



Enrollment Shifts between Public and Non-Public Schools During the COVID-19 Pandemic in North Carolina

In the fall of 2020, students returned to a schooling landscape that had been dramatically reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid the disruptions created by the public health threat of COVID-19, the economic recession, and the transition to remote and hybrid instruction, many families decided to send their child to a different school. To understand how the pandemic affected student enrollment decisions across school sectors, we answer two research questions:

- 1) How did student enrollment change during the pandemic in traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and home schools relative to the years before the pandemic?
- 2) How were student enrollment changes in different school sectors distributed across grade levels?

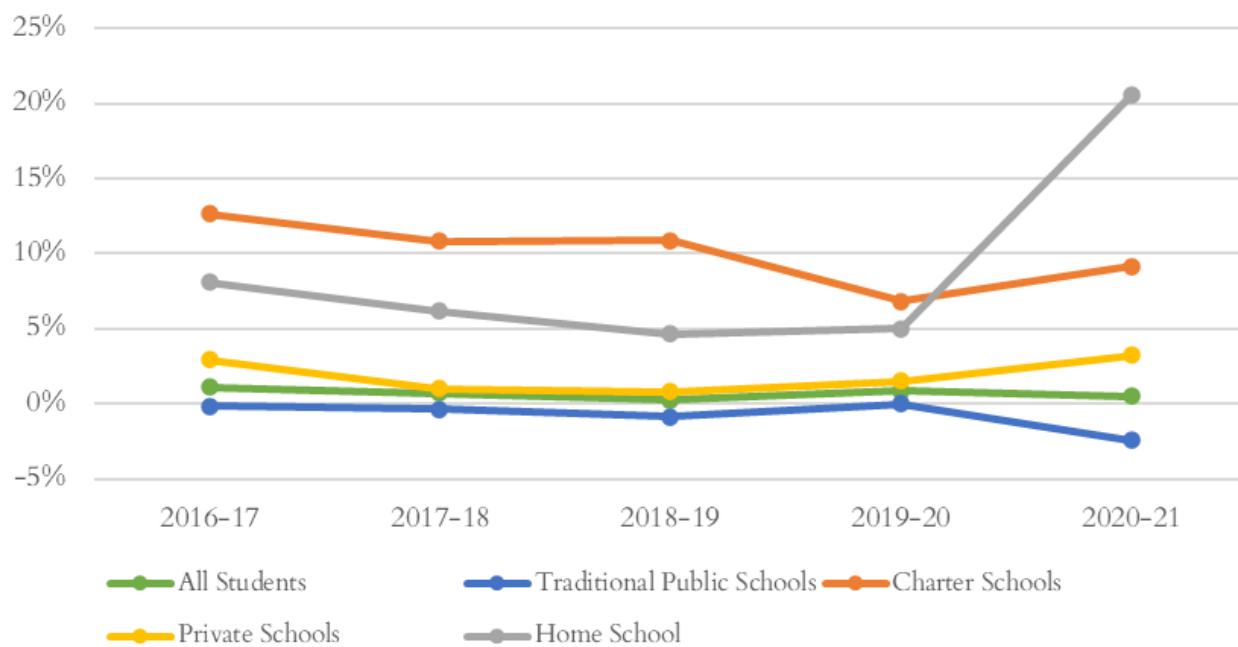
To answer these questions, we examine overall enrollment numbers and enrollment numbers by grade level in each schooling sector for the 2016–17 to 2020–21 school years.¹ For each year, we calculate the percent change in enrollment from the prior school year for the same group of students. Figure 1 displays percent changes in student enrollment over the last five years in North Carolina. We present these data for all students—regardless of the type of school they attend—and for students attending traditional public schools, charter schools, private schools, and home schools. Across all students, enrollment was relatively flat over this time period, increasing by approxi-

mately 9,500 students between 2020 and 2021 (from 1.79 million to 1.8 million) and an average of approximately 13,000 students, per year, in the prior school years. There are sharp differences in enrollment changes by school sector, especially in the 2020–21 school year. Enrollment in traditional public schools was essentially flat between 2017 and 2020 but decreased by nearly 35,000 students (2.4 percent) in 2021.² In contrast, other school sectors—i.e. charter, private, and home schools—experienced enrollment increases during the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021, charter school enrollment rose from approximately 108,000 to 118,000 students (a 9 percent increase). Likewise, private school enrollment increased by nearly 3,500 students (3.2 percent) over the same time period. Charter and private schools each enroll over 100,000 students in North Carolina, making them larger than all but two public school districts in the state. For charter schools, this enrollment growth was comparable to the enrollment growth in previous years, while private schools saw a small but notable increase in enrollment growth. Home schools experienced the largest growth—by numbers and percentage—across all sectors during the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021, home school enrollment went from approximately 149,000 to 180,000 students. This is an increase of more than 20 percent and would make home schools, if they were a single district, the largest school district in North Carolina.

¹Data for traditional public schools and charter schools comes from an aggregate of student level enrollments provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Data for private schools and home schools comes from publicly available reports on enrollments by year, county, and grade level from the North Carolina Department of Administration: <https://ncadmin.nc.gov/about-doa/divisions/division-non-public-education>

²For a deeper examination of changes in student enrollments in public schools, see prior work from EPIC: [School Enrollment Changes in North Carolina During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Figure 1: Percent Change in Enrollment Over Time by School Type



Note: This table displays the percent change in student enrollment from the prior school year for each school sector.

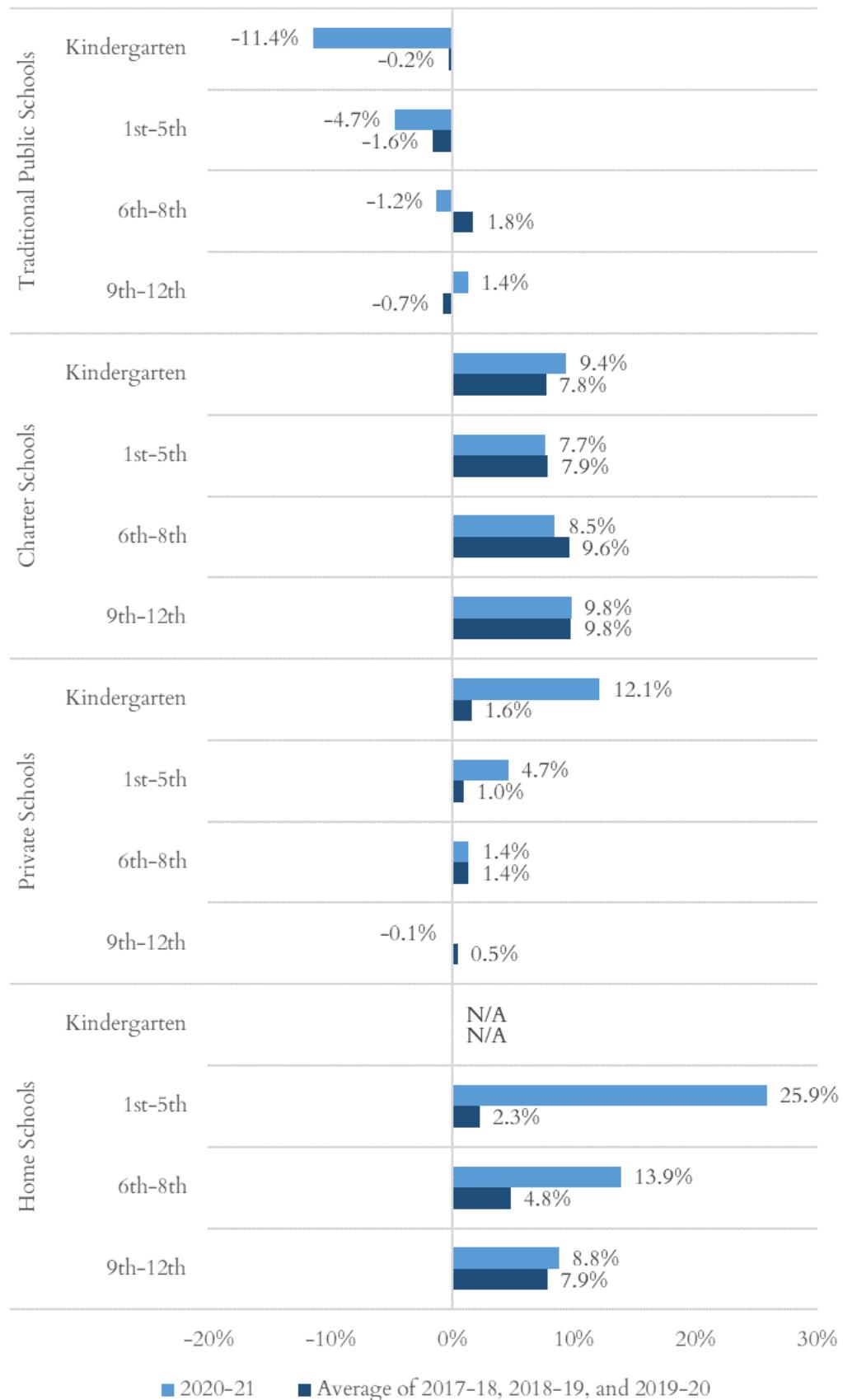
To better understand these shifts in student enrollment, Figure 2 presents percent changes in enrollment by grade level and school sector. Specifically, we display enrollment changes prior to and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Data from traditional public schools show a sharp decline in kindergarten enrollment of 11.4 percent in the 2020-21 school year. Other elementary grades (1-5) also experienced drops in enrollment of nearly 5 percent. Turning to other school sectors, enrollment changes in charter schools are largely consistent—growth rates of approximately 8-10 percent—across time (pre and post-COVID) and grade levels. This likely reflects the growing number of charter schools in North Carolina. The growth in private school enrollment, by grade level, was rather modest (less than two percent) before the pandemic. However, in the 2020-21 school year, private schools experienced increases

in kindergarten enrollment of more than 12 percent and increases in grades 1-5 enrollment of nearly five percent. These values are proportional to the enrollment declines in traditional public schools. Lastly, kindergarten enrollment figures are not available for home schools,⁴ but in grades 1-5, home school enrollment increased by nearly 26 percent in 2021—from 59,000 to 80,000 students. Home school enrollment growth in middle grades (6-8) was 14 percent in 2020-21 compared to 5 percent in prior years. Home school enrollment growth in high school grades (9-12) remained largely similar (8 percent versus 9 percent) from the pre- to post-pandemic periods. Overall, these data indicate that families of younger children were more likely to shift enrollment from traditional public schools to private or home schools during the pandemic.

³Post-pandemic changes represent changes from the 2019-20 to 2020-21 school years, while pre-pandemic changes are the average of the changes between the 2016-17 to 2017-18, 2017-18 to 2018-19, and 2018-19 to 2019-20 school years.

⁴For home schools, the Department of Administration reports students aged 6 as grade 1 and each successive age is reported as the successive grade. Because kindergarten is not compulsory in North Carolina, data on students below age 6 is not reported. This indicates that reported enrollment counts for home schools are likely lower than the true number of students who are home schooling.

Figure 2: Percent Change in Enrollment by Grade and School Type



Note: This table shows the percent change in student enrollment from the prior school year for the post-COVID (2020-21) time period compared to the pre-COVID (2017-18 to 2019-20) time period. Changes are displayed by different grade levels and school sectors.

Taken together, these analyses show that the pandemic led to a substantial shift of students between school sectors in North Carolina. These changes were particularly pronounced in the earliest grades and particularly pronounced for traditional public schools and home schools. A central question these changes raise is whether students will return to traditional public schools as the pandemic wanes and school operations return to normal. If students do not return to traditional public schools, this has implications for school funding and financial impacts may be particularly

adverse in certain schools. If students return to traditional public schools in the coming school years or at later grade levels, schools will face the challenge of providing instruction to students with a much wider set of prior schooling experiences. In future school years, researchers and policy-makers should continue to monitor school enrollment patterns to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affects student movement across educational sectors in the longer term.

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EPIC is an interdisciplinary team that conducts rigorous research and evaluation to inform education policy and practice. We produce evidence to guide data-driven decision-making using qualitative and quantitative methodologies tailored to the target audience. By serving multiple stakeholders, including policy-makers, administrators in districts and institutions of higher education, and program implementers we strengthen the growing body of research on what works and in which context. Our work is ultimately driven by a vision of high quality and equitable education experiences for all students, and particularly students in North Carolina.



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