

Study claims charter schools, competition good for students

by **Christine DeLoma**

Are students in charter schools doing better than if they remained in traditional public schools? Are kids who enroll in traditional public schools helped or hurt by the presence of charter schools?

These are the questions two Texas A&M economics professors, Dr. **Timothy J. Gronberg** and Dr. **Dennis W. Jansen** set out to answer in their new study, *Texas Charter Schools: An Assessment in 2005*, sponsored by the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

“The findings of this study furnish two solid reasons for expanding charter schools,” wrote Gronberg and Jansen. “First, charter school students – especially non-high school students – are doing as well or better than if they remained at traditional public schools. Second, traditional public school students in districts facing charter competition are doing better than students in districts without charter schools.”

As an alternative to traditional public schools, charter schools are independently run by groups such as non-profits, foundations, or government entities. Though free of many district regulations, they receive public funds to operate. As the popularity of charter schools has increased, so in four years their number has grown by 25 percent, and their enrollment has doubled.

Gronberg and Jansen analyzed the differences in charter and non-charter schools. For one thing, charters serve a “markedly larger percentage” of African-American students than traditional public schools. A larger percentage of economically disadvantaged students and at-

risk students are enrolled in charters.

The authors point out that the student-teacher ratio is higher in charter schools. Teacher salaries are on average 10 percent lower compared to their counterparts in non-charters (experience being equal).

All things being equal, charter schools operate with less money and get less funding per pupil. Charters’ per pupil operating expenses are on average, \$1,012 lower than geographically matched traditional public districts. And charters receive 6.1 percent to 7.3 percent less in state and local tax funding per student than traditional public schools.

Are students in charter schools doing better than if they remained in traditional public schools? By all accounts, it is clear that charter school students score lower on average on the state’s TAKS test, particularly in math. The TAKS test measures an absolute level of knowledge. The authors note that this is not surprising, given the major differences between charters and non-charters in the student population, teachers’ pay, level of funding, and operating expenses per pupil.

Notwithstanding the differences between charter schools and traditional public schools, Gronberg and Jansen found that elementary and middle school students who have remained in charter schools for several years, achieved significantly higher academic gains in math and reading than their counterparts in traditional public schools. The authors measured changes in test scores rather than test score levels, arguing changes in test scores give a better picture of a charter school’s impact on student achieve-

ment. In their statistical analysis, the authors controlled for the differences in charter student populations and traditional public student populations by looking at score changes and also by separating the at-risk from the not at-risk student results.

Interestingly, Gronberg and Jansen’s findings do not hold for charter high school students, who were found to under-perform in math and reading compared to high students at traditional public schools.

One reason may be the uncharacteristically high proportion of charter high school students who are at risk for dropping out and are enrolled in alternative education. Approximately 68.2 percent of students are classified as being in alternative education, compared with just 27.4 percent of non-charter high school students.

Are kids in traditional public schools helped or hurt by the presence of charter schools? Gronberg and Jansen looked at the secondary impact that charter schools have on traditional public schools. Drawing upon extensive studies, the authors theorize that giving parents the option of public school choice results in competition among schools.

They found that students in traditional schools that face charter competition perform better in reading and math, achieving significant gains compared to students in traditional public schools that do not face charter competition.

“This charter competition effect may in the long run prove to be one of the most important contributions of charters to student achievement,” the authors argue. ☐

Crime in Texas

Category	2004		2003		Notes
	Total	Rate	Total	Rate	
Murder	1,359	6.0	1,417	6.4	48.7 percent decrease since 1991.
Rape	8,401	37.4	7,986	36.1	Increase of 3.5 percent over 2003.
Robbery	35,811	159.2	37,000	167.3	44 percent decrease since 1991.
Aggravated Assault	75,983	337.9	75,706	342.3	Most common violent crime.
Violent Crime total:	121,554	540.5	122,109	552.1	
Burglary	220,079	978.6	219,733	993.4	Increase of 0.2 percent over 2003.
Larceny-Theft	696,220	3,095.7	697,790	3,154.8	Most common, auto burglary highest category.
Motor vehicle theft	93,844	417.3	98,174	443.9	Six percent decrease two years in a row.
Property Crime total:	1,010,143	4,491.5	1,010,697	4,592.1	
All Crime total:	1,131,697	5,032	1,137,806	5,144	35.6 decrease since 1991. 2.2 percent since 2003.

* Source: 2004 Crime in Texas report, Texas Department of Public Safety

