

## Charter schools can help state solve dropout woes

By **BROOKE DOLLENS TERRY**  
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Charter schools can be a solution to the horrific dropout crisis afflicting both Texas and America.

A student drops out of an American high school every 26 seconds, according to America's Promise Alliance. In Texas, researchers at the Intercultural Development Research Association find that one out of every three school students fails to graduate. Last year, 185 Texas high schools were labeled "dropout factories" by Johns Hopkins University researchers.

Lawmakers outraged at the staggering number of dropouts are looking for solutions. They should consider charter schools as a proven way to address the dropout crisis.

Charter schools are public schools funded with public dollars with more freedom to innovate. Texas' first charter schools opened their doors in 1996; today, more than 110,000 students attend charter schools.

Charter schools serve a large percentage of poor and minority students, many of whom lag their peers academically. Last year, 80 percent of Texas students in charter schools were minorities, compared with 60 percent in traditional public schools.

To best meet the individual needs of their students, there are a range of charter school models. Some charter schools, to help their students catch up, offer a longer school day, Saturday classes and mandatory summer school.

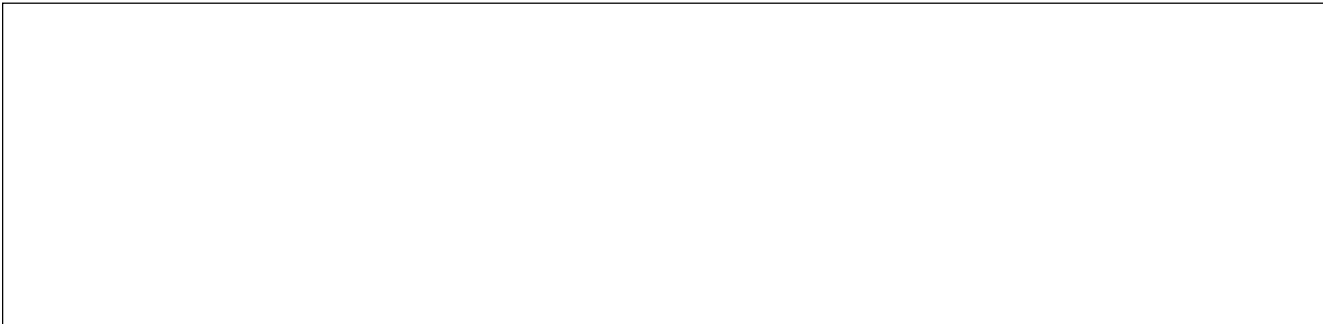
Another charter school model has a math and science preparation emphasis, with multiple math and science Advanced Placement and dual credit offerings and involvement with math and science competitions. Other charter school models offer a second chance to former dropouts, teenage parents, homeless youth and juvenile offenders, providing these students with tremendous flexibility, one-on-one academic tutoring and job skills training.

Consider the remarkable success story of Noah, whom I met on a recent tour of American YouthWorks charter school in Austin. Noah first got into trouble with the law at age 12. By the age of 14, he had served time at the Texas Youth Commission. He is the father to three children under the age of 6.

The ability to attend a charter school gave him the opportunity for a fresh start. Noah, now 21, is working toward his GED, learning valuable job skills, and earning money through the school's construction program. He plans to enroll in a local community college's automotive program.

The media like to fixate on the few bad apples among charter schools, giving the impression that all charter schools are mediocre at best and fraudulent at worst. But there are many shining examples of charter school excellence in Texas and nationwide.

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U.S. News and World Report's list of "America's Best 100 Public High Schools" included 18 charter schools. Two charter schools in Texas made the cut — IDEA Public Schools in the Rio Grande Valley (number 19) and YES Prep Public Schools in Houston (number 52).

In the 2007-2008 school year, Texas rated 7.1 percent of charters exemplary, compared with only 2.8 percent of traditional school districts. Additionally, Texas charter schools outperformed traditional public schools with fewer charter schools missing federal annual yearly progress targets (23.8 percent versus 31.8 percent).

After three years at a Texas charter school, students go from being academically behind to outscoring their peers at traditional public schools in reading, writing and arithmetic, according to the Texas Center for Educational Research.

Demand for charter schools is growing. Last year, nearly 17,000 Texas students were on a waiting list to attend a charter school. Nationwide, the waiting list is 365,000 students.

Yet, opportunities are dim for charter school growth in Texas now that the State Board of Education has hit the cap on charters.

State lawmakers should eliminate the cap of 215 charters to allow more charter schools to open in Texas and lower barriers for high-performing charters to expand.

Texas can stem its dropout crisis by giving more students like Noah options and second chances.

That can happen if we increase the availability of public charter schools.

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