

Profiles of High-Performing

TEXAS OPEN-ENROLLMENT CHARTER SCHOOLS

Over the past eight years, Texas charter schools have developed within the context of the growth of the charter school movement throughout the United States. Since Minnesota enacted the first charter legislation in 1991, 39 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have enacted charter school laws. According to the Center for Educational Reform, approximately 2,700 charter schools served over 684,000 students nationwide during the 2002–03 school year. The states with the most charter schools in operation are Arizona (464), California (428), Florida (227), Michigan (196), and Texas (221).¹

Texas passed legislation in 1995 establishing charter schools. In that session, the 78th Legislature provided for the creation of 20 open-enrollment charter schools (TEC §§ 12.101-120). Open-enrollment charter schools are public schools that are substantially released from state education regulations and exist separate and apart from local independent school districts. They may be sponsored by an institution of higher education (public or private), a nonprofit organization as set out in the Internal Revenue Code (501(c)(3)), or a governmental entity. In 1997, the Legislature provided for an additional 100 open-enrollment charter schools and an unlimited number of open-enrollment charter schools serving students at risk of failure or dropping out of school (75 Percent Rule charter schools). The Legislature made further revisions to the education code governing

charter schools in 2001. These provisions eliminated the 75 Percent Rule designation, capped the number of charter schools the State Board of Education may grant at 215, and allowed for an unlimited number of specialized charter schools sponsored by public senior colleges and universities.

Characteristics of Charter Schools and Students

As a result of the enabling legislation, the number of Texas charter schools has increased dramatically. During the 1996–97 school year, only 17 open-enrollment charter schools operated in Texas. By the 2001–02 school year, a total of 180 charter schools were in operation for the majority of the year. At the same time, the number of students enrolled in charter schools also has increased significantly, from 2,498 to 46,304 across six school years. The total charter school student enrollment, however, represents only a small proportion of the approximately 4.1 million public school students in Texas.

Compared to Texas traditional public schools, charter school students are more racially/ethnically diverse. Charter schools have a greater share of African American students (40.1 percent versus 14.4), substantially less White students (20.4 percent versus 40.9), and comparable proportions of Hispanic students (37.9 percent versus 41.7). Charter schools in Texas also enroll a somewhat higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students (57.6 percent versus 50.5) than traditional public schools.

¹Center for Education Reform (2003). About charter schools. www.edreform.com.

Number of Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools and Students Served

Total Charter School Year	Total Charter Schools in Operation	Number of Campuses in Operation	Average Students Enrolled	Campus Enrollment
1996–97	17	17	2,498	147
1997–98	19	19	4,135	216
1998–99	89	99	17,616	198
1999–00	146	174	25,687	156
2000–01	160	200	37,696	188
2001–02	180	241	46,304	192

Source: Open-enrollment evaluation reports, years one to six (www.tcer.org)

Charter School Accountability

As the charter school movement continues to grow, student achievement is a pivotal concern in Texas and nationally. In general, states rarely exempt charter schools from state student assessments, and most states hold charter schools to the same accountability standards (based on student outcome measures) as traditional public schools.

In Texas, charter schools are included in the public school accountability system. Mandated by the 1993 Texas Legislature, the system relies on the state's student-level information system (Public Education Information Management System—PEIMS) and criterion-referenced assessment (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills—TAAS) to accredit districts and rate schools. Through 2002, Texas districts and campuses, including charter schools, have received annual accountability ratings based primarily on TAAS performance and dropout rates. Charter schools in the first year of operation are not rated unless requested; however, newly opened charter campuses administered by operating charter schools receive ratings. Districts and campuses may be rated under one of two systems: the *standard accountability system* or the *alternative education accountability system*.

In 2002, performance standards for each of the four standard accountability system ratings categories listed below had to be met by each of five student groups: all students, African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged.

- **Exemplary**—90% or more passing TAAS, dropout rate of 1% or less
- **Recognized**—80% or more passing TAAS, dropout rate of 2.5% or less
- **Acceptable**—55% or more passing TAAS (50% or more on social studies), dropout rate of 5.0% or less

- **Low-Performing**—less than 55% passing TAAS, (less than 50% on social studies), dropout rate of more than 5.0%

In addition to the ratings described above, a campus serving primarily at-risk students may apply to be rated under the alternative education accountability system procedures. Alternative education ratings use the following three categories, and performance standards must be met for all five student groups.

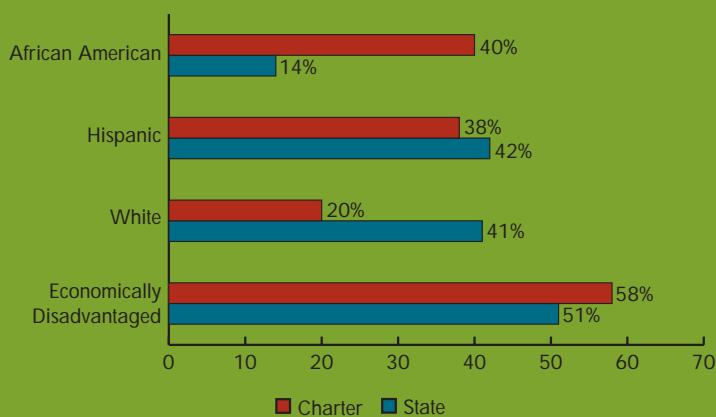
- **Commended**—30% or more passing TAAS, 85% increasing Texas Learning Index (TLI) scores, dropout rate of 6% or less, attendance rate of 94% or higher
- **Acceptable**—30% or more passing TAAS, dropout rate of 10% or less, attendance rate of 80% or higher
- **Needs Peer Review**—less than 30% passing TAAS, dropout rate of more than 10%

Across six school years, Texas traditional public schools have consistently outperformed charter schools on both standard and alternative education accountability ratings. Still, noteworthy findings for the past three school years reveal steady progress by charter schools toward higher performance levels. In 2002, for example, the percentages of charter school campuses rated as Exemplary (standard system) and Commended or Acceptable (alternative education system) rose markedly. Unfortunately, the percentages of charter schools rated as Low-Performing or Needs Peer Review remained unacceptably high in comparison to traditional public schools.

Purpose of Charter School Profiles

Profiles of High-Performing Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools was funded through a federal Public Charter School Dissemination Grant received by Rapoport Academy in 2001. The grant program aims “to

Demographic Comparisons for Texas Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools: AEIS 2001–02



increase national understanding of the charter school model by supporting activities that help open new public schools (including public charter schools) or share the lessons learned by charter schools with other public schools” (TEA Request for Application, 701-03-009). Although Rapoport Academy’s dissemination grant includes several activities, one piece centers on documenting successful practices of Texas charter schools that enable students to learn challenging state content standards and achieve state performance standards, and the dissemination of that information to interested educators. To that end, Rapoport Academy contracted with the Texas Center for Educational Research, an independent, nonprofit research organization, to undertake a study of the characteristics of successful charter schools in Texas.

Study Approach and Method

Researchers conducted intensive case studies to provide an in-depth look at a select group of charter schools. The purpose was to explore the different types of innovations and best practices successful charter schools employ—charter schools rated as Exemplary (standard accountability system) or Commended (alternative education accountability system)—to meet the specific needs of their students. Researchers selected sites through a review of Texas accountability system ratings awarded to open-enrollment charter campuses in 2002 and the previous two school years. To ensure stability, charter schools had to have been in operation for at least three school years. Sites selected for visits included eight campuses rated as Exemplary and two rated as Commended. In addition, selected sites had either sustained the highest performance level across years or accountability ratings had improved over time.

Teams of two to three researchers conducted one-day site visits to the 10 selected charter schools. Data col-

lection methods included (a) interviews with administrators, teachers, and in some cases, board members; (b) focus groups of teachers and students; (c) observations conducted primarily in core content-area classrooms; (d) tours of charter school facilities; and (e) document collection. The number and type of participants varied according to the size and complexity of the charter school. In total, researchers conducted interviews with 17 administrators, 29 teachers, and 10 board members; observed in 26 classrooms; conducted nine teacher focus groups involving 48 teachers; and facilitated eight student focus groups including 57 secondary students (grades 6 through 12).

Current research on charter schools identified primary areas of interest (e.g., administrator and teacher roles, educational program, parent involvement, governance). Structured protocols assigned questions to respondents who could provide the most accurate or insightful information on a topic. Data analyses involved the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources. Guided by major topics of study, researchers used a constant comparative method to identify major themes and relationships. Data gathered from AEIS reports provided contextual and demographic data within which to interpret qualitative findings. Of the 10 sites visited, researchers determined that nine charter schools met standards that warranted their inclusion in the final group; one site was excluded due to data collection problems.

High-Performing Charter Schools

The nine high-performing charter schools include seven awarded Exemplary ratings in 2002: Encino School, KIPP Academy, Mainland Preparatory Academy, The North Hills School, NYOS Charter School, Seashore Learning Center, and YES College Preparatory Academy. Two charter schools, Focus Learning Academy and John H. Wood Charter School, received Commended ratings

Charter Schools and Traditional Public School Performance—Percent Receiving Standard and Alternative Education Accountability Ratings

Rating System	Charter Schools			Traditional Public Schools		
	N=63	N=96	N=91	N=6,363	N=6,616	N=6,444
Standard						
Exemplary	8	5	17	20	24	30
Recognized	11	9	10	32	36	37
Acceptable	49	42	34	46	38	32
Low-Performing	32	44	40	2	2	2
Alternative Education	N=33	N=62	N=109	N=310	N=263	N=230
Commended	0	2	6	2	4	2
Acceptable	27	38	57	88	85	90
Needs Review	73	61	37	11	11	8

Source: TEA Division of Student Performance Reporting. Schools are rated as campuses.

under the alternative education system. Profiles for individual schools, presented in sections to follow, describe school missions, students served, the educational program, parent involvement, school governance, and academic accomplishments. In addition, researchers conducted a cross-site analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to identify prevailing trends that may help explain student achievement.

High-performing charter schools, similar to charters as a whole, are located across the state and serve varied student populations. Schools tend to get a greater share of their revenue from local sources compared to all charter schools. Per-pupil expenditures vary widely across successful charter schools and in some cases exceed average expenditures for all charters and the state. Teachers in high-performing charter schools are more likely to hold degrees, have more years experience, and earn higher salaries than charter school teachers overall.

Researchers identified nine attributes appearing consistently across high-performing charter schools that provide potential explanations for why students in these schools perform better than students in other charter schools. The following findings suggest charter school traits that may foster student academic success.

Focused mission guides coherent actions. High-performing charter schools are mission-driven organizations. Schools have typically been founded to achieve a clearly defined educational vision for a specific student population. Wide-ranging missions may focus on preparing students to attend a four-year university, using an innovative curriculum to achieve each child's potential, or other goals. In general, organizational structures and pedagogical practices are coherent with professed beliefs, values, and goals. Although no one configuration (e.g., extended time, combined grades, multiage grouping) or practice (e.g., thematic units, service learning, indi-

vidualized instruction) was considered *innovative*, the overall way in which each school achieved its mission was unique.

Schools are small, with a developmental grade span.

Positive outcomes achieved by high-performing charter schools are often associated with small school size. Moreover, schools typically have a grade span supporting a developmental educational continuum, with the foundation for learning laid in earlier grades leading to targeted outcomes at higher grade levels. Small size along with continuity achieved through contact with students over multiple years are frequently viewed as contributors to positive interpersonal relationships between students and staff, a disciplined learning environment, a vertically-aligned curriculum, and enhanced communication and collaboration.

School culture supports student success. Each of the charter schools visited had a culture that communicates high expectations for student success. Foremost, one belief was pervasive across schools—given appropriate educational opportunities, all children, regardless of background, can achieve high academic standards. Schools, however, used a variety of approaches to create a culture supporting achievement: motivational slogans, visual symbols, commitments to excellence, goal-setting and rewards for performance, school uniforms, interpersonal connections, individualized attention, and caring and readily available teachers, for example.

Teachers feel responsible for student learning. Teachers who choose to work in these charter schools express a high level of ownership for student learning and pride in student accomplishments. Teachers receive a substantial degree of curricular and instructional freedom in exchange for high expectations regarding effective classroom practices and student performance. Teachers, whose input into school decision-making is

Characteristics of High—performing Charter Schools

School	Grade Span	#	Students				2002 Rating	Location
			AA	H	W	Eco		
Encino School	PK–8	67	0%	97%	3%	94%	Exemplary	Encino
KIPP Academy	5–9	338	19%	78%	2%	90%	Exemplary	Houston
Mainland Preparatory Academy	PK–8	284	90%	6%	3%	47%	Exemplary	Texas City
NYOS Charter School	PK–10	262	13%	13%	71%	14%	Exemplary	Austin
Seashore Learning Center	K–6	139	0%	17%	78%	30%	Exemplary	Corpus Christi
The North Hills School	1–12	799	9%	8%	60%	2%	Exemplary	Irving
YES College Preparatory School	6–12	423	7%	89%	3%	55%	Exemplary	Houston
Focus Learning Academy	K–7	381	95%	3%	2%	50%	Commended	Dallas
John H. Wood Charter School	6–12	135	18%	44%	37%	93%	Commended	San Antonio

Note. AA=African American, H=Hispanic, W=White, Eco=Economically disadvantaged.

solicited and valued, are often strongly committed to the school mission. In addition, many teachers report being motivated by a desire to serve the school's special student population.

Students are held responsible and accountable for behavior and learning. High-performing charter schools typically create learning environments that allow student ownership of behavior through strategies such as goal setting, assuming responsibility, logical consequences, and rewards. Almost all schools have a specific behavior management plan that is administered consistently in the school. Students are typically described as well mannered, disciplined, polite, cooperative, and motivated. Students who choose to attend these charter schools agree to challenges (along with their parents) regarding the completion of a rigorous academic curriculum and, in most cases, extensive homework. Schools typically have a student waiting list for enrollment.

Attention to prerequisite knowledge and skills lays a foundation for student success. Even though effective charter schools use a wide range of curricular and instructional approaches to support student learning, one consistent theme across schools was attention to building a strong foundation of knowledge and skills that allows students to succeed at increasingly higher levels. Reading comprehension, mathematics, and writing are viewed as critically important to advanced learning. Schools serving disadvantaged student populations commonly enrich the curriculum to build students' background knowledge through field trips, service learning, and real-world activities. Educators speak of teaching for success instead of remediating failure.

Student accomplishments, beyond state-mandated tests, are expected. High-performing charter schools, although pleased to be recognized by the state for achieving Exemplary or Commended status and high passing rates on TAAS, believe there are other even more

important student goals to be accomplished. Successful performance in high school, acceptance to and success in colleges or universities, performance on alternative assessments, and acquisition of social skills needed for everyday life are examples of other student learning outcomes valued by schools.

Parents are committed to student academic support. Although parents may or may not be involved in the day-to-day activities of these charter schools due to time and work constraints, they almost invariably lend strong support for their children's academic achievement through actions such as assisting with homework, checking on progress, visiting the school, communicating regularly with teachers, and supporting disciplinary actions.

Schools have strong organizational supports and community connections. Effective charter schools have highly engaged administrative leaders who assume roles as needed, including, for example, academic leader, teacher/substitute teacher, financial manager, or janitor. These schools also receive strong support from governing boards that generally include a blend of professionals (e.g., business, law, finance, health, higher education), community members, and parents. Boards typically are not involved in day-to-day school management but instead provide guidance, oversight for financial activities, expertise needed by the school, and assistance with fund raising and resource acquisition. Overall, these schools have strong community connections that contribute to their success.

The Profiles

Profiles for individual schools, presented in the following sections, introduce readers to charter schools' varying missions, student populations, organizational features, educational approaches, and student learning outcomes.

Financial Data and Teacher Characteristics for High-Performing Charter Schools

School	Revenue and Expenditure*				Teachers**				
	Revenue			Per-Pupil	#	Hold Degree	Yrs Exp	Turn-over	Average Salary
	Local	State	Fed.						
Encino School	4%	83%	12%	\$6,365	4	100%	12.0	20%	\$34,757
KIPP Academy	48%	43%	9%	\$10,378	17	88%	3.9	47%	\$37,054
Mainland Preparatory Academy	75%	23%	1%	\$9,848	18	100%	7.9	53%	\$33,710
NYOS Charter School	14%	83%	3%	\$7,104	30	93%	5.1	35%	\$34,497
Seashore Learning Center	5%	91%	4%	\$5,099	9	100%	7.0	58%	\$28,177
The North Hills School	10%	89%	1%	\$5,506	66	96%	7.1	32%	\$31,890
YES College Preparatory School	14%	56%	30%	\$8,886	30	87%	4.5	44%	\$37,655
Focus Learning Academy	6%	83%	12%	\$7,744	36	92%	7.1	21%	\$33,097
John H. Wood Charter School	0%	95%	5%	\$13,305	2	100%	9.5	83%	\$44,501
All charters	8%	77%	15%	\$6,762	--	84%	5.4	49%	\$29,343
Traditional public schools	52%	39%	9%	\$7,851	--	99%	11.9	16%	\$39,232

Source: * Actual financial data for all funds, PEIMS 2001-02. ** AEIS reports 2001-02.