

Executive Summary

Brief Background

Charter schools, publicly funded institutions designed to have greater flexibility to experiment with ways of educating students, were first created over 25 years ago, with the first charter school opening in Minnesota in 1991.¹ Charter schools now operate in 42 states and the District of Columbia, educating over 2.1 million students by 2011-12 (US Department of Education, 2014).

In Texas, charter schools were authorized in 1995 in an effort to improve student learning, increase options for students and families within the public school system, create professional opportunities that attract new teachers to the public school system, establish a new form of accountability for public schools, and encourage innovation in learning methods (Texas Education Code, §12.118). As of 2012-13, Texas educates 178,826 students in charter schools (approximately 3.5% of the public school student population) in 202 open-enrollment charter schools operating 552 charter school campuses across the state.

In response to evaluation requirements stated in Texas Education Code §12.118, this evaluation was designed to describe students attending the nine open-enrollment charter school campuses (within six charter schools), that began operations in 2012-13, to examine student performance, attendance and behavior, and to measure students' and parents' satisfaction with their school. In addition, this evaluation sought to describe how these charter schools spent funds, and examine changes that may have occurred among the population of students and parents in the districts from which these students withdrew in order to attend the charter school campuses (referred to as feeder schools for the remainder of this report).

Key Findings

Student Enrollment

A total of 2,871 students attended the nine open-enrollment charter school campuses that began operations in 2012-13. The majority of students (68%) were in elementary grades (Pre-kindergarten through Grade 5). Overall, 51% of students served by these nine charter campuses were black, non-Hispanic; 28% were Hispanic; and 16% were white. A small proportion of students were Limited English Proficient (LEP, 8%) or received special education services (4%), and approximately one-quarter were classified as at-risk (24%). A bit more than half were participating in the Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) program.

¹ Throughout this report, the term “charter school campus” will be used to refer to the campus-level entity that students attend and the term “charter school” will be used to refer to the local education agency to which the campuses belong. The United States Department of Education defines a local education agency as a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties that is recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools.

The nine open-enrollment charter school campuses each served very different populations, and no individual campus necessarily represented the aggregate summary described above. Below are some examples of the ways in which the campus populations differed:

- Enrollment ranged from 80 students to 453 students by campus.
- Two campuses served predominantly Hispanic students; three campuses served predominantly black, non-Hispanic students; and one campus served predominantly white students. Two campuses served more heterogeneous populations.
- Three campuses had almost no LEP students; four campuses had small LEP populations (ranging from 2% to 12%); and two campuses had total LEP populations of 37% and 58%.
- Two campuses had 80% or more of students participating in the FRL program while campus had fewer than 16% of students participating.
- Three campuses had fewer than 10% of their students classified as at-risk while one school had three-quarters of their population identified as at-risk.

Student Outcomes

Students attending the nine open-enrollment charter school campuses that began operations in 2012-13 did not show meaningful differences in attendance rates from similar students in feeder schools. They did, however, exhibit differences on performance in reading and mathematics outcomes and on behavior.

- Students at charter school campuses performed significantly² lower on the reading and mathematics State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) tests compared to comparable students in feeder campuses, as measured by scale scores and in the percent of students meeting the satisfactory performance level (Level 2)³. Specifically, charter school campus students' scores in reading were 18 scale score points lower, on average, and 47 points lower in mathematics, on average, while 5% fewer charter school students met satisfactory performance levels in reading compared to comparable students in feeder campuses, and 17% fewer charter school students met satisfactory levels in mathematics, on average.
- Students at most charter school campuses were cited for behavioral infractions significantly less often than comparable students at feeder campuses, being disciplined at 67% the rate of students in the comparison group, on average.
- Austin Achieve Public School was an exception to both of these findings. Students at Austin Achieve outperformed comparison students in feeder campuses in reading, and mathematics (with the difference in mathematics reaching statistical significance – 29 points on the mathematics scale score and 8% more of their students meeting the satisfactory performance

² A comparison is considered statistically significant if a difference is large enough that it would only occur 5% of the time or less by random chance.

³ Satisfactory performance level was defined at the Phase-In 1 Standard.

level). They also were the only charter school campus in the population that demonstrated a significantly higher discipline-per-student rate compared to students in feeder campuses.

Student Perceptions

Six charter school campuses (of eight serving students in Grades 6 or above⁴) administered surveys to students on their impressions about their new campus. Across these campuses, students reported positive impacts of their new campus on their own attendance, grades and behaviors; reported that they like their campus; and that they were told they were doing well the same or more often than at their last campus. Most students graded their campus an A or B in most areas of questioning (e.g., how much they are learning, how safe they feel, how well teachers are teaching the material, etc.), and the majority of students gave the same or higher letter grade in those areas than in their prior campus. There was one exception to this pattern, with students from one campus reporting notably less satisfaction than students at the other campuses.

Approximately half of all students responding to the survey reported that they would be returning to the campus next year, while another 23% were unsure. Of those who said they would not be returning, most did not indicate why not, though some were graduating and some indicated the campus did not have the next grade level in which to enroll.

Operational Costs

Across the six charter schools that began operations in 2012-13 (at nine campuses), expenditures per student ranged from \$5,445 to \$11,551 per student, with an average of \$8,287 spent per student. Foundation School Program funds were the source of funding for between 72% and 92% of the charter schools' expenditures, with other expenditures accounted for by various funds across the schools, including Elementary and Secondary Education Act funds, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act funds, National School Breakfast and Lunch Program funds, Unrestricted Net Assets Class funds, Public Charter Schools funds, State Textbook funds, and local funds.

The six charter schools differed in the functional operations and services provided. For example, one school incurred transportation expenditures, while three had substantial food service programs. Facilities expenditures sometimes accounted for a large proportion of expenditures (24% for one school) or sometimes a small proportion of expenditures (3% for one school). Additionally, charter schools that were operating multiple campuses incurred different types and levels of costs compared to charter schools operating one campus only (such as instructional leadership costs).

Changes in Feeder Campuses

The opening of nine open-enrollment charter school campuses in 2012-13 did not have a measureable impact on the composition of students and staff at the campuses that the charter school students attended in 2011-12 (feeder campuses). With the withdrawal of students enrolling in the new charter school campuses, almost 85% of feeder campuses lost fewer than 1% of their student body, and 98% of

⁴ Only students in Grades 6 or above were included in the student survey due to the nature of the questions that required students be able to compare their current experiences to their experiences of up to two years ago.

feeder campuses lost fewer than 10% of their students. The overall composition of the student body at those campuses did not change, as measured by demographics or performance. There was no change to the composition of staff at any of the 679 feeder campuses, as measured by demographic characteristics or teacher experience and salary levels. Similarly, principals at feeder campuses who were aware of the new charter school campuses indicated little impact of the new charter campuses on how they ran their campus or interacted with parents.