

TEXAS STUDENTS RISING

VOL 1. ISSUE 3. SUMMER 2021

Beta Academy,
Houston



TEXAS
PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS
ASSOCIATION

There are nearly **800** public charter school campuses in Texas, serving nearly **365,000** students.



About *Texas Students Rising* Magazine

Texas Students Rising is a quarterly publication of the Texas Public Charter Schools Association (TPCSA) and is 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. 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.



Beta Academy, Houston



Letter from Starlee Coleman, CEO of TPCSA

3



Public Charter Schools in Texas Boost Achievement for English Learners

4



Beta Academy in Houston Ensures English Language Learners are Thriving

6



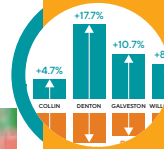
Public Charter Schools are Helping Young People Navigate an Increasingly Complicated Landscape

7



Keeping the Legacy Alive

8



Public Charter Schools Welcomed At-Risk Students During the Pandemic

10



Texas Advocates of the Year

12



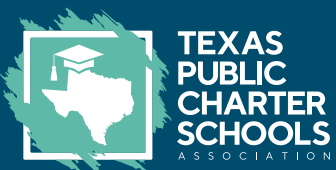
Understanding Governing Boards of Texas Public Charter Schools

14



Board Member Feature

15



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The future of Texas depends on the ability of our public schools to help English learners unlock their full potential. I'm incredibly proud that our public charter schools are leaders in this area.

This contribution to the state's education system is sorely needed. The percentage of English learners who are still learning the language after five years in school has skyrocketed in Texas, according to a recent study by Rice University researchers. And two-thirds of the state's English learners graduate from high school without the reading and writing skills they need to be prepared for future success, limiting their access to college and high-wage jobs.

Public charter schools are helping turn the tide. For example: **Nine of the top 10 school districts in Texas, based on how many English learners in middle school meet state reading standards, are charters.** For elementary school students, four of the top 10 districts are charters.

While these results are impressive, what really makes the numbers come to life are stories like Julianna's, which you will read more about later in this magazine. Julianna started at El Paso Leadership Academy in the sixth grade without speaking a word of English. But in just one year, she jumped ahead four grade levels in English and six in math. Within two years, Julianna was fully fluent in English. This fall, she'll be attending New Mexico State University on a nearly full ride scholarship.

Students like Juliana deserve public schools that will give them the skills they need to be successful in life. With the help of incredible educators like Omar Yanar, the founder and superintendent of El Paso Leadership Academy, they can be. Public charter schools are making good on the promise of a high-quality education for all of their students, especially those who are learning English.

If you have any questions about our schools or what you read here, please reach out: scoleman@txcharterschools.org.

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "Starlee Coleman".

Starlee Coleman

CEO
Texas Public Charter Schools Association

Research Brief No. 4
APRIL 2021

English Language Learners Fly Higher in Texas Public Charter Schools

BY TIMOTHY MATTISON, Ph.D.

BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Bilingual Education is another program school districts can offer in addition to or instead of ESL to satisfy the state requirement to help ELL students improve their English language proficiency. TEA requires all Bilingual program teachers – in both traditional public and public charter schools – to earn a Bilingual teaching certification. Like ESL, the main objective of Bilingual Education is to improve ELLs' English language proficiency. However, unlike ESL, Bilingual education seeks to preserve ELLs' first language proficiency by grouping students with the same first language and transitioning them to English rather than immersing them in it. TEA provides another comprehensive rubric describing structures and practices required to implement an exemplary Bilingual Education program. See the "Author Note" of the research brief for a link to this rubric.

OTHER ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES

Many Texas public charter schools, like traditional public schools, now have so many ELLs that standalone ESL and Bilingual Education programs are simply not enough to help ELLs achieve full English proficiency. Some of these districts turn all teachers, regardless of content area, to provide English language instruction. For instance, teachers learn to create language learning objectives and classroom activities. They also learn to create rich classrooms using word walls. These initiatives, while not part of district official ESL or Bilingual Education programs, are helpful for ELL English language development.

Texas Public Charter Schools Association - Research Brief No. 4 - April 2021

Subject	Charter	ISD
Science	20%	18%
Math	19%	20%
ELA	22%	19%
Social Studies	17%	15%
Writing	16%	14%

English Language Learners Fly Higher in Texas Public Charter Schools 7

MORE ELL STUDENTS ATTEND CHARTER SCHOOLS

Texas Public Charter Schools Have Higher Rates of ELLs

Children who speak only English at home have a background in the language. As a result, they spend kindergarten, first grade, and second grade learning basic reading and writing skills, which are critical for studying math, science, ELA, and social studies from the 3rd grade onward. By contrast, ELLs must develop in school the speaking and comprehension skills that native English speakers learn at home. Therefore, public schools provide ELL programs and services to compensate. Building ELLs' English foundation is no easy task, because it must occur at an accelerated pace so that ELLs do not miss out on critical academic content. This task becomes even more difficult as the percentage of ELLs in a school district increases.

More ELL students attend charter schools. Texas public charter schools enroll one third more ELL students than traditional public schools. As a result, public charter schools must work even harder to make sure all ELLs have strong enough English skills to ensure they learn their grade-level academic content. In response, public charter schools have school operations that meet the challenge. Studies show that becoming certified generally does not help a teacher improve student outcomes. However, the specialized training leading to Bilingual and ESL certification does make an impact. State data shows that Texas public charter schools employ almost double the percentage of teachers who have these certifications, compared to traditional district schools. Public charters also spend 3 times as much of their total operating revenue on Bilingual and ESL programs, compared with traditional district schools.

School Operations Metrics Related to ELL Students

Metric	Charter	ISD
% Teachers Bilingual or ESL Certified	3.9%	2.2%
% Bilingual or ESL Funded per Total Budget	0.6%	0.2%

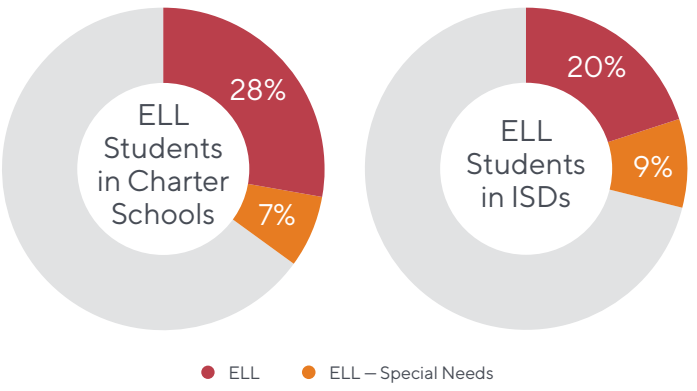
English Language Learners Fly Higher in Texas Public Charter Schools 5

conversations with their teams about strategy and how they will assess all their own conclusions." "Generally speaking, the extent of collective learning allows more students can easily apply the concepts and strategies they learn while eighth graders were at least "approaching grade level" on the Reading STAAR exam. So more 91% of fourth graders and 83% of third graders. "It's all about how much our teachers love." "Miami says,

Public Charter Schools in Texas Boost Achievement for English Language Learners

A new research report finds that Texas public charter schools not only enroll more English language learners than traditional school districts, but also help them achieve at a higher level.

English Language Learners Fly Higher in Texas Public Charter Schools analyzes enrollment, outcomes, and operations data related to one of the state's largest and fastest-growing student populations.



The report finds that charter schools invest nearly three times as much of their funding in associated support services for English language learners.

The report also shows that compared to traditional districts, public charter schools are helping many more English language learners translate their language fluency gains into better academic performance – including in subjects besides reading. Students are taking what they learned and using it to stay on track in science, social studies, and other classes.

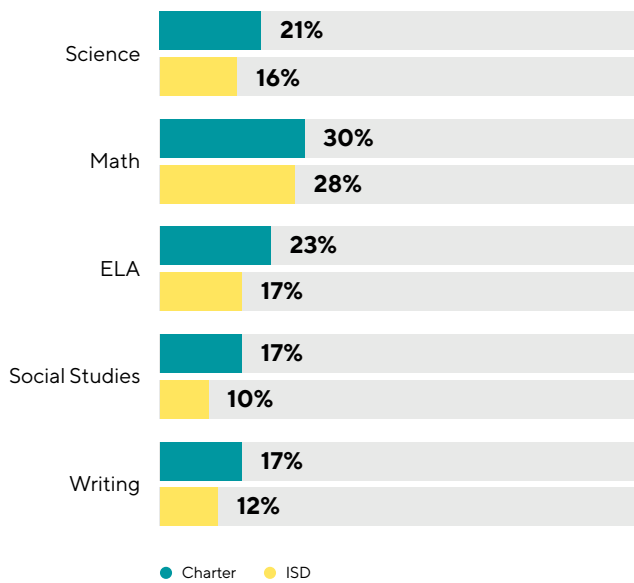
When public charter schools were initially conceived more than 30 years ago, the idea was to identify practices to solve some of the challenges we were facing in the public school system such as ensuring English language learners would have opportunities for success. These data demonstrate that public charter schools are indeed living up to that promise and ensuring more students, including students learning English, are able to reach their full potential.

To read the full report, visit bit.ly/TexasELL.

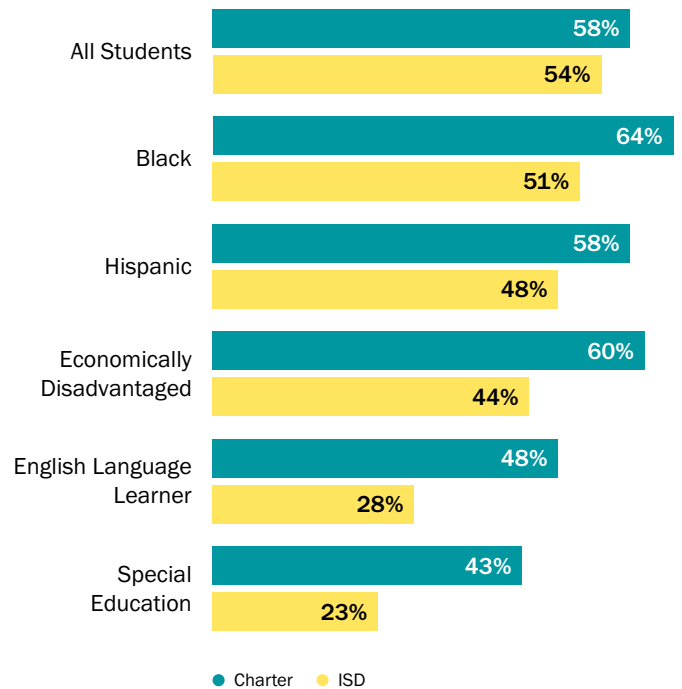
TOP FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- Texas charter schools enroll **33%** more English language learners than ISDs.
- English language learners at charters are also about **33%** more likely to meet state reading standards, compared to their ISD peers.
- Charter schools are helping English language learners translate their language fluency gains into **better academic outcomes** at twice the rate of ISDs – and in more subject areas.
- More English language learners at charter schools are **on grade level in every tested subject**: science, math, ELA, social studies, and writing.
- English language learners at charters are nearly **twice as likely to enroll in college**.

Percent of ELLs Receiving ELL Services & On Grade Level



Enrollment in Texas Colleges



Beta Academy in Houston Ensures English Language Learners are Thriving

English learners at Beta Academy in Houston are among the highest-performing in the entire state. Their elementary-level scholars, for example, meet grade-level reading standards at the 15th highest rate out of nearly 550 school districts in Texas.

They're thriving thanks in large part to a literacy program that embraces and responds daily to their needs.

"When we wrote the charter application, we chose a research-based curriculum that was proven to benefit English learners," said Helen Abernathy, the school's Executive Director of Research & Development. "When I taught those students in a large district, the experience just wasn't designed for them."

At Beta Academy, an A-rated public charter school, 22% of students are English learners. Most come from Spanish-speaking families, although other home languages, particularly Vietnamese, are also represented.

One key to their success: Students who are still learning English don't feel isolated or singled out. They use cooperative learning and read with partners and in groups alongside native English speakers. Everyone receives explicit direction to talk about words that challenge them, form a team consensus, and report back to the class together.

"It's amazing how even our youngest scholars have rich conversations with their teams about strategy and how they arrived at their own conclusions," Abernathy says.

This spirit of collective learning also means students



Beta Academy (Houston, TX)

can easily apply the concepts and strategies they learn while reading to other subjects, such as social studies and science.

"Kids learn really well from other kids," Abernathy says.

Similarly, all educators at Beta Academy weave techniques to support English learners into their instruction. English as a second language-certified teachers and aides "push in" to classrooms, rather than pulling English learners out of class. That prevents anyone from losing instructional time and builds a culture of high expectations — a belief that all students can, and will, learn at a high level.

Beta Academy's approach also incorporates flexibility and nimbleness. The school organizes in-class reading groups based on students' reading level, as tracked by regular assessments, and moves students based on their progress. In this format, it's easier for teachers to tailor their guidance to specific students. That's especially helpful with such a large population of English learners.

School leaders also place a premium on fostering close relationships between teachers and students. English learners feel connected to the community in a deeply personal way. Esther Marin, the school's ESL director, recalls one eleventh grader who didn't feel completely confident with her language skills. But her teacher worked so closely with her, and inspired her so much, that she scored at the "advanced high" level in writing.

That kind of success isn't uncommon. In 2019, all of Beta Academy's middle school English learners (fifth through eighth grade) were at least "approaching grade level" on the Reading STAAR exam. So were 91% of fourth graders and 83% of third graders.

"It's all about how much our teachers care," Marin says.



Beta Academy (Houston, TX)

Public Charter Schools are Helping Young People Navigate an Increasingly Complicated Landscape



Omar Yanar, Founder/CEO/
Superintendent, El Paso Leadership
Academy (El Paso, TX)

As a young Social Studies teacher for seventh graders, Omar Yanar felt there was more his school could do to prepare students for the complex world that awaited them. He knew that a holistic approach to education would yield impressive results because he grew up watching his trailblazing mother manage the University of Texas at El Paso's Upward Bound Program. He watched as 100% of his mother's traditionally-underserved students went to college — and nearly all of them graduated.

Yanar understood what was possible with visionary leadership. But the young Stanford graduate with a master's degree in education was disheartened when his suggestions to implement evidence-based educational approaches were continuously shot down by a school administrator where he taught. He wanted to offer a space where students' native languages and cultures were honored while English language proficiency and new skill sets were developed. Yanar proposed teaching young people how to navigate an increasingly complicated academic, social, and economic landscape.

"I was told that I wasn't here to teach responsibility, and that was such a moment for me," Yanar recalls. "The comment was so tone deaf to the needs of immigrant, Black and Asian students, and their families." Others at the meeting also dismissed his ideas and told Yanar that he ought to try starting his own "dream school." So he did.

Today, sitting in the conference room of El Paso Leadership Academy, a public charter middle and high school with 1,200 students, he points out the window and explains that the Mexican border is just one mile away. "We are located in Segundo Barrio, one of the most impoverished areas of the country. And this is exactly where we need to be."

Creating the school was an adventure. Yanar earned a second master's degree — this one in public policy from Harvard. He then returned to his hometown of El Paso and assembled a team of educators who shared his vision

of creating what he describes as a civil rights organization that uses education as a catalyst to create social change.

"The staff, we are all from the Isle of Misfit Toys who have turned to one another and become Voltron," he said with a laugh.

Jokes about the animated super robot aside, El Paso Leadership Academy is super heroic in its effort to transform the educational model for students who aren't served well by traditional districts. The school is currently ranked second in Texas for overall academic progress of students, even though 64% of its students are English language learners. For perspective, 8% of students nationwide are English language learners.

Numbers like this are exciting, but nothing lights up Yanar's day like talking about the success of his students and alumni. He shares the story of Julianna, a high school senior who started at El Paso Leadership Academy in the sixth grade not speaking a word of English. "She jumped four grade levels in English and six in math in just a year, and was fully fluent in English in two years," he said, checking his phone to see if the young woman has texted to let him know where she has decided to attend college. "It's New Mexico State University," he says proudly. "Nearly a full ride."

Tita Yanar, the school founder's mother and inspiration, couldn't be more delighted by what El Paso Leadership Academy has achieved. "She is impressed," Yanar says, "but also hopeful, because our team has taken her work to the next level to inspire a new generation."



Omar Yanar and students, El Paso Leadership Academy (El Paso, TX)



Abel De Leon and students, SST-Northwest (San Antonio, TX)

Keeping the Legacy Alive

SST-Northwest Principal Abel De Leon Considers His Work with Students an Extension of His Family Legacy

Abel De Leon’s parents grew up in poverty. His mother and her siblings struggled for basic necessities – “we’re talking six kids having to make their own clothes out of potato sacks and flour sacks, and that was their contribution to the family,” De Leon said – but their father instilled in them the importance of education.

De Leon’s maternal grandfather, Rogerio Gil, left school in the fourth grade to take care of his siblings after the death of his mother. Before she died, he promised her that he would create a better life for the family. And he never forgot that promise. As an adult, and while raising his own children, Gil started a community for migrant farmers. He would take families around the state chasing crops in a school bus he’d bought at an auction. Along the way, Gil studied others who seemed to have the lives he considered better, and realized they all had one thing in common: education.

“You can imagine it’d be hard to make education a priority under these circumstances,” De Leon said. But his grandfather did. Even if they were only in a town for one week, their first stop was the public school. To show his family how important education was, Rogerio also enrolled himself back into school and finished with a 6th grade education.

Two generations later, as the principal of the School of Science and Technology-Northwest in San Antonio, De Leon finds himself reflecting on his work to help other families prioritize education under a different set of challenging circumstances. The pandemic exposed students to new hardships – many of their family members, for example, were working in healthcare.

“My grandfather committed our family to education. What would have more value than to be the next Rogerio Gil, for not just my family, but for anyone who will allow me?”

“You can imagine the pressure these families are feeling, because they’re trying to help the public through this, help their families through this, and they’re worried about whether they’re going to bring the virus home,” he said. “They don’t necessarily have all the supplies they need. I think COVID-19 caught America by surprise. And part of that is because we don’t have the kind of equipment readily available to the workers.”

One of the campus’s teachers, Helen Pryor, took home two of the school’s three 3-D printers to print mask shields the school could donate to medical personnel on the frontlines.

It’s not just students, De Leon said, who dealt with new burdens during the pandemic. One of the school’s teachers saw her husband off on a 150-day National Guard deployment.

“A lot of people are losing their jobs, and there’s a lot of

extra stress on the community, which makes it hard,” De Leon said. “We try to be that respite for them, we try to keep the positive face, we try to keep them focused on positive things.”

Amid the crisis, De Leon and his school worked hard to bring the community together. He read to students on Facebook Live, for example, while his wife put on a puppet show next to him to illustrate the story. Teachers organized a virtual “we miss you” parade where families saw them walking across their screens and pausing to send encouraging messages. Staff regularly checked in with parents to connect them to whatever resources they needed. The school even went above and beyond to make home deliveries of Chromebooks and portable WiFi devices to families who didn’t have access to transportation to come get them.

De Leon rallied families behind a simple message: they’re all in this together. “I think right now with this current situation, a message about sticking together, caring about other people, being empathetic, that’s a really important message,” he said.



Abel De Leon and student, SST-Northwest (San Antonio, TX)

“My grandfather committed our family to education. What would have more value than to be the next Rogerio Gil, for not just my family, but for anyone who will allow me?”

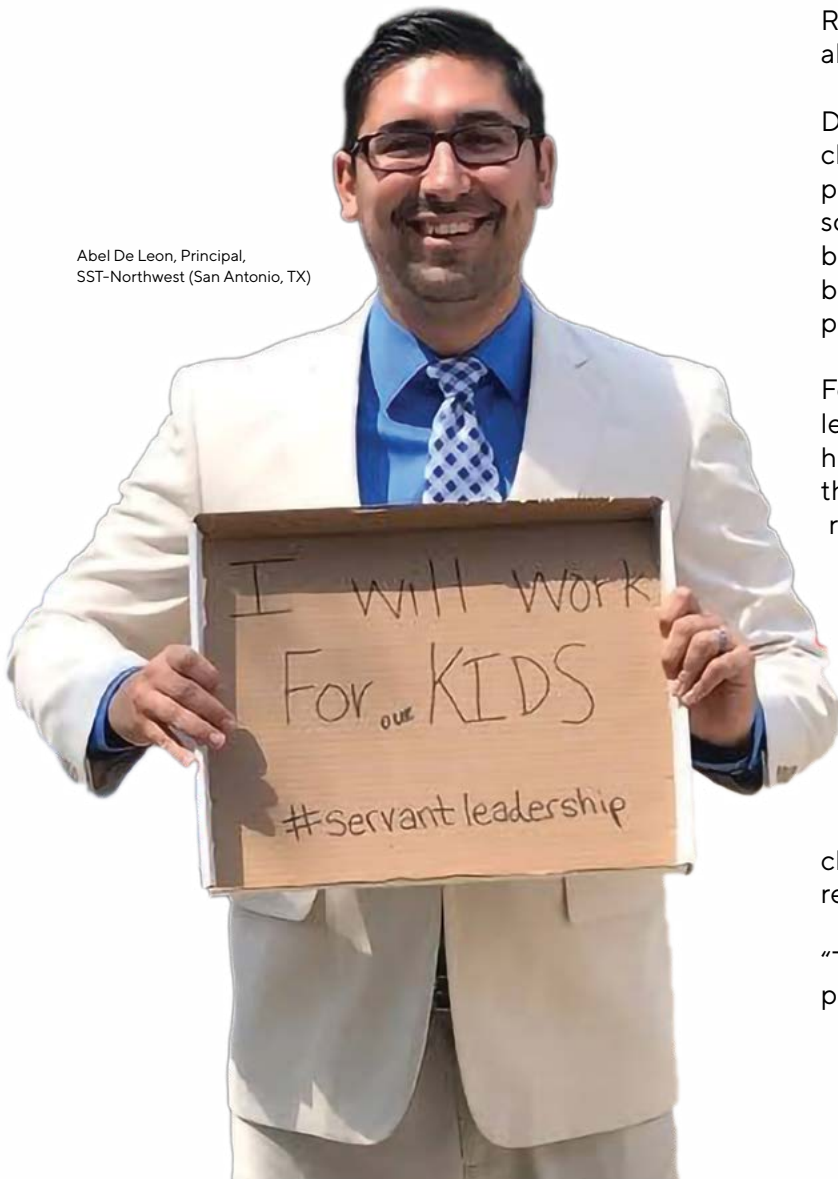
De Leon’s mission to make the community at his public charter school feel like a family started before the pandemic – and will continue long after it. “It’s a small school with a big heart,” he said. “We may not have the biggest budget, we may not have the fanciest campuses, but we have the biggest heart, because we hire the right people, and we invest in our people.”

For example, he said, before he was principal, school leaders put him on a leadership track that would pay for his master’s degree and get him in the pipeline to run the school. This set the model for what is now a tuition reimbursement program that helps a lot of the staff train for leadership positions and allows the school to maintain a home-grown pool of talent.

“We’re educators, and we were started by educators, and we want to help create things that are going to help kids build a better way and a better future – and then we want to give it away for free. We want to give away the things that work so that more kids can have a high-quality education. They can have a choice. Especially in the parts of town where those kids really wouldn’t have had a choice,” said De Leon.

“This is my life’s ambition. This is what I do. This is what I’m passionate about,” he said.

Abel De Leon, Principal,
SST-Northwest (San Antonio, TX)



Public Charter Schools Welcomed At-Risk Students During the Pandemic

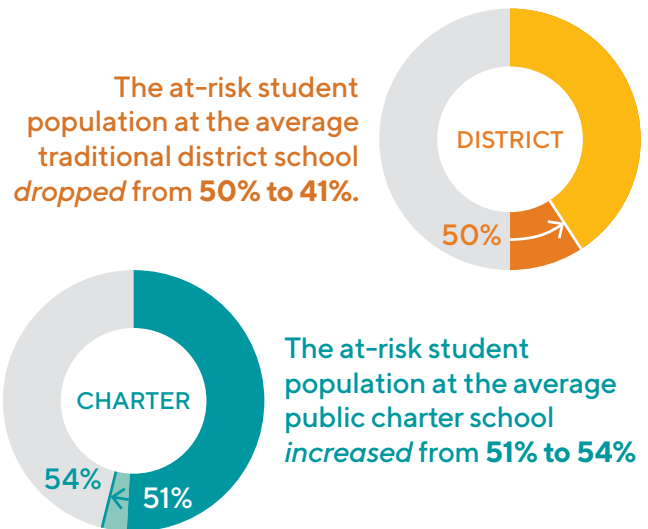
Many of the state’s most vulnerable students left traditional district schools between 2020 and 2021. In some cases, administrators couldn’t account for them. Public charter schools stepped up to help by opening their doors to thousands of these at-risk students during a time of crisis.

These students, designated “at-risk” by the Texas Education Agency, include those who:

- Are severely behind academically
- Are pregnant or parents
- Have been previously expelled, incarcerated, or placed on parole
- Previously dropped out of school
- Are homeless
- Are still learning English
- Reside in a residential treatment facility

In the 2020-21 school year, ISDs enrolled many fewer at-risk students than the previous year. **But public charter schools enrolled many more.**

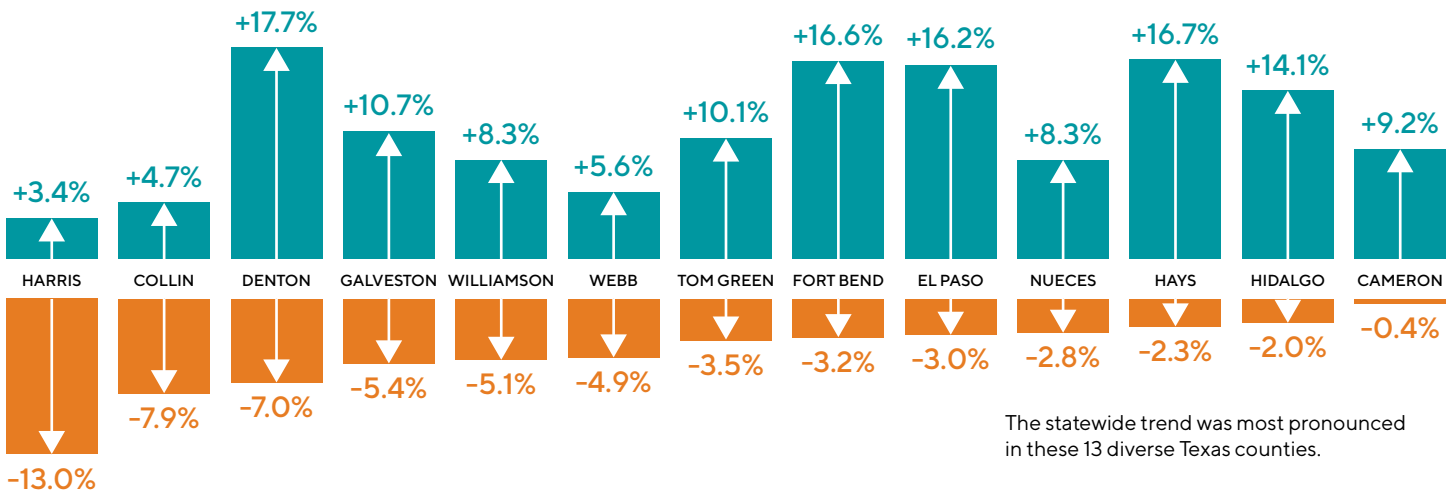
Between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years:



13 COUNTIES THAT TELL THE STORY

Change in # of At-Risk Students

● Public charter schools ● Traditional districts



PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

- In Harris County, the number of at-risk students doubled at nine public charter schools. That includes Beatrice Mayes Institute, KIPP Journey Collegiate, YES Prep Hobby, and ILTexas Windmill Lakes.
- In suburban Dallas, the number of at-risk students at iSchool Virtual Academy, part of Texas College Preparatory Academies, increased by 230%, from 126 to 416.
- In the Rio Grande Valley, the Rembrandt campus of Vanguard Academy and Tres Lagos campus of IDEA Public Schools both enrolled about 170 more at-risk students.
- The at-risk student population increased by 40% at Premier High School El Paso and 50% at the Linguistic Academy of El Paso.

Serving Vulnerable Students: Public Charter School Success Stories



Texans Can Academies

When Eddie grew up with his mother, brother, and sister, a regular family meal was a tortilla with salt for seasoning. His loving mother worked hard, but making ends meet was difficult. His dad was not in the picture. At 15, Eddie decided to leave the ninth grade to go to work so he could provide for his younger siblings.

Eddie moved in with his uncle, who had a construction job for him in San Antonio. After turning 21, Eddie decided he should go back to school and get his diploma. He looked online and found Texans Can – San Antonio. This was, Eddie says, “the best decision I ever made.” Eddie found staff and teachers who made him feel cared for – the first time he ever knew that feeling in school. “For the first time in my life, I actually got to be a kid.”

Seven years after graduation, Eddie is an award-winning store manager for AT&T. Married with two small children, Eddie is grateful that they “will never know what it was like to struggle” as he did. “They will never know the pain of growing up without their father.” And he continued to work in construction while earning his high-school diploma so that he could send money back home. The new life he created by attending Texans Can, Eddie says, is “truly amazing.”



Raul Yzaguirre Schools for Success

Thaly Rios Lozano arrived in the United States at the age of 12. When her mother first enrolled her as an eighth grader at Raul Yzaguirre Schools for Success (RYSS) in Houston, the teachers were concerned. Thaly only knew Spanish and wasn't familiar with the Texas public school system. But educators closely monitored her progress and helped her successfully complete the year. Soon after, however, she and her mother returned to Mexico.

Three years later, Thaly moved back to Houston and re-enrolled at RYSS. During the coronavirus pandemic, she gave birth to her daughter. If teachers had concerns three years ago, when Thaly first enrolled, those concerns were only heightened. Teaching and learning virtually can be a challenge for any student – much less a new parent changing schools for her senior year of high school.

But Thaly is thriving. She has mastered Zoom and Google classroom, actively engaging with lessons on the school's virtual learning platforms even while holding her toddler. She continues to learn English as educators at RYSS give her all the support she needs to keep up academically. One teacher described her as “a rock star.”

Why did Thaly choose to come back to RYSS? “I liked the atmosphere. It was small and made me feel comfortable,” she said. “And I recalled the attention and support I received from my teachers. Now, with my daughter and the pandemic, I know the only school for me is RYSS.”

Texas Advocates of the Year

In May 2021, the Texas Public Charter Schools Association, which represents 180 charter districts and more than 700 campuses across the state, announced the organization's three Education Advocates of the Year. The awards honor parents, teachers, and school leaders who are leading the charge toward a stronger public education for all Texas students.

TPCSA unveiled the winners as part of National Charter Schools Week, a celebration of the high-performing, tuition-free public schools that have changed the landscape of public education across the nation. In Texas, public charter schools educate approximately 365,000 students – a majority of whom come from traditionally underserved communities – and employ 20,000 educators.

TPCSA was honored to recognize these three tireless advocates.

Gregory Harrington

PARENT ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

Gregory Harrington is a champion for the diverse needs of schools and families in Central Texas. He serves on the advisory board for Harmony Science Academy, a public charter school district, as well as the Strategic Planning Committee of Pflugerville ISD. His daughter Madison is a fourth grader at Harmony School of Science in Austin.

Mr. Harrington founded the Back to School Parade, a celebration and fundraiser that has supplied thousands of students with backpacks full of school supplies since 2008. He is also a leader and past president of the Austin Alumni Chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers, a role Mr. Harrington has used to broaden awareness of STEM fields for local students.

He regularly meets with lawmakers on behalf of Central Texas parents and has recently testified before the House Public Education Committee and the State Board of Education. As a member of the Texas Charter Parent Council, Mr. Harrington motivates his fellow parents to speak out – including by addressing hundreds of attendees at the TPCSA Parent Pep Rally earlier this year.

Harrington advocates because he understands firsthand the value of different kinds of opportunities within the public education system. He believes in the impact of parents' stories on lawmakers and wants to make sure more of those stories are told because families simply don't have time to wait for good schools for their children.



Parent Advocate of the Year: Gregory Harrington, Parent and Advisory Board Member, Harmony Public Schools (Austin, TX)

Judy Moore

TEACHER ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

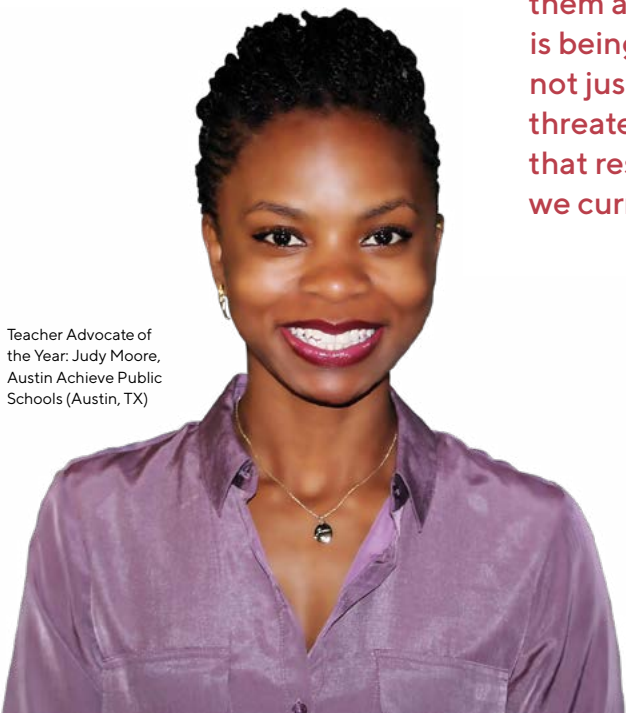
Judy Moore, a middle school teacher at Austin Achieve Public Schools, isn't just helping the students in her classroom excel. She's also helping other educators get involved in Texas education policy and speak out for their students.

Moore serves as a coach and mentor to Central Texas fellows in the Teacher Advocacy Leadership Institute. She helps them share their experiences and priorities with local and state lawmakers. Earlier this year, Ms. Moore helped organize a virtual Teacher Rally, helping to facilitate dialogue among hundreds of educators statewide.

The threats facing Texas public charter schools drive Judy in her advocacy. "One thing that sparks my passion is when things are unfair. I could not be content in my role as a teacher, looking my scholars in the face everyday, knowing that opportunities and access to high-quality education for them and 55,000 others is being withheld as they languish on waitlists to attend a charter school – and not just withheld, but threatened with policies that restrict the liberties we currently have."

As a first-generation college graduate, Ms. Moore understands the power of public education in unlocking students' potential – and the power of teacher voices in leading communities forward. After the pandemic began, Ms. Moore and her students met virtually with a state lawmaker. She has also been featured in media outlets such as Reform Austin, where she explained how she and her colleagues were adapting to virtual instruction.

Teacher Advocate of the Year: Judy Moore, Austin Achieve Public Schools (Austin, TX)



School Leader Advocate of the Year: Dr. Narciso Garcia, Vanguard Academy Charter School (Pharr, TX)

Dr. Narciso Garcia

SCHOOL LEADER ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

Dr. Narciso Garcia is the superintendent of Vanguard Academy Charter Schools, a district whose seven campuses near the US-Mexico border are among the highest-performing in all of Texas.

"Charter schools like Vanguard Academy get to work collaboratively with parents to make sure ALL students and young people get out of poverty," Dr. Garcia said. "We place children, young people, and families first."

Dr. Garcia is a champion for creativity and excellence in education – the kind that helps traditionally underserved students thrive in college and access skilled, high-paying jobs. Vanguard's blended learning approach to math has been so successful that the Texas Education Agency awarded the district a Math Innovation Zone grant.

This legislative session, Garcia spearheaded a bill – passed recently by both chambers of the Texas Legislature – that would give charter schools access to the Jobs & Education for Texans (JET) grant program, which funds equipment for career and technical education courses.

Vanguard also serves its community. The schools have distributed hundreds of thousands of meals since the pandemic began in March 2020 to local families, forming partnerships with the Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley and H-E-B. The City of Pharr recently honored Dr. Garcia as "Citizen of the Year."

An Inside Look: Understanding Governing Boards of Texas Public Charter Schools

BY TIMOTHY MATTISON, Ph.D.

Research Brief No. 5

JULY 2021

SUMMARY

The Role of Public Charter School Boards of Directors

About **1,300 experienced professionals** serve on the governing boards of Texas public charter schools, volunteering their time and talent so that students are well-positioned to succeed. Their experience enriches the way that public charter schools – designed to be creative and flexible – operate each day.

Public charter school boards of directors in Texas oversee school operations for over **365,000 students** and manage over **\$3 billion** in taxpayer revenue across the state every year. This role requires an understanding of not only school operations, but school finance and governance laws and regulations in order to meet the high standards for academic and financial accountability set by the Texas State Legislature, the Texas Commissioner of Education, and the federal government.

“As a charter school board member, I get to see the bigger picture and help guide the organization towards our shared vision. As volunteers, we are invested in the school and its focus on developing relationships with students, families, teachers and staff. Seeing decisions we made at the board level come to life as they are implemented at the school and classroom levels, things that might be considered innovative in another school, but at Legacy are just ‘the way we do things’ is what makes this work so rewarding.”

KATRINA MARTINEZ, Board Member,
Legacy Preparatory Charter Academy

Public Charter School Boards are Accountable to Taxpayers

Charter schools are public schools designed to put the needs of students first and they face tough accountability standards to ensure they deliver on that promise. The nonprofit volunteer board governance system in Texas is one reason why Texas public charter schools educate 6% of the state’s public schools students, but represent 67% of the state’s top-rated school districts. In fact in Texas, the accountability standards are among the strictest in the nation.

- Texas has strict standards for those who may serve on a public charter school board. These standards are far stricter than those governing who may serve on an ISD board.
- Texas public charter school board members receive no compensation for their service and cannot have a financial stake in a management company.
- Texas public charter school boards are held just as accountable, and must be just as transparent, as those in traditional public school districts. As 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations, public charter schools and their boards must also comply with additional IRS accountability guidelines.
- Texas public charter school board members receive training to ensure they understand state law.
- Texas public charter school boards are separate from the boards of management organizations.
- Texas public charter school board members who breach their duty or commit a crime can be removed with relative ease, whereas ISDs and the State have virtually no authority or ability to remove ISD trustees who have breached their duty.
- Texas public charter school board members are directly accountable to the TEA and Attorney General and can be held individually and personally liable for breach of duty. There is no similar mechanism for ISD trustees.

Public Charter School Board Member Creating Opportunities for Texas Students

Katrina Martinez became involved with Legacy Preparatory Charter Academy nearly 10 years ago because she knew the K-12 school focused on innovative approaches to engaging students through hands-on exploratory experiences that were authentic to the world around them. It's also why she joined its board of directors last year.

From the start, Martinez understood that the quality of education would be good because Legacy Preparatory was founded by Martinez's graduate school professor and mentor, Dr. Rebecca Good. What Martinez didn't realize is that she would be moved by a wave of emotion when she attended her first high school graduation ceremony and watched Legacy Preparatory seniors earn their diplomas.

"It was a proud moment seeing first-gen students, some with associate's degrees already in hand," said Martinez. "Many were students of color who might not have been on this path to college, and there was a gap we were able to help close. This is my community and it means a lot to me to create more opportunities in it."

In addition to her volunteer service on the board at Legacy Preparatory, Martinez is a project manager at the School of Education & Human Development at Southern Methodist University. Still, she carves out time from her busy schedule to make Legacy Preparatory a place where she would want to send her own family. In fact, her 14-year-old nephew Joaquin is in the ninth grade at Legacy Preparatory and has access to programming that puts him on track for success whether he pursues higher education, a career or military service.

"He's a student who primarily benefits from a good challenge and exploring his curiosities in an educational setting," Martinez explained. At Legacy Preparatory, young people learn through projects that engage them in a way that promotes critical thinking and problem solving. "Students develop projects that demonstrate their mastery of the curriculum," she said.

As proud as Martinez is of the work done by Legacy Preparatory, she sometimes feels frustration over the misconceptions about charter schools. Some people think academic standards aren't as high, or that they take funding from traditional schools. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"We are able to tailor our approach and adapt to the needs of students and their families quickly," she explained. "Charter schools and independent school districts should work together to collect and review data about the community's needs, invite community voices, and come together to target areas of academic and basic needs and concerns."

Referencing the African proverb about how it takes a village to raise a child, Martinez says, "The village needs to collaborate to ensure effective school environments for every child in Texas. Whether students earn their diplomas from traditional public schools or charter schools, they are all part of a community that is better served when they have received the best education for their needs."

"Many were students of color who might not have been on this path to college, and there was a gap we were able to help close. This is my community and it means a lot to me to create more opportunities in it."

Katrina Martinez, Board Member,
Legacy Preparatory Charter
Academy (Plano, TX)





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