

# A Comparative Look at College Outcomes for California Public School Graduates

## Executive Summary

College matters. Numerous research studies document the link between attaining a college degree and improved population outcomes such as lower unemployment rates and higher median earnings.<sup>i</sup> These same studies indicate that even attending some college, completing it or not can positively impact these economic outcomes. In this report, we examine the observable links between the high schools that students attend and the postsecondary outcomes students ultimately achieve. In addition, we seek lessons that might help more students get to and through college. Specifically, given a clear body of research documenting charters schools' large positive impact for historically disadvantaged student groups, we analyze whether this trend also appears in the college going/college attainment data.<sup>ii</sup> Within charters, we also investigate whether there are differences or trends in these data based on concentration of disadvantaged students.

The California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) worked with the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to obtain a dataset on California public high schools (charter and traditional) to assess how different types of high schools succeed in helping students enroll in, persist and complete two- and four-year college programs. This dataset represents about 1,000 charter and traditional public high schools in California. CCSA's research team conducted similar analyses to the NSC's national [High School Benchmarks](#) study, breaking out the data to explore trends by socioeconomic, minority, and rural/urban status. Some of these analyses lead to small sample sizes, which limit the generalizability of the data (see the limitations section below and the appendix for detail). To ensure the charter schools and traditional public schools were comparable, we focus on classroom-based charter and traditional public schools and exclude alternative and non-classroom-based (independent study/combo) programs.<sup>1</sup>

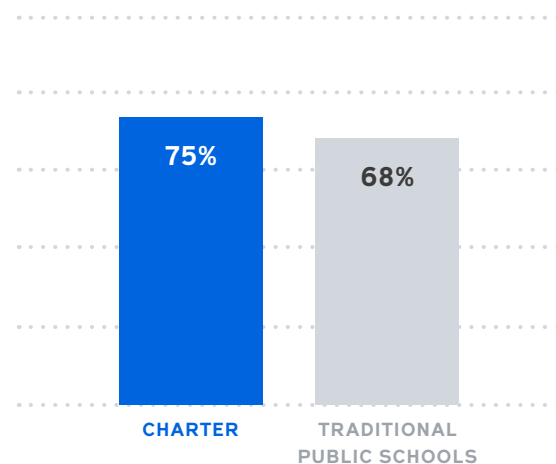
<sup>1</sup> See Methodology and Limitations section for more detail and rationale for inclusion/exclusion criteria.

On average, a higher proportion of California charter school students enrolled in college than traditional public school students in California.

## Summary Findings

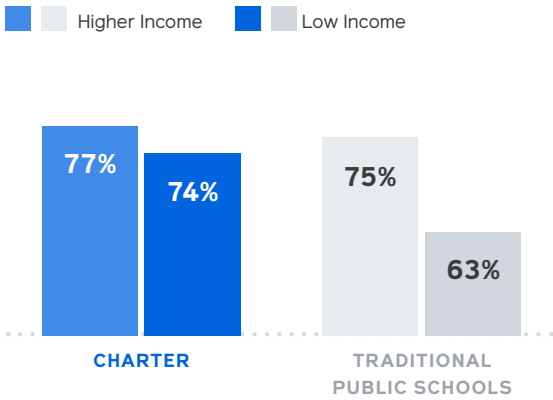
Figure 1 shows that 75% of California charter graduates from the class of 2016 enrolled in college<sup>iii</sup> compared to 68% of traditional public school students (for a full count of students and schools included in this study please see the data sample in the appendix). When narrowing the focus from an “all students” lens to focus on results by income status, a different picture comes into view.

**FIGURE 1**  
Overall Percent of Graduates Enrolled in College, Class of 2016



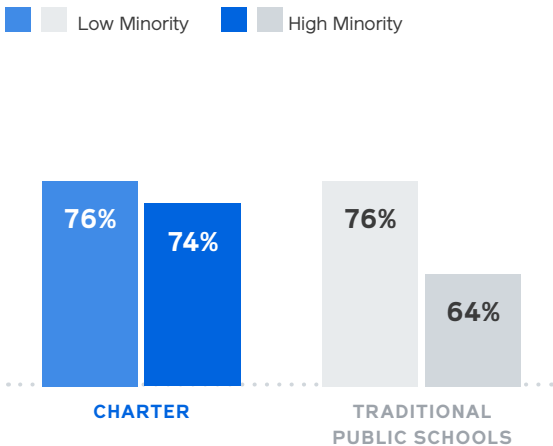
**FIGURE 2**

Gap in First Fall College Enrollment Rate  
by High School Income Status, Class of 2016



**FIGURE 3**

Gap in First Fall College Enrollment Rate by High School  
Minority Status, Class of 2016

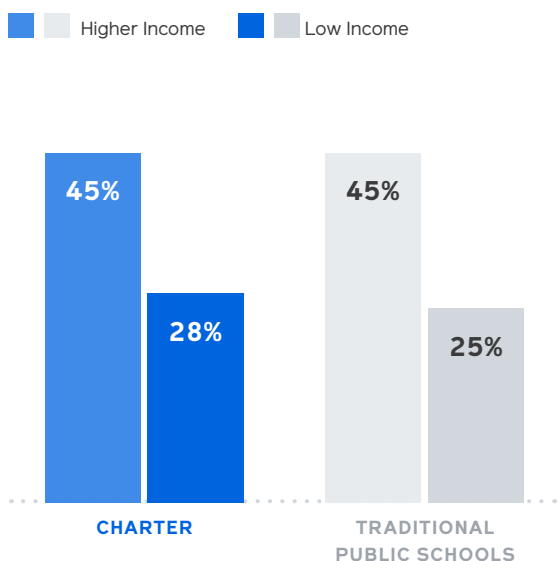


Specifically, Figure 2 shows that the gap between schools with majority higher income students and those with majority low income students is substantially lower at California charter schools (only 3%), compared with 12% at traditional public schools.

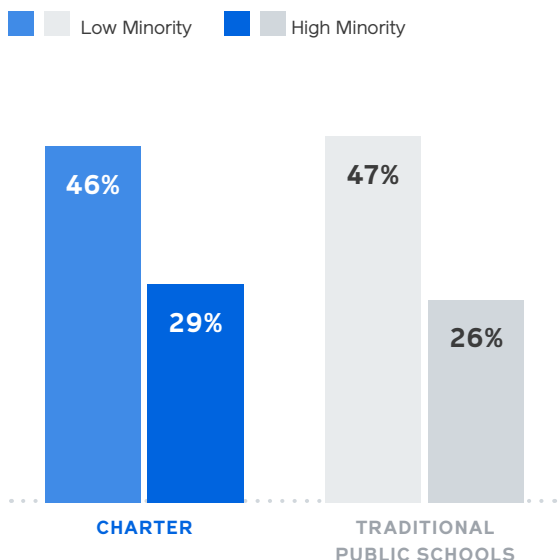
Shifting the lens to minority status in Figure 3, we see a similar gap emerge: charter students enrolled in high schools with a high minority population enrolled in college at a 74% rate, only 2% behind students enrolled in low minority populations. In contrast, only 64% of students from traditional public schools with high minority populations enrolled in college. Based on this data, California charter schools had a smaller income-based achievement gap in college enrollment than California traditional public schools.

**Charter students from low income and high minority schools enroll in college at essentially the same rate as students from high income and low minority schools. Charter schools nearly closed the college entrance gap between high and low income schools AND between high and low minority schools.**

**FIGURE 4**  
Gap in Six Year College Completion Rate  
by High School Income Status, Class of 2010



**FIGURE 5**  
Gap in Six Year College Completion Rate by  
High School Minority Status, Class of 2010



**In both charter and traditional public schools, college completion rates were substantially lower for California students from low income high schools than from higher income high schools.**

Despite this success with college enrollment, students from low income traditional public schools and charter schools are completing college degrees at much lower rates than their peers from higher income schools. Charter schools' 2016 enrollment disparity for low income schools was just 3%, but that gap was more than five times larger for the high school class of 2010's college completion. Figures 4 shows that the size of the college achievement gap between higher income and lower income schools was 17% for California charter schools and 20% for California traditional public high schools for the class of 2010.

Figure 5 nearly matches those rates, where graduates from low minority charter high schools are 17% more likely to graduate from college in 6 years than peers from high minority population schools and graduates from traditional public schools are 19% more likely to graduate college from a low minority school than a high minority school.

# Detailed Findings

## Purpose and Definitions

This report is limited to schools that share data with the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). CCSA received summary information about college going for schools by income status, minority student population, and urbanicity, also split for charter and traditional public schools. The purpose of this report is to better understand California charter college enrollment and attainment, replicating the analyses of the [NSC high school benchmark report](#) with a specific focus on California charters and traditional public schools.

To see a set of full definitions including outcomes and school types, please see the Definitions sections of the Appendix.

Our sample included of over 400,000 California high school students in each graduating class. For each year of data, a different sample of schools and students was available. For this reason, we did not make any comparisons across years. To see a total of school count student counts that were included in these analyses, please see the Data Sample section of the Appendix.

We measured college achievement with three different metrics:

**1 First fall enrollment**, or the percent of graduates enrolling in a college in the fall semester after their high school graduation.

**2 Persistence**, or the percent of students who enrolled in college their first year after high school graduation and persisted into their second year at any institution.

**3 Completion**, or the percent of students who attained a degree within the first six years following high school graduation.

We also examined schools in groups of given student body demographics:

### Low Income Schools

Where at least 50% of the student body is eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch

### High Minority Schools

Where at least 40% of the student body is African American or Latino

# Comparisons by NSC Metric

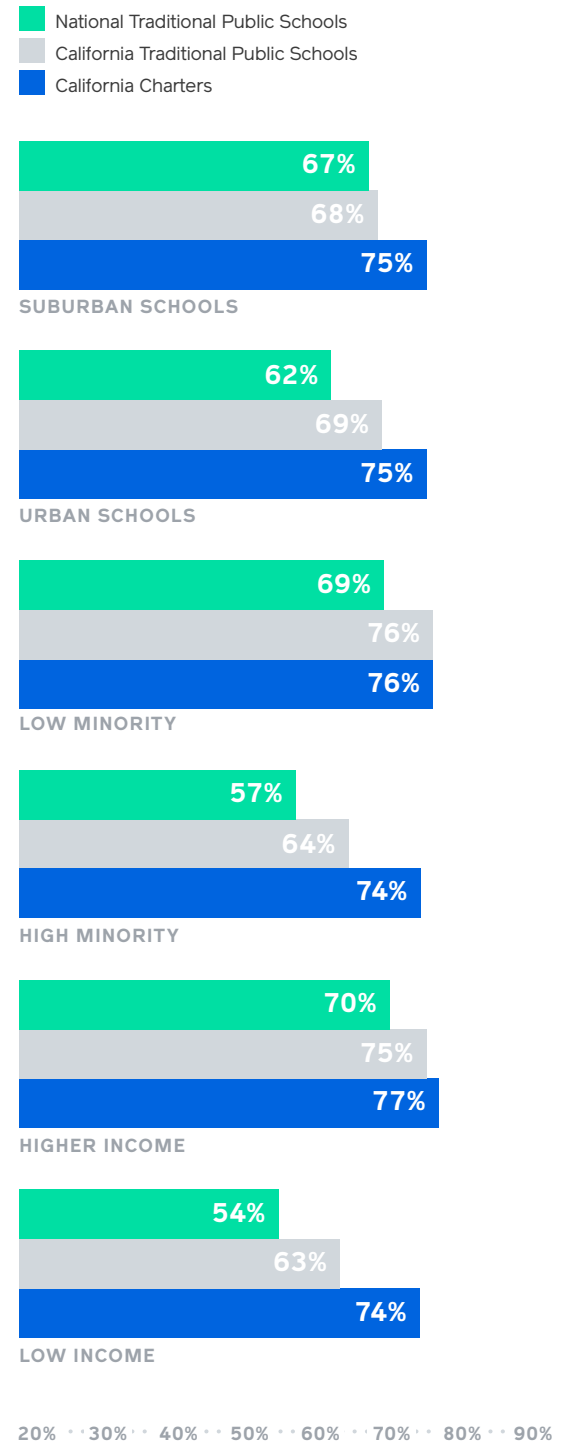
## First Fall Enrollment

A higher proportion of 2016 charter graduates enrolled in college than did traditional public school graduates in California. First fall college enrollment rates were higher for California charter school graduates than for traditional public school graduates for every school group examined (Figure 6).

The gaps seen in Figure 6 are most noticeable for low income schools (11% difference between California charters and California traditional public schools) and high minority schools (10% difference). These large gaps among schools serving historically disadvantaged students speak to the improved college access students of color and low income students gain from charter school attendance.

For students in urban settings, California charter school graduates enrolled in college at a rate 13% higher than did urban graduates nationally. Additionally, on average both charter and traditional public schools in California enrolled a larger proportion of their students in college than high schools nationwide. Since college enrollment is not the finish line for postsecondary educational attainment, this report also measures college persistence, specifically those who stay in college a second year.

**FIGURE 6** Percent of Graduates Enrolled in College, Class of 2016



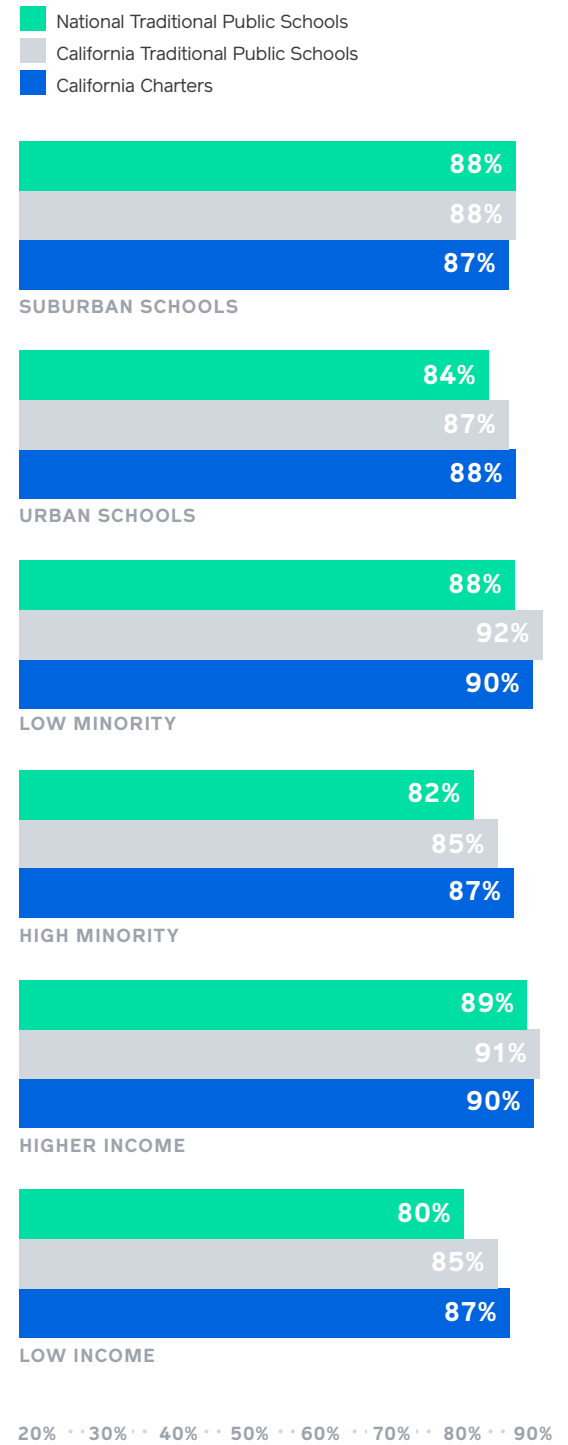
## Persistence

Among California charter and traditional students as well as students nationwide, the college persistence rates were within 7% of each other for each school type examined. Charters had comparatively higher persistence rates with low income and high minority schools.

The surprisingly positive patterns of college enrollment in 2016 for California charter students were not consistent in college persistence rates for the class of 2014. Charter school students' persistence rates exceeded traditional public schools for some groups of students but not all. Figure 7 illustrates the similarity in college persistence rates across school types and across school locations.

As with college enrollment, the biggest persistence disparities occur with schools serving majority low income students and high minority student schools, but the persistence rates are slightly higher for charter schools. The 2014 California charter school graduating cohort from low income schools persisted at a 7% higher rate into their 2nd year of college than students from low income schools nationwide. Similarly, high minority California charter schools saw 5% more graduates persist into their 2nd year than students who attended similarly high minority schools nationwide. In both of these cases, persistence rates for California traditional public school graduates fell between the charter school rate and the national rate. California students persisted at higher rates than students nationwide, but it is not clear if California charter school graduates had an advantage over California traditional public school students in college persistence. These persistence statistics are a key indicator on the path to ultimate educational attainment - degree completion.

**FIGURE 7** Two Year College Persistence Rate, Class of 2014



## Six-Year Completion Rate

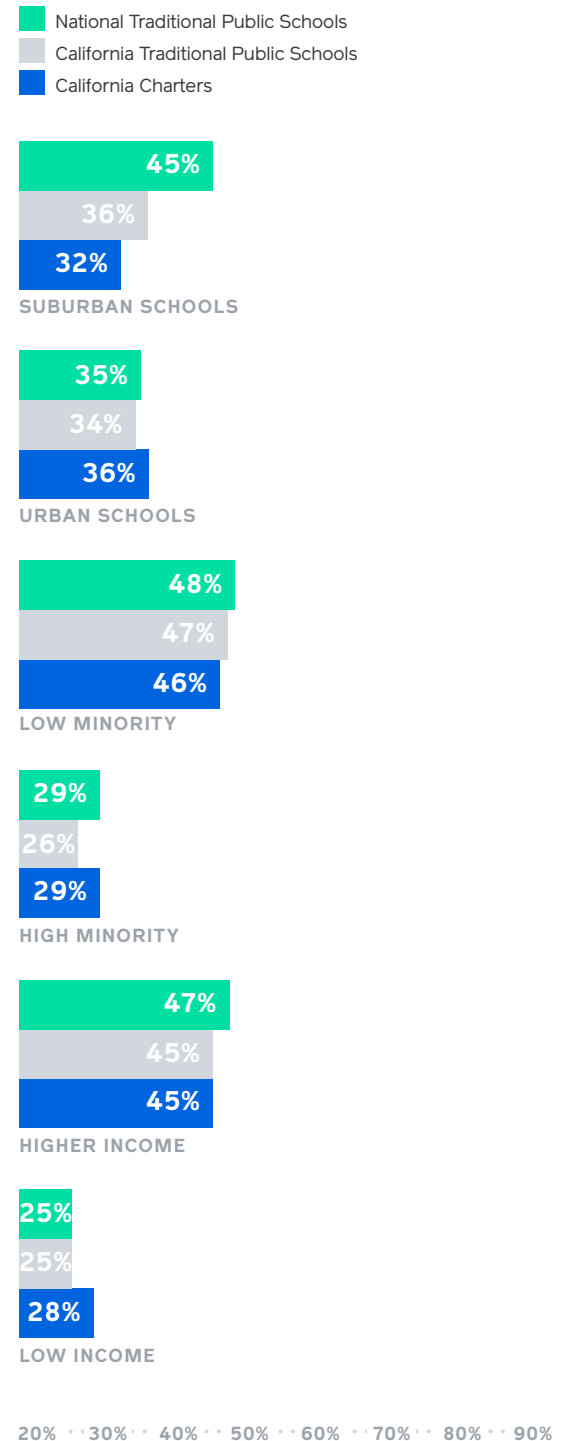
California charter students from high minority and urban schools completed college at similar rates to their peers nationally and charter students from low income schools completed college at a slightly higher rate.

Overall, California high school graduates from the class of 2010 did not complete college at higher rates than graduates nationally. However, for urban, high minority, and low income schools, California charters had equal or higher completion rates than their traditional or national peers. Figure 8 shows that students from low income California charter schools completed college at a 28% rate, 3% higher than students from low income high schools nationwide.

Figure 8 also shows that college completion rates for this cohort were 13% lower for California suburban charter school students than students from suburban high schools nationally. The gaps in college completion between students from more privileged and less privileged high schools are particularly notable. High income and low minority school graduates completed college at nearly double the rate of their opposite group peers.

Achievement gaps like these are persistent and detrimental to minority groups in American education.<sup>iv</sup> As such, the next section of this report focuses on the gaps between low income and higher income outcomes. Low-income school outcomes across each of the metrics were explored particularly because they illustrate the achievement gap facing students and demonstrate the strength of charter schools in California as they make strides toward closing the achievement gap.

**FIGURE 8** Six Year College Completion Rate, Class of 2010

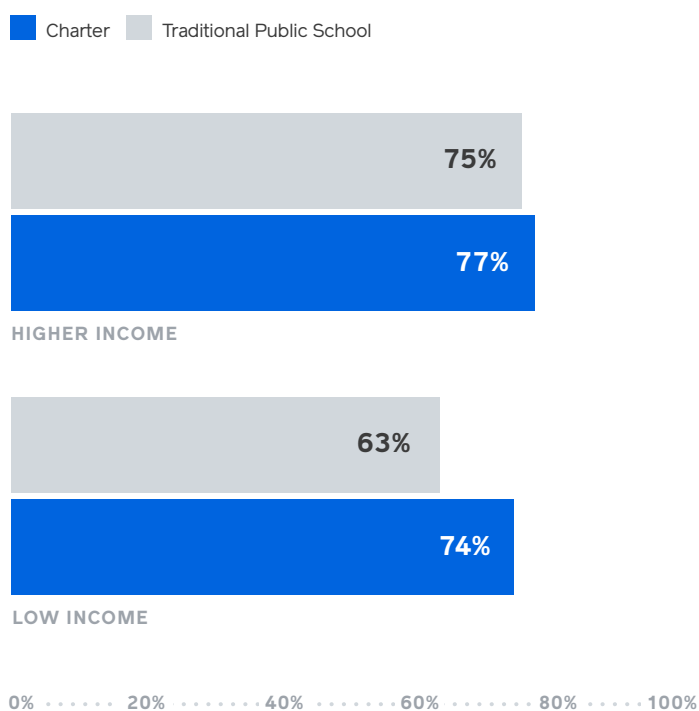




# California Low-Income Focused Analyses

**Charter schools are giving college access to students who might not attend college if they were enrolled at a traditional public school.**

**FIGURE 9**  
Percent of Graduates Enrolled in College, Class of 2016

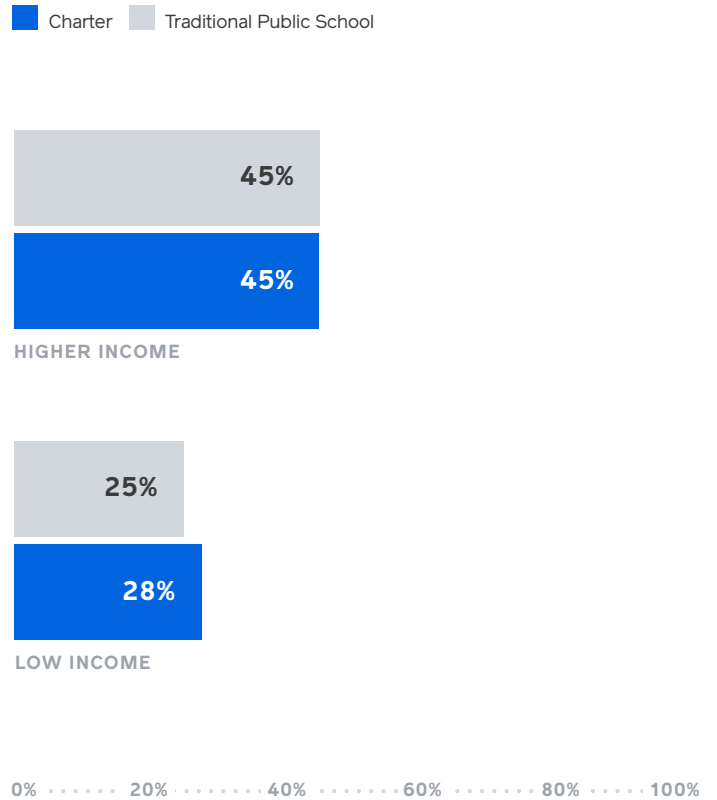


Nationwide, low income students are less likely to attend college and for those that do attend, they are less likely to obtain a degree.<sup>v</sup> Charter schools in California combatted one of these trends with improved college access for low income students. As seen in Figure 9 below, 74% of graduates from low income California charter schools enrolled in the first fall semester of college in 2016, compared to only 63% of graduates from low income traditional public schools. In addition to this improved rate, only 3% more students from higher income charter schools enrolled in college when compared to low income schools. This same gap was 12% for traditional public schools. Mirroring California K-12 outcome research, California charter schools more successfully narrowed the college attainment achievement gap for low income students than California traditional schools.<sup>vi</sup> Perhaps the most striking evidence of charter success here is that students from low income charter schools enrolled in college at a similar rate to students from higher income traditional public schools.

Unfortunately, college enrollment does not guarantee a degree, especially for low income students. Studies have shown that academically prepared low income students are historically *less* likely to graduate college than their middle income peers with less academic preparation.<sup>vii</sup> We see this same finding echoed in Figure 10, where, for the 2010 high school graduating classes, there was a nearly 20% gap in college completion between students graduating from low income schools and higher income schools.

This gap was large and concerning for both charter schools and traditional public schools in California. As an education system, K-12 to postsecondary, reforms are needed that allow students from all backgrounds to be successful. Academically prepared college students should be able to finish college, regardless of familial financial resources.

**FIGURE 10**  
Six Year College Completion Rate, Class of 2010



## Conclusion

**On average, a higher proportion of California charter school students enrolled in college than did traditional public school students in California and students nationwide.** California charter schools successfully enabled more students to apply and enroll in college than traditional public schools in California and nationwide. In particular, charters had an increased level of college enrollment for students from low income schools and high minority schools.

**Despite this success, significant achievement gaps for all schools existed in college attainment between students based on income level, as well as between schools with high or low concentrations of minority students.**

These gaps exist nationally, in California traditional public schools, and in California charter schools. Of the school types examined in this report, California charter school students had the smallest achievement gaps between low income and higher income and high minority and lower minority groups overall for college enrollment, persistence, and completion.



## Methodology and Limitations

Like any research study, this report has specific limitations of generalizability, reliability, and validity. Only schools that opted to participate with NSC were included in the results of this report. While nearly all US colleges participate with NSC, only 60% of high school students enrolled nationwide were represented by NSC.<sup>viii</sup> The results in this report were also limited to site-based schools. The exclusion of non-classroom-based schools allows the school groups between charter and traditional public schools to be comparable, as very few traditional public schools operate an exclusively non-classroom-based school. Those non-classroom-based programs that do exist were mostly comprehensive high schools that offer independent study programming for select students and their data are not published separately from the comprehensive high school, making an apples-to-apples comparison between non-classroom-based charters and traditional public schools difficult.

Upon request, the NCS-provided dataset excluded schools that match the California Department of Education [definition](#) of ASAM or Alternative schools.<sup>ix</sup> These schools served a high proportion of disadvantaged students and academic outcomes from these schools should not be compared to schools serving a more typical student body.

Due to limits on NSC participation, the sample of charter schools included was limited for some groupings of schools. Specifically, the number of higher income charter schools and low minority charter schools included in this analysis is below 20.<sup>x</sup>

CCSA received 6-year college completion rates for the class of 2010, persistence rates for the class of 2014, and enrollment rates for the high school class of 2016 aggregated to groupings of schools. Neither student-level data nor school-level data was released to CCSA to protect student privacy.

## Definitions of School Type

### Low Income Schools

Schools where at least 50% of the students are eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch.

### High Minority Schools

Schools where at least 40% of the students are black or Hispanic.

### Locale

Defined by the NCES urban-centric locale code. Schools with a code from 11 to 13 are defined as urban. Schools with a code from 21 to 23 are defined as suburban. And, those with a code from 31 to 43, covering both town and rural areas, are defined as rural.

## Definitions of Outcomes

**College Enrollment** in the first fall after high school graduation:

Percentage of high school students who enrolled in a two- or four-year postsecondary institution in the fall semester immediately following graduation. The fall semester immediately following graduation is defined as any enrollment that occurs between August 15 and October 31.

**Persistence** from first to second year of college:

Percentage of students enrolled in the first year after high school graduation who remained enrolled in postsecondary education in the second year. This is the percentage of students who re-enrolled at any postsecondary institution, not necessarily the same one they started in. Thus, it is different from the typical measure of retention at the same institution.

**College Completion** within six years after high school graduation:

Percentage of high school students who attained a degree from a two- or four-year postsecondary institution during the six academic years immediately following graduation. Only associate, bachelors, and advanced degrees are counted in these rates. Certificates are not included.

## Data Sample

		2016 College Enrollment (First Fall)		2014 College Persistence (2 Years)		2010 College Completion (6 Years)	
		School Count	Student Count	School Count	Student Count	School Count	Student Count
Charter	Rural	1	92	0	0	1	457
	Suburban	18	2,356	19	1,824	10	753
	Urban	49	6,284	53	5,865	35	3,170
	Higher Income	15	2,203	15	2,248	15	2,016
	Low Income	53	6,529	57	5,441	31	2,364
	High Minority	58	6,485	63	6,192	35	2,611
	Low Minority	10	2,247	9	1,497	11	1,769
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>26,196</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>23,067</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>13,140</b>
Traditional Public Schools	Rural	47	11,719	57	9,282	52	16,530
	Suburban	182	74,320	195	59,381	146	64,753
	Urban	233	84,520	239	66,027	206	79,244
	Higher Income	160	70,021	169	58,920	170	73,486
	Low Income	302	100,538	322	75,770	234	87,041
	High Minority	319	114,884	338	84,410	247	96,117
	Low Minority	143	55,675	153	50,280	157	64,410
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1,386</b>	<b>511,677</b>	<b>1,473</b>	<b>404,070</b>	<b>1,212</b>	<b>481,581</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1,590</b>	<b>537,873</b>	<b>1,689</b>	<b>427,137</b>	<b>1,350</b>	<b>494,721</b>	

- <sup>i</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. “Fast Facts” From: [nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372)
- <sup>ii</sup> Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis “Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps”  
From: [cepa.stanford.edu/educational-opportunity-monitoring-project/achievement-gaps/race/](https://cepa.stanford.edu/educational-opportunity-monitoring-project/achievement-gaps/race/)
- <sup>iii</sup> For the purposes of this report, college refers to any two- or four-year postsecondary institution
- <sup>iv</sup> Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis “Racial and Ethnic Achievement Gaps”  
From: [cepa.stanford.edu/educational-opportunity-monitoring-project/achievement-gaps/race/](https://cepa.stanford.edu/educational-opportunity-monitoring-project/achievement-gaps/race/)
- <sup>v</sup> Johns Hopkins School of Education: Institute for Education Policy. “Family Income and the College Completion Gap”  
From: [edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/family-income-and-the-college-completion-gap/](https://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/family-income-and-the-college-completion-gap/)
- <sup>vi</sup> Center for Research on Education Outcomes. “Charter School Performance in California”  
From: [credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/ca\\_report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/ca_report_FINAL.pdf)
- <sup>vii</sup> Johns Hopkins School of Education: Institute for Education Policy. “Family Income and the College Completion Gap”  
From: [edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/family-income-and-the-college-completion-gap/](https://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/family-income-and-the-college-completion-gap/)
- <sup>viii</sup> National Student Clearinghouse. “About the Clearinghouse”  
From: [studentclearinghouse.org/about/](https://studentclearinghouse.org/about/)
- <sup>ix</sup> California Department of Education. “Alternative Schools Accountability Model”  
From: [www.cde.ca.gov/re/pr/asam.asp](https://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pr/asam.asp)
- <sup>x</sup> Please see the appendix for school counts in each school grouping.