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# THEME & VARIATION: MISSOURI CHARTER & MAGNET SCHOOLS

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# Definitions

*In this brief, we analyze variation in charter and magnet schools based on their curriculum, pedagogy, and student body focus. This is a first-of-its-kind analysis for Missouri.*

**Charter Schools:** Privately-managed, publicly-funded (tuition free) schools of choice. Charter schools typically must accept all students who apply and administer a lottery if applications exceed available seats.

**Magnet Schools:** District-run schools of choice. Students must apply to attend, and magnet schools may have selective admissions requirements, such as test scores or auditions. Magnet schools typically offer a specialized curriculum or unique teaching approach.

**Curriculum:** Classroom content. A general school curriculum includes the core disciplines of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Curricularly-specialized schools focus on particular subjects or pre-professional fields or programs. For example, a STEM-specialized curriculum would feature more classes on science and technology, while an arts-based curriculum integrates art into the core curriculum or treats the arts as a core subject.

**Pedagogy:** Teaching approach. We define traditional pedagogical approaches as those that are primarily teacher-directed. This includes conventional teaching methods and the high expectations (formerly “no excuses”) approach, which is known for its rigorous academic and behavioral expectations. Pedagogically-progressive approaches are more student-centered, such as inquiry-based or project-based learning.

**Diverse-by-design:** Diverse-by-design schools focus on creating a racially and/or socioeconomically diverse student body, often through strategic marketing or locational decisions.



# Key Facts

## Charter

## Magnet

**Kansas City  
(2021-22)**

**42 schools  
13,334 students  
(50% of public school students)**

**9 schools  
4,095 students  
(31% of KCPS students, 15%  
of all public school students)**

**St. Louis  
(2021-22)**

**38 schools  
11,824 students  
(41% of public school students)**

**26 schools  
9,690 students  
(57% of SLPS students, 33%  
of all public school students)**

**Curriculum,  
or classroom  
content**

**Most (63%) have a  
general curriculum.  
15% specialize in STEM.**

**Most (77%) have a  
specialized curriculum.  
20% specialize in STEM.**

**Pedagogy, or  
teaching  
approach**

**Approximately half take a high  
expectations approach.  
28% are pedagogically-  
progressive, and most (77%) of  
these have opened since 2011-12.**

**The majority use conventional  
teaching methods. 34% are  
pedagogically-progressive.**

**Student Body  
Focus**

**20% are diverse-by-design.  
All of these offer a specialized  
curriculum or progressive  
teaching approach.**

**While initially created to help  
integrate cities, these schools  
no longer have policies  
ensuring racial integration.**



Public school choice is now the reality in Kansas City and St. Louis City. Both cities have growing charter school sectors, and Kansas City Public Schools (KCPS) and Saint Louis Public Schools (SLPS) offer specialized magnet schools that are open to all students who reside within those districts.<sup>1</sup>

For families in either city, attending a charter or magnet school requires applying to enroll somewhere other than the district school to which they are residentially-assigned.

Charter schools are privately-managed, publicly-funded schools that are given increased autonomy in exchange for greater accountability. Charter schools are held accountable by their sponsor, which in Missouri can be the school board of an accredited district, a qualifying higher education institution, or the Missouri Charter Public School Commission. A charter school's sponsor must assess whether the school is meeting academic and financial benchmarks.

Charter schools have operated in the state since 1999 and now serve half of public-school students in Kansas City and approximately 40% of the public-school population in St. Louis City.

While magnet schools can have selective admissions requirements such as test scores or auditions, charter schools typically must accept all students who apply and administer a lottery if applications exceed available seats.

Magnet schools are district-run schools of choice. In both Kansas City and St. Louis, magnet schools were initially created in the 1980's as part of court-ordered desegregation plans and were intended to help racially integrate the state's two largest metro regions.<sup>2</sup> Early magnet schools had specialized themes designed to attract families of different racial backgrounds and "pull" White students from suburban areas into majority-Black central city districts.

Today, magnet schools may no longer have desegregation as a primary aim; instead, they seem intended to both provide specialized options<sup>3</sup> and attract students to district schools who might otherwise attend charter or private schools.

Both charter and magnet schools have the potential to lessen persistent school segregation by bringing students together from different neighborhoods and backgrounds. Alternatively, school choice in the form of charter and magnet schools may lead to further segregation if families opt out of diverse neighborhood schools and attend schools that primarily serve students of one racial or ethnic identity.

It may also be that some types of charter and magnet schools are diverse while others are racially homogenous.

In this first in a series of policy briefs, we describe the different types of charter and magnet schools that currently operate in Kansas City and St. Louis.<sup>4</sup> Many of these schools have specialized curricular themes or pedagogical (teaching) approaches or target their recruitment to particular groups of students.

This brief catalogues the unique types of charter and magnet schools that operate in the state's two largest cities and examines how early and later charter schools differ.

## **2 School Characteristics: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Student Body Focus**

We analyzed the websites of all 80 charter schools and 35 magnet schools that were open in Kansas City and St. Louis City in 2021-22 and classified them according to a typology developed by White and Huang (2022).<sup>5</sup> This approach gives us a first-of-its-kind look at distinct curricular offerings and pedagogical approaches in Kansas City and St. Louis charter and magnet schools.

In their categorization of schools, White and Huang (2022) offer nine different curricular specializations, 11 different approaches to teaching (pedagogy), and five special populations of students, most of which are present in some form in Missouri. Appendix A defines the curricular, pedagogical, and student body foci that are present in Kansas City and St. Louis charter and magnet schools.

Charter or magnet schools may have multiple foci within a given category. For example, a charter school may use both inquiry-based and project-based instruction. For the purposes of this analysis, each charter and magnet school is classified according to its primary focus in each category.

## Curriculum

<i>Missouri Charter and Magnet School Primary Curricular Foci, (2021-22)<sup>6</sup></i>		
Curricular Focus	Charters (out of 80 schools)	Magnets (out of 35 schools)
None/General	63% (50)	23% (8)
Accelerated	-	11% (4)
Arts	5% (4)	14% (5)
Civics	3% (2)	3% (1)
CTE	8% (6)	6% (2)
Cultural	-	6% (2)
International Baccalaureate	1% (1)	9% (3)
Language Immersion	6% (5)	9% (3)
STEM	15% (12)	20% (7)
Note: May not sum to 100% due to rounding.		

Sixty-three percent of charter schools have a general curriculum, while 77% of magnet schools have a special curricular focus. For schools that do have a specific curricular focus, STEM is the most common specialization for both charter and magnet schools (15% of charters and 20% of magnet schools).



## Pedagogy

<i>Missouri Charter and Magnet Primary Pedagogical Foci, by School (2021-22)</i>		
Pedagogical Focus	Charters (out of 80 schools)	Magnets (out of 35 schools)
None/Conventional	28% (22)	57% (20)
Blended	-	3% (1)
Constructivist	-	9% (3)
Expeditionary	6% (5)	-
High Expectations	45% (36)	9% (3)
Inquiry-Based	10% (8)	9% (3)
Montessori	3% (2)	9% (3)
Personalized	5% (4)	-
Project-Based	4% (3)	6% (2)
Note: May not sum to 100% due to rounding.		

Thirty-six out of 80 charter schools (45%) but only three out of 35 magnet schools (9%) take a high expectations (formerly known as “no excuses”) pedagogical approach. The majority of magnet schools in Kansas City and St. Louis use conventional teaching methods.

## Student Body Focus

<i>Missouri Charter and Magnet Primary Student Body Foci, by School (2021-22)</i>		
<b>Student Body Focus</b>	<b>Charters (out of 80 schools)</b>	<b>Magnets (out of 35 schools)</b>
None/All	70% (56)	89% (31)
Alternative	6% (5)	-
Diverse-by-Design	19% (15)	-
Dropout Recovery	1% (1)	-
Gifted	-	11% (4)
Single Sex	4% (3)	-
Note: May not sum to 100% due to rounding.		

Seventy percent of charters and 89% of magnet schools serve the general population of students. For charter schools that have a special student body focus, the diverse-by-design approach is most common (19%). Only four magnet schools (11%) in the state have a target student population, and all four schools are in St. Louis and serve students who test as gifted.

# 3

# Charter and Magnet School Groupings



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It is helpful to examine charter and magnet school types in larger groupings: general versus specialized curriculum; traditional versus progressive pedagogy; and diverse-by-design versus all/other student body focus. Below we introduce an eight-part typology along these lines:

<i>Charter and Magnet Schools Types</i>			
<b>Type</b>	<b>Curriculum</b>	<b>Pedagogy</b>	<b>Students</b>
General-Traditional	General	Traditional	All/Other
General-Traditional-Diverse	General	Traditional	Diverse
Specialized-Traditional	Specialized	Traditional	All/Other
Specialized-Traditional-Diverse	Specialized	Traditional	Diverse
General-Progressive	General	Progressive	All/Other
General-Progressive-Diverse	General	Progressive	Diverse
Specialized-Progressive	Specialized	Progressive	All/Other
Specialized-Progressive-Diverse	Specialized	Progressive	Diverse

We consider curricularly-specialized schools to be any that have a specific curricular focus, such as STEM.

We define traditional pedagogical approaches as those that are primarily teacher-directed and include both a conventional approach and the high expectations approach under this category. For the sake of this policy brief, we consider the remaining pedagogical approaches to be progressive.<sup>7</sup>

Because we are interested in how students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds sort across various types of charter and magnet schools, we consider diverse-by-design charter schools to be unique in having a strategic focus on racial and socioeconomic integration and thus contrast these schools with other types of charters. Magnet schools in both Kansas City and St. Louis no longer have racial diversity policies and so are not categorized as diverse-by-design.

<i>Charter and Magnet School Type Frequencies (2021-22)</i>						
Type	Charters (n=80)	KC Charters (n=42)	STL Charters (n=38)	Magnets (n=35)	KC Magnets (n=9)	STL Magnets (n=26)
General-Traditional	50% (40)	50% (21)	50% (19)	6% (2)	-	8% (2)
General-Traditional-Diverse	-	-	-	-	-	-
Specialized-Traditional	18% (14)	10% (4)	26% (10)	60% (21)	78% (7)	54% (14)
Specialized-Traditional-Diverse	5% (4)	10% (4)	-	-	-	-
General-Progressive	3% (2)	-	5% (2)	17% (6)	22% (2)	15% (4)
General-Progressive-Diverse	10% (8)	12% (5)	8% (3)	-	-	-
Specialized-Progressive	11% (9)	19% (8)	3% (1)	17% (6)	-	23% (6)
Specialized-Progressive-Diverse	4% (3)	-	8% (3)	-	-	-

We find 40 out of 80 charter schools in the state have a general curriculum and a traditional (teacher-centered) pedagogical approach. These schools may resemble district neighborhood schools in many ways and do not obviously differentiate themselves through unique curricular offerings or a progressive approach to education. Their websites may emphasize instead that they offer a safe and supportive learning environment or have high expectations for student success.

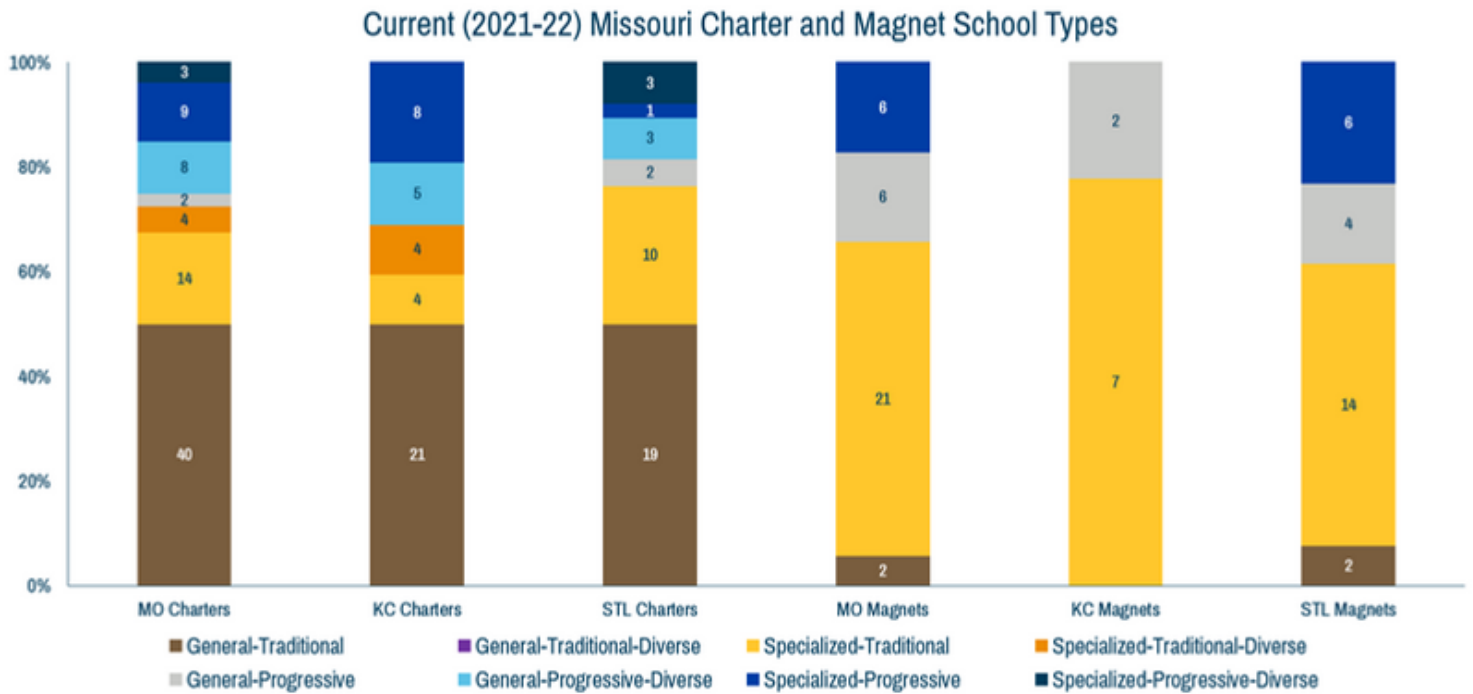
Another 23% of charter schools are traditional in their teaching methods but have some type of specialized curriculum. Only 28% of charters statewide highlight the use of progressive pedagogical methods such as inquiry-based learning.

Notably, all diverse-by-design charters offer a specialized curriculum (n=7) and/or take a progressive approach to teaching (n=11).<sup>8</sup> Thus, there are no General-Traditional schools that are also diverse-by-design, and no diverse-by-design schools use a high expectations approach.<sup>9</sup> Diverse-by-design schools resemble the integrative magnet schools of the 1980's, which offered a unique educational experience to "pull" in families from different racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Magnet schools are more likely to have specialized curriculum.  
73% of charter schools are pedagogically traditional.**

Magnet schools today may not have diversity as a primary aim, but they still differentiate themselves from district neighborhood schools by offering a specialized curriculum and/or a progressive pedagogical approach. While half of charter schools have both a general curriculum and traditional pedagogy, only 6% of magnet schools fall into the General-Traditional category. Magnet schools in St. Louis are more likely than magnet schools in Kansas City to highlight progressive pedagogy on their websites.

Online Appendix B lists all charter and magnet schools in Kansas City and St. Louis, their level, type, foci in each category, and racial demographics. For charter schools, we also include the year that each school first opened even if the school has changed sponsors since that time.<sup>10</sup>

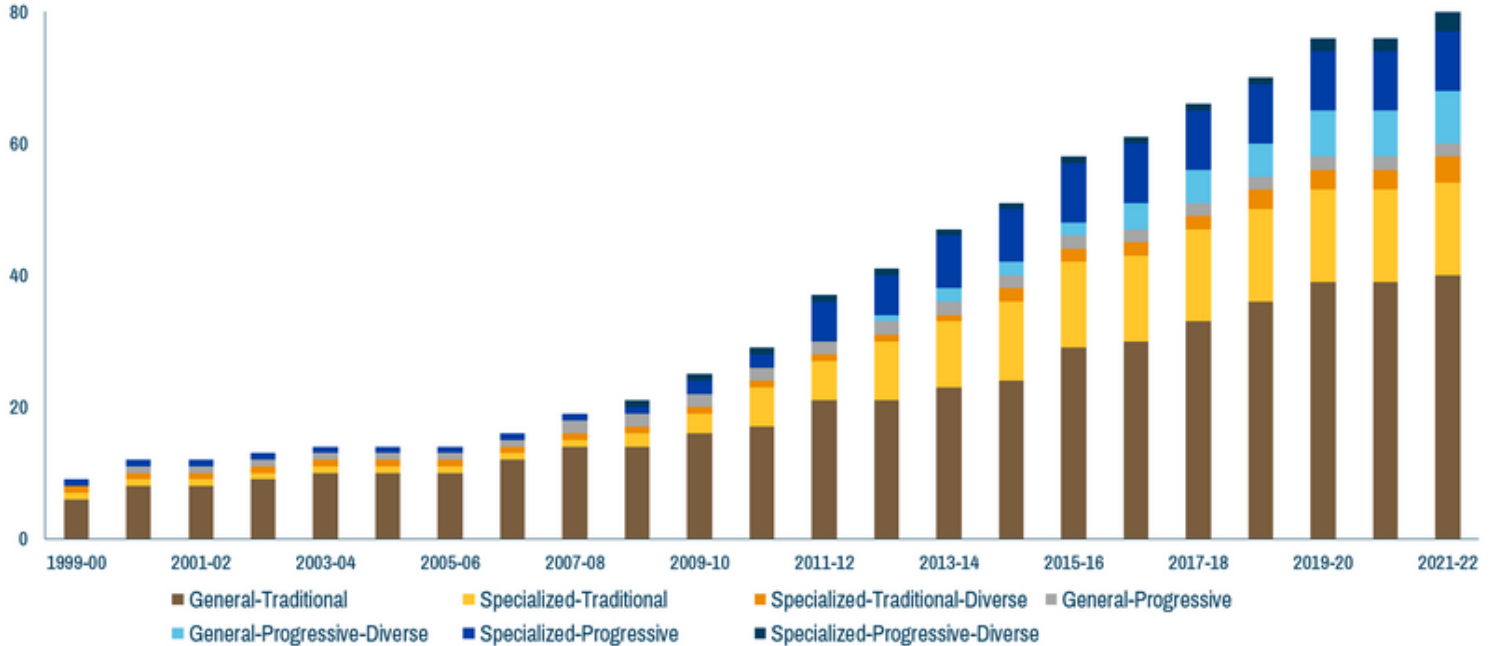


# 4

# Charter School Types Over Time



Current (2021-22) Missouri Charter School Openings Over Time, by Type

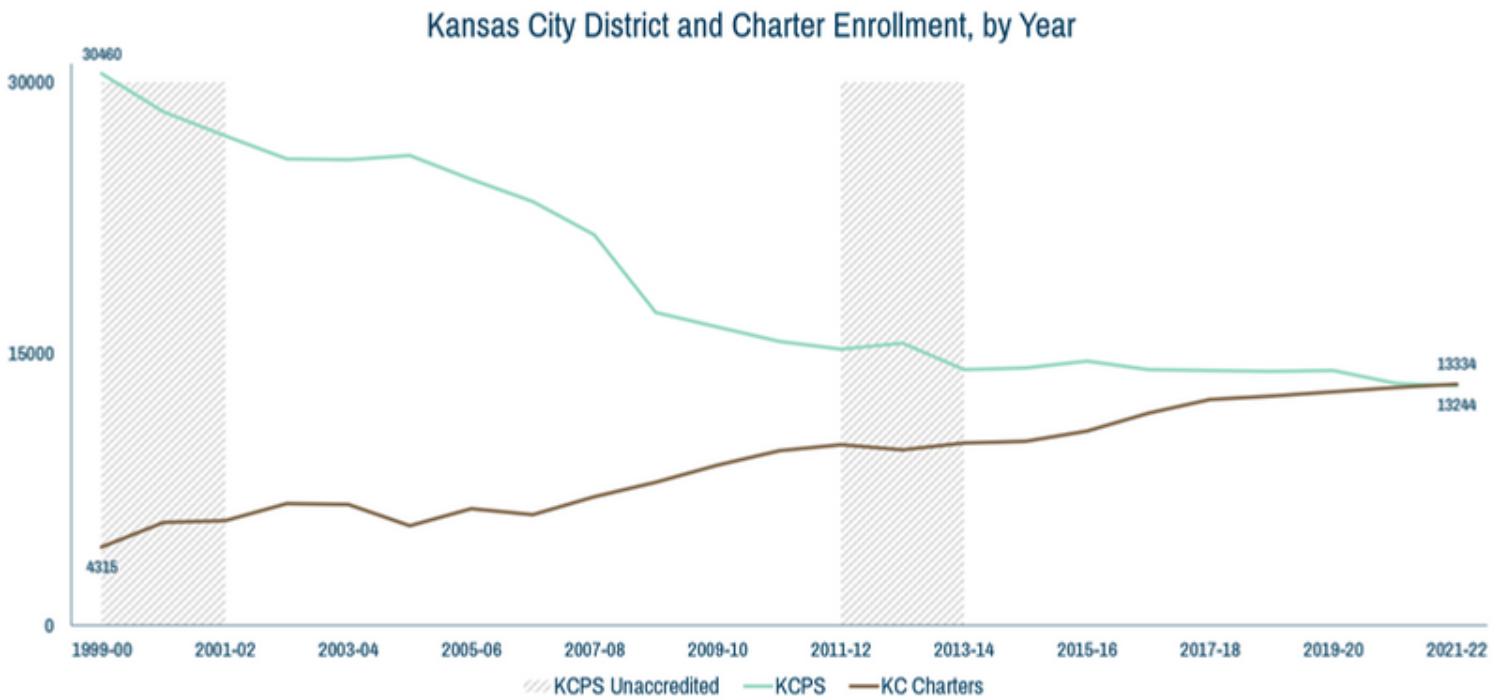


## Missouri Charter Schools Have Become More Specialized and Progressive Over Time

When we examine current charter schools by when they first opened, we find a steady but slow growth in the number of General-Traditional charters over time.<sup>11</sup> However, we find the share of charter schools that are General-Traditional has steadily decreased, from 67% of current charters open in 1999-00 to 50% in 2021-22. Specialized-Traditional charters now account for almost 20% of charter schools, and pedagogically-progressive charter schools of various types have increased from 11% in 1999-00 to 28% in 2021-22. One of the original nine charter schools (11%) was diverse-by-design, while in 2021-22 there were 15 charter schools in the state (19%) with an intentional focus on racial and socioeconomic diversity.

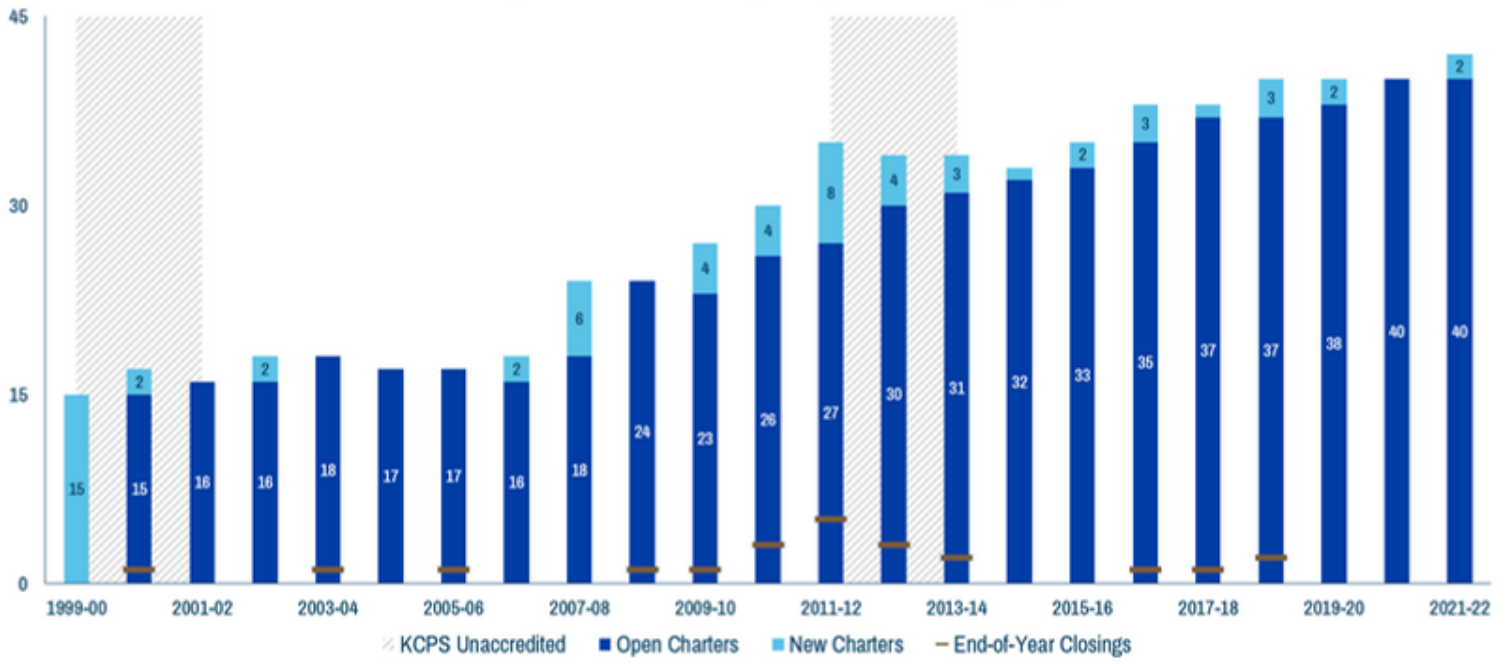
In the sections that follow, we more closely examine the growth of the charter school sector and how the types of charter schools that have opened in Kansas City and St. Louis have changed over time.

# Kansas City: Later Charters Specialized or Progressive



In Kansas City, district enrollment decreased by 50% between 1999-00 and 2013-14, a span of time which included two periods when KCPS lacked accreditation. District enrollment then stabilized for several years, while charter school enrollment continued to grow. Half of public school students in Kansas City are now enrolled in charter schools.

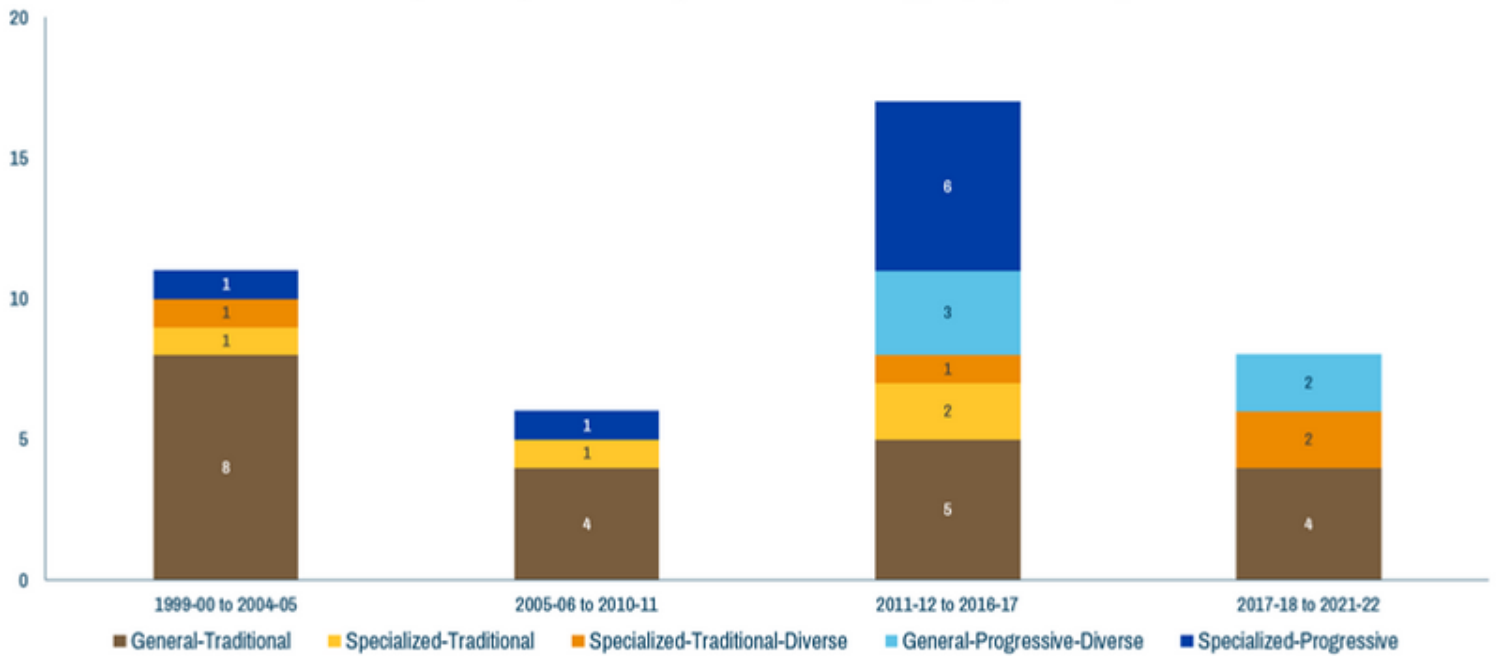
Kansas City Charter School Openings and Closings, by Year



We examined the number of charter schools that opened and closed in Kansas City each year between 1999-00 and 2021-22. Unlike what we see in St. Louis, we do not observe a time of rapid charter entry during times when the district lacked accreditation. However, the first year KCPS lost accreditation did correspond with the first year charter schools were able to open in the state. Of the 64 charter schools that have opened in Kansas City over time, 42 were still open in 2021-22.



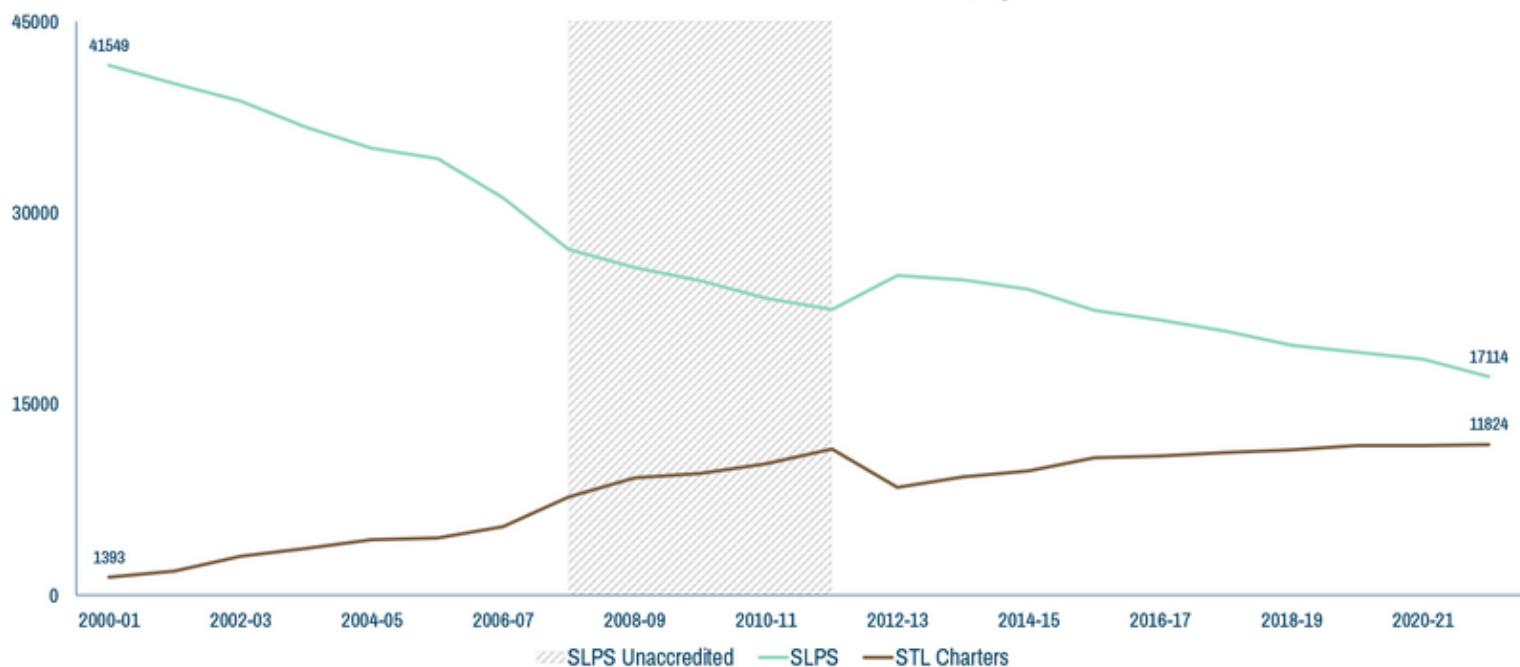
Current (2021-22) Kansas City Charter School Types, by Years Opened



Seventy-one percent of current charter schools that opened prior to 2011-12 are General-Traditional. Starting in 2011-12, we observe a distinct shift toward Specialized-Traditional and pedagogically-progressive charter schools of various types in Kansas City. This may indicate a shift in education more broadly or reflect an effort to appeal to diverse populations of students and families, as many of these schools are also diverse-by-design. In fact, eight of the nine diverse-by-design charter schools in Kansas City opened in the past decade.

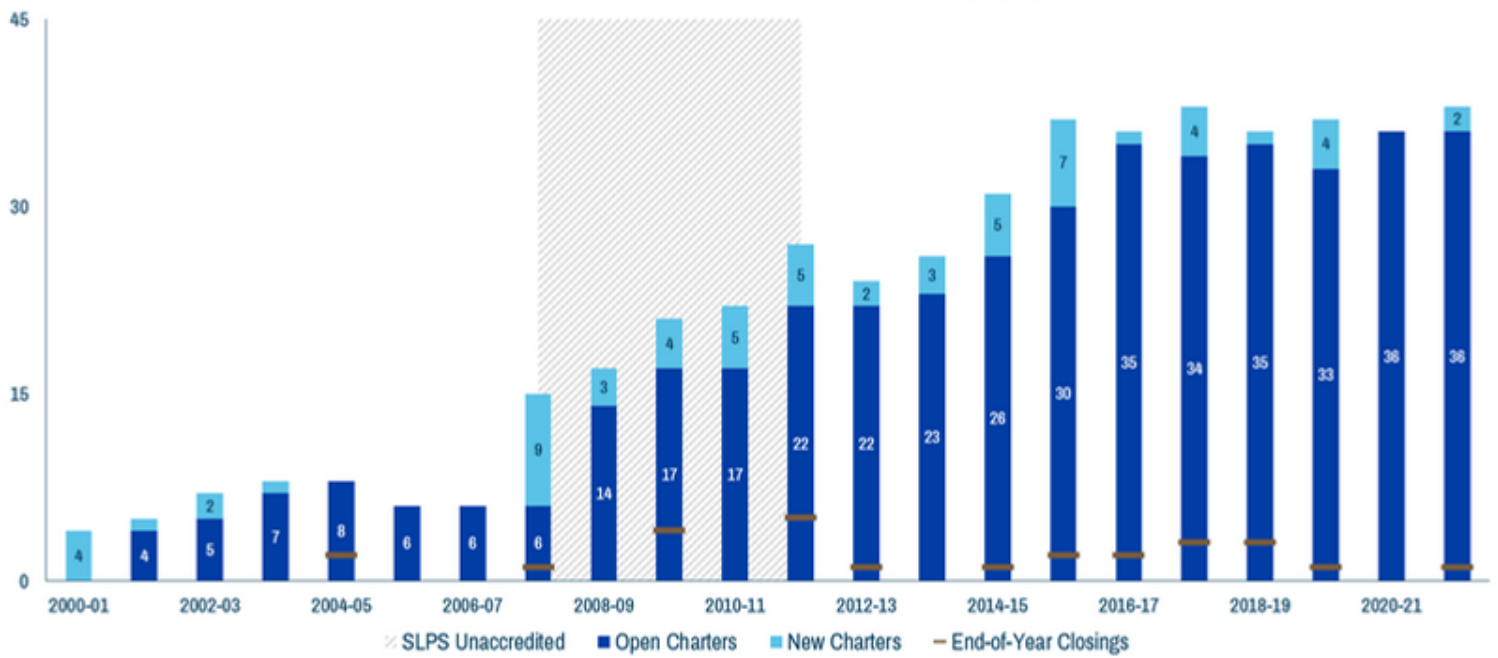
# St. Louis: Most Charters Traditional, Recent Charters Progressive and Diverse-by-Design

St. Louis District and Charter Enrollment, by Year



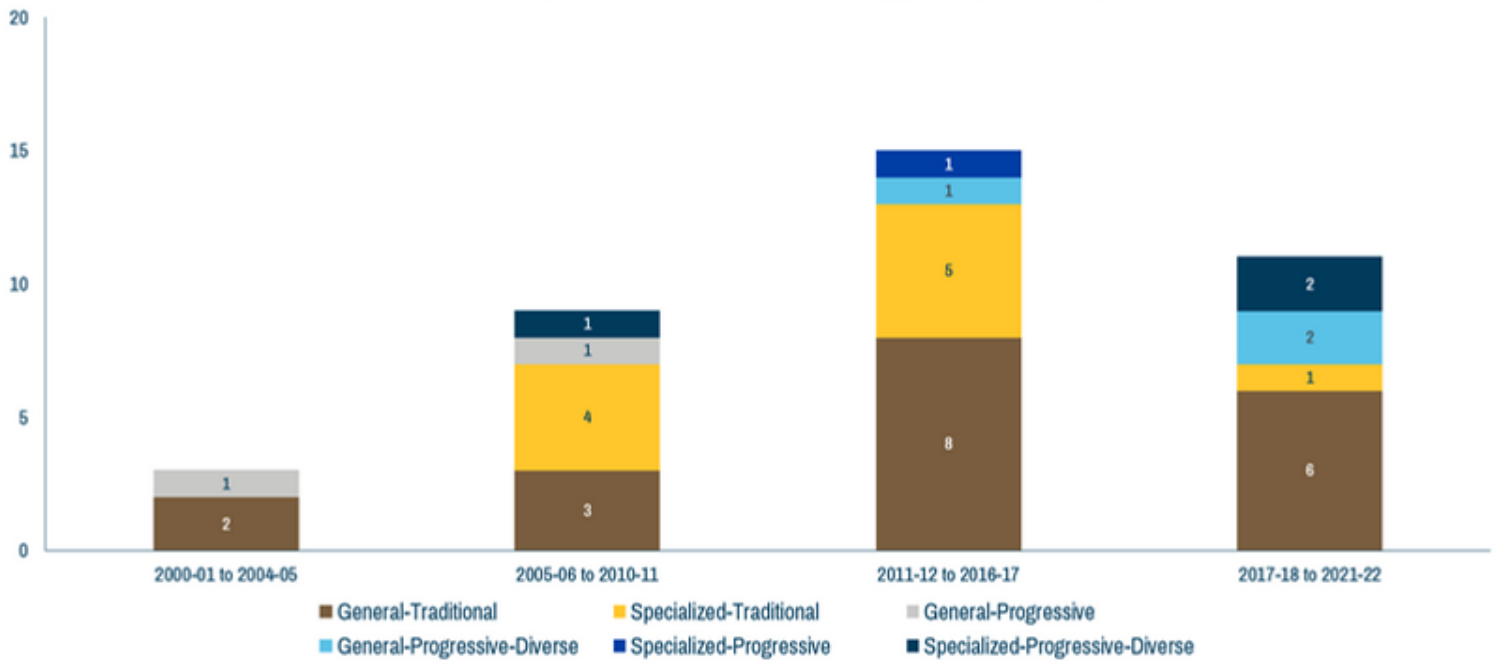
Charter schools first opened in St. Louis City in the 2000-01 school year. We observe a steady increase in charter school enrollment over time, with a marked drop in enrollment after 2011-12 when the six Imagine charter schools closed, displacing over 3500 students. This also led to a short-term increase in district enrollment.

St. Louis Charter School Openings and Closings, by Year



St. Louis experienced a period of rapid charter school entry during the four years when SLPS lacked accreditation and in the following six years when the district continued to be managed by a state-appointed Special Administrative Board (SAB). Since 2017-18, no net charter schools have been added.

Current (2021-22) St. Louis Charter School Types, by Years Opened



Of the 38 charter schools open in 2021-22, 76% are General-Traditional or Specialized-Traditional. However, the four charter schools that have opened most recently in the city are pedagogically-progressive and diverse-by-design.



The charter and magnet school sectors are distinct from each other because of the entities and policies that govern them. However, there is also great variety within each of these sectors. Charter and magnet schools differentiate themselves from each other and from district neighborhood schools and private schools by offering special curricular themes or a unique approach to education. Even charter schools that have a general curriculum and traditional teaching approach may have a strong emphasis on particular aspects of school culture, such as high expectations for student academics and behavior. In this brief, we offer a first-of-its-kind look at distinctions amongst charter and magnet schools in Kansas City and St. Louis and how the charter sector has changed over time.

It is likely that schools offering different types of education appeal to families with different educational values and aims, and we would expect to find demographic differences across different types of charter and magnet schools. The school-level information in Online Appendix B supports this expectation. In our next policy briefs in this series, we will further examine racial demographics across charter and magnet school types in the contexts of Kansas City and St. Louis.

### ***Acknowledgements***

Thank you to Claire Heggie and Meg Gorton for their invaluable assistance in the initial round of coding all charter schools in Missouri.

*The following definitions are adapted from White and Huang (2022) and were used to code curricular, pedagogical, and student body foci for each charter and magnet school in Kansas City and St. Louis.*

Definitions of Charter and Magnet School Primary Foci in Kansas City and St. Louis (2021-22)		
Category	Focus	Description
Curriculum	Accelerated	Curriculum that is above grade level
Curriculum	Arts	Curricular focus on the fine arts, music, performing arts, or visual arts; infuses or integrates arts into the core curriculum; treats art as a comprehensive subject like English or math
Curriculum	Civics	Curricular focus on law, economic justice, social justice, public policy, community engagement, or citizenship; also includes a distinct curricular focus on anti-bias, anti-racism (ABAR)
Curriculum	CTE	Curricular focus on vocational or career skills or subjects; many offer certifications; may specialize on a specific field; often provide apprenticeship and internship opportunities
Curriculum	Cultural	Curricular focus on a particular cultural tradition; often paired with language immersion; often serve indigenous populations, immigrant communities, or other diaspora
Curriculum	International Baccalaureate (IB)	Six main subjects include language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, science, math, and the arts
Curriculum	Language	Curricular focus on learning a second language
Curriculum	STEM	Curricular focus on science, technology, engineering, and/or math
Pedagogy	Blended	Pedagogical approach involving technology-enhanced learning
Pedagogy	Constructivist	Pedagogical approach based on the theory that children actively construct knowledge as they make sense of their world; foundation of approaches such as inquiry-based or project-based learning
Pedagogy	Expeditionary	Pedagogical approach involving learning through experiences; often includes field trips into the community or outdoor learning
Pedagogy	High Expectations	Pedagogical approach involving high academic and behavioral expectations; formerly known as "No Excuses"
Pedagogy	Inquiry-Based	Pedagogical approach that lets students explore material they find personally or socially interesting; allows students to posit and discover answers to questions or inquiries they have

Pedagogy	Montessori	Pedagogical approach that follows the methods of Maria Montessori; notable features include uninterrupted blocks of work time, classroom environments that foster exploration and discovery, self-directed learning, and mastery-based age groupings
Pedagogy	Personalized	Pedagogical approach that allows students to advance at their own pace based on mastery
Pedagogy	Project-Based	Pedagogical approach involving teaching through projects, either independently or in groups
Students	Alternative	Focus on a student population that is unique from the general student population; this may include indigenous populations, immigrant communities, or other diaspora; may offer credit recovery
Students	Diverse-by-Design	Focus on creating a racially and/or socioeconomically diverse student body; typically accomplish through selective marketing, or by locating in strategic locations that allow them to draw from diverse communities; also known as intentionally or purposefully diverse
Students	Dropout Recovery	Focus on serving students who are credit deficient, have dropped out of school, or are at risk of dropping out
Students	Gifted	Focus on serving students who test as gifted
Students	Single Sex	Focus on educating students in a single-sex classroom environment; may serve only boys or only girls; may accept both boys and girls while educating them separately for some or all courses

***To see a list of each charter and magnet school in Kansas City and Saint Louis City, along with the 2021-22 type, primary foci, and racial demographics of each school, see our online [Appendix B](#).***



1. Kansas City Public Schools. (2023). Signature schools. <https://www.kcpublicschools.org/schools/signature>; Saint Louis Public Schools. (2023). Magnet schools. <https://slpsmagnetschools.org/programs>
2. Shelton, A., & Park, A. (2020). Missouri magnet schools: What's the purpose? <https://www.sluprime.org/prime-blog/magnetschools>
3. Williams, M. R. (2019). 9,000 hot dogs, 3 new recruiters: In a crowded field, KC schools pump up marketing. <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article232977932.html>
4. Until 2022-23, charter schools have only operated in Kansas City and St. Louis City. We focus on these two cities to compare the charter and magnet sectors, though magnet schools are also present in other districts in the state.
5. White, J., & Huang, L. (2022). A census of all specialized charter school foci and models. *Journal of School Choice*, 16(1), 11-42.
6. Websites may not fully describe the unique educational environments of schools, and we do not know to what extent charter and magnet schools implement the curriculum and pedagogy they highlight on their websites. Thus, this analysis might best be considered a description of how charter and magnet schools publicly market themselves to prospective families. In addition, different individuals might come to different conclusions about how to categorize schools. To address this concern, we used multiple coders to analyze charter school websites and discussed areas of disagreement. For magnet schools, we primarily relied upon the labels provided by KCPS and SLPS on their respective magnet school webpages. The author welcomes feedback from the schools included in this policy brief. [amy.shelton@slu.edu](mailto:amy.shelton@slu.edu)
7. We report this at the school-level because charter schools within the same charter district may have different educational approaches.
8. This includes Blended, Constructivist, Expeditionary, Inquiry-Based, Montessori, Personalized, and Project-Based.
9. A school may use the phrase “high expectations” on their website without it being the primary pedagogical approach. For example, the three Crossroads Charter Schools in KC list high expectations as one of their core values. However, their primary approach is classified as expeditionary because of their unique emphasis on “authentic learning experiences and downtown expeditions.”
10. We use 2021-22 data because racial demographic data was not yet available for 2022-23.
11. We only have data on school type for charter and magnet schools that were still open in 2021-22. Thus, this brief does not describe the types of charter and magnet schools that opened and closed between 1999-00 and 2021-22. We do include The Arch Community School charter, which closed at the end of the 2021-22 school year.



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### ***About the Author***

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