The cover features a photograph of students in a classroom, with a large, stylized hexagonal graphic overlaid on the right side. The hexagon is composed of several colored segments: a teal top-left section, an orange top-right section, a dark red middle-right section, and an orange bottom-right section. The background is a light teal color.

Colorado Charter Schools Performance Report

January 2025



For more than 40 years, Keystone Policy Center has been a catalyst empowering leaders to rise above entrenched positions to reach common higher ground. From health to agriculture and energy to education, Keystone has shaped public policy debates at the local, state, and national levels. Keystone's exceptional combination of experience and expertise has led to groundbreaking progress when all other efforts have failed. By objectively analyzing and advising on issues, identifying key leaders and decision-makers, and using the framework of a focused collaborative approach, Keystone has helped leaders craft public policy solutions with significant, lasting impact. Keystone's unique strategy provides a blueprint for policymakers and leaders to address today's most pressing and vexing policy issues with shared, action-oriented solutions.

Introduction

As Colorado, like states across the country, works to help schools and students recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning, it is critical that we take a moment to look at what is working to help develop scalable solutions. Across the state and nation there are bright spots that show us what is possible and should be studied and replicated, even if not perfect, to help more students succeed. This includes social-emotional supports for students, talent strategies and a range of other initiatives that have positively impacted schools and students. This report will focus on the charter school sector in Colorado and its impact on student academic learning, particularly for traditionally underserved students and in high-needs areas around the state. It is not intended to say charters are the only strategy that works, nor that academics are the only outcomes that matter; rather, we are aiming to demonstrate that there are schools, including charters, helping students recover academically and we should continue to learn from them and others.

Charter schools are public schools governed by an independent, non-profit board of directors given additional autonomies and held accountable through a contract with their authorizer. In Colorado, the authorizers are either individual school districts or the Colorado Charter School Institute ("CSI"). While authorizer quality varies across both the state and the nation, this relationship allows schools to implement a model best suited to student needs while authorizers can hold schools accountable if goals are not met.

In Colorado, where the charter sector is often held up as a model across the country, this has resulted in a charter sector that outperforms traditional schools, including in serving the highest-needs students and in communities lacking high-quality options. Learning from these successes and replicating them where possible can only help all Colorado students. The successes seen in the charter sector in Colorado are echoed by a national study of charter school academic performance, which included Colorado, showing charter school students making more academic progress than their non-charter school peers across demographic groups.¹

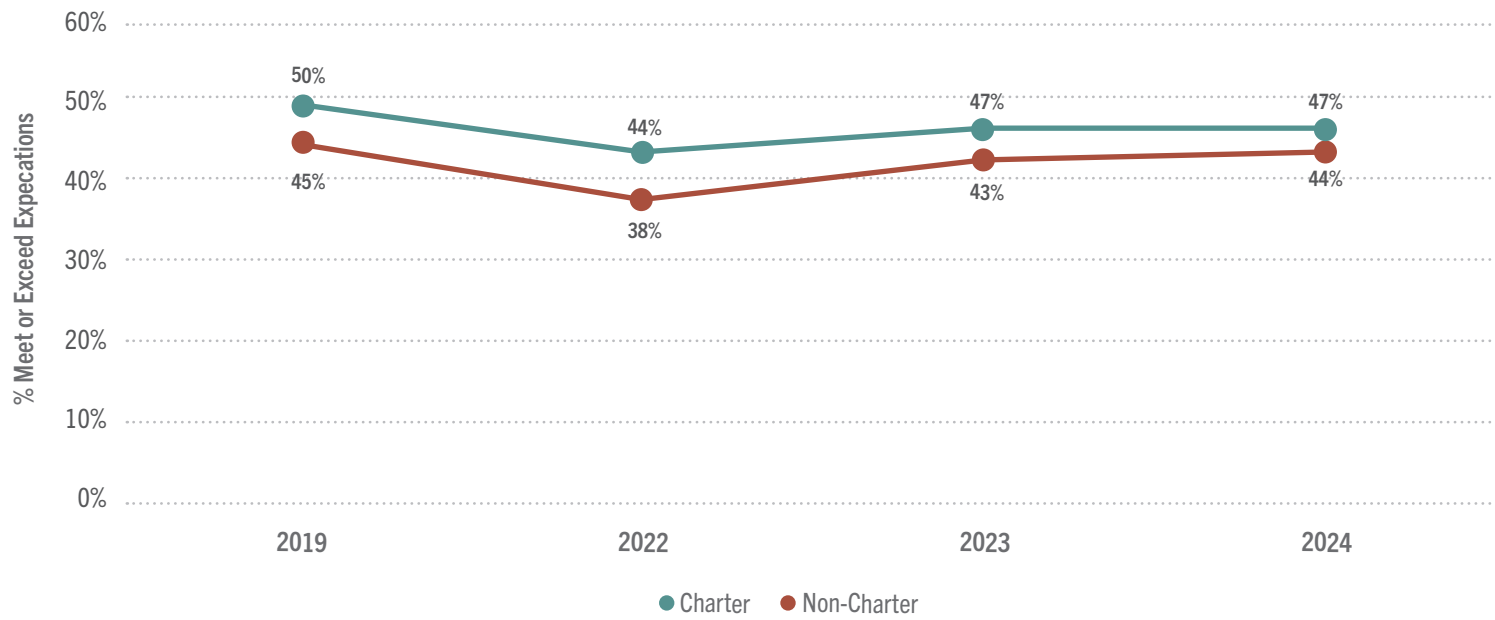
¹<https://credo.stanford.edu/reports/item/national-charter-school-study-iii/>

Historical Performance Comparisons for Elementary and Middle School:

Charter schools have consistently achieved higher academic outcomes when compared to non-charters in Colorado. This is generally true across subjects and grade levels; this report will primarily focus on elementary and middle school literacy results as an illustrative example.

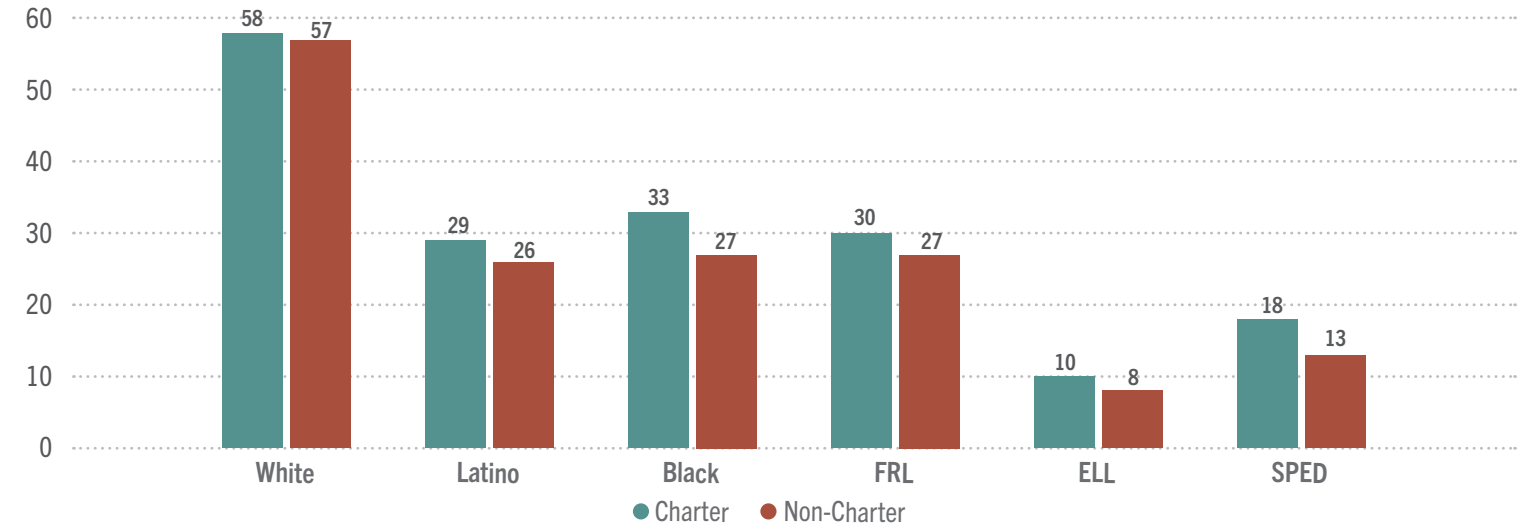
Student Proficiency: When looking at overall proficiency rates, charters have outperformed non-charters by a consistent margin of 3-5 percentage points over time, although both sectors are still shy of their pre-COVID proficiency levels on CMAS.

CMAS ELA PROFICIENCY RATES



While these overall proficiency rates can be beneficial, it is also critical to look at how different student groups perform by school type. When looking at traditionally underserved groups by race, income and language status, charters outperform non-charters as it relates to proficiency rates.

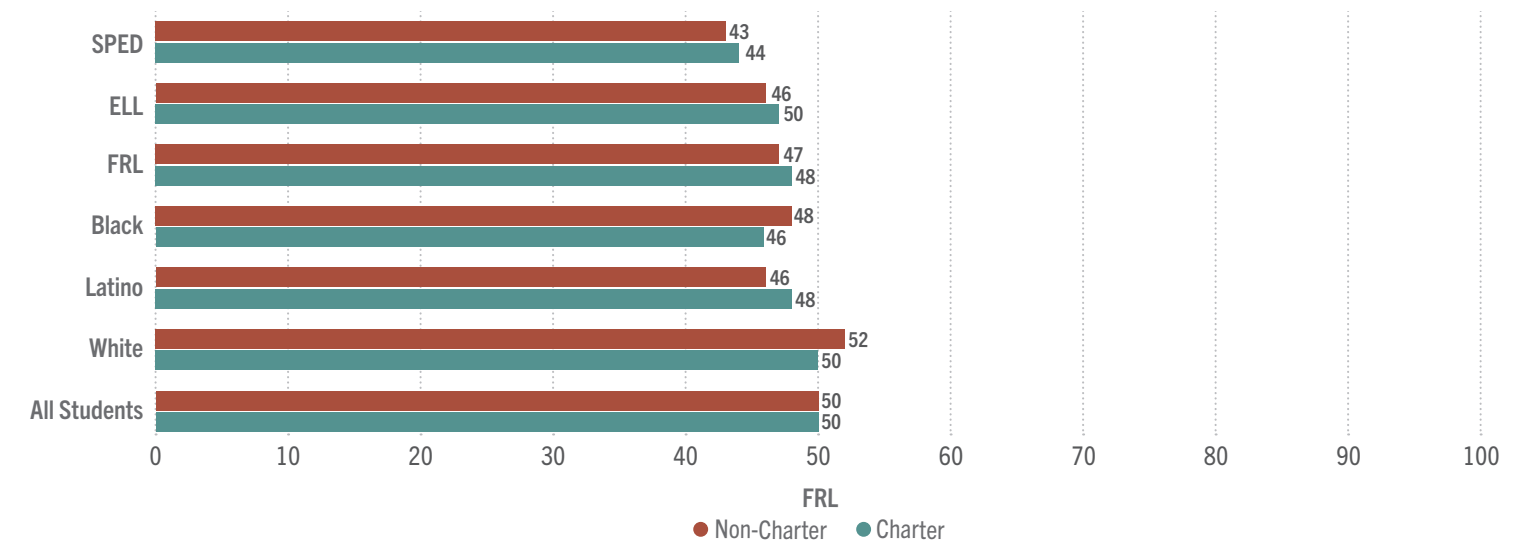
2024 CMAS ELA PROFICIENCY



While celebrating these higher rates is important, it is also important to note that large gaps between student groups still exist across governance types and we should also look at schools that are closing these gaps (regardless of governance) to learn from their practices.

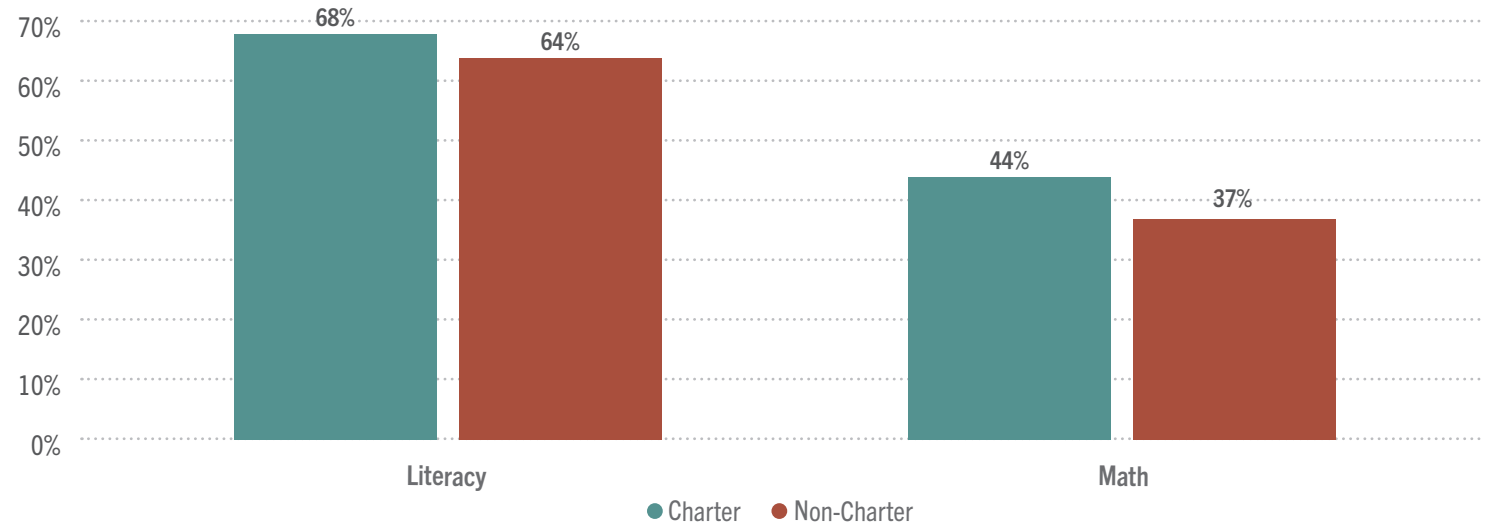
Student Growth: Proficiency rates are a critical measure of student performance, but it is also important to look at how much growth schools are helping students make year over year to understand their direct impact on students. In Colorado, Median Growth Percentile (“MGP”) looks at how much growth individual students are making compared to similar-performing peers. An MGP of 50 indicates that students at a school are keeping pace, while below indicates they are making less growth than their peers. Since we cannot aggregate these into a single “Charter” or “Non-Charter” MGP, we instead look at the average MGP for schools by governance type. Charter schools are showing more growth than non-charters with traditionally underserved groups which could help to close proficiency gaps, although overall growth is similar between the sectors.

2024 CMAS ELA Growth



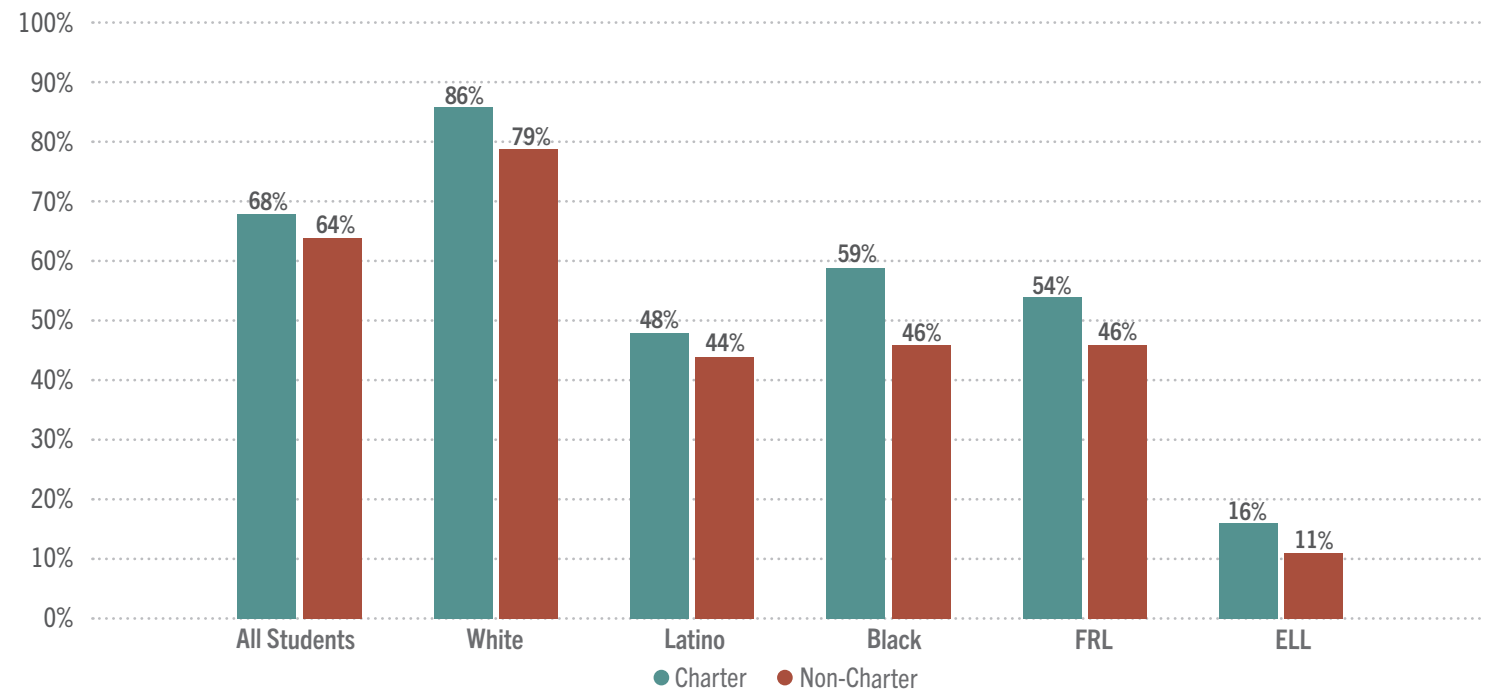
Performance Comparisons for High Schools: In addition to CMAS, we can look at how high school students in charter schools across the state performed on the PSAT and SAT compared to students in non-charter schools.² Regarding overall performance, charter schools outperform non-charters in both literacy and math.

2024 PSAT/SAT PROFICIENCY



Additionally, when looking at the performance of student groups, charter schools outperform non-charters across all student groups,³ most notably for black and low-income students.

2024 PSAT/SAT LITERACY PROFICIENCY

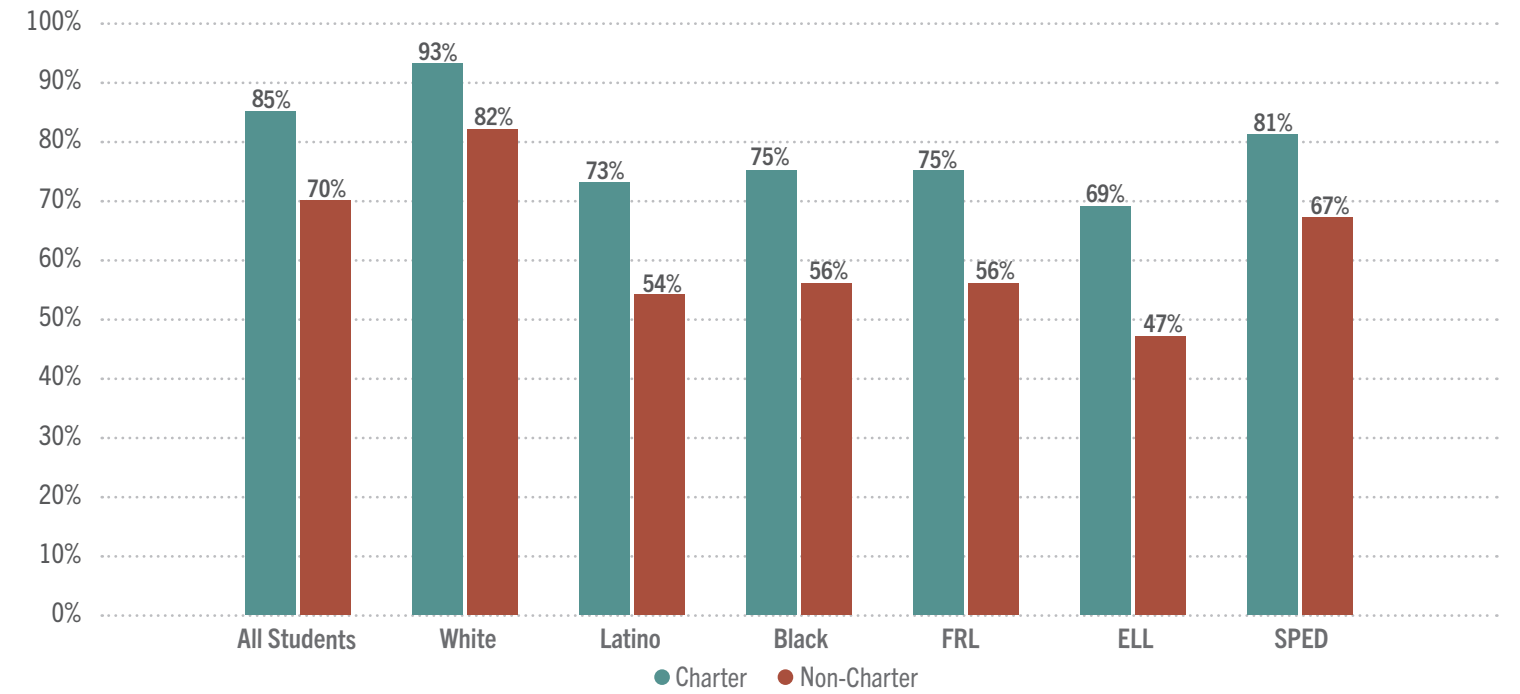


² For the purposes of this report Alternative Education Campuses are excluded from PSAT/SAT Analyses. Additionally, because the test and scoring has changed over time we are focused on 2024 performance.

³ Data not available for special education students due to data suppression rules.

SPF Performance: In addition to looking at performance on individual metrics we can look at the percentage of students attending high-quality schools as defined by the State's School Performance Framework (SPF). Both overall and by student demographics, a higher percentage of charter school students attend quality schools (receiving a rating of "Performance") compared to students in non-charters.

2024 SPF PERFORMANCE

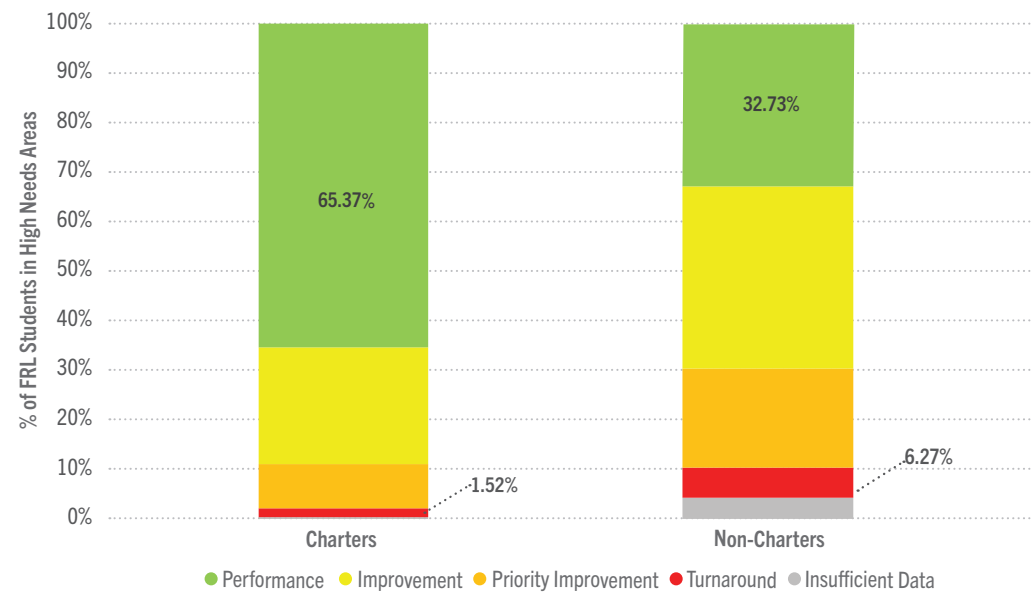


⁴ Specifically, high needs areas of the state have been identified by looking at zip codes that have at least two SPF rated schools and where at least 25% of students have enrolled in schools in the bottom two tiers of the state rating system: Priority Improvement and Turnaround.

Performance By Geography: The previous section of this report talked about performance across Colorado, but we know there are areas of the state that lack high-quality options, so it is important to see if charter schools are providing a strong alternative in these areas specifically. For the sake of this report, we are defining high-needs areas as zip codes with numerous schools rated as "Turnaround" (dark green) or "Priority Improvement" (orange) on the state SPF in 2023 and/or 2024, although there are numerous other ways to identify high-needs areas.⁴

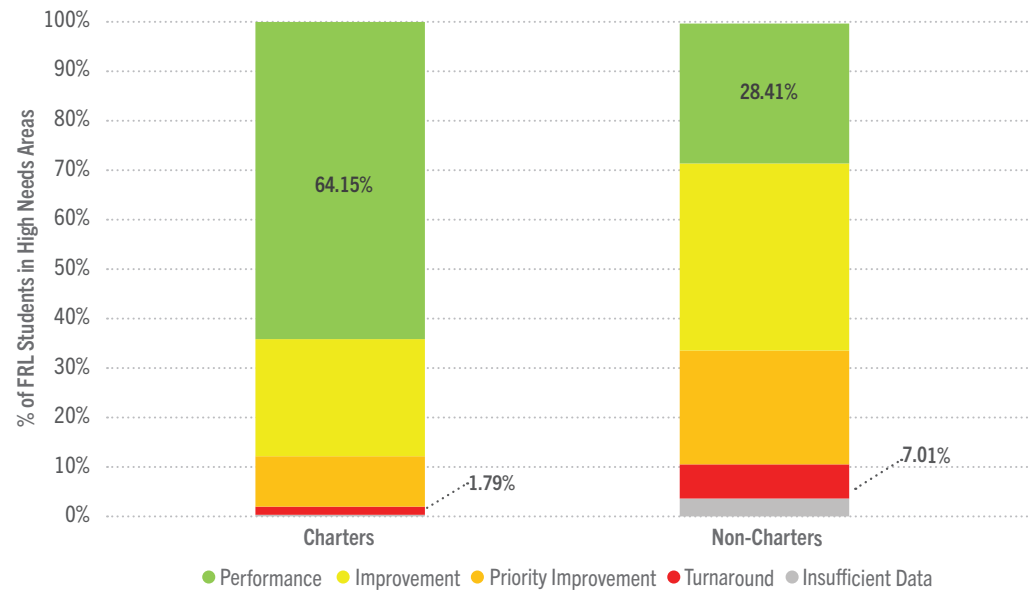
When looking at schools in these high-needs areas, charter school students are significantly more likely to attend a "Performance" rated school based on 2024 SPF ratings. They are also less likely to be attending a "Turnaround" rated school.

2024 SPF PERFORMANCE IN HIGH-NEEDS AREAS



When looking only at students from low-income households in these high-needs areas, the gap remains substantial. Similar trends exist for other traditionally underserved student groups.

2024 SPF PERFORMANCE IN HIGH-NEEDS AREAS: FRL STUDENTS



Additionally, charter schools in these high-needs areas have higher proficiency rates across subjects and grade levels. Given these small geographies, the outcomes achieved by these charters should be replicable across other areas and deserve greater attention.

	CMAS		SAT	
	CMAS ELA	CMAS Math	SAT ELA	SAT Math
Non-Charters	26.7%	18.0%	29.2%	10.7%
Charters	31.6%	21.1%	44.2%	24.1%
Difference	+3.9%	+3.1%	+15.0%	+13.4%

School Improvement: In understanding how to improve academic outcomes and opportunities for students in Colorado, it is important to look not only at current performance but how schools that were previously underperforming have been addressed over time. This can ensure that students are not languishing in underperforming schools for many years, impacting their long-term ability to succeed. When looking at schools that were rated as "Turnaround" or "Priority Improvement" on the SPF in prior years, charter schools are consistently either higher performing or no longer in operation when compared to non-charters. This is likely a direct result of both the self-regulating nature of the charter sector and their autonomy to make shifts in programs quickly to address deficiencies. Of Red or Orange charter schools on the 2019 SPF, over 50% were green in 2024—an improvement of two or three performance bands—compared to only 23% of non-charters. Similar trends exist when looking at the 2024 SPF ratings of schools that were Red or Orange in 2016. This demonstrates that even when charter schools run into academic challenges, they are more able to utilize their autonomy to make programmatic shifts leading to improvements in academic performance.

Conclusion:

Providing all Colorado students with a world-class education is a critical need for the state, most notably students who historically have been underserved by our schools. Achieving this goal will require a range of strategies and innovations. However, it must start with identifying strategies that are achieving higher outcomes and learning from and expanding these. In Colorado, this includes studying and replicating the lessons from Colorado charter schools highlighted in this report as well as district-managed schools that should also be studied and replicated. We must focus on replicating these practices for historically underserved students and in regions of our state where large percentages of students are not attending high-quality schools.

Acknowledgments:

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