



# 2019 NCES ID REPORT

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The Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) creates unique identification numbers, called NCES IDs, for every school in the United States in order to provide the most up-to-date and comprehensive account of schools in the nation. The NCES IDs prove useful in part because they contain valuable information embedded in them. Each NCES ID begins with a two-digit state Federal Information Processing Standards (FIPS) code, which identifies the state or territory in which the school belongs. After this, NCES adds an ID for the school district or Local Education Agency (LEAID), followed by a unique ID number for each school within the LEA (SCHNO). These three pieces of information combine to create a distinctive twelve-digit identification number as follows<sup>1</sup>:

**NCES ID = XX XXXXX XXXXX**  
                  └─┬─┘ └─┬─┘ └─┬─┘  
                  FIPS LEAID SCHNO

While the embedded information is useful in determining certain information about a school, this formula can be problematic if one wants to accurately track schools over time. This is particularly true for charter schools.

## CHANGES OVER TIME

In any given year, NCES IDs help researchers access school data from across federal datasets. Challenges mostly arise when trying to view data longitudinally. When NCES IDs change over time, it can be difficult to determine what caused the NCES ID to change, such as a school in question closing, new schools opening, or some other reason. In an ideal world, every school would receive an NCES ID that stays constant over time. However, over the last fifteen years, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools has recorded more than 500 instances of NCES IDs changing. The situations that lead to changes in NCES IDs vary as shown below:

- 1. Changes in LEA affect the NCES ID.** When a school changes its school district (or in the case of the charter schools, also their authorizer), as occurred when oversight of New Orleans charter schools transitioned from oversight by the Recovery School District (RSD) to the Orleans Parish School Board, its ID often changes. The move affects little in terms of day-to-day operations with the schools themselves remaining largely the same. However, this administrative shift leads to new NCES IDs. Given the imbedded information within the NCES ID, including the LEA, issuing new NCES IDs is appropriate. However, these changes mean that, schools that transition appear to close. While an extreme example, one study found that 34 Ohio schools changed authorizers over a seven-year period<sup>2</sup>. If their NCES ID changes, a school that remains open for years in the same building, with roughly the same staff, may appear one year, and be new the next.
- 2. Charter school expansion affects NCES IDs.** New campuses associated with a charter holder or charter management organization may or may not receive new IDs when they first open. Sometimes NCES generates only one ID for many schools and campuses across an entire city.

For years, NCES listed all of the more than one dozen Noble Network schools in Chicago under the same NCES ID. Recently, NCES created separate IDs for these schools, making them appear to be new entities. However, these schools served families for years, making their new IDs potentially confusing.

- 3. One school may appear in multiple records.** Datasets may list one school under multiple NCES IDs, each representing a different grade span within a school. This may occur because of differing ways schools report enrollment to their district or authorizer. NCES may count a single school with grades kindergarten through eight as a single school with grades K-8, or as both a school with grades K-5 and another with grades 6-8, or as some other variant. States may also report schools differently than the federal government, which means a one-to-one match on NCES IDs often fails to capture all schools. When NCES rectifies these discrepancies in their NCES ID, it may appear that a school closes when in fact, they simply addressed the duplicated recording.
- 4. School conversions may impact NCES IDs.** Schools that convert from charters to district or vice versa may receive new NCES IDs. In some cases, district-run schools briefly convert to charter schools in order to apply for Charter Schools Program funding but convert back the following year. Any change in NCES IDs associated with these conversions may give the appearance that a charter school closed in its first year of operation.
- 5. School mergers may impact NCES IDs.** Schools merge for various reasons. Declining enrollment, or facility challenges may necessitate a merger in order to continue to serve the students in a given area. Sometimes, two charter schools that operate under the same management organization will combine. Whether or not the merger results in changes to staff or students, school mergers can result in both schools appearing closed if the merged school receives a new NCES ID that is not associated with either of the merging schools.

## CONCLUSION

These challenges require a careful attention to detail when it comes to calculating enrollment and trends in school openings and closings. This paper does not seek to determine what constitutes a closed or a new school, but rather to highlight the challenges with using the NCES ID as a closure indicator. The NCES ID serves as a valuable tool in education research, but the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools urges researchers to use caution before making assumptions regarding why NCES IDs changed. A thorough school-by-school analysis yields a more accurate picture. For researchers interested in such an analysis, the National Alliance encourages them to seek out existing state crosswalks published by state education agencies.

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<sup>1</sup>Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey, 2000-2001, <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/data/txt/psu00lay.txt>.

<sup>2</sup>Bellwether Education Partners and Thomas B. Fordham Institute, The Road to Redemption: Ten Policy Recommendations for Ohio's Charter School Sector (2014), pg 28 [http://media.cleveland.com/plain\\_dealer\\_metro/other/The%20Road%20to%20Redemption%20Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://media.cleveland.com/plain_dealer_metro/other/The%20Road%20to%20Redemption%20Report_FINAL.pdf)