of resource-intensive recovery strategies. Compared with responding traditional public schools, charter schools were more likely to hire across a broader range of positions, do so earlier, and extend instructional time following the pandemic.

Previously, as part of a larger project evaluating Tennessee charter schools, we [reported](#) that while the performance of the charter school students was generally on par with traditional public school (TPS) students during the pandemic (in 2020-21), charter school students consistently outperformed TPS students post-pandemic (2021-22 and 2022-23).¹ To provide additional context for these findings, we surveyed school leaders from charter schools and comparison TPSs about the challenges they faced and the practices they used amid the pandemic. While these data cannot identify which practices caused differences in student performance, they provide insight into how schools adapted during this period.

SURVEY OVERVIEW

Between spring 2025 and spring 2026, we surveyed principals, vice principals, deans, and other school leaders about the challenges their schools faced prior to the pandemic (before Spring 2020), during the pandemic (Spring 2020 through Spring 2021), and after the pandemic (Fall 2021 through Spring 2023), as well as the practices they used to address them. Adapted and extended from prior nationwide surveys (see appendix for more details), the survey covered a broad range of topics, including but not limited to mental health services, absenteeism, hiring, tutoring, summer programming, food distribution, and communication. Most items were asked across all three periods, while those related to learning loss and pandemic recovery were only asked about during and after the pandemic.²

¹ To see the full set of results and details of the analysis, see Kho et al. (2025) at <https://bit.ly/charter-covid>.

² The full survey is available at <https://bit.ly/charter-covid>

SAMPLE

We highlight two aspects of Tennessee’s charter sector relevant to this study. First, Tennessee law prohibits virtual charter schools, meaning charter schools faced the same initial challenge of transitioning to virtual instruction as TPSs at the start of the pandemic. Second, as of the 2023-24 school year, three years after most schools had returned to in-person instruction, charter schools operated in four regions - Nashville, Memphis, Chattanooga, and Knoxville.³ Accordingly, we limited our survey to schools in these four regions.

In Spring 2025, we contacted all Tennessee charter schools included in our achievement analysis (Kho et al., 2025), as well as a matched sample of TPSs to participate in the survey. To increase TPS respondents, in Fall 2025, we re-matched charter schools whose original TPS match did not respond and contacted additional matched TPSs. We contacted 195 schools (124 TPSs⁴ and 71 charter schools) and received

responses from 92 schools, including 62 TPSs from Memphis, Chattanooga, and Knoxville and 30 charter schools across the four regions. We were unable to survey TPSs in Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS).⁵ The overall response rate was 47% (50% for TPSs and 42% for charter schools).⁶ Additional sampling details are provided in the appendix.

Table 1 shows baseline demographic and performance characteristics of contacted and responding schools by sector. While schools were similar across most characteristics, charter and TPSs differed in the percentages of Hispanic and LEP students. Combined with the small sample size and the absence of TPSs from MNPS, we focus on descriptive comparisons rather than formal statistical tests between sectors. Accordingly, **our findings should be interpreted as descriptive rather than representative of Tennessee charter schools and TPSs.**

Table 1: Characteristics of Student Populations in the Contacted and Responding Schools

Characteristic (School Percent)	Contacted			Responded		
	Overall	TPS	Charter	Overall	TPS	Charter
Female	49.6	49.0	50.7	49.5	50.0	48.4
Students with Disabilities (SWD)	11.5	12.0	10.6	11.1	11.2	11.0
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	12.0	9.3	16.6	10.6	8.6	14.7
Economically Disadvantaged (ED)	57.8	60.1	53.8	57.5	59.7	52.8
White	9.8	11.1	7.6	9.8	10.7	7.9
Hispanic	15.3	12.5	20.2	14.2	10.9	21.0
Asian	1.0	1.2	0.7	1.0	1.2	0.5
Black/African American	73.7	75.0	71.4	74.7	76.9	70.3
Math Proficiency (2019)	27.9	29.1	25.9	30.9	32.1	28.8
Reading Proficiency (2019)	22.5	23.4	20.8	22.9	23.3	22.0
Number of Schools	195	124	71	92	62	30

Note: All demographics are from 2019-2020. Proficiency rates were collected from 2019 and reflect the percent of students “on track” or above on state exams. Source: <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>

³ As of the 2024-25 school year, two additional school districts have authorized their first charter schools.

⁴ We included magnet schools in the pool of TPSs.

⁵ Charter schools were matched to a set of TPSs throughout the three other districts that had charter schools (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, Hamilton County Schools, and Knox County Schools) that had similar demographic characteristics.

⁶ We received two responses from TPS which we did not initially contact. We exclude these schools from the response rate but include them in the responding school demographics and results as they are from our target districts.

PANDEMIC & POST-PANDEMIC CHALLENGES

Below, in a series of figures, we highlight a number of challenges schools faced during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Rather than showing responses to all survey items, we highlight items where there were meaningful differences over time or between sectors.

Student behavioral challenges generally worsened during and after the pandemic across both sectors.

Figure 1. Student Behavioral Challenges

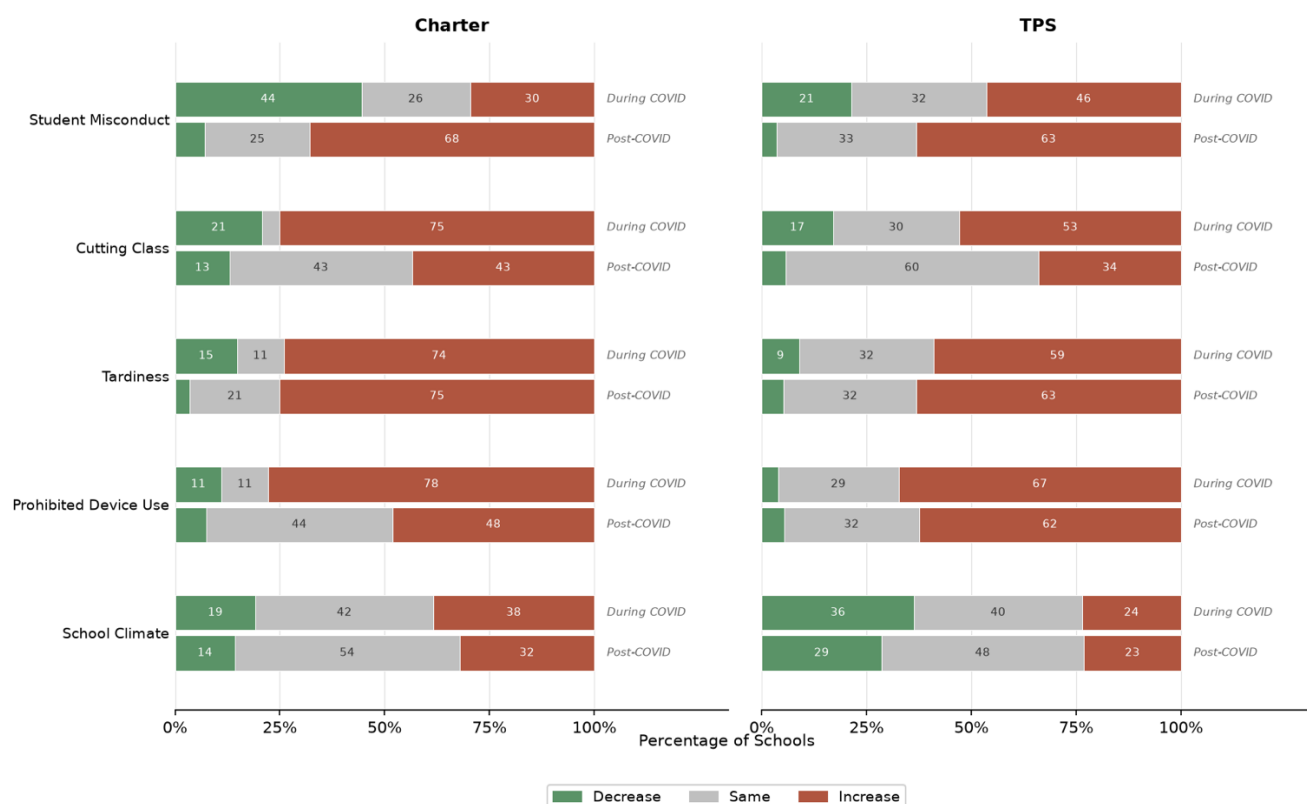


Figure 1 shows how schools reported changes in student behavioral challenges in charter schools and TPSs during and after the pandemic relative to the pre-pandemic period. Each bar indicates the percentage of schools reporting whether each challenge had decreased, stayed the same, or increased relative to the pre-pandemic period.⁷

Several patterns emerge. First, schools in both sectors commonly reported increases in student behavioral challenges during and after the pandemic. Second, reports of increased class cutting and prohibited device

use were more common during the pandemic, particularly among charter schools. Although these concerns became less prevalent after the pandemic, they remained more common than before the pandemic. Reports of tardiness also increased during the pandemic and remained a widely reported challenge afterward, especially for charter schools. Finally, relatively few schools reported improvements in school climate, although TPSs were somewhat more likely than charter schools to do so. The most common response from schools was that school climate remained similar to the pre-pandemic period.

⁷ School climate was reverse coded to align with other challenges such that “increased” indicates that school climate got worse.

Teacher-related staffing challenges also increased during and after the pandemic.

Figure 2. Teacher-Related Staffing Challenges

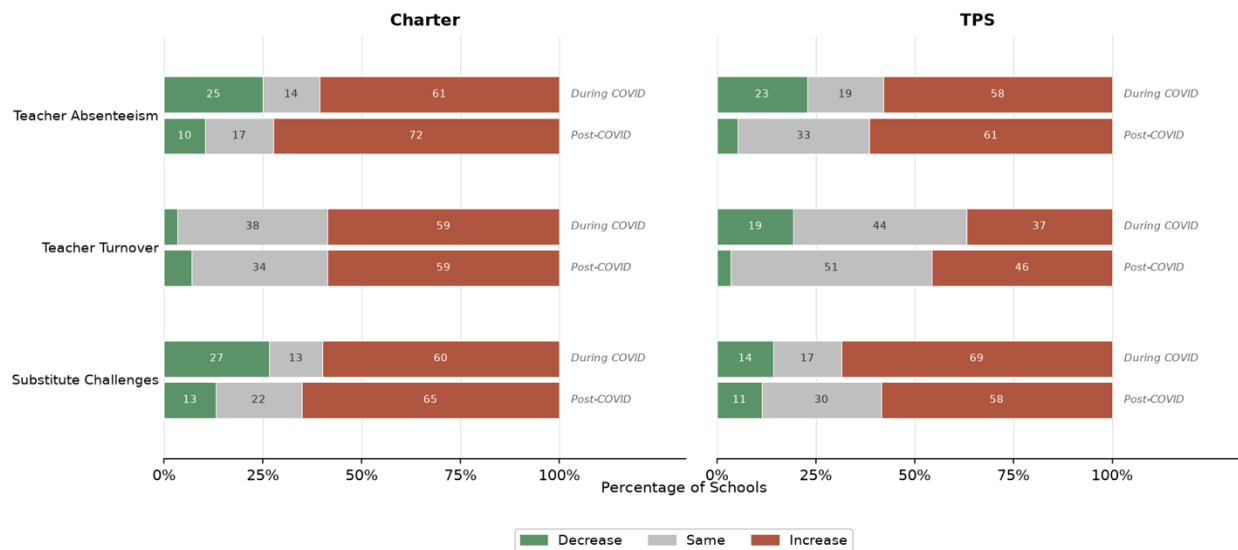


Figure 2 shows how charter schools and TPSs reported changes in teacher-related staffing challenges during and after the pandemic relative to the pre-pandemic period. Teacher absences became a greater challenge in both sectors during the pandemic, with an even larger share of schools reporting increased challenges post-pandemic. Teacher turnover showed a more mixed pattern. While many schools reported little change from the pre-pandemic period, charter school

respondents consistently reported greater turnover challenges during and after the pandemic. In contrast, more TPS respondents reported turnover as the same or less of a challenge than pre-pandemic. Finally, more than half of schools in both sectors reported greater challenges finding substitute teachers during and after the pandemic, although TPSs were slightly more likely to report an increase during the pandemic and charter schools slightly more likely afterward.

Student and staff chronic absenteeism increased and remained widespread after the pandemic.

Figure 3. Chronic Student and Staff Absenteeism

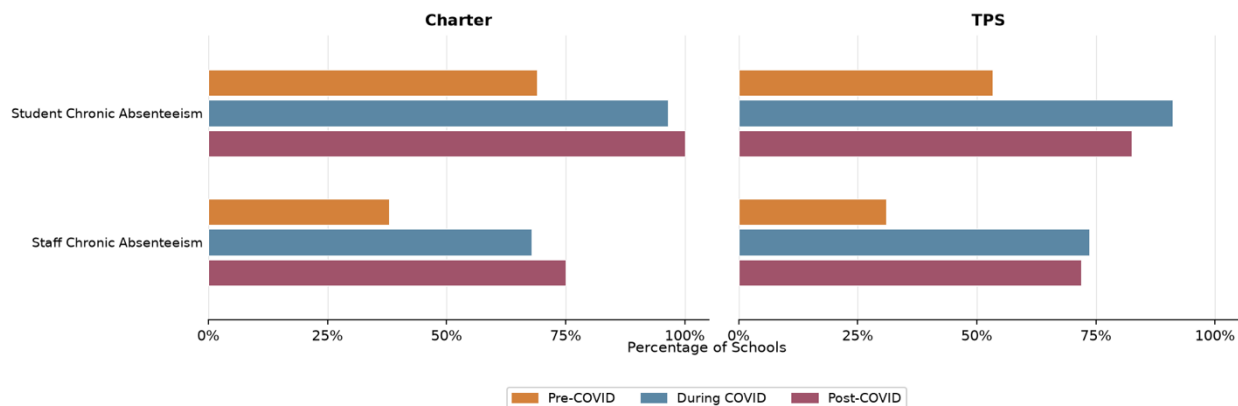


Figure 3 shows the percentage of responding schools reporting student or staff absenteeism challenges.⁸ Charter schools generally reported higher levels of chronic student absenteeism than TPSs, with 100% of

charter schools and 82% of TPSs reporting challenges post-pandemic. Schools in both sectors reported similar levels of staff chronic absenteeism, which was relatively uncommon prior to the pandemic.

⁸ Specific definitions for chronic or extended absenteeism were not provided in the survey.

SCHOOL PRACTICES IN RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

Schools responded to these and other challenges by expanding academic supports, communication strategies, staffing, and instructional time. In Figure 4, we show clusters of communication and meal provision practices. In Figure 5, we show clusters of instructional practices, including tutoring programs and summer offerings.

Schools shifted from crisis-response strategies during the pandemic, such as virtual communication and alternative meal distribution, to academic recovery efforts after the pandemic, including expanded high-dosage tutoring and summer programming, particularly among charter schools.

Figure 4. Communication and Meals

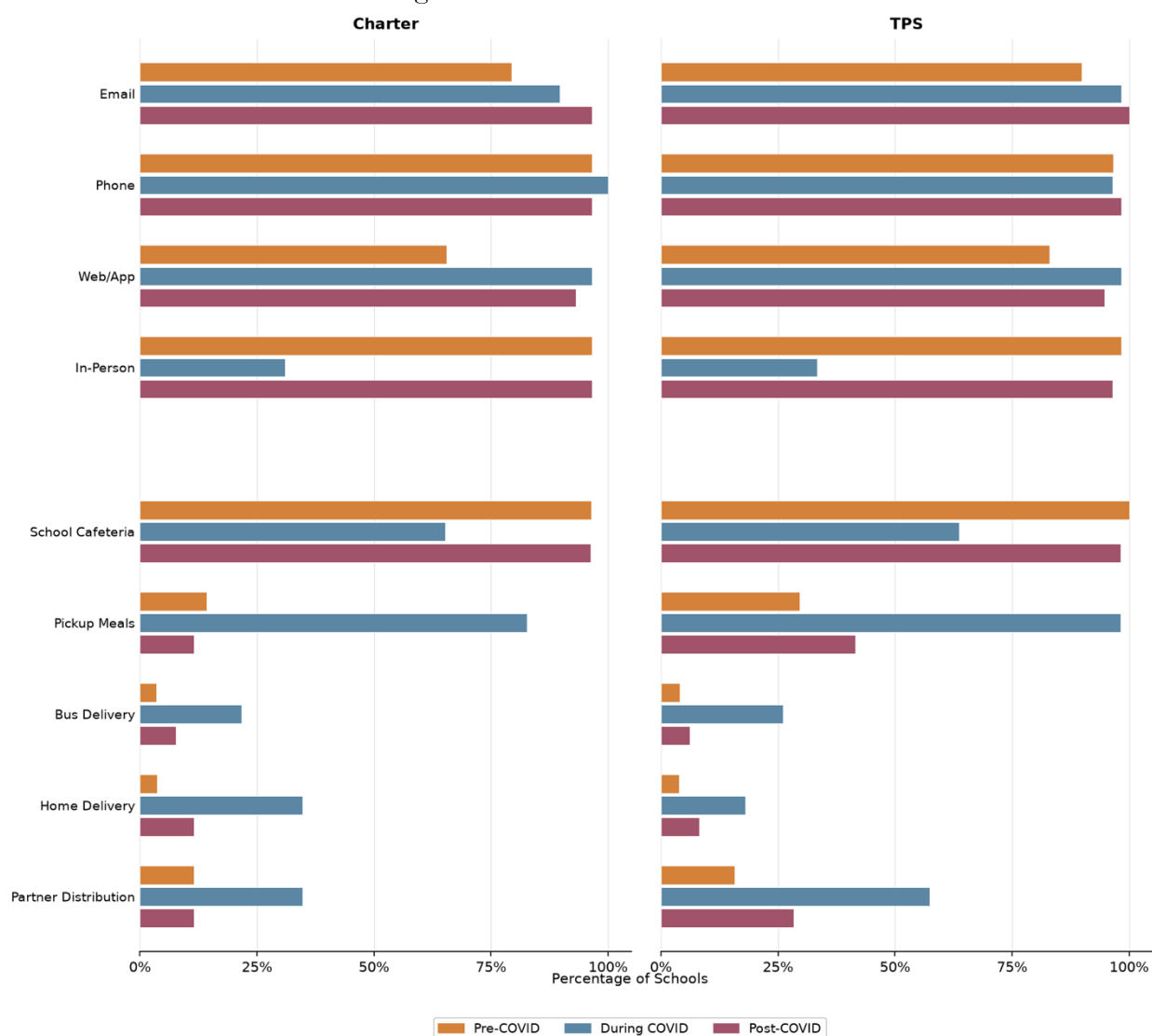
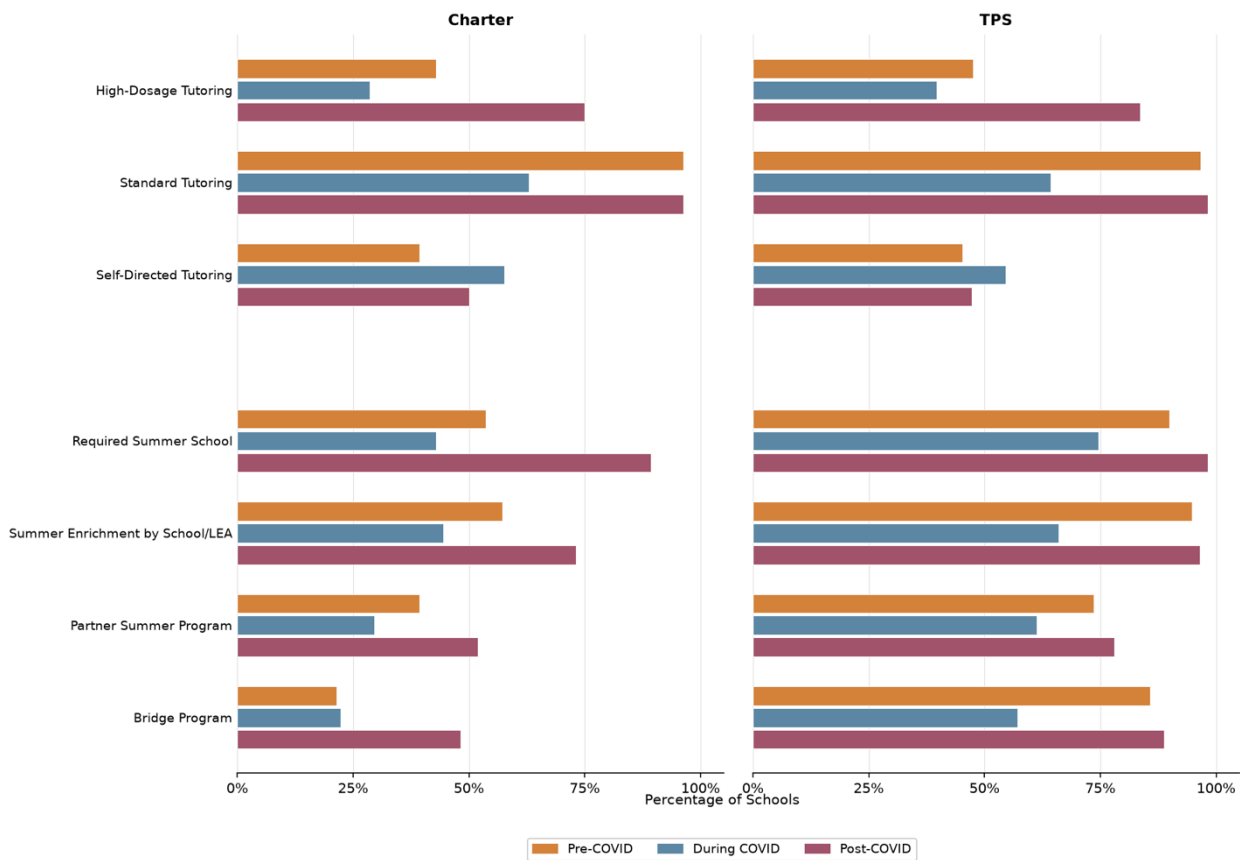


Figure 4 shows the impact of the pandemic on in-person services, with declines during the pandemic in offering meals at school and in-person communication with parents. There was a corresponding increase in other forms of meal provision and increases in other

forms of communication. While charter schools were less likely to communicate via email and the web/apps pre-pandemic; post-pandemic, these methods of communication had near-universal adoption in both sectors.

Figure 5. Supplemental Instruction



From Figure 5, several patterns emerge. First, TPSs were more likely to offer summer programs across all three periods, but charter schools substantially increased their summer programming post-pandemic. Second, in-person tutoring and summer programming declined across both charter and TPSs during the

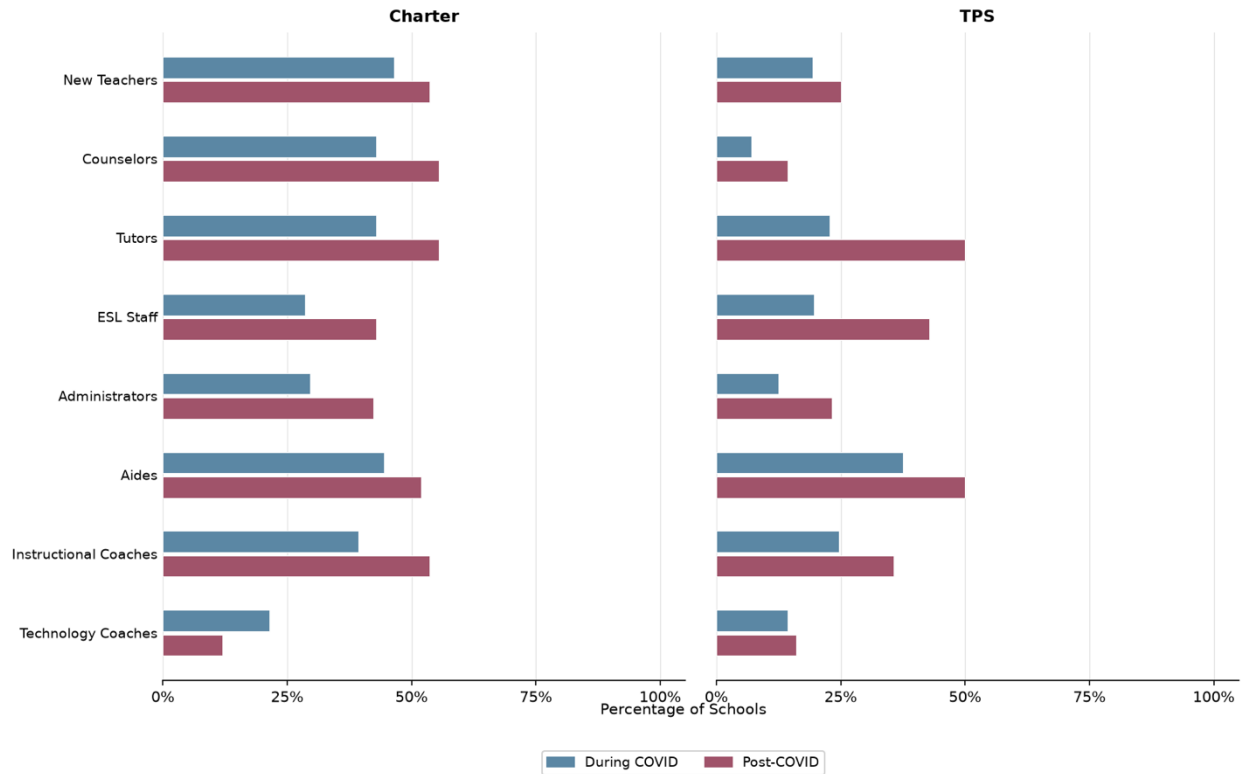
pandemic (except for the case of self-directed tutoring). Finally, comparable percentages of charters and TPSs offered standard tutoring post-pandemic and both sectors greatly increased high-dosage tutoring practices.

Charter schools reported hiring across more positions and doing so earlier than TPSs.

Figure 6 summarizes hiring practices schools adopted during and after the pandemic. As the figure suggests, charter schools reported hiring across more positions and doing so earlier than TPSs, which may have been partially the result of higher turnover in charter schools

as reported in Figure 2. Charter schools were much more likely to hire teachers, counselors, administrators, and instructional coaches. TPSs and charter schools were more comparable in the hiring of aides and technology coaches.

Figure 6. Hiring Practices



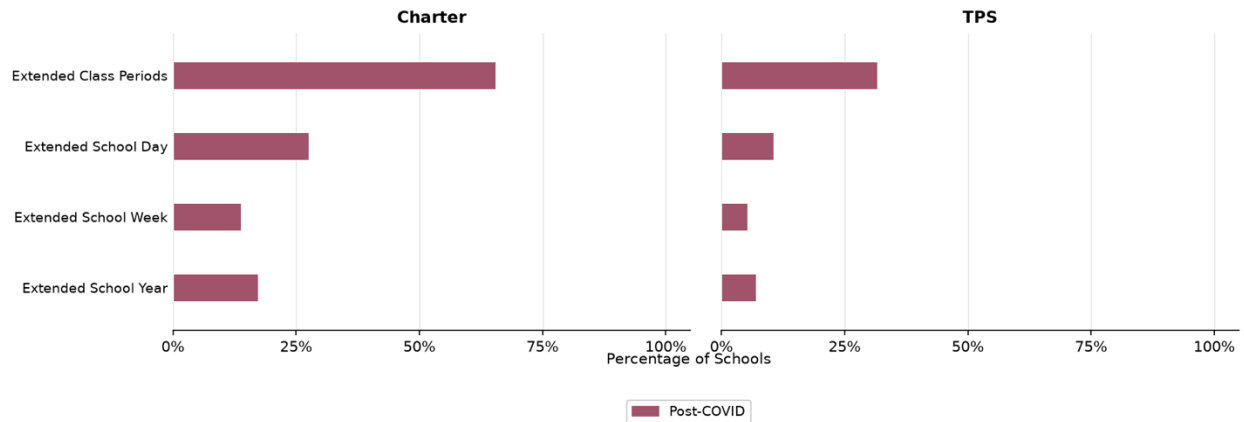
Charter schools were substantially more likely than TPSs to extend instructional time as a strategy for addressing learning loss.

Finally, in Figure 7, we focus on the strategy of increasing instructional time via extended school day, week, or year as a means of addressing learning loss. Only in the post-pandemic period did schools begin to realize the full scale of student learning loss (Cohodes et al., 2022; Fahle et al., 2023; Goldhaber et al., 2023; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; Sass & Ali, 2022; Sparks, 2022). Therefore, these survey items were asked only for the

post-pandemic period as a strategy to address learning loss.

As shown in Figure 7, a higher percentage of charter schools increased instructional time, with 65, 27, 13, and 17 percent of charter schools extending the class period, school day, week, or year, respectively. This is in contrast to 31, 11, 5, and 7 percent of TPSs for the same items.

Figure 7. Instructional Time



CONCLUSION

Our survey of school practices and challenges surrounding the pandemic demonstrates both similarities and differences between charter and TPSs. Across sectors, challenges with student behavior and absenteeism have increased since the pandemic. Student absenteeism has received substantial attention since the pandemic (Dee, 2024; Fuller et al., 2024; Malkus, 2024; Swiderski et al., 2026), and survey respondents across sectors echo the prevalence of absenteeism. Respondents, especially from the charter sector, also reported that staffing challenges intensified alongside growing student needs.

While schools faced greater challenges during and after the pandemic, responses suggest that many schools entered the pandemic with a broad suite of supports already in place. For instance, most schools had multiple methods of communication and offered at least some form of tutoring. While charter schools initially lagged behind in summer school offerings, those have increased despite not matching TPS levels. Hiring of new staff and increased instructional time did not see the same kind of widespread adoption as other

practices, particularly compared to low/no-cost practices like email communication. However, these practices did increase substantially among some schools (e.g., hiring tutors or aides reaching 50% adoption among both responding charter and TPSs). Increased hiring across roles and increased instructional time had greater adoption among charter schools in particular.

While we cannot speak directly to whether a particular practice or challenge resulted in charter schools' higher performance in our previous report (Kho et al., 2025), we note particular divergence in the offering of increased instructional time and hiring practices as promising areas for inquiry. While schools across sectors responded to many of the same challenges, charter schools may have been better positioned to adopt such resource-intensive strategies. Understanding the conditions that enabled these responses may help policymakers support pandemic recovery and strengthen school improvement efforts more broadly.

Acknowledgements

We thank Mark Berends, Julie Dallavis, Joseph Ferrare, Steve Ponisciak, and R. Joseph Waddington for their feedback on this study.

Disclaimer

Notwithstanding any Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) data or involvement in the creation of this research product, the TDOE does not guarantee the accuracy of this work or endorse the findings. Any errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.

REFERENCES

- American Institutes for Research. (2020). *National survey of public education's response to COVID-19*. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/National-Survey-of-Public-Education-Response-to-Covid-19-2020.pdf>
- Cohodes, S., Goldhaber, D., Hill, P., Ho, A., Kogan, V., Polikoff, M., Sampson, C., & West, M. (2022). *Student achievement gaps and the pandemic: A new review of evidence from 2021–2022*. Center on Reinventing Public Education. <https://crpe.org/student-achievement-gaps-and-the-pandemic-a-new-review-of-evidence-from-2021-2022/>
- Dee, T. S. (2024). Higher chronic absenteeism threatens academic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(3), e2312249121. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2312249121>
- Fahle, E. M., Kane, T. J., Patterson, T., Reardon, S. F., Staiger, D. O., & Stuart, E. A. (2023). *School district and community factors associated with learning loss during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. https://cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/explaining_covid_losses_5.23.pdf
- Fuller, S. C., Swiderski, T., Mikkelsen, C. N., & Bastian, K. C. (2024). In school, engaged, ontrack? The effect of the pandemic on student attendance, course grades, and grade retention in North Carolina. *Educational Researcher*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X241299397>
- Goldhaber, D., Kane, T. J., McEachin, A., Morton, E., Patterson, T., & Staiger, D. O. (2023). The educational consequences of remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic. *American Economic Review: Insights*, 5(3), 377–392. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aeri.20220180>
- Kho, A., Smith, S. L., & Zimmer, R. (2025). *From disruption to recovery: Charter school performance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic* (EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1225). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. <https://doi.org/10.26300/53p1-fc12>
- Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., & Lewis, K. (2022a). Test score patterns across three COVID-19-impacted school years. *Educational Researcher*, 51(7), 500–506. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221109178>
- Malkus, N. (2024). *Long COVID for public schools: Chronic absenteeism before and after the pandemic*. American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/LongCOVID-for-Public-Schools.pdf?x85095>
- Sass, T. R. & Ali, S. M. (2022). *Student achievement growth during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Georgia Policy Lab. <https://gpl.gsu.edu/download/student-achievement-growth-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-spring-2022-update-report/?wpdmdl=2737&refresh=684ad315ea8251749734165>
- Swiderski, T., Fuller, S. C., & Bastian, K. C. (2026). Student-level attendance patterns across three post-pandemic years. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 48(1), 400–407.
- U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2025). *School Pulse Panel*. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/>

APPENDIX

In this appendix, we describe the survey development, sample, and process of fielding the survey. To develop the survey, we drew upon survey items from the [Institute of Education Sciences School Pulse Panel](#) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2025) and [the American Institutes for Research](#) (American Institutes for Research [AIR], 2020) surveys as foundations for building our own survey questions. While those surveys primarily captured data at cross-sectional points in time, we refined items to allow responses for pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. We also included a small set of newly developed items that were not captured in these previous surveys.

After initial survey development, we conducted cognitive interviews with eight principals and assistant principals who were not part of our sample. The cognitive interviews were conducted using a Think-Aloud framework where participants continually updated the interviewers about their interpretation of each attribute, level, and question on the survey. The principals were asked during the interview how well they could recall their responses and if any attributes were missing from the survey. Overall, interviewees felt like it was easy to recall responses from earlier periods. The survey was then finalized based on suggestions made by multiple interviewees. For the full survey, please see <https://bit.ly/charter-covid>.

Starting in spring 2025, we contacted all Tennessee charter schools that were part of the achievement analysis in Kho et al. (2025), as well as a matched sample of TPSs to participate in a survey of school practices. This matched sample of TPSs included magnet schools in the districts. Schools were matched using a propensity score approach based on student demographics and pre-pandemic achievement to mirror the distribution of characteristics found at charter schools in our study population. We were unable to survey TPSs in Metro Nashville Public Schools. Therefore, charter schools were matched to a set of TPSs throughout the three other districts that had charter schools (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, Hamilton County Schools, and Knox County Schools) that had similar demographic characteristics. To increase the sample of TPS respondents, in fall 2025, we re-matched schools and reached out to an additional set of matched TPSs for the set of schools for whom we had not received a survey response from the initial TPS match. We contacted 195 schools, including 124 TPSs and 71 charter schools. After multiple attempts at recruitment via emails, phone calls, and postcards that extended through the spring of 2026, we ultimately received survey responses from 92 unique schools, including 62 TPSs and 30 charter schools.⁹ Respondents received a \$75 gift card for their time in completing the approximately 30-minute survey.

⁹ Three respondents reported practices spanning multiple campuses (e.g. middle and high schools). In these cases, we treated the responses as a single observation and aggregated school demographics using weighted enrollment.