

OVERVIEW

Charters:

Tennessee is one of 43 states, including the District of Columbia, that permit charter schools. Tennessee's charter law [was enacted in 2002](#). As of the 2013-14 school year, there are 71 charter schools in the state, enrolling an estimated 15,533 students.

Tennessee does not place any caps on charter school growth. Both new charter start-up schools and traditional public to charter school conversions are allowed, but virtual charter schools are not. Currently, charters can be authorized by local school districts and the Achievement School District.

TENNESSEE'S CHARTERS

Year of Charter Law – 2002

NAPCS Ranking of Charter Law – 35 of 43

Total Charters – 71

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) ranks Tennessee's law as among the weakest nationwide (35th out of 43 states).

Vouchers or Other State Assistance for Private School Choice:

Tennessee does not currently have a tax credit scholarship or voucher program in operation. Governor Bill Haslam has expressed strong support for vouchers, and legislation to establish a private school voucher program for students in low-performing schools was proposed but not passed in both 2013 and 2014.

State Laws on Other Forms of School Choice:

Tennessee passed open enrollment legislation in 2013, which allows students to transfer between school districts without the approval of the sending school district. The first open enrollment period is scheduled for the 2014-15 school year.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

History

- Public charters have been [allowed under state law since 2002](#), and the law has been amended a number of times to expand access to charters.
- As of the 2013-14 school year, [71 charters were in operation in Tennessee](#), enrolling an estimated 15,533 students.

**Details**

- Tennessee's original 2002 law limited charter schools to four metropolitan areas and restricted charter enrollment to low-performing students, students enrolled in failing schools, and those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch within those four districts.
 - 2009: The law was amended to expand the original cap of 50 charters to 90 schools and to allow students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch statewide to enroll in charters.
 - 2011: Legislation established open enrollment for charter schools, lifting restrictions on who may enroll in charters. It also removed the cap on the number of charters that can be approved statewide.
- Tennessee's [charter law](#) permits new charter school start-ups and traditional public to charter school conversions but not virtual charter schools.
- Charter schools may be authorized by local school boards and the Achievement School District.
 - The Achievement School District is a statewide school district that is able to authorize and select charter management organizations to run the lowest five percent of schools based on student achievement.
 - [2014 legislation](#) allows the State Board of Education to approve charter schools rejected by local school districts that have schools in the bottom five percent statewide.
- Charter school operators are required to be independent, non-profit entities whose boards include at least one parent.
- A charter school among the lowest five percent in the state can be [subject to having its charter revoked](#) at the end of the school year in which it is identified as a priority school.

FINDINGS ON CHARTERS IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee charter school performance varies by school. In the 2012-13 school year, [seven charter schools received the "reward" school designation](#) for attaining high student growth on the state's standardized tests. On the other hand, the list of "priority" schools (those with student proficiency in the bottom five percent statewide) released in 2012 included five charter schools, one of which was closed due to low performance at the end of the 2012-13 school year.

In 2013, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University produced a [report](#) comparing the academic performance of charter school students to similar peers in traditional public schools across the country. In 2012, Tennessee charter schools made gains over similar traditional public school students equivalent to an additional 86 days of reading instruction and 72 days of math instruction per year.

VOUCHERS OR OTHER STATE ASSISTANCE FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

History

- Tennessee does not currently have a tuition scholarship or voucher program in operation.

Details

- The Senate passed a [voucher bill](#) in 2011 that would have initially provided tuition vouchers to students from low-income families in Davidson, Hamilton, Knox, Memphis, and Shelby counties. The legislation was opposed by the school districts in these counties, which expressed concern about whether the vouchers would drain funding for public education. The bill ultimately failed to pass the House.
- In 2013, Governor Haslam supported the [Tennessee Choice & Opportunity Scholarship Act](#) based on the work of the Task Force on Opportunity Scholarships (*see box below*). The bill would have established a voucher program for up to 5,000 students in failing schools. The legislation faced debate among Republicans about whether it should have a larger scale, and the governor ultimately withdrew the bill.
- The [Choice & Opportunity Scholarship Act](#) was reintroduced in 2014. The bill would have limited vouchers in the first year to 5,000 students and increased participation to 20,000 students by 2016. The bill passed the Senate, but it was [withdrawn after it became evident that there were insufficient votes in House](#).

FINDINGS ON VOUCHERS IN TENNESSEE

The Beacon Center of Tennessee and the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice conducted a [poll of Tennessee voters](#) in 2012 regarding their opinions on school choice. Of the survey participants, 59 percent expressed support for school vouchers; support was highest among parents, urban voters, low-income voters, and African Americans. More than half of the voters also supported tax credit scholarships and education savings accounts.

In 2012, Governor Haslam [appointed a task force](#) to examine how a state voucher or opportunity scholarship program might be implemented in Tennessee. The nine-member commission included the State Commissioner of Education, the Superintendent of the Achievement School District, and two legislators appointed by the Lieutenant Governor and the House Speaker. Although the commission did not reach consensus on all potential program components, [members agreed](#) that any state voucher program should increase options for low-income students and that participating private schools be screened before participating and be held to academic standards.

STATE POLICIES ON OTHER FORMS OF SCHOOL CHOICE

Open Enrollment

- [Open enrollment legislation](#) passed in 2013 requires local education agencies to hold an annual open enrollment period during which families can request a transfer to a different school district.
- The school district in which a student has been previously enrolled is not required to approve the transfer.
- The first open enrollment period is scheduled for the 2014-15 school year.

Virtual Schools

- Virtual education offerings in Tennessee include the Tennessee Virtual Academy, a full-time statewide school, as well as a number of district-run programs.
- The Tennessee Virtual Academy, an online school run by the for-profit K12 Inc., first opened in 2011 and enrolled 2,927 students in 2013-14. Operated under the auspices of Union County Public Schools, the district keeps four percent of state per-student funding and the remainder goes to K12 Inc.
 - The school has received scrutiny after three consecutive years of failing performance. Although the school will remain open in the 2014-15 school year for 625 previously admitted students, State Commissioner of Education Kevin Huffman has [ordered that the school close](#) at the end of year based on its low student growth results.
- State legislation passed in 2013 [restricts initial enrollment in new virtual public schools](#) to 1,500 students, with a total enrollment cap of 5,000. No more than 25 percent of a virtual school's student body may come from outside its district.
 - The legislation also allows the state to take action if a virtual school has below expected achievement growth for three consecutive years.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

[At a Glance: Public Charter Schools in Tennessee](#)

[Charter Schools Annual Report \(February 2014\)](#)

[Keeping Pace with K-12 Online and Blended Learning](#)

[National Charter School Study \(2013\)](#)

[Tennessee K-12 & School Choice Survey](#)