

TEXAS STUDENTS RISING

VOL 1. ISSUE 1. FALL 2020

Cedars International
Academy, Austin



TEXAS
PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS
ASSOCIATION

There are **700**
public charter
school campuses in
Texas, serving nearly
320,000
students.



About *Texas Students Rising* Magazine

Texas Students Rising is a quarterly publication of the Texas Public Charter Schools Association (TPCSA) distributed to policymakers, elected officials, and community and business leaders throughout Texas.

TPCSA is committed to making sure every child in Texas has access to a high-quality public school that will set them on the path to future success. Public charter schools are complements to Independent School Districts (ISDs). Our schools are preparing the workforce of the future and sending more students to and through colleges, universities, and technical training programs. Public charters are accountable to taxpayers and are doing their part to help the state meet its academic goals so that all Texas children can thrive.



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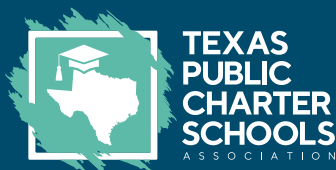
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The first issue of *Texas Students Rising* was originally meant to be sent to the printer on March 13. We all know what happened that day!

COVID-19 turned our world upside down and nowhere is that more evident than in our public schools.

Through it all, we witnessed heroic acts by teachers and school leaders who shifted from brick-and-mortar buildings to online classrooms literally overnight. We saw school administrators personally drive laptops and hotspots to students who didn't have them. We saw cafeteria workers suit up in personal protective equipment (PPE) to provide meals to low-income students and their families who lost their daily source of healthy food when buildings closed. And we saw teachers work day and night to provide engaging lessons for their students and check in on them one-on-one.



On average, teachers spend 140 hours each year planning lessons and activities—but they never could have planned for this. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that our educators are heroes in good times and bad. I bet you and I agree that they don't get the appreciation they deserve in normal times; in this tumultuous time, we can never thank them enough.

Here's another thing we've learned: America doesn't work when our schools aren't open. Having safe, loving environments that foster our children's natural creativity, curiosity, and civic-mindedness is critical for the economy and our communities in the short- and long-term.

When we can safely reopen school buildings, Texas students need to come back to schools that are ready to help them not only catch up, but also zoom ahead. We are proud of the role that public charter schools in Texas have played and will continue to play in helping students do both.

As you'll read in this magazine, public charter schools were created in Texas 25 years ago to help offer a lifeline to students who were assigned to schools that were struggling. Over the past 25 years, charters have helped their students close opportunity and achievement gaps, catch up with their wealthier peers, and move ahead in college readiness, college enrollment, and college graduation rates.

Equally important is the impact charters are having on Independent School Districts (ISDs). We analyzed the data and found that ISDs with charter schools located inside their boundaries are improving faster than ISDs without charter schools in their boundaries.

Not only are charter school students thriving, but as charter schools expand, more students who stay in their assigned district schools are also thriving. This is great news for kids, families, and our communities that are depending on public schools to prepare Texas's future workforce.

We hope you enjoy reading *Texas Students Rising*. We look forward to sharing news and information with you that will answer your questions about public charter schools in Texas and our role in the public education landscape.

If you have questions or feedback about what you read here, please let me know. You can reach me anytime at scoleman@txcharterschools.org. I'd love to hear from you!

Sincerely,

Starlee Coleman

CEO
Texas Public Charter Schools Association

Texas Districts with Charter Schools See Big Gains

AFTER 25 YEARS, CHARTER SCHOOLS DELIVERING ON AMBITIOUS PROMISES

On May 30, 1995, then Governor George W. Bush signed into law Senate Bill 1 to allow public charter schools in the state of Texas. Led by Democrat Paul Sadler, the bipartisan coalition behind the bill created a new kind of public school designed to try new ideas and better serve children who were falling behind—promising that all public schools would improve and all students would benefit.

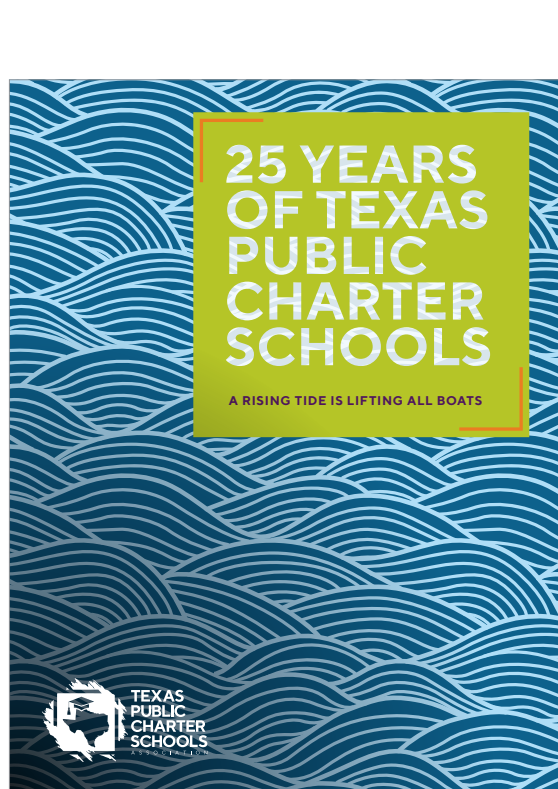
Due to rising parent demand, public charter schools now educate 6% of Texas public school students. Recent years have seen significant growth. From 2012 to 2019, enrollment at Texas public charters tripled, from just over 100,000 to over 300,000. Today, about 320,000 children attend charters.

On the 25th anniversary of Texas' public charter school law, TPCSA released the report "A Rising Tide is Lifting All Boats: 25 Years of Texas Public Charter Schools," which shows that charters are helping improve academic outcomes for kids across the state—regardless of whether those children attend a public charter school or a district school. The report looks closely at 5th grade and 8th grade data from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR), which are key indicators for how likely students are to be promoted to middle and high school and are early predictors of college enrollment and readiness.

The report finds that:

- **Both ISDs (Independent School Districts) and charters are performing better as charters expand.** From 2012 to 2019, as total statewide charter enrollment approximately tripled, the average district raised its student achievement from 4% to 8%.
- **ISDs with charters in their attendance zones are more likely to improve than ISDs without them.** From 2016 to 2019, for example, 82% of ISDs with charters in their attendance zones boosted their 5th grade reading scores—compared to 67% of ISDs without any charters.
- **Many ISDs with charters in their attendance zones are ascending to "high-performing" status.** Over the past three years, the number of ISDs where at least 95% of 5th graders met state math standards doubled. That compares to a 63% increase among ISDs without charters in their attendance zones.

Overall student performance is improving as charters grow—and the improvement is happening even faster in districts where charters are located. As a state, our goal should be to lift up as many Texas students as possible, no matter what type of public school they attend.



NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The content of this report is based on a study TPCSA conducted on the relationship between public charter enrollment growth and the average rate of 'Met Standards' for grades 5 and 8 as part of the Student Success Initiative. TPCSA conducted a regression analysis on enrollment and 'Met Standards' data from the 2012-2019 period. TPCSA used linear regression to model the relationship between enrollment growth and 'Met Standards' data. TPCSA then created scatter plots and conducted linear regression analysis on districts with the highest enrollment growth (red line) and districts with the lowest enrollment growth (blue line). TPCSA also conducted a regression analysis on districts with the highest enrollment growth (red line) and districts with the lowest enrollment growth (blue line). TPCSA also conducted a regression analysis on districts with the highest enrollment growth (red line) and districts with the lowest enrollment growth (blue line).

KEY FINDINGS

- » Both ISDs and charters are performing better as charters expand. From 2012 to 2019, as total statewide charter enrollment nearly tripled, the average district raised its student achievement between 4% and 8%, depending on the grade and subject tested.
- » ISDs with charters in their attendance zones are more likely to improve than ISDs without charters. From 2016 to 2019, for example, 82% of ISDs with charters in their attendance zones boosted their fifth-grade reading scores—compared to 67% of ISDs without any charters.
- » Many ISDs with charters in their attendance zones are ascending to "high-performing" status. Over the past three years, the number of ISDs where at least 95% of fifth graders met state math standards doubled. That compares to a 63% increase among ISDs without charters in their attendance zones.

What if public education had been growing faster? This data demonstrates that ISDs with charters in their attendance zones are performing better than ISDs without charters. This is good news for all students. Not only are charter school students doing better, students who stay at their ISD school are also doing better. Charters are helping lift up a whole lot of Texas children—and nothing promised they would 25 years ago.

Virginia Chen, Executive Director, Houston

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE LAST FOUR YEARS:

Charters Influence the Performance of 5th & 8th graders at ISD schools

Zooming in on STAAR results over the past four years (2016 to 2019), we also find that ISDs with charters in their attendance zones were more likely to improve than ISDs lacking charters:

5TH GRADERS



8TH GRADERS





Harmony Ingenuity: Increasing Diversity in Healthcare and Promoting Healthy Communities

In cavernous rooms once used as medical laboratories, two classes of students at Harmony School of Ingenuity in Houston prepare for futures in the medical field. On the left side of the room, sophomores study the systems of the human body. On the right, seniors discuss innovations in the field.

These two classes are a part of Harmony Ingenuity's distinguished Project Lead the Way Biomedical Academy. For the past seven years, this four-year program has provided a hands-on approach to learning that focuses on solving real-world problems and exposing students to new and lesser-known careers in the field.

Houston is one of the top 10 cities for hospitals in America—with many of those hospitals located right down the street from Ingenuity. Although 45% of Houston's residents are Latino and 22% are Black, people of color make up only 11% of the city's medical professionals. Harmony Ingenuity, whose students are overwhelmingly Latino and Black, is working to shift that balance—moving Texas and the U.S. toward a future where doctors and researchers understand the communities they serve.

To get there, more students from diverse backgrounds need training in biomedical studies. And they need that training earlier in their public-school years, giving them time to decide whether the profession interests them and to explore different specialties in the field. Harmony Ingenuity is leading the way. The program's integrated learning approach gets students discussing scenarios and working on projects that mirror the work they'd be doing in the real world—all the way down to the

sounds of beeping equipment you'd hear at a hospital or lab.

At Ingenuity, the biomedical courses are taken in succession, allowing students to systematically build their knowledge. Starting with the Human Body System course, students advance from learning the basics, to more advanced terminology and techniques, to applying what they've learned using projects. These projects go well beyond the standard biology class dissections you might remember from childhood. Students learn how to identify internal body parts, diagnose symptoms, and determine causes. Importantly, because the biomedical credits from Harmony Ingenuity's program can be applied for college credit, students leave the program several steps closer to achieving their dreams.

There is a long way to go when it comes to achieving diversity in the world of healthcare. Today, for example, nursing is the only health profession in which the share of Black workers is in line with the general population (about 12% of all Texans and 12% of nurses are Black). Conversely, people of color are overrepresented in community health worker positions—roles in which an individual, with or without pay, serves as a liaison between a local community and professional health services. Though these roles are immensely important, they do not serve as pathways to social mobility for workers in the ways other medical professions do.

In short, we need more doctors and scientists of color. Harmony Ingenuity is helping blaze a trail toward equity by training the medical workforce of the future and creating healthier communities for everyone. ●

Although 45% of Houston's residents are Latino and 22% are Black, people of color make up only 11% of the city's medical professionals

What Exactly is a Charter School?

Charter schools are public, tuition-free, and open to all students. Unlike a traditional one-size-fits-all approach to education, public charter schools put the needs of students first by giving them the time and personalized attention they need to really learn. Charter schools are given greater flexibility to serve students' individual needs, and with that flexibility comes greater oversight than traditional public schools. They are held accountable to high financial, academic, and managerial standards by oversight boards made up of parents, teachers, and community members. Charter schools currently educate 6% of Texas public school students, but make up more than 60% of A-rated districts in the state.



337,000
charter school students²



179
charter holders²



781
charter school campuses²

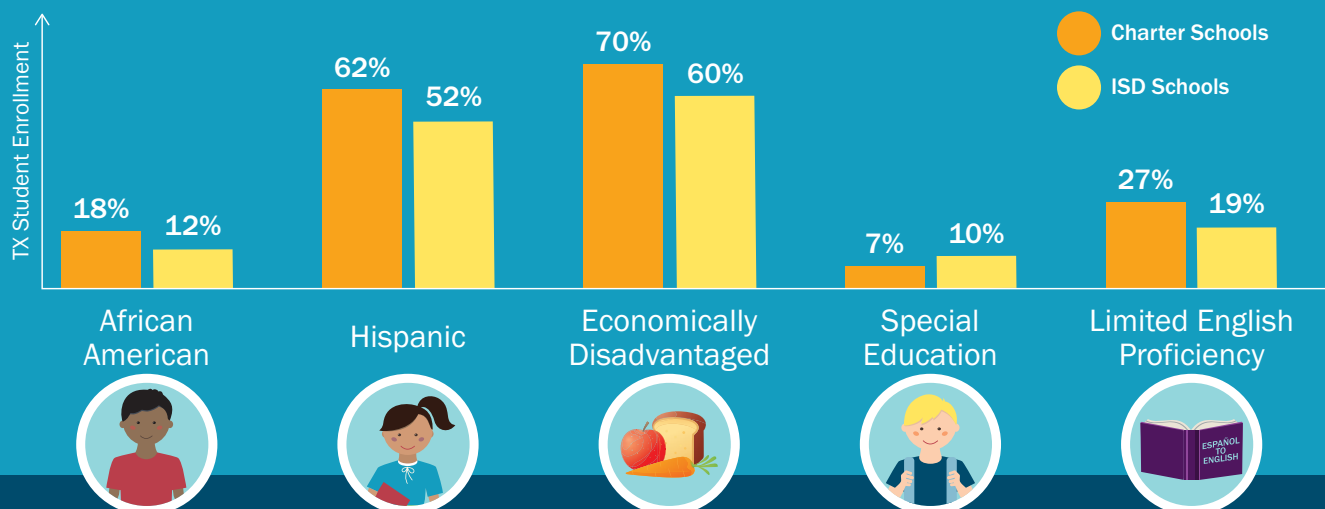


25
years charter schools have
been serving students

How are Charter Schools Funded?

Charter schools receive state funds based on the number of students who attend (just like traditional public schools). Charter schools receive less funding than traditional public schools because they receive state dollars only and do not receive any local taxpayer dollars.¹ TPCSA advocates for more charter school funding to close the gap.

Charter School & ISD School Enrollment²



Beatrice Mayes Opened a School to Save Students in Her Neighborhood

When Beatrice Mayes was working as a teacher in Houston in the 1960s, she grew exceptionally tired of feeling like children who looked like her were being left behind—and no one seemed to notice or care. She started to tutor children in her neighborhood. It became clear that many of them couldn't read and weren't even motivated to learn.

In October 1966, she decided to formally open her own school in a three-bedroom house her husband had purchased. Neither of them could have projected that her life's purpose would be realized in that little school house.

The journey was not easy. The Mayes family struggled personally and went into debt to keep the school's doors open; at the time, the school was charging \$12 tuition a week, and many of the parents couldn't afford to pay it. Since lenders wouldn't

loan money to Black borrowers, she and her husband couldn't borrow to cover the gap.

But Mayes made it work by learning how to do more with less. She assembled a curriculum that was even more

advanced than the one offered at the local neighborhood schools—these children were going to have to be twice as good as others if they were going to be able to compete for similar opportunities, and their leader knew it.

“The results that you were seeing for the children, the development of our young people, the enthusiasm that you were getting from them, just to know that they were learning, and not only that, but there was someone who actually cared for them” all made it worth it.

“It was hard,” she remembers. “It was exhausting. But it was rewarding to know that you were developing children beyond the norm that children would get in public school.”

“The results that you were seeing for the children, the development of our young people, the enthusiasm that you were getting from them, just to know that they were learning, and not only that, but there was someone who actually cared for them” all made it worth it, she said. “The children became my heart.” Their parents, many of whom had felt trapped in schools that didn't serve them well, now “felt safe and had confidence that their children were being taken care of and they were learning,” Mayes said.

The school's enrollment soon grew far greater than the 30 students for which it had been licensed—Mayes had outgrown the house. The students and teachers went from church to church holding classes until they finally landed in a building on Calhoun Road in Houston's historic Yellowstone neighborhood.

Christopher Mayes, the school's current superintendent, grew up watching his mother's struggles with and passion for the



“The Children Became My Heart”

school she built. The younger Mayes did not initially start off in education. He graduated from the school but attended Prairie View A&M University and studied engineering before landing a job at NASA. Only later did he find his way back to what is now Beatrice Mayes Institute (BMI), a public charter school.

"I've always had a heart for the school. I was a student here—all I knew growing up was this school," he said. "My mom would come back and talk about some of the frustrations with the classroom, and hearing that it was mostly in math and science—I decided to try to help. I'd do after school tutorials three days out of the week."

He saw himself in many of the students. A self-described "low-A, B student in math," Mayes said he made a lot of careless mistakes in math class. He also remembers feeling like math was too hard and he couldn't do it, so working with students who looked like himself and who similarly saw themselves as not capable of "doing math" was "really life-changing for me," he said. Although he has had offers to go back to NASA and work on the space station, he has turned them down. "This is where my heart is," he said.

A lot of his approach to teaching has been adapted from his professors at Prairie View. In fact, there are lots of parallels between the small community school founded by his mother, a Black educator, and his alma mater, which was established 80 years earlier to educate students who were shut out of the state's white institutions. Beatrice Mayes Institute is the oldest continually operating Black school in Houston; Prairie View is the state's second oldest institution of higher education and the oldest established to educate African Americans. Both have become pillars in their communities—not just for educating students, but also for developing community activists who are just as committed to giving back as the institutions that raised them.

Eight of the 48 current staff members at BMI are former students, and even more of the current students have parents who count themselves as alumni. Mayes estimates that roughly 8 in 10 of the school's students go on to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), including his own daughter, Bethany, who currently attends Dillard University in New Orleans.

"You can be really down home and real with the kids, and connect to them, and still get the content across because you made those connections." He remembers the way one of his professors "cared so much, in so many ways, which is synonymous with what's here. We're working because we love you."

And when the work is motivated by love, it cannot fail. ●



"I've always had a heart for the school. I was a student here — all I knew growing up was this school."

Mental Health Should be a Top Priority at Schools This Fall

BY ARYN VAN STEIJN

As COVID-19 disrupted school for children statewide, many educators were focused on maintaining academic progress. That's certainly important. But in my experience, as a public charter school teacher in Austin, it's impossible to do that without paying special attention to the mental health of students.

Every year, I ask my juniors and seniors about their preferred method of communication with their friends and families. While some might think their answer would be texting or video chat, this year it was not. In fact, every year since I have asked this question, my students have said personal, face-to-face, in-person communication is their top choice. Its absence due to the current crisis is deeply concerning.

In a recent national survey of parents conducted by the National Parents Union, 56% said that they were concerned about their children's mental health and emotional well-being as a result of the pandemic. Strikingly, more than 50% of parents were concerned about their own emotional well-being. A mental health crisis is upon us.

While much of the media coverage in education has been about the difficulties schools faced while transitioning to teaching virtually and using technology in entirely new ways, that was not my biggest concern as a teacher. I am no expert in virtual teaching, but I knew my students were about to lose the social interactions normally found at school, and I could see the emotional challenges to come—caused by increasing isolation—that would impact their mental health and ability to learn.

But there is good news on the horizon as we look to what is possible this fall. Nationally, 71% of parents are confident that their child's school will be able to provide the resources to support their child's mental health and emotional well-being. And teachers by their nature are creative and innovative. When supported by school leaders who value their contributions and provide them with the flexibility to meet the individual needs of the students in their classroom, teachers will rise to the occasion and amazing things will happen for kids and communities.

Every day this spring I saw this happen at Chaparral Star Academy. From our counselor providing students with tangible coping skills to deal with the impact of social distancing on their mental health, to teachers and students sharing pictures of their pets and stories about their families deepening bonds

between kids and trusted adults, to teachers sharing video messages about how much we missed seeing our students in person, to finding new and fun ways to engage in academics like Zoom scavenger hunts—I saw it all. Our teachers, trusted and supported by our leaders, found many new and unique ways to engage students. They did not feel alone and were not overwhelmed by the events going on around them.

When supported by school leaders who value their contributions and provide them with the flexibility to meet the individual needs of the students in their classroom, teachers will rise to the occasion and amazing things will happen for kids and communities.

There is no question we will have much to talk about with our students when we are together again. From the personal impact of COVID-19 on their individual families to collaborating on changes to ensure racial equity in our communities, we are just beginning to address all that our students have heard, seen and faced. But I know we will get through this time of uncertainty together because of the relationships we have developed and our commitment to focusing on our school community's well-being.

I believe our most important job as educators right now is to be there for our students. While I know some teachers may be trying to decide whether returning to the classroom is the right choice for them, there is no question where I will be when schools reopen. I am where I am meant to be. I am glad I found Chaparral Star Academy all those years ago and my hope is that every student, parent and teacher in our state has a community that embraces them like ours does. We will continue to be there for our students and their families. We will continue to focus on academics while prioritizing social and mental well-being. We will get through this together. ●

Aryn van Steijn is the high school Spanish teacher at Chaparral Star Academy in Austin, Texas. She is a mother of two young boys. She met their Dutch father while studying in Panamá. She enjoys cooking, podcasts, and connecting with other moms in the Austin area who are also raising bilingual children.

This opinion piece was originally published by Education Post at <https://educationpost.org/mental-health-should-be-a-top-priority-at-schools-this-fall/>.



Volunteer Charter School Board Members Bring their Passion and Talent to Public Education

Luly Castillo works as a Technical Marketing Manager for Halliburton. She's also passionate about public education, and as a result has been engaged with public charter schools for as long as she can remember.

First and foremost, Luly is a proud alumna of YES Prep, a public charter district based in Houston. She is the parent of two students at International Leadership Texas, another highly-rated charter district. But she wanted to be even more involved and give back to her community. So Luly joined the volunteer non-profit Board of Directors at YES Prep.

When describing charter schools, Luly says we should think of them as schools that are able to make decisions quickly and provide the necessary attention for meeting the specific needs of every student. Her experience has been that charter leaders and teachers are looking to create a family-like feeling with a heavy investment in student success. Instead of seeing charters as competition to traditional districts, Luly sees them as just one more option

Instead of seeing charters as competition to traditional districts, Luly sees them as just one more option for families, giving parents the opportunity to determine what works best for their kids.

for families, giving parents the opportunity to determine what works best for their kids. Not all schools have the same concept, methods, or goal.

When the time came to select a school for her first child, Luly recalled her amazing experience at YES Prep, where she was supported and encouraged to reach her full potential. She knew that she wanted a similarly positive experience for her own children. International Leadership of Texas, which offers a triple language option and a focus on leadership skills and giving back to the community, was an easy choice. Four years later, she still loves the school and believes her kids and their peers at ILTexas will be future leaders in our community, making a difference and putting others before themselves.

As a YES College Prep board member, Luly is committed to the organization's ongoing academic, financial and operational success, and to accountability for achieving its goals. Like her colleagues on the board, she brings a variety of business skills, strategy, vision, and leadership to the organization.

As she looks to the future, Luly thinks schools will continue to need to be able to provide for virtual education when circumstances require it—whether that be a hurricane or pandemic. Ensuring students can continue to learn even if they are not in a classroom should be a priority for all public schools. And it will be critical to find ways to help parents by providing guidance and feedback to support their child's learning at home. ●

For more information about YES Prep and ILTexas, visit <https://www.yesprep.org> and <https://www.iltexas.org>.





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