

Charter schools spread across Texas with goal of newer, better teaching

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More than 120 charter schools in North Texas are part of a national explosion, fueled by a recent surge in political, philanthropic and parental support.

Fifteen years into the Texas charter school experiment, some charters have brought impressive innovation to public education, saved dropouts and posted enviable test scores. But on other campuses, kids have languished in poorly run classrooms and taxpayer money has been squandered on shady operations.

Despite the wildly varied results, the national charter school movement has gained serious steam over the past year. The forces include strong local political support, backing from philanthropic giants like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, ambitious charter school management groups, private investors, fed-up urban parents – and even President Barack Obama.

"We're not an experiment anymore," said David Dunn, executive director of the Texas Charter Schools Association. "We're a small but crucial piece of the overall public education system in this state."

Charter schools are public schools that are privately run and free of many state laws governing traditional schools. The theory is that, freed of red tape, charter schools can forge new and creative approaches to help kids learn.

Sometimes that has happened; other times it hasn't.

Take two of Texas' earliest charter schools, Renaissance Charter Academy and North Hills School. Both opened in Irving, Renaissance in 1996 and North Hills a year later.

The group that operates North Hills, Uplift Education, now runs 15 charter schools in North Texas and plans to open two more this fall. North Hills has been rated mostly "exemplary" or "recognized" each year. Renaissance, meanwhile, shut down after about five years, owing the state nearly \$3 million, mostly because it inflated attendance figures, which determine state funding. The school earned average to low state ratings.

"What we know is that charter schools vary tremendously. There are some charter schools that have very good results, and some that have very poor results," said Marisa Cannata, associate director of the National Center on School Choice at Vanderbilt University.

More campuses

Texas limits charter school districts to 215, though a single district may operate multiple campuses. The State Board of Education has granted approval for 211 charter districts – and 28 groups have applied for the four remaining spots.

Texas has the third-highest number of charter schools, after California and Arizona. Despite the cap, the number of charter campuses grows every year.

Five new campuses will open in the Dallas area this school year. About a third of the local charter schools are less than 3 years old.

Most of the recent arrivals are run by groups experienced in the business, such as Uplift. The charter operation will open two more schools in Dallas this fall – Heights Preparatory in West Dallas and Laureate Preparatory downtown.

Life School, a charter group that stresses character education at its five North Texas campuses, will open a sixth this fall in Cedar Hill. A postcard promoting the new campus declares it has "no tuition," presenting itself as an alternative to traditional schools without private school costs. And Responsive Education Solutions, based in Lewisville, opened its 35th campus this spring in McKinney and plans for several more around Texas this fall.

A *Dallas Morning News* analysis of charter schools shows that Texas charter schools are most popular in urban areas, such as Dallas and Houston. About 10 percent of children living in the Dallas Independent School District opt for a charter school.

Charters draw larger shares from some low-rated, high-poverty suburban school districts.

For example, Lancaster ISD and North Forest ISD near Houston carry the state's lowest academic rating of "unacceptable." In both cases, more than 15 percent of students living in the district attend a charter school, *The News* found.

Grants, donations

The Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank in Austin, estimates that more than 40,000 children across the state are on charter school waiting lists.

While demand is fueling the growth of charter schools, so is money.

Obama has called for the expansion of good charter schools. His administration is awarding more than \$4 billion in competitive grants to improve education, with priority given to states that relax or eliminate caps on the number of charter schools they allow.

Traditional school districts, which stand to lose students and money to charter schools, are following the new charter-friendly emphasis now placed on federal education dollars. DISD Superintendent Michael Hinojosa recently announced that the district would partner with Uplift Education and apply for a \$5 million federal grant to create teacher training academies, an odd partnership that surprised many.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, and Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation have given tens of millions of dollars to support charter schools. Last year, the Gates Foundation said it would guarantee \$30 million in bonds to help Houston-based charter group KIPP expand.

Private investors are also taking interest. Unlike traditional schools, charter schools don't receive public funds to build schools. They often must pay higher interest rates on their loans because they lack lengthy financial track records.

Then there's parent demand.

Dallas parent Shaniqua Childs chose Life School in east Oak Cliff for her son and daughter.

"This school is phenomenal," she said. "The teachers really care about the students." She also likes that the school requires parents to earn "parenting points" by attending seminars and observing classrooms.

State Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, said legislators should respond to parent demand and lift the "arbitrary" state cap.

"You've got 40,000 students waiting in line to go to a charter school. Tell me another school in the state of Texas that has that type of demand," said Shapiro, chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee.

Quality control

Not everyone is convinced that charter schools should be allowed to freely multiply.

The Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers opposed a bill last year that would have allowed more charter districts.

The teachers union argues that state officials are not scrutinizing applicants well enough.

"You've got to have quality-control mechanisms in place before you charge forward with greater quantity," said Nancy Van Meter, a deputy director with AFT in Washington, D.C. "It's clear to us that the quality-control mechanisms are not in place in many states, including Texas, based not only on the mixed student achievement, but on the questionable financial and business operations that have surfaced."

As a group, charter schools in Texas are more likely to have low state ratings. Last year, 7 percent of Texas charter schools were rated "unacceptable," compared with 3 percent of traditional schools. Among schools designed for students at risk of dropping out, 17 percent of charters and 7 percent of traditional schools were rated "unacceptable."

Despite a flurry of studies, there is no agreement on whether charter schools outperform traditional public schools.

The latest national study, released last week by Mathematica Policy Research, examined 36 charter middle schools in 15 states and found that they did no better or worse on average than traditional schools. The quality of individual charter schools varied widely, with the most successful charters in large urban areas and serving disadvantaged kids. But the study did not find specific strategies that brought success.

Research may never offer a final verdict on charters.

"We know that there are successful traditional public schools and there are very bad traditional public schools," said Jeffrey Henig, a charter school expert at Teacher's College at Columbia University. "We know there are very successful charter schools and there are very bad charter schools – the driving forces are elsewhere."

CHARTER SCHOOLS AT A GLANCE

HOW THEY WORK

- Texas passed charter-school legislation in 1995.
- Charter schools are public schools, but they're exempt from many laws that govern traditional public campuses. For instance, charter schools do not have to hire certified teachers. The goal is to encourage new, creative and better ways of teaching children and to give parents more choices within the public school system.
- Charter schools are subject to state testing and accountability rules.

TYPES OF CHARTERS

- Open-enrollment charter schools:** The most common charter schools in Texas. They are created and run by nonprofit groups, universities or local government groups, and they operate independent of any school district. They must enroll students who live within their geographic boundaries. If the number of applicants exceeds the number of available spots, the schools admit students by random lottery. These charters must be approved by the State Board of Education. The state allows up to 215 open-enrollment charter districts.
- Campus charter schools:** These are charter schools operated by school districts. The charter schools and programs do not require state approval and are exempt from the charter cap. The Dallas, Cedar Hill and Carrollton-Farmers Branch school districts each operate one charter campus. Houston ISD operates 39 charter campuses, the most of any district in the state.

ABOUT THE SERIES

This is the first installment of an occasional series exploring the growing charter school movement. Look for stories in the coming months about the successes and failures of charter schools, their effects on traditional schools and *Dallas Morning News* charter school rankings.