

EDUCATION Reporter

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Texas Charter Schools: A Good Choice?

Charter schools have been around for over three years, and yet many people don't know they exist, let alone why. But the more pressing questions are how much autonomy charters have and how accountable and effective they are. This issue of the *Education Reporter* answers some frequently asked questions about charter schools and includes results of the most recent study on their operation.

What is a charter school?

Charter schools were established by legislation in 1995 to offer parents school choice within the public school system. The basic premise is that charters are released from many state laws, State Board of Education (SBOE) rules, and Texas Education Agency (TEA) regulations in return for accountability for student performance.

Are charter schools public or private schools?

Open-enrollment charter schools are part of the public education system, paid for with state funds. Charters are free public schools and must take all eligible students up to their maximum enrollment. Students who reside within a charter school's geographic boundaries are eligible. Charters administer the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test and are part of the state's accountability system. The SBOE monitors compliance with their char-

ter, which is similar to a written contract. In contrast, private schools may charge tuition, are not required to serve all students, and do not participate in TAAS or the accountability system.

Who can go to a charter school?

Any child who lives within the geographical area served by the charter school and is appropriate for the grade levels served has a right to attend, as long as the school has not reached its approved enrollment capacity. The charter school may only deny admission to students who are adjudicated or convicted for delinquent conduct or have been removed from their previous school due to disciplinary reasons. Some charters, however, are designed to work with just this type of student.

Is the student population found in Texas charter schools primarily economically advantaged with little ethnic diversity?

An analysis of the current school population shows that over 75 percent of the students in Texas charters belong to a minority group. Also, the charters have higher percentages of minority representation than the state in their populations of faculty members, administrators, and board members.

Will traditional public schools suffer a loss of their top student achievers to charter schools?

It doesn't appear so. Students identified as being "at risk of dropping out" make up almost 70 percent of the charter school population. Identified gifted and talented students are underrepresented in charters. These percentages vary, of course, with each individual school.

Are these schools held accountable to any standards?

Charter schools are in the state's accountability system just like all public schools, but they also are accountable to parents, who can remove their child(ren) if they are dissatisfied. Charter schools operate independently of local school districts and are freed from many state education regulations. For example, charter schools do not have to follow student-to-teacher class size requirements; they are not required to follow the district-level planning process or site-based decision making. In addition, charters are not required to hire certified teachers or to follow the teacher contract laws in the Texas Education Code.

Are all teachers at a charter certified?

Not necessarily. Each charter school decides for itself whether it will require its teachers to be certified. In Texas, only 3.9 percent of all tradi-

tional public school teachers are uncertified; however, 53.9 percent of charter school teachers are not certified, and the percentage rises to 62.3 percent for at-risk charter schools.

How can a group start a charter school?

Open-enrollment charter schools may be awarded to a governmental institution, a college or university (public or private), or to a nonprofit entity as defined by Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Some charters have been started by groups of parents who have organized, received their nonprofit status, and applied for the charter. The SBOE awards charters; local school districts do not participate in this decision. A sample application may be obtained from the Division of Charter Schools at TEA, 512-463-9575.

May a local school district establish its own charters?

Yes. The same law creating open-enrollment charter schools (which are awarded by the SBOE and are limited by a legislative cap) also created "campus charters," which are awarded by local school boards. State law requires every school district in Texas to adopt a board policy, application, and approval process for campus charters. There are no limits on the number of campus charters a district may award. Campus charter schools are not exempt from state laws and rules but may, if the school board approves, be exempt from certain local district policies.

Where are the Texas open-enrollment charter schools located?

Charters are now approved in urban areas such as Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin; but there are also charter schools located in smaller towns such as Encino, Lometa, and New Waverly. A full listing of the current charters may be requested from TEA's Division of Charter Schools.

A review of charter schools in trouble

Seven charter schools have closed or had their charters revoked by the State Board of Education since the Legislature approved the program in 1995. Here's a review:

The **Academy of Austin** abruptly closed its Austin charter school in December 1999 without notifying students' parents. Officials at the Academy of America of Southfield Mich., the company that ran the Austin school, cited declining attendance and problems with its landlord. The Texas Education Agency assigned a monitor to evaluate the company's four other charters in Texas. Those schools in Beaumont, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio remain open.

Cypress Lodge Charter School, which had been planned for East Texas, surrendered its charter in 1996 without opening after receiving (and spending) \$240,519 in public funds.

The **Emma L. Harrison Charter School** in Waco had its charter revoked in July 1999 after a state audit accused operators of financial mismanagement and illegal activities. The school shut down in October.

Helping Others Pursue Excellence (HOPE) in Houston; **Life's Outreach Vocational Educational Center (LOVE)** in Denton; and **Pushing Our Way into Educational Rehabilitation (POWER)** in Dallas all were operated by Life's Beautiful Education Centers of Houston. Each school faced financial troubles and the threat of state sanctions when the group agreed to surrender the charters in October 1999.

The **Rameses School** of San Antonio had its charter revoked in January after an administrative judge found that school accounts were being used for personal purposes by the executive director of the school without any oversight by the board of directors. School officials are appealing the decision.

Source: Associated Press, March 16, 2000; reprinted with permission.

What are some examples of innovative schools?

Currently, approved Texas open-enrollment charters include neighborhood schools where none existed previously, two schools specifically designed to offer bilingual programs, several drop-out recovery high schools, a school specializing in individual instruction that has attracted a high percentage of special education students, an International Baccalaureate curriculum middle school, and two-distance-learning schools. Virtually all charter schools are unique as they are a response to a perceived need in the community.

How many charter schools operate in Texas?

Texas began with 19 open-enrollment charter schools. To date, the SBOE has awarded 170 charters; 161 charters are active and 140 charter schools are currently operating with over 20,000 students in attendance. The SBOE will consider charter applications in summer 2000 and again in fall 2000.

How Did They Do?

Results of the 1998-99 charter evaluation

To help ensure accountability, the SBOE appointed a consortium of research organizations to annually evaluate Texas charter schools. Part one of the third-year evaluation, released in March 2000, profiles charter schools and describes their characteristics. It reports findings from a survey of charter school directors as well as a survey of school superintendents in districts where charter schools have opened. In addition, a report on a survey of charter school student satisfaction is included in the evaluation.

The study, commissioned by the SBOE, was conducted by a team of researchers from the School of Urban and Public Affairs, University of Texas at Arlington; Texas Center for Educational Research, Austin; Center for the Study of Educational Reform, University of North Texas; and Center for Public Policy, University of Houston.

The evaluation reports that charter schools serve proportionally more minority students than do Texas schools as a whole. Charter school boards are also distinctive, with a majority of directors reporting boards made up of one racial group (or predominantly one racial group). These findings about student and board demographics reflect the geographic circumstances of the schools as well as community response to their missions. Generally, charter schools are not racially distinctive if they are viewed in the context of their missions and the communities in which they are located.

Among other findings in the evaluation:

- **Teaching staff.** Charter school staff characteristics differ from those of public school districts. Charter school teachers have roughly six years of experience compared with an average of 12

Characteristics of Charter School Faculty, 1998-99 (percentages)

Teacher Characteristics	Texas Public Schools	Texas Charter Schools	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools
Non-certified	3.9	53.9	62.3	47.5
African American	8.0	35.2	40.1	31.4
Hispanic	16.0	21.8	24.1	20.1
Anglo	75.0	46.5	39.5	51.5
Other	1.0	1.8	1.1	2.3

Source: 1998-99 Charter School Evaluation

Overall Open-Enrollment Charter School Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity, 1998-99 (percentages)

Ethnicity	Texas Public Schools	Texas Charter Schools	At-Risk Charter Schools	Non-at-Risk Charter Schools
Hispanic	38	42.5	50.2	34.4
African American	14	34.2	35.2	33.1
Anglo	45	21.5	13.8	29.6
Other	3	1.8		

Source: 1998-99 Charter School Evaluation

years of experience for public school teachers. About half have certification to teach in Texas. Average annual full-time salaries for charter school teachers are about \$7,500 lower than salaries for public school teachers. Charter schools employ a higher proportion of minority teachers than do public schools.

- **Reasons for start up.** Sixty-six charter school directors responded to a survey from the evaluation team. They report that their reasons for founding a charter school were to realize a particular vision for a school and to gain more autonomy than they might have in a public school setting.

Service to children also rated high as a reason for founding a charter school. Directors report having strong business and community support as well as parent support. According to charter school direc-

tors, fund raising is an important form of parent involvement.

- **Student mobility.** Charter school students are more mobile than public school students. Directors reported that about 66 percent of eligible charter school students who had been enrolled in 1998-99 and were eligible to return actually did return to school in fall 1999. Over half of the schools report having a waiting list, and charter school directors indicate that word-of-mouth advertising is an effective means to inform families of opportunities at the charter school.

- **Student satisfaction.** Charter school students in grades 7 through 12 are satisfied with their schools. They believe the classes are a better fit for their needs and they believe they get more attention from teachers. They report that charter school teachers are



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better than teachers they have had before. Students also like the smaller classes offered at the charter schools.

■ **Superintendents' perspective.**

Over 100 public school superintendents responded to a survey about the effects of charter schools on their districts. Roughly 90 percent indicated that charter schools had not had a financial impact on the district nor had the charter school's presence resulted in program changes within the schools. Superintendents expressed concern about the operations of some charter schools and accountability. A few respondents noted that their district had lost some students to charter schools. A more common response was that school districts welcome the presence of charter schools that can serve as a viable alternative for students dissatisfied with traditional public schools

or at risk of dropping out of school.

In summer 2000, the team will publish the complete evaluation report for 1998-99. It will include the material from part one as well as a report on student TAAS performance, an analysis of charter school expenditures for 1998-99, and a report on a survey of charter school parent satisfaction.



The jury may still be out on the overall success of open-enrollment charter schools. Whether they survive and flourish will depend on a perception by parents and students that charter schools truly provide an added benefit beyond the traditional public school system. The ultimate choice is theirs.

Sources: Texas Education Agency, Division of Charter Schools; and Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools, Third Year Evaluation, Part One

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