

Brooke Dollens Terry: Too many Texas students on charter school waiting lists

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While almost 130,000 students benefit from attending a public charter school in Texas, 40,000 more are prevented from attending because of space constraints. Clearly, demand is increasing for public charter schools, but supply is not.

Last year, 40,813 students were on waiting lists to attend a public charter school in Texas. This number is more than double the 16,810 students the previous year. In the Dallas-Fort Worth area, the number increased from nearly 5,900 students to more than 10,100.

How do these public charter schools benefit students? Consider the story of Stephanie Cruz.

Stephanie is a fourth-grader at Peak Preparatory, a public charter school operated by Uplift Education in East Dallas. Stephanie's parents speak Spanish at home, but all of her instruction and schoolwork is in English.

Stephanie started attending Peak Preparatory in August 2009 and came to the charter school behind academically in math and reading. Her teacher has worked hard to help her improve, and she has gone from failing the math basic skills test last year to being above grade level in math. In reading, Stephanie has shown 32 percent growth in the last four months and is now on grade level.

Socially, Stephanie has changed from a shy and timid student into one more confident and independent. Before attending a charter school, she was unable to help her younger siblings with schoolwork; now she regularly reads to her younger brother. Stephanie loves her school and is upset when she is sick and can't make it. She and her parents feel she is getting a better education than in her traditional public school.

A charter school is a public school funded with public dollars that has the freedom to innovate. Open-enrollment charter schools such as Uplift Education operate outside the confines of public school districts and enter into a contract with the state to educate students. Public school districts can also operate a charter school; currently 14 Texas school districts run 71 district charter schools.

Nearly 3 percent of all public school students in Texas or approximately 128,000 students attend a charter school.

Charter schools serve a higher proportion of poor and minority students than traditional public schools in Texas. In the 2008-09 school year, charter school students were 83 percent minority and 70 percent low-income compared with 65 percent minority and 55 percent low-income in traditional public schools.

Unfortunately, Texas has a cap limiting the number of open-enrollment charter operators to 215. This number was put in place in 2001 so that the Texas Education Agency could refine its application review and oversight processes to weed out bad charter schools.

We support the measures the state has taken in recent years to shut down charter schools that are not effective at educating our children and not responsible stewards of taxpayer funds. However, the cap does not address the growing demand for public charter school options or allow successful new operators to open schools in Texas.

We applaud the recent decision by Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott to allow successful charter schools to expand more quickly, but the long-term solution is for the Texas Legislature to eliminate the arbitrary and unnecessary cap and remove barriers to the replication of successful schools.

Lawmakers and policymakers interested in learning more about charters might want to visit a charter school and hear students' stories for themselves.

There is strong demand in Texas for more education options, as evidenced by the more than 40,000 students on a waiting list to attend a charter school. Texas policymakers need to put the best interest of students like Stephanie first by opening the schoolhouse door to students waiting in line.

Brooke Dollens Terry is an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute based in Austin. Her e-mail address is bterry@texaspolicy.com.