

## SCHOOL CHOICE MARKET NEARS 100,000 STUDENTS

*"The most callused aspect of the (Arkansas) education monopoly is that it willingly and deliberately forces children--except those whose parents have wealth--to attend bad schools. And it does so with financial resources taken from parents already struggling financially and at the expense of their ability to choose a better school for their sons and daughters." Policy Foundation, 1998*

(October 2020) Nearly 100,000 Arkansas students attend charter, home or private schools, or are eligible to participate in a public school choice program, according to state Department of Education and non-profit records.

The niche school choice market has grown from 66,627 students (2013)<sup>1</sup> to 97,337 (2019-21). Factors contributing to this market's growth include dissatisfaction with public schools deemed 'failing' in letter-grade surveys, technology that makes distance learning feasible, and religious affiliations.

### Charters Largest Group

School choice has advanced since Policy Foundation analysts Allyson Tucker and Donna Watson wrote their landmark 1996 study<sup>2</sup> recommending charters. More than 40,000 students statewide are currently enrolled in charters, a type of public school that is free from certain state regulations.

Education department records show 22,890 students enrolled in open-enrollment charters<sup>3</sup> in the current school year (2020-21). An open-enrollment charter is operated by "a governmental entity, an institution of higher learning or a tax-exempt non-sectarian organization," according to the department.

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<sup>1</sup> "Arkansas School Choice Market Expands" (Policy Foundation Research memo) February 2014

<sup>2</sup> *Arkansas' Weak Charter School Law: Failing The Grade* (Policy Foundation study) 1996

<sup>3</sup> [http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/contact-us/charter-schools/charter\\_school\\_categories/open-enrollment](http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/contact-us/charter-schools/charter_school_categories/open-enrollment)

Academics Plus (Maumelle), 1,645; Arkansas Arts Academy (Rogers), 1,204; Arkansas Connections Academy (Bentonville), 2,836; Arkansas Virtual Academy (Little Rock), 3,872; Capitol City Lighthouse Academy (North Little Rock), 161; eStem Public Charter Schools (Little Rock), 3,180; Exalt Academy of Southwest Little Rock, 518; Friendship Aspire Academy at Little Rock, 210; Friendship Aspire Academy at Pine Bluff, 112; Future School of Fort Smith, 229; Graduate Arkansas (Little Rock), 91; Haas Hall Academy (Washington County), 1,407; Imboden Area Charter School, 61; Jacksonville Lighthouse, 801; KIPP Delta Public Schools (Blytheville, Helena-West Helena), 1,205; LISA Academy (Little Rock, North Little Rock, Springdale), 3,342; Northwest Arkansas Classical Academy (Bentonville, Little Rock), 1,048; Pine Bluff Lighthouse Charter School, 222; Premier High School of Little Rock, 125; Premier High School of North Little Rock, 136; Scholarmade Achievement Place (Little Rock), 275; Southeast Arkansas Preparatory High School (Pine Bluff), 83; and The Excel Center (Little Rock), 127.

Another 17,622 students are enrolled in district conversion charters<sup>4</sup> this year. A conversion school "is a public school converted to a public charter school. Conversion schools can only draw students from within the school district's boundaries," the department notes."

### **Home Schools Are Second Largest Group**

Students attending home schools are the second largest group in the Arkansas school choice market. Department of Education records show 26,039 students enrolled in home schools. The number increased this year as more households turned to the practice in response to COVID-19.<sup>5</sup>

### **Private School Enrollment Declines**

Private school rolls declined to 17,843, data from the Arkansas Nonpublic School Accrediting Association, a non-profit, shows. School employees cited COVID-19, noting more households opted to home school this year.

### **Public School Choice Capped at Three Percent**

Another 12,943 students were eligible to participate in public school choice<sup>6</sup> in 2019-20, department records show. The program allows students to transfer to another public school district.<sup>7</sup>

--Greg Kaza

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<sup>4</sup> [http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/contact-us/charter-schools/charter\\_school\\_categories/district-conversion](http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/contact-us/charter-schools/charter_school_categories/district-conversion)

Academic Center for Excellence (Cabot), 235; Academies of West Memphis, 993; Blytheville High School-A New Tech School, 492; Cave City High School Career & Collegiate Preparatory School, 383; Cross County High School, A New Tech School (Cherry Valley), 292; Don Tyson School of Innovation (Springdale), 4,029; Fayetteville Virtual Academy, 466; Fountain Lake Charter High School (Hot Springs), 430; Fountain Lake Middle School Cobra Digital Prep Academy, 417; Gentry High School Conversion Charter, 427; Harrisburg College & Career Preparatory School, 339; Harrison High School Conversion Charter, 817; Hot Springs Junior Academy, 771; Hot Springs World Class High School, 748; Lincoln High School, 345; Miner Academy (Bauxite), 87; Mountain Home High School Career Academies, 1,584; North Little Rock Center of Excellence, 345; Osceola STEM Academy, 314; Polk County Virtual Academy (Mena), 62; Prairie Grove High School, 622; River Valley Virtual Academy (Van Buren), 649; Rogers New Technology High School, 655; Siloam Springs High School, 1,300; Southside Charter High School (Batesville), 434; and Warren Middle School, 386.

<sup>5</sup> More information is posted at: <http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/divisions/learning-services/home-school>.

<sup>6</sup> Total excludes charters and exempted public schools (see below). Arkansas law "establishes a numerical net maximum limit on school choice transfers each school year from a school district of three percent (3%) of the enrollment of the school district as of October 15 of the immediately preceding school year. <http://adecm.arkansas.gov/ViewApprovedMemo.aspx?Id=4255>

<sup>7</sup> The department exempted the following districts from the school choice act in 2019-20: Camden-Fairview, Cutter-Morning Star, El Dorado, Fountain Lake, Hope, Hot Springs, Jessieville, Junction City, Lake Hamilton, Lakeside (Garland County), and Mountain Pine. <http://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/divisions/legal/school-choice>