

CARNEGIE INSIGHTS

Data for Informed Action

May 2023

Carnegie
CORPORATION
OF NEW YORK

 MarGrady Research

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INTRODUCTION

NEW SCHOOL

Opened after SY1990



OLDER SCHOOL

Opened in or prior to SY1990



The education landscape today looks very different than it did 30 years ago. Toward the end of the 20th century, it was becoming increasingly clear that the traditional, one-size-fits-all approach to education in the United States was failing to prepare all learners for success in a rapidly changing world. This recognition spurred three decades of innovation, resulting in myriad new school models during that time.

Philanthropy played a catalyzing role in this process, often with the intention of leveraging new school models to demonstrate a new vision for learning, build demand among communities, and drive systems change. This has been the goal of our grantmaking at Carnegie Corporation of New York, where our support for personalized, student-centered learning models is complemented by a focus on the systemic conditions necessary to sustain them. Other funders have increasingly adopted this orientation, and while our collective efforts have not always yielded breakthrough results, they have provided valuable lessons that continue to guide our work today. We see these lessons manifested across the country: in schools that personalize student learning experiences and center socio-emotional development, in districts that have invested in capacity-building at all levels, and in policies that enable locally driven change.

Despite these organic learnings, the field has not yet surfaced comprehensive information about the number, geographic distribution, and characteristics of the new schools that opened during this time. We commissioned this study from MarGrady Research to fill that gap. Our hope is that the findings, particularly the number of new schools opened in the last 30 years and the share of students attending these schools across the country, will help deepen the field's understanding of the scope of new school creation and the implications for the broader education system, particularly as declining enrollment around the country may lead to an increase in school closures and consolidations.¹

The sheer scale of new school development over the past three decades is striking.² Of the 93,502 public elementary and secondary schools operating in the 2019–20 school year, 31,912 (34 percent) did not exist 30 years earlier. These new schools are attended by nearly 17 million students, or one-third of all public school students.

We can consider the pattern of new school development over the last 30 years alongside what we know about the school reform movement during this time period. MarGrady Research found three waves of new school creation within the period of focus: (1) In the 1990s, the growth in new schools appears to have aligned with increases in student enrollment; (2) In the 2000s, the

Throughout this report, school years are referenced using the abbreviation SY. For example, SY2020 refers to the 2019–2020 school year.

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annual number of new schools increased at a higher rate than school enrollment; (3) In the 2010s, the number of new schools declined. The data show that new school creation peaked in the late 1990s through the first decade of the 2000s, concurrent with education reform efforts that prioritized new schools.

While some of these new schools were opened commensurate with enrollment growth, many were likely created as part of improvement strategies. For example, of the 31,912 new schools identified in this study, 7,079 — more than one in five — are charter schools. When taking multiple factors into consideration, such as the articulation of school mission and design required of charter schools along with enrollment data, at least half of new schools appear to have been created as part of a change strategy.³

We can also learn more about the drivers of new school creation by looking closely at individual cities, such as New York City, where more new schools opened during the last three decades than in the next three largest districts combined. Fifty-seven percent of New York City public schools are new schools, collectively enrolling 45 percent of the city's students. The peak period of new school creation in New York City, from SY2004 to SY2014, corresponds to an era when the city implemented targeted policy initiatives that centered around the creation of new, small high schools that reimaged the student experience, as well as other new district and charter schools. The strategy is reflected in the data: new schools in New York City are 37 percent smaller than older ones on average.

The difference is particularly pronounced at the high school level: the average enrollment for a new New York City high school started in the 2000s is 495 students compared with an average enrollment of 1,416 at older New York City high schools.

While this analysis provides critical new insights, the data raise as many questions as they answer. By building on these data and linking them with existing studies, future inquiries could further explore the characteristics of new schools and their impact on student achievement, as well as their systemic influence, by investigating such topics as the following:

- **New School Design** As part of a separate project, the Corporation has supported research that provides some insight into variation in school design by shining a light on school-level innovation across the country.⁴ How might this research, in conjunction with this new study from MarGrady Research be used, to ascertain differences in the design of new and older school models? What lessons might we take forward into the work of school design and redesign?
- **New School Creation as a Change Strategy** The data from this study indicate that the pace of new school creation has slowed over the last decade, suggesting that future innovation will need to be driven as much from within existing schools as through the creation of new ones. How might we foster that capacity for change and innovation in existing schools?

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Our hope is that these findings serve as both a starting point and shared knowledge base to support the continued efforts of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners around new school creation, innovation, and systems change.

– Saskia Levy Thompson, Program Director, New Designs to Advance Learning, Carnegie Corporation of New York

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- **New School Outcomes** Other research, notably MDRC’s work in New York City, indicates a positive relationship between intentionally designed new schools and student performance.⁵ Where else was significant new school creation spurred by a reform strategy? What can we learn about the impact of those new schools on student outcomes?
- **Demographic Data** This study found that new schools are more likely to enroll students who are Black or Hispanic and less likely to enroll white students. Planned future research commissioned by the Corporation will examine demographic data from new and older schools across the country, allowing us to compare demographic trends in all public schools.
- **Systems Change** About one-third of the nation’s students attend schools that were created during the last three decades, a scale that would seem to suggest not only widespread individual impact but also systemic influence. How are these new schools affecting the school systems in which they exist, and vice versa? Where new schools have been designed

for innovation, have school districts fostered that innovation across their systems?

As the country moves toward a post-pandemic future, our collective capacity for change and innovation in education will help determine our success. This study shows that significant, transformative change is possible within our system and, inasmuch as our ability to make our education system more equitable depends on our capacity for change, we can be encouraged by the findings. However, we also recognize that this study is just a first step and that the data offer just one lens into a complex and dynamic system. Our hope is that these findings serve as both a starting point and shared knowledge base to support the continued efforts of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners around new school creation, innovation, and systems change.

Saskia Levy Thompson

Program Director, New Designs to Advance Learning
Carnegie Corporation of New York

NOTES:

- ¹ Many districts around the country are experiencing declining enrollment due to post-pandemic enrollment shifts and falling birth rates, among other factors. [A recent article published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#) advocated for early planning to prepare for the school closures and consolidations likely to arise as a result.
- ² This study defines a school as any unique NCES ID in the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) enrollment file that has at least one student enrolled. It excludes correctional facilities, district offices, hospitalized/homebound students, and schools that never had more than 25 students enrolled in any year over the course of the study’s time period. A new school is defined as one that has both a new NCES ID and either a new name or a new location.
- ³ MarGrady Research followed up on the original study with further analyses of the 24,833 new district schools: (1) a district-level analysis of enrollment growth and school openings/closings and (2) a school-level analysis identifying whether a new school was opening where another school previously existed. Through these analyses, MarGrady determined that at least one-third of new district schools

were likely created due to enrollment pressure and at least one-third of new district schools are unlikely to be part of an enrollment growth story.

- ⁴ The Canopy Project allows education leaders, school designers, and researchers to see both the “trees” – individual learning environments – and the whole “forest” of K–12 innovation. Nominating organizations from across the country identified a diverse set of learning environments to be included in the project. Many of those learning environments contributed data on their approaches, providing a picture of emerging innovative practices shaping students’ experiences.
- ⁵ MDRC’s [New York City Small Schools of Choice Evaluation](#) leverages New York City’s unique high school admissions process to conduct an unusually large and rigorous study of the impact of small high schools on students’ academic achievement, high school graduation, and progression into college. The project’s reports and policy briefs provide rigorous evidence that new small public high schools are narrowing educational attainment gaps and markedly improving graduation prospects, particularly for disadvantaged students.

NEW SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

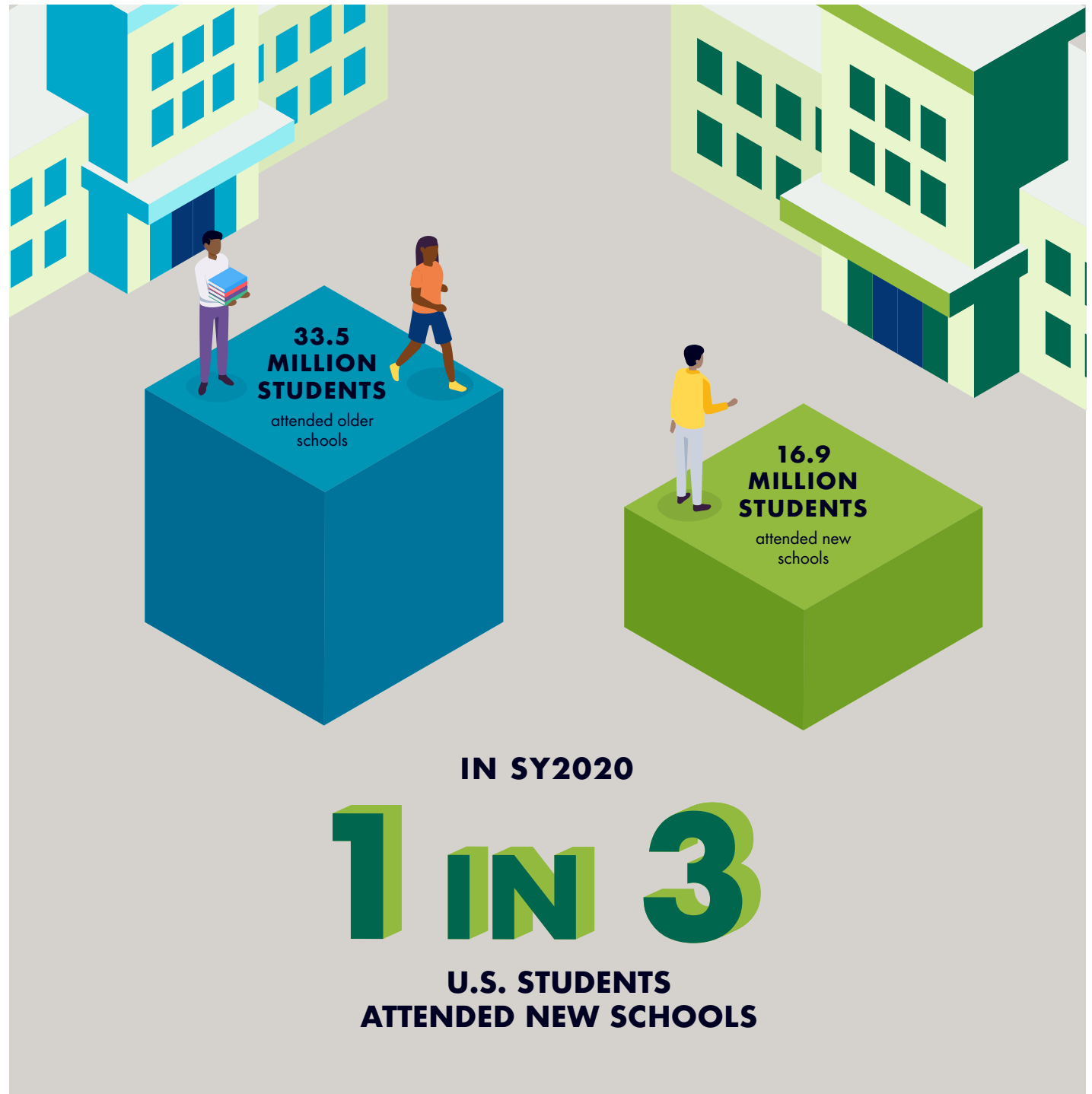


U.S. STUDENTS ATTENDING NEW SCHOOLS IN SY2020

In SY2020, nearly 17 million students — one-third of public school students in the U.S. — attended 31,912 new schools opened between SY1991 and SY2020.

In recent decades, the creation of new schools has become an increasingly common strategy to improve K–12 education. State and local governments, often supported by philanthropy, including Carnegie Corporation of New York, have invested significant time and money in their creation.

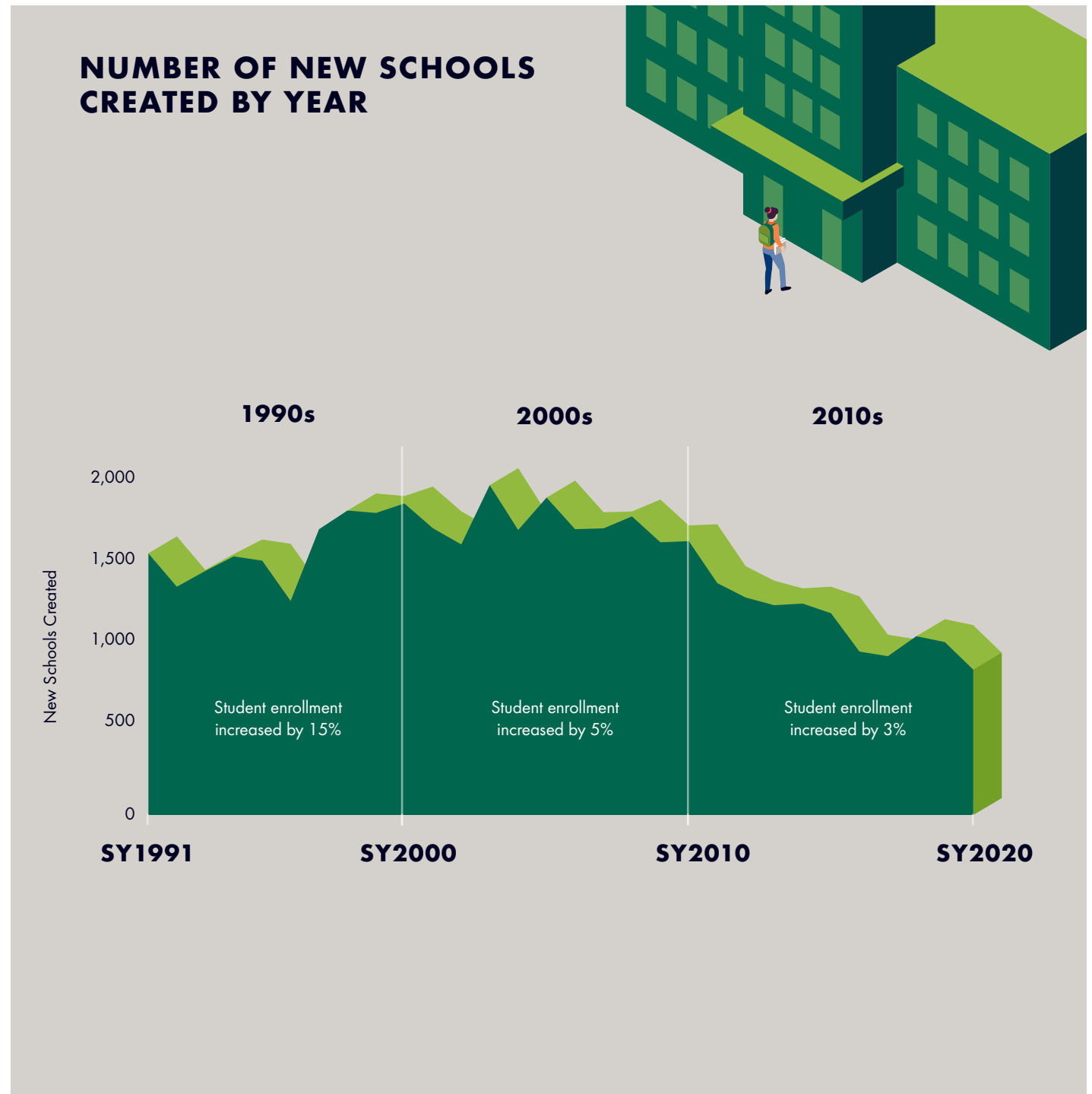
The new schools can take many forms, including elementary schools constructed to address population growth, small high schools, and charter schools.



U.S. NEW SCHOOL CREATION, SY1991–2020

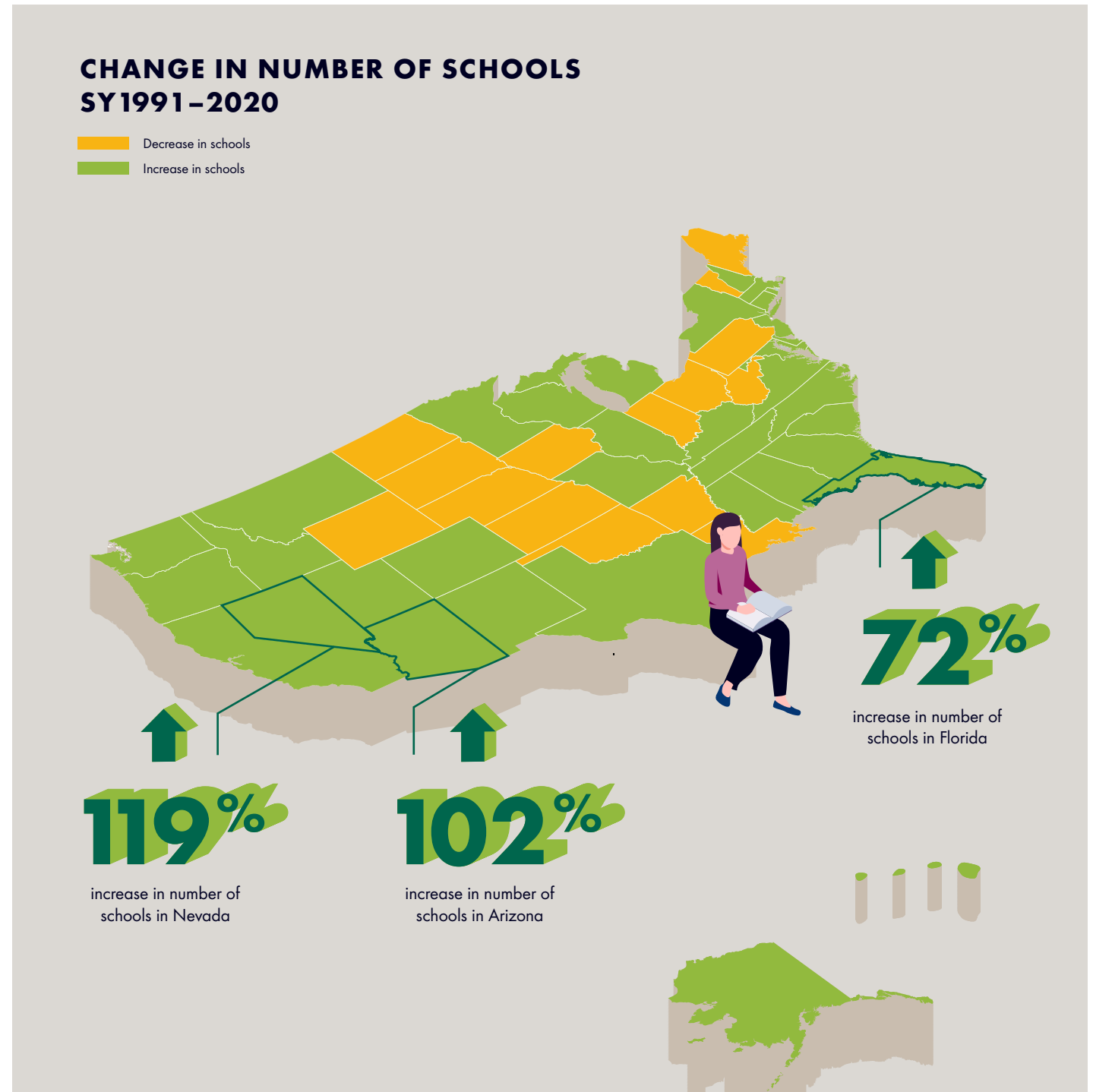
This analysis identifies three waves of new school creation:

- During the 1990s, enrollment growth aligned with new school openings — student enrollment increased by 15 percent.
- During the 2000s, the number of new school openings remained high even as enrollment growth slowed to 5 percent — concurrent with reform efforts such as the small schools movement.
- During the 2010s, the number of new school openings declined as enrollment growth slowed further to 3 percent.



U.S. STATES WITH LARGEST INCREASES IN SCHOOLS

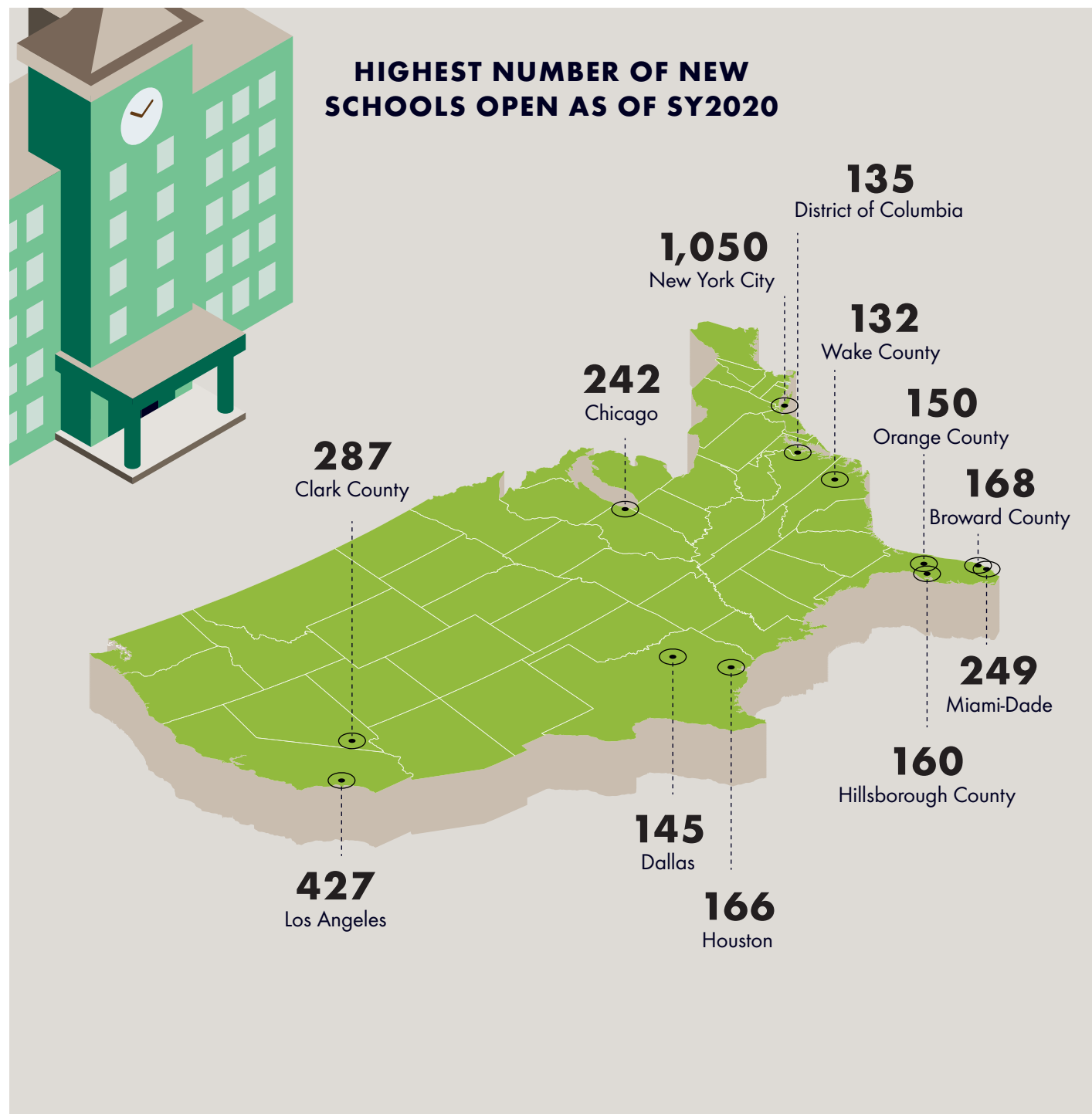
States in shades of green saw increases in the number of schools — with Nevada, Arizona, and Florida ranking at the top. States in yellow saw decreases in the number of schools.



U.S. DISTRICTS WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF NEW SCHOOLS

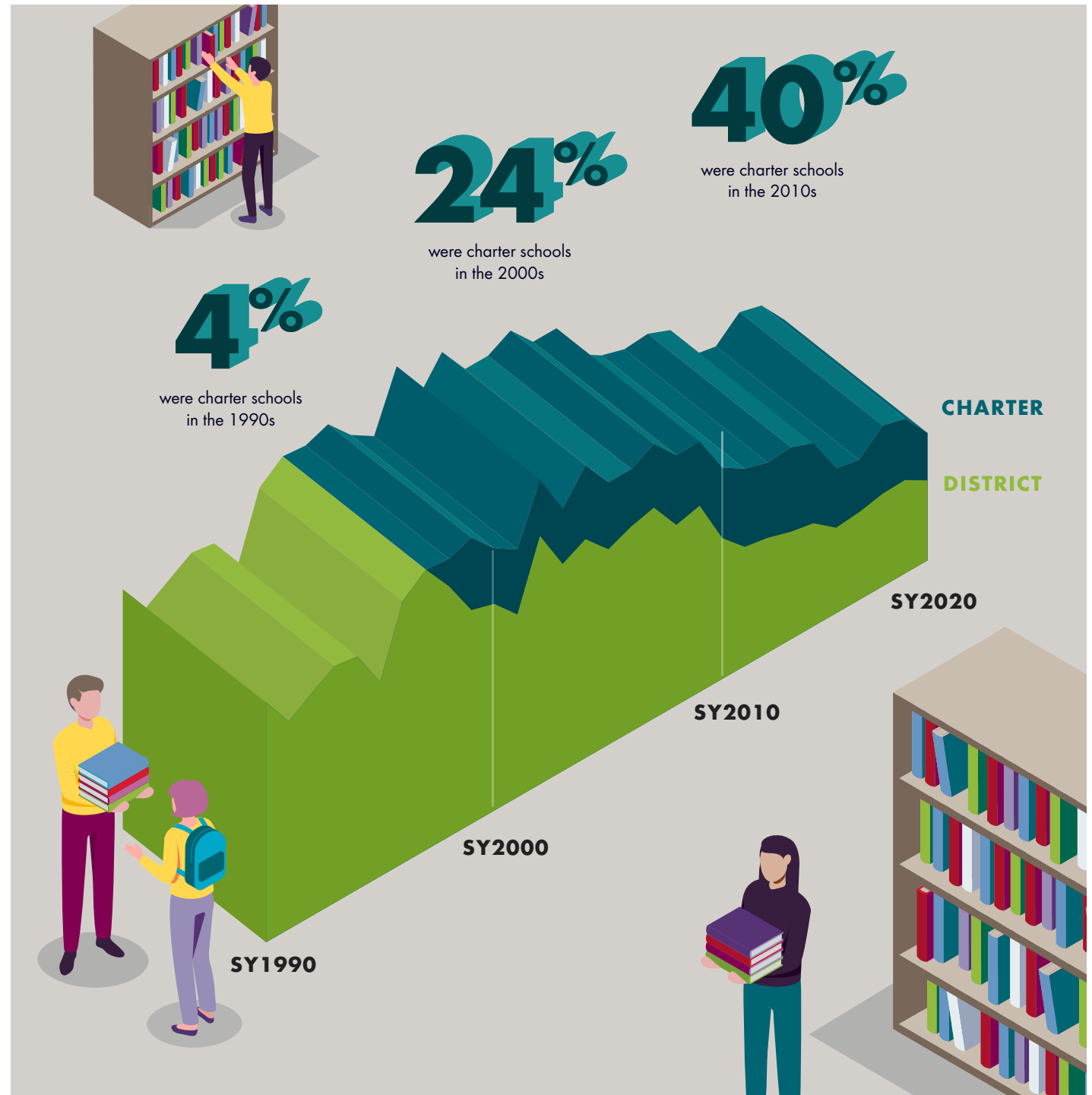
New schools have opened in school districts throughout the country. New York City saw the largest number of new schools — more than the next three largest districts combined (Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami-Dade).

In some districts, more than half of their schools in SY2020 were new schools, including Clark County, Nevada (70 percent); Wake County, North Carolina (62 percent); Orange County, Florida (60 percent); and the District of Columbia (59 percent).



GROWTH OF U.S. CHARTER SCHOOLS AMONG NEW SCHOOLS

More than one in five of the new schools created over the last 30 years are charter schools. Unlike district schools, which may be formed for a variety of reasons, charter schools, by definition, must be authorized through a process that requires an articulation of school mission and design.



RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF NEW SCHOOLS IN THE U.S.

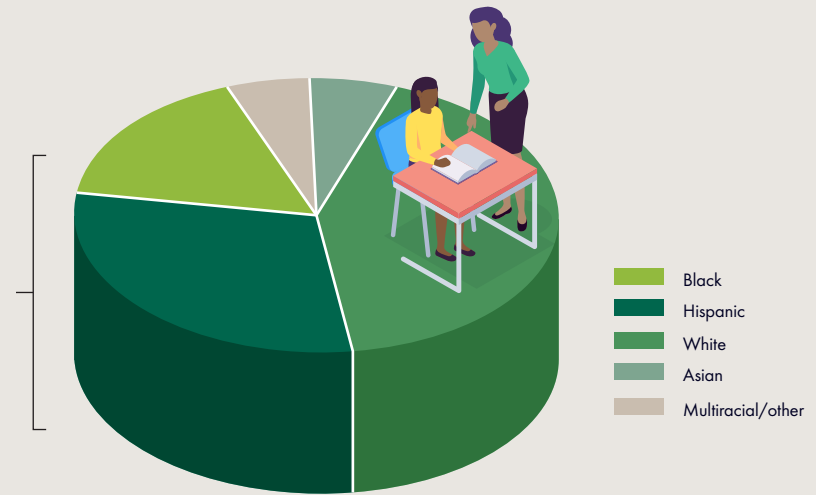
Compared with older schools, new schools in the United States are more likely to enroll students who are Black or Hispanic and less likely to enroll white students. This is especially true for schools started more recently; schools opened in the last decade have the lowest proportion of white students. These trends are largely driven by newly opened charter schools, which tend to enroll a higher share of Black and Hispanic students than district schools.

RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS, SY2020

NEW SCHOOLS ENROLL

47%

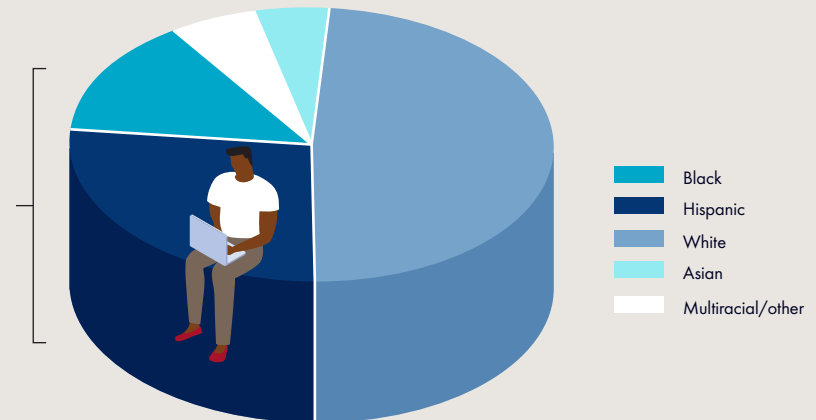
Black and Hispanic students



OLDER SCHOOLS ENROLL

41%

Black and Hispanic students



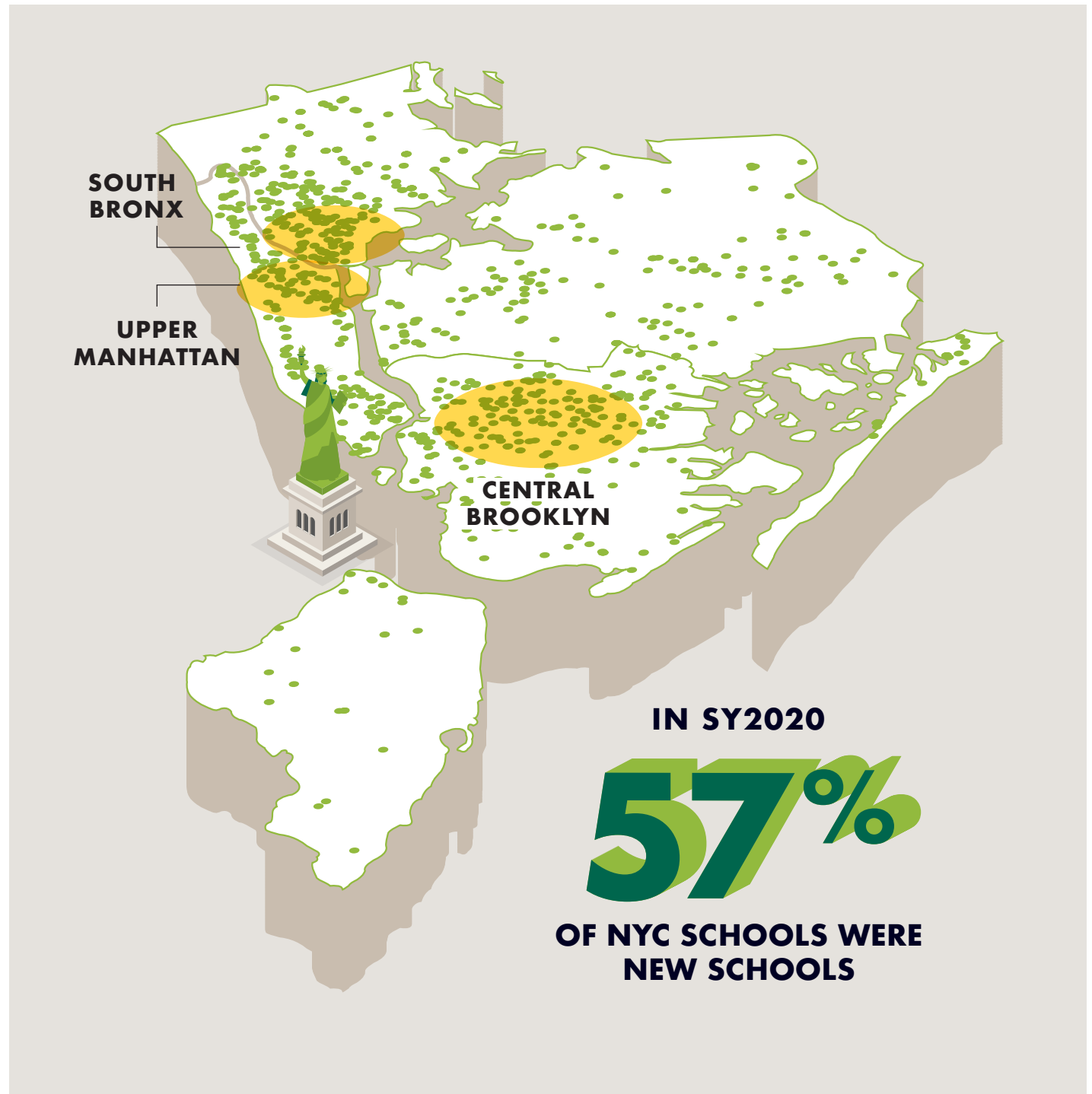
NEW SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK CITY



LOCATION OF NEW NYC SCHOOLS

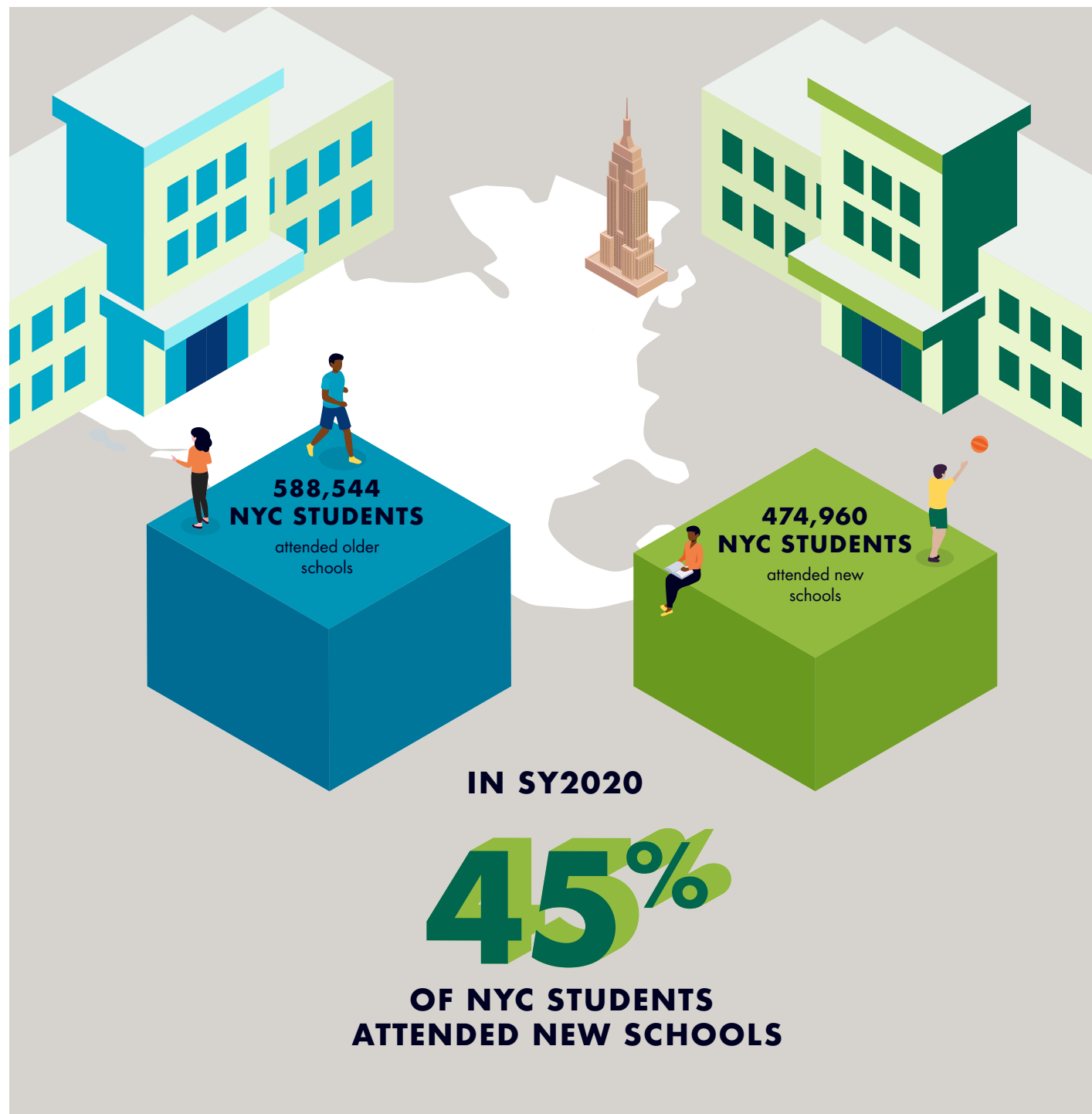
As of SY2020, 57 percent of New York City public schools were new schools opened in the last three decades.

While these new schools were opened throughout the five boroughs, they were especially concentrated in three historically underserved communities: Upper Manhattan, Central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx.



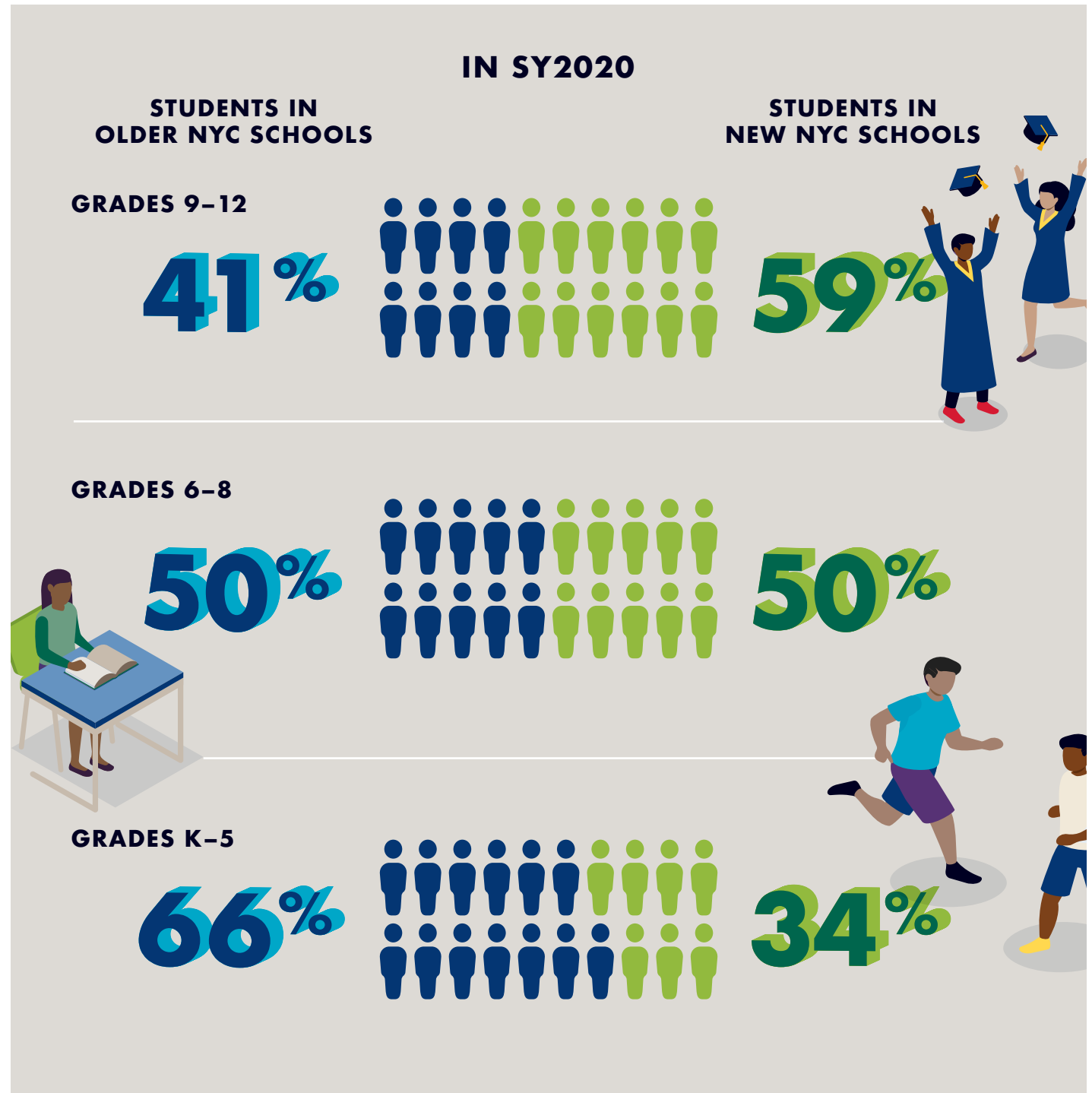
NYC STUDENTS ATTENDING NEW SCHOOLS IN SY2020

Forty-five percent of all public school students in New York City were enrolled in a new school in SY2020. Collectively, these 1,050 new schools served nearly 475,000 students.



STUDENTS IN NEW NYC SCHOOLS BY GRADE

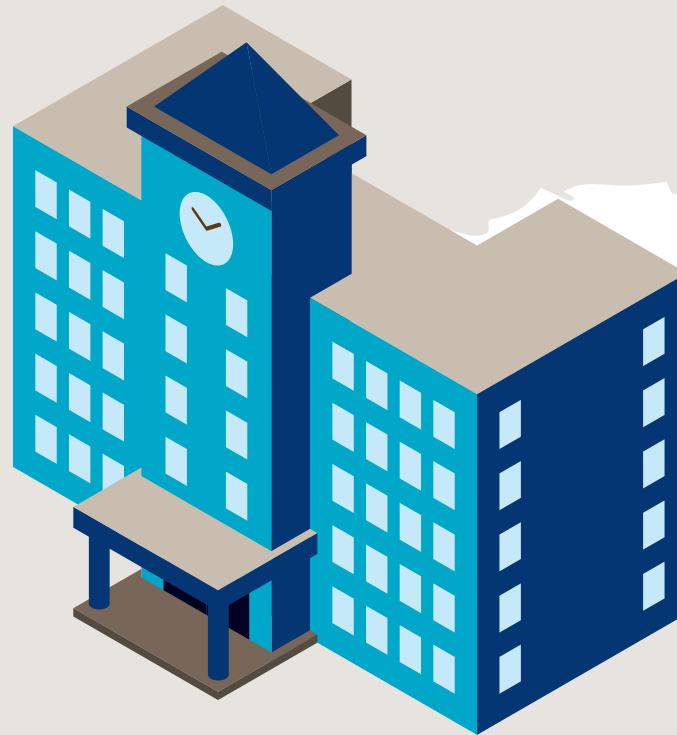
In New York City, high school students are more likely to attend new schools than middle or elementary school students. This trend is driven by new district schools, which have focused primarily on grades 9–12 and secondarily on grades 6–8.



ENROLLMENT SIZE OF NEW NYC SCHOOLS

In SY2020, the average new school enrolled 452 students compared with 744 students enrolled in older schools. The difference is especially pronounced at the high school level: the average enrollment for a new New York City high school started in the 2000s is 495 students, compared with an average enrollment of 1,416 at older New York City high schools. This finding aligns with new school creation efforts of the Bloomberg administration, which prioritized small schools.

IN SY2020



OLDER NYC SCHOOLS

enrolled

744

students on average per school

NEW NYC SCHOOLS

enrolled

452

students on average per school

RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF NEW NYC SCHOOLS

RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS, SY2020

NEW NYC SCHOOLS enroll

79%

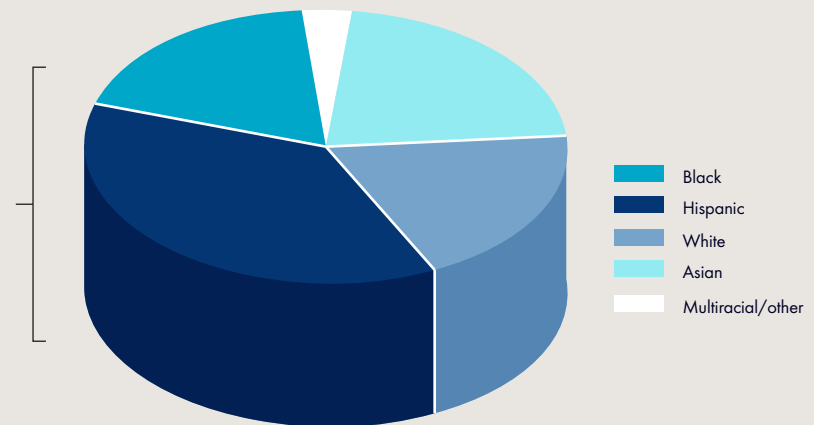
Black and Hispanic students



OLDER NYC SCHOOLS enroll

56%

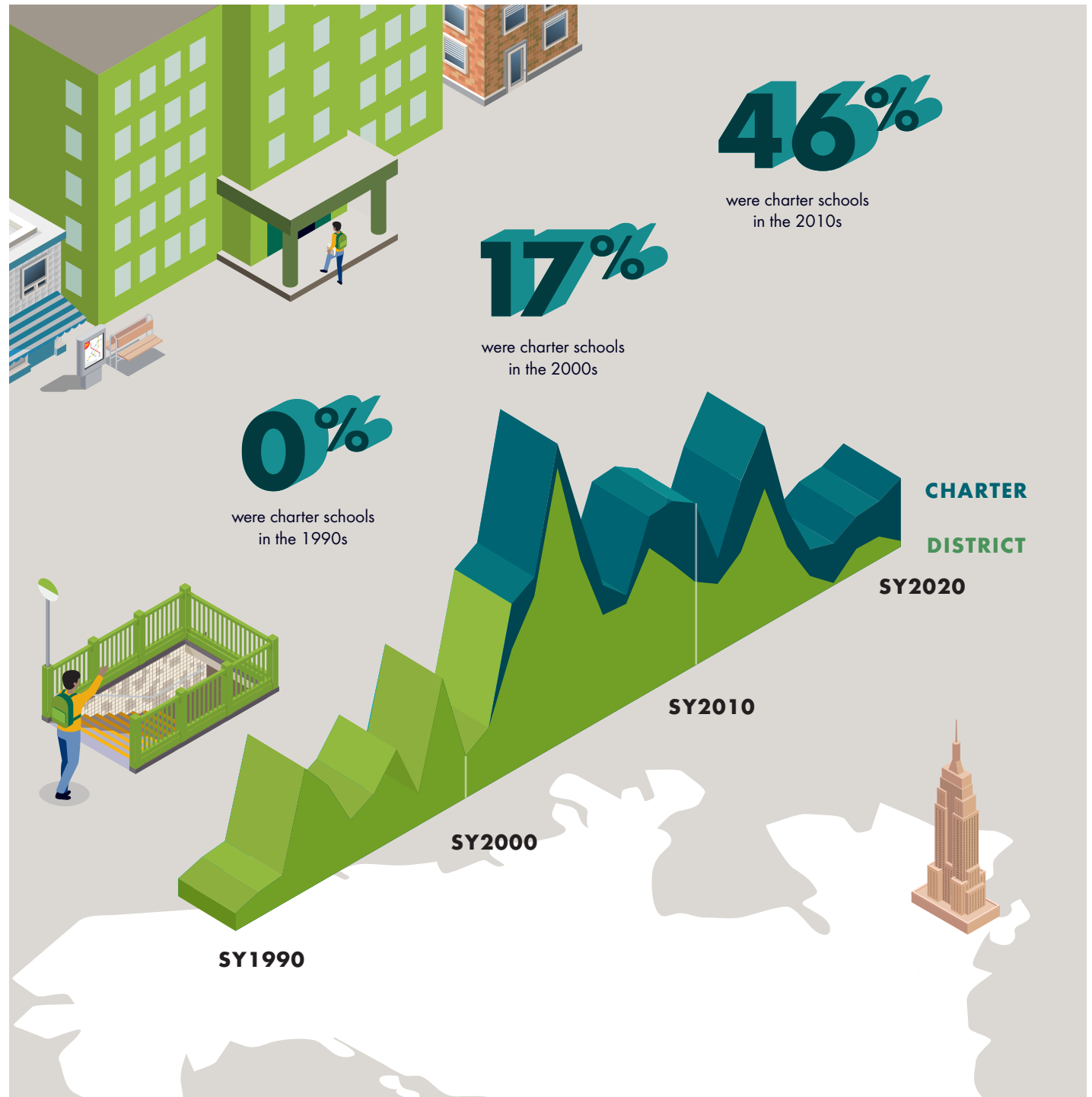
Black and Hispanic students



Compared with older schools, new schools in New York City are much more likely to enroll Black and Hispanic students and less likely to enroll Asian and white students. New district schools enroll a higher share of Black and Hispanic students than older schools; charters have a substantially higher share of Black students.

PEAK NEW SCHOOL CREATION IN NYC

Most new school creation in New York City occurred during the Bloomberg administration (2002–2013). Through SY2015, the majority of new New York City schools were district schools; since SY2016, 71 percent of new schools created in the city have been charter schools.

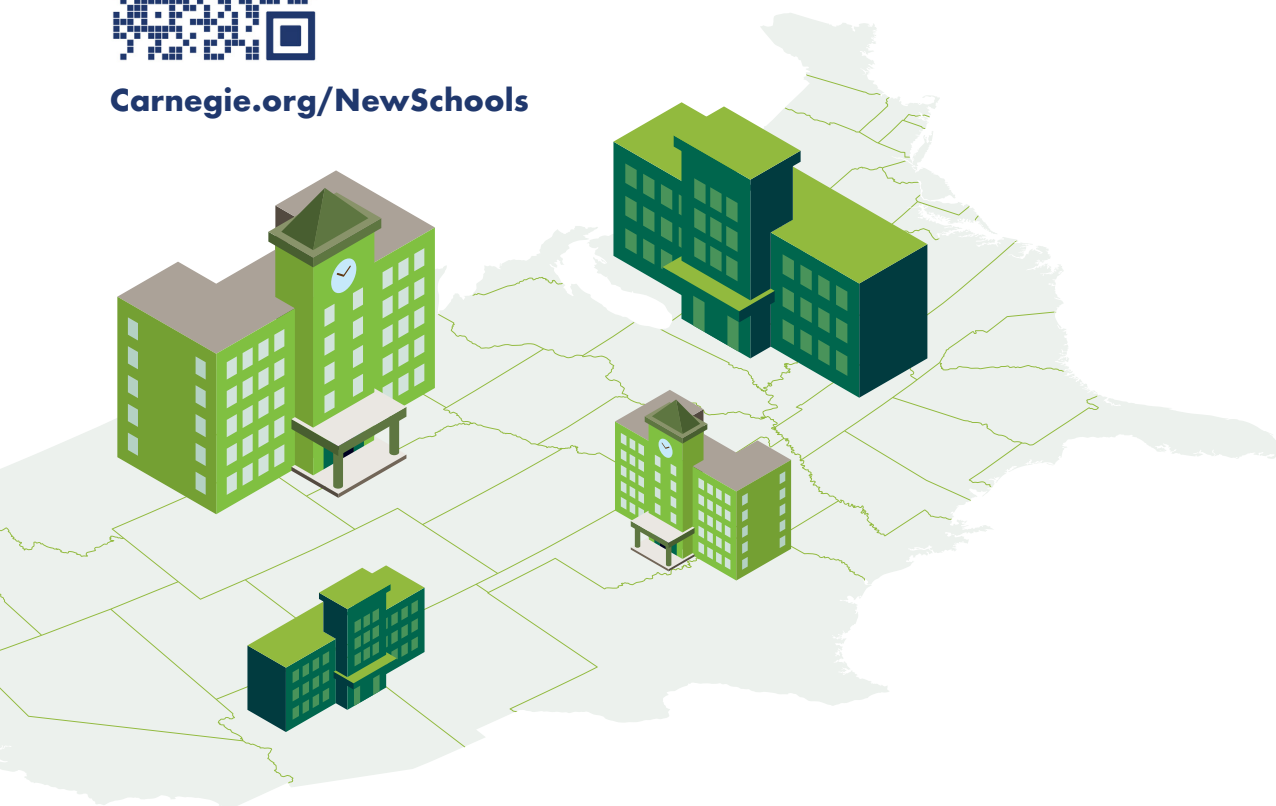


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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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