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San Antonio to get two more charter schools

By **Eva Ruth Moravec** - Express-News

The State Board of Education handed out the final eight charters available in the state Friday to entities who will use them to operate schools with focuses ranging from health careers to college-prep.

The number of charter operators in Texas is limited to 215, a limit the state Legislature established in 2001. Now that there are none left, the state won't seek more applicants for charter schools in the future, unless lawmakers raise the cap to free up more charters.

Charter schools are publicly funded but operated by nonprofit entities and are free from many of the requirements of traditional public schools. The charter school concept was sold to taxpayers as an exit plan for students trapped in failing public schools, and charter operators said they could educate students better without the restraints imposed on public school districts.

Charter operators may have multiple schools – there are more than 400 Texas charter schools – but adding schools to an existing charter is less appealing than securing a new charter. The state pays new charter holders \$450,000 over three years for start-up costs, said a Texas Education Agency spokeswoman, but they get no new money to add schools under the same charter.

The eight new charter schools, including two in San Antonio, were approved by the board to open as early as next fall, and another eight applicants that didn't receive a charter could get one during the year.

TEA staff said an average of five charters have been returned or revoked during the school year for each of the past five years, so more may become available this year. Because new applicants won't be sought, the state board voted to make the eight applicants that were denied charters eligible for charters that are freed up over the year.

“We're doing everything we possibly can,” said State Board of Education member Gail Lowe, who chairs the committee on school initiatives. “It would be my delight to give one (a charter) to everyone that's here, you've shown that you can do it and you do it well.”

Both local charter applicants, City Center – Health Careers and Henry Ford Academy: San Antonio, were approved.

Academica, a company that manages and operates charter schools, will operate City Center, a charter school for students in grades six through 12 that are interested in studying medicine.

The Henry Ford Academy: San Antonio will open next fall to ninth-graders inside of Loop 410, exclusive of Alamo Heights residents. Modeled after other Henry Ford schools, it will be housed in the Alameda National Center for Latino Arts and Culture.

The board decided that next year's committee will determine how charters are handed out in the future. That group will also have to change the process if legislators raise or eliminate the cap on charter school operators.

The number of state charters was first limited in 1995, when 20 charter schools opened.

"It was a new concept and we didn't know if it was going to be a success or not," said Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano.

In 1997, state lawmakers raised the cap, allowing a total of 100 charter schools to operate in the state; in 2001, it was raised to 215.

Texas Freedom Network spokesman Dan Quinn said his organization is against lifting the cap.

"We've seen a lot of bad apples in charter schools in Texas," he said. "This is a system that we should clean up before we should expand it."

David Dunn, executive director of the Texas Charter School Association, first prioritized cleaning up existing schools, leveling the playing field for charter schools and then lifting the cap on TCSA's agenda.


"We are for raising the cap," Dunn said. "We do think it's important to have an environment that will make good choices available."

According to a Texas Public Policy Foundation report, there are 17,000 Texas students on waiting lists for charter schools. The cap needs to be lifted so schools can meet that demand, says Brooke Dollens Terry, the foundation's education policy analyst.

"We have a good process in place to scrub any agency that is looking to open a charter school," she said, "but why should we limit the number?"

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