

BRIEF ANALYSIS

No. 259

*For immediate release:**Tuesday, March 10, 1998*

Choice and Accountability: Texas Leads the Way

Texas has adopted one of the most liberal charter school laws in the country. It also has established one of the first statewide school accountability systems, a model for the nation. Rigorous testing standards that apply to both regular and charter schools give parents the information they need to evaluate their children's schools and compare them with other schools. Let's take a look.

Accountability. Under the accountability system, educators are given specific benchmarks, offered more freedom to find the best ways to help students learn and held accountable for the results:

- Annual testing in basic skills allows parents and the general public to compare student progress year by year, grade by grade and school by school.
- School districts are required to disseminate student test results in ways parents can understand and even to make them available to local newspapers.
- Schools face consequences ranging from cash awards for high ratings to escalating sanctions for low ones.

Results. The approach has paid off. In the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fourth graders in Texas, a state with a high percentage of poor and minority children, had among the highest math scores in the nation.

- Both white and black fourth graders had higher average scores than their counterparts in any of the other 38 states that participated, and Hispanic fourth graders averaged sixth highest.

- Between 1992 and 1996, Texas fourth graders also showed the greatest improvement of those in any state.

Some critics of testing have complained that teachers teach to the tests. Even if that is true, when the tests are constructed properly they measure skills students need to learn.

Charter Schools. Despite accountability, Texas has some low performing public schools, and an increasing number of parents are finding charter schools an attractive alternative. Charter schools are public schools that operate with a great deal of autonomy. Many are founded by parents, teachers and social service organizations.

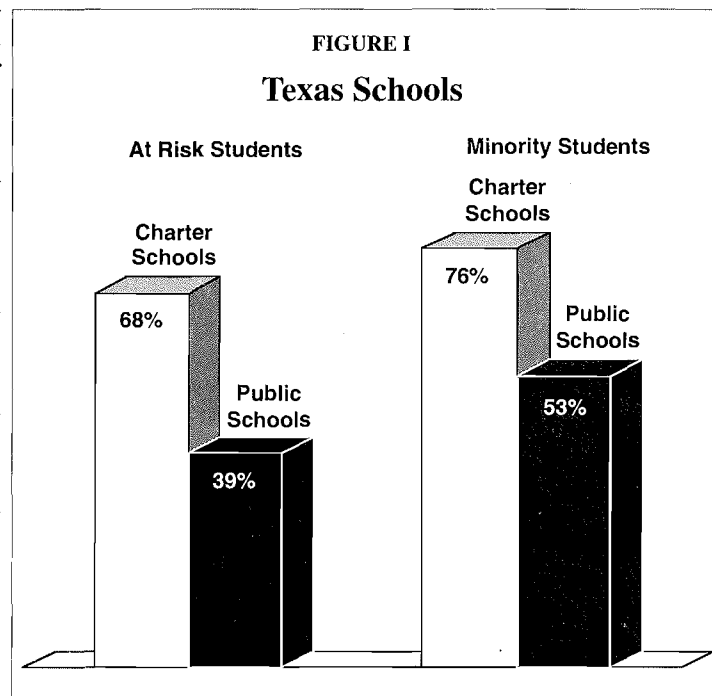
They receive about the same per pupil expenditure for maintenance and operations as other public schools, but receive no capital funding. In Texas, this means they get about \$4,000 per pupil each year, compared to about \$5,000 per pupil for traditional public schools.

Currently, charter schools in Texas serve 4,200 students in grades K-12. For the coming year, the Texas Legislature has authorized as many as 100 additional, regular state charter schools plus an unlimited number specifically serving

at-risk students. In addition, individual school districts can authorize an unlimited number of local campus charter schools.

Texas law exempts charter schools from many nonessential regulations other public schools face:

- Charter schools do not have to hire state-certified teachers or pay minimum salaries.
- In addition to accountability standards, they are only required to meet health, safety and nondiscrimination rules.



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- Anyone can start a charter school; even a private school can become a charter school and several already have done so.

Although charter school teachers are not required to be certified, a recent evaluation found they are more likely to hold advanced degrees than traditional public school teachers statewide. And more than one-half of the charter school teachers came from private schools, businesses and universities.

Models for Success. One of the first local charter schools was started by Thaddeus Lott, an innovative public school principal, in a violent, drug-infested area of Houston. All of the students at Wesley Elementary qualified as “disadvantaged,” 99 percent were minorities and their test scores were mediocre. But by 1996, 100 percent of Wesley’s third graders were passing the state’s reading exam.

Impressed by the results, in 1995 local residents petitioned the Houston school board to allow Lott to manage Wesley and three neighboring schools as a separate district of charter schools. Their efforts were rewarded. Even in the worst of the four schools, Highland Heights, the portion of fourth graders passing the state reading exam jumped from 37 percent three years ago to 100 percent last year.

Models of Diversity. Contrary to critics of educational choice, charter schools do not take the best students from traditional schools. Seven of the 19 state charter schools now in operation are specifically for students who have dropped out of other schools. Moreover, as Figure I shows:

- Sixty-eight percent of students attending open enrollment charter schools are classified as at-risk, compared to 39 percent in traditional public schools.
- Seventy-six percent are minorities, compared to 53 percent in regular public schools.

The racial makeup of Texas charter schools now open is 45 percent Hispanic, 29 percent black, 24 percent white and 2 percent other. [See Figure II.]

A Businesslike Approach. The Texas business community, concerned about the quality of the state’s workforce, has spearheaded school reform. First came a revision of the state’s Education Code to decentralize authority and provide incentives — both rewards and sanctions. More recently, business leaders established the Charter School Resource Center of Texas to aid the expansion of charter schools. And a new foundation will

provide private working-capital loans to all qualified charter schools who need startup funds.

The Next Steps.

These reforms have met resistance. To ease the shock of accountability (and perhaps to mollify teacher opposition), special education students and students who took Spanish-language versions of the tests — about 10 percent of students statewide — have not been counted in grading school performance. They are a substantial portion of students in some schools. Thus a lot of

poorly performing schools have been given a temporary reprieve. Beginning next year, however, special education and Spanish-speaking students’ scores will be counted. In addition, Gov. George W. Bush has proposed ending social promotions, as President Clinton has for the nation as a whole.

Overall, increasingly tough standards applied to more students and more schools — coupled with more freedom of choice for parents — is proving to be a formula for success.

This Brief Analysis was prepared by NCPA Senior Scholar Dorman E. Cordell.

FIGURE II
Students Attending
Texas Charter Schools

