

## What You Should Know About Charter Schools in Texas

*By Chris Patterson*

Charter schools are making a vital contribution to public education in Texas—proving better able to serve disadvantaged students than traditional public schools and exerting a positive academic impact on the traditional public schools that surround them. This good news, described in a progress report on Texas charter schools recently produced by two economists at Texas A&M, replicates—as well as contradicts—the findings of five other research reports released over the past 12 months. Altogether, the reports identify what we should know about Texas charter schools and the steps that should be taken to improve the public education of all children.

### What Does The Research Say About Charter Schools?

#### *Texas Charter Schools: An Assessment in 2005*

(Dr. Timothy J. Gronberg and Dr. Dennis W. Jansen, commissioned and produced by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, September 2005)

- ◆ When student performance is evaluated on the basis of test scores, students in Texas charter schools perform on the average lower than do students in traditional public schools. However, when changes in test scores are used to judge performance, academic gains by charter school students can be demonstrated.
- ◆ Students who leave traditional public schools for charters are doing better, on the average, than if they had remained in traditional public schools.
- ◆ Low-performing charter school students gain more academically than higher-performing.
- ◆ Students in non-alternative education charters, have a significantly higher increase in performance than their traditional public school peers.

- ◆ Although overall charters school students perform as well or better than their peers in traditional public schools, high school and alternative education charter students do not fare as well as their traditional peers.
- ◆ Students in traditional public schools facing charter competition generally achieve significantly higher academic gains than do students in schools that do not compete with charters.

#### *Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools*

*2003-04 Evaluation* (commissioned by the Texas Education Agency and produced by the Texas Center for Education Research, February 2005)

- ◆ Instances of improving student performance for charter schools are rare.
- ◆ Overall educational outcomes completely favor traditional public schools.
- ◆ The small group of charter schools with positive accomplishments is overshadowed by the substantial proportion of charter schools with unacceptable performance.

#### *Charter School Funding: Inequities Next Frontier*

(Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 2005)

- ◆ Texas charter schools receive about \$1,000 less per pupil than traditional public schools.

#### *Focus on Results: An Academic Impact Analysis of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)*

(commissioned by the KIPP Foundation and produced by the Education Policy Institute, August 2005)

- ◆ Fifth grade students in KIPP schools (including Texas) demonstrate significantly greater gains on the Stanford Achievement Test than is considered normal annual performance (9-17 points).

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***America's Charter Schools: Results From the NAEP 2003 Pilot Study*** (National Center for Education Statistics, December 2004)

- ◆ Math achievement of White, Black and Hispanic fourth graders in charter schools nationwide (including charter schools in Texas) was comparable to achievement of students with similar racial/ethnic backgrounds in traditional public schools.
- ◆ There was no difference in reading achievement between fourth grade students in charters or traditional public schools in the aggregate.

***Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences*** (Carolyn Hoxby, National Bureau of Economic Research, December 2004)

- ◆ Charter school students throughout the nation (including charter school students in Texas) demonstrate proficiency rates that are 5.2 percent higher than their traditional public school peers in reading and 3.2 percent higher in math.
- ◆ Gains of charter school students increase as charter schools mature, and the academic proficiency of charter school students rises faster than their peers in traditional public schools.
- ◆ In minority and high-poverty areas, charter school students demonstrate greater gains than charter school students in more affluent areas.

## **Why Do Researchers Disagree About Charter School Performance?**

Of these five research reports, only the report issued by the Texas Center for Education Research (TCER) finds that charter school students are at a disadvantage when compared with traditional public schools. This difference is largely explained by the fact that TCER evaluates school performance based on passing rates rather than test scores or changes in scores. Passing rates—because they do not provide any information about achievement levels or gains—represent an inferior method of measuring charter students who were performing poorly in traditional public schools. Additionally, the difference may be attributed to the type of assessments used to measure student achieve-

ment; compared with Texas's assessments, NAEP and Stanford are considered to be more sensitive, discrete measures of academic achievement.

## **What is the Bottom Line for Charter Schools in Texas?**

- ◆ Charter schools are a valuable alternative to traditional public schools.
- ◆ Charters are especially effective with disadvantaged students.
- ◆ Charters challenge traditional public schools to improve student performance.
- ◆ Charters must do a better job with high school students and alternative education programs.

## **How Can We Improve Texas Charter Schools?**

There is one additional research report, published within the 12-month period, which merits attention: ***Texas Roundup: Charter Schooling in the Lone Star State*** (produced by Nelson Smith, Progressive Policy Institute, February 2005). This report begins with the statement, "It has been difficult to come to a definitive conclusion about the performance of the charter sector, largely because too many charter schools have been evaluated through an alternative accountability system with questionable standards and entry criteria." It concludes with these recommendations for improving Texas charter schools:

- ◆ Create a single accountability system for all schools—eliminate alternative accountability;
- ◆ Use measures of student achievement growth in the accountability system to evaluate schools;
- ◆ Redefine at-risk students to recognize that poor or troubled students can reach high standards;
- ◆ Get rid of low-performing schools;
- ◆ Scrap the cap for successful charter schools, encourage multi-campus charters/franchisers, and encourage universities to operate charters;
- ◆ Eliminate state regulations that impede charter success; and
- ◆ Revamp charter school finance and provide facilities funding.

