



Chartering A Better Education

Charter Schools Positively Impact Performance In Traditional Schools

By Jamie Story

Relocating a family can be a tough experience for anyone. Decisions made during the process can weigh heavily on the minds of everyone involved, and have consequences that last a lifetime. Even more so when children are involved.

Parents have become more sophisticated in aligning critical factors with their particular needs. While crime rates, transportation, and taxes all come into play, fifty-three percent of public school parents in a recent survey said the most important factor is the quality of the local schools. "Are the kids going to get a good education?" is the question that can make or break a move.

A new report commissioned by the Texas Public Policy Foundation provides insights that can help parents make better decisions on finding the best schools to meet their needs. Moms and dads should add "proximity to charter school" to their list of questions, whether or not their children would actually attend it.

The study finds that students in public schools competing with a local charter school outperform students in public schools that do not. Charter schools don't just impact the learning of charter school students; they have a positive effect on public school students as well. All children, regardless of their socio-economic position, receive this benefit.

Why do charter schools have a positive effect on surrounding public schools? In two distinct, though related, ways.

First, charter schools have been able to achieve real academic improvement with students who were not being well-served in the "traditional" setting,

where they might have even been labeled difficult to educate.

By letting these children move to a charter's learning environment that better meets their needs, the traditional public schools can re-focus their efforts in serving the broader student population. In each situation, students benefit.

Second, public schools are forced to improve because of the competition they face from charter schools; they must be both more efficient and effective at retaining students. The better a charter school is, the more students it potentially draws from surrounding public schools. This creates an incentive for public schools to improve their offerings in meeting student needs.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation has long maintained that the positive effects of charter schools were being understated because previous studies were limited to comparisons of test passage rates between public school students and their counterparts in charter schools. That is simply not an appropriate measure of success.

It makes much more sense to compare the improvement in test scores. Many students enrolling in a charter school may have never passed a state assessment, so by examining the rate of improvement of students who once struggled in public schools, the effectiveness of charter schools becomes apparent. Of course, we would also suggest using the standard of "academic improvement" for all schools, and not just charters.

Parents whose children's lives are turned around by excellent charter schools have long understood the benefits for their families. Now we know the entire community of students benefits when an excellent charter school is allowed to co-exist with public schools. The best move for Texas will be found in encouraging even more excellent charter schools to open their doors.

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