



Cedars International Academy, Austin

Texas Public Charter Schools Prepare Children for Kindergarten and Beyond

BY TIMOTHY MATTISON, Ph.D.

OVERVIEW



Pre-kindergarten (pre-k) programs help ensure that all children, regardless of their background, are prepared to thrive in kindergarten and beyond.

Texas public charter schools play an outsized role in creating these educational opportunities. Pre-K enrollment at public charter schools is growing at a rate nearly quadruple that of traditional districts.

And from the forefront of this rapidly-emerging field, public charter school educators are beating the odds—helping the state’s most vulnerable students prepare to read, write, and develop math skills before they ever become part of an “achievement gap.”

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE RAPIDLY MEETING COMMUNITY DEMAND

Nearly a quarter million students in Texas attend pre-K. From 2016 to 2020, pre-K enrollment at public charter schools increased by 40%, compared to 13% for the state as a whole.¹ Pre-K now accounts for 9% of all public charter school students and 4% of students enrolled in traditional school districts.²

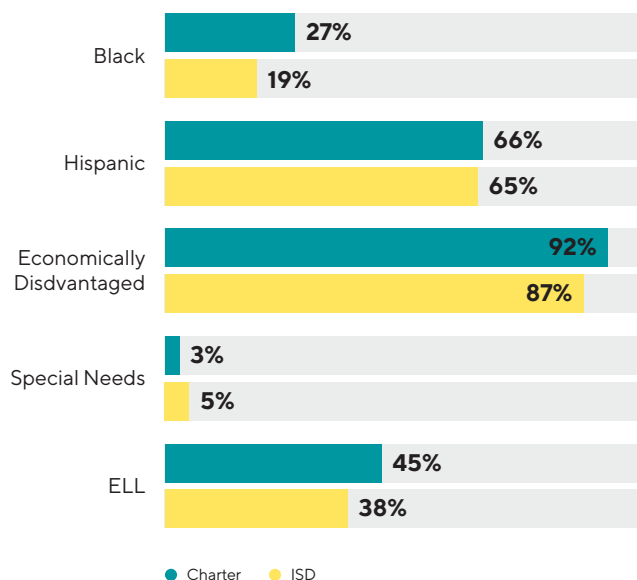
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVE MORE HIGH-NEEDS STUDENTS

Texas public charter school pre-K programs enroll 8% more Black students, 5% more economically disadvantaged students, and 7% more English learners than traditional Independent School Districts (ISDs).

These differences are similar to those that exist overall between public charter schools and traditional public schools in grades K-12, with the exception of Hispanic students (who represent a higher percentage of public charter school students in grades that follow pre-K).³

Pre-K Type	Enrollment in 2016	Enrollment in 2020	% Increase
Public Charter School	13,714	19,213	40%
Traditional District	206,877	229,130	11%
Overall	220,591	248,343	13%

Enrollment in Pre-K Programs



Texas Public Charter School Pre-K Programs are Beating the Odds

Past research on pre-K programs suggests that based on student demographics alone, public charter schools should have worse outcomes than traditional school districts. Public charter schools enroll higher rates of students from most historically-underserved backgrounds, and these students typically start with more barriers to learning.

However, in general the opposite is true. Public charter

schools in Texas help *more* students finish their pre-k experience prepared for kindergarten (91% vs. 85% at ISDs).⁴ Furthermore, at Texas public charter schools, students move from “not ready” to “ready” at higher rates than their ISD peers in most subjects and demographics.

The results are particularly pronounced for three sub-groups of students:

PERCENT OF BLACK PRE-K STUDENTS PREPARED FOR KINDERGARTEN



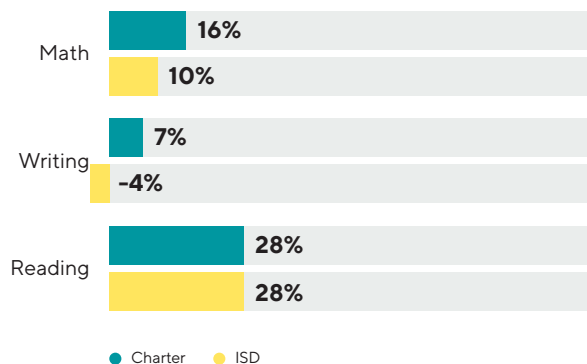
Black pre-K students at public charter schools finish their program prepared for kindergarten math at a rate 9% higher than their ISD peers. And they’re not only prepared for kindergarten writing at a rate 8% higher, but fully 100% leave pre-K with the foundational skills they need.

PERCENT OF HOMELESS PRE-K STUDENTS PREPARED FOR KINDERGARTEN



More **homeless pre-K students** at public charter schools finish their program ready for kindergarten—at a rate 10% higher in math, 8% higher in writing, and 8% higher in reading.

PRE-K STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO PROGRESS FROM “NOT READY” TO “READY” FOR KINDERGARTEN



At public charter schools, 7% of **pre-K students with disabilities** progressed from “not ready” to “ready” for kindergarten writing. This is a clear need in the education system: At ISDs, the percentage of pre-K students with disabilities prepared for kindergarten writing *declined* by 4%. Public charter schools also helped a higher percentage of these students make progress toward readiness for kindergarten math (16% vs. 10%).

Public Charter School Pre-K Programs are Leading the State Forward

There are 26 public charter school districts in Texas where a majority of pre-K students are non-White and from low-income families—but where at least 80% finish their program ready to hit the ground running in kindergarten. These public charter school pre-K programs are re-shaping the public education system in a way that equips vulnerable students for success.

The chart below highlights five illustrative examples, where the majority of pre-K students are low-income or children of color and 100% move on to kindergarten prepared to learn higher-level skills.

WHAT MIGHT EXPLAIN PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS' PRE-K SUCCESS?

Previous pre-K research offers several possible explanations for why public charter schools' outcomes are stronger than expected, given their high-need student populations. For example: Pre-K students have better outcomes in schools and classrooms with staff members and teachers that share their race or ethnicity. Public charter schools in Texas employ twice as many Black and Hispanic staff members as ISDs (66% vs. 32%) and many more teachers of color,

including five times as many Black teachers (22% vs. 4%).

But there's more to the story. We interviewed several Texas public charter school leaders in districts with high rates of both kindergarten readiness and historically-underserved students to gain a richer understanding of their success. They emphasized:

- Providing ample opportunities for creativity and imaginative play that help students develop cognitively
- Helping students explore their local communities—without leaving campus—so they can expand their vocabularies and explain the world around them
- Facilitating robust professional development, led by experienced coaches, that is no less rigorous and collaborative than that offered to K-12 educators
- Hiring staff members of color who can identify with, and relate to, both pre-K students themselves and their families
- Making the pre-K experience a “team effort” by equipping parents to practice key skills at home

Public Charter District	Black and Hispanic	Low-Income	English Learners	Kindergarten Ready
Universal Academy	89%	100%	44%	100%
Cedars International Academy	95%	100%	50%	100%
La Academia De Estrellas	98%	82%	72%	90%
Horizon Montessori Public Schools	96%	62%	46%	82%
Brazos School for Inquiry & Creativity	99%	100%	33%	80%



Case Study: Rhodes School

At the Rhodes School for the Performing Arts (RSPA) in East Houston, Ladacia Austin is serious about helping her smallest students unleash their big imaginations.

“It’s very difficult to take little babies on field trips,” she says, “so you have to bring those experiences to them.”

As the Early Childhood Program Coordinator, Austin coordinates training for early childhood educators throughout the region as part of Texas School Ready and oversees the RSPA pre-K program. She takes a no-nonsense approach to cognitive play—insisting on providing children with a **high-quality early education** structured around **rich language and multi-sensory learning experiences through thematic play** to ensure children’s school readiness without leaving campus.

After a lesson of about 15-20 minutes with the whole class, RSPA pre-K students work independently in learning centers for 45-60 minutes—covering math, science, emergent literacy, writing, and letter knowledge—during their school day. These learning centers are designed to help children cement the direct instruction with guided exploration and hands-on experiences such as counting and phonological awareness.

The learning centers are also portals into the broader world. If students are learning about their local community, for example, one center might represent a fancy restaurant where they order and serve food. Another might transport them to Walmart so they can learn vocabulary words such as “cashier” and “debit card” while practicing their “shopping.” The dramatic play center might also be a doctor’s office (to learn making appointments and caring for patients, which expands their vocabularies) while the math center represents a pharmacy (where children count sets).

Austin is equally serious about training and developing her teachers as she is about fostering creative play for students. **Pre-K and kindergarten teachers receive 22 sessions of professional development each year**—from social and emotional development, to content areas, to planning lessons. What educators learn during those sessions is reinforced during live coaching—to avoid any missed learning opportunities—and later in reflective conversations and detailed follow-up.

“We don’t do ‘cram and slam’ professional development,” Austin says. “Training and developing teachers is something we do every day.”

Intense coaching lasts three years for each teacher, then gives way to “sustainability mode.” Educators who complete those three years often move into administrative roles or curriculum development.

Austin also attributes some of Rhodes School’s success to the way **it leans on educators of color who can relate to the lives of its families**. Teachers are more comfortable and confident, for example, when explaining to parents what they need to do at home to help equip students for success.

“I was raised by a single mom,” Austin says. “My father died when I was six. There were seven children in our house and sometimes we didn’t have electricity. So I can relate to single parents who might be struggling or be in difficult situations.”

Educators are also inspired by each other to excel. A number of Rhodes School teachers hired without a high-school diploma now have PhDs, Austin says, because of the mentorship and coaching they received.

Austin knows firsthand just how well the Rhodes School model translates to results. One of her daughters, who enrolled at Rhodes in Pre-K, is now thriving in middle school. Her other daughter is a Rhodes graduate who now attends college on a full academic scholarship.

“I can vouch as a parent that the program works,” she says. “As early as pre-K, we’re talking to kids about college. We’re talking to kids about goals and telling them what to expect next.”

“We have kids in pre-K who became full-blown readers. They’re ready to hit the ground running.”



Case Study: La Academia de Estrellas

At La Academia de Estrellas, a public charter school in South Dallas, the pre-K experience isn't just for students. It's a journey that deepens the bonds between educators, families, and even residents of the neighborhood.

Rebecca Ramos, architect of the school's pre-K program and principal of its early childhood campus, explains that it takes a "team effort" to ensure her students—most of whom are low-income and speak Spanish at home—have a strong foundation for kindergarten.

Every month, for example, the school hosts "Fruit with Families" parent meetings. "We target a skill that we see children need help with," Ramos says, "and we give parents the materials they need to practice." If students could use extra support with fine motor skills, educators might create bags with tweezers and other materials for families to use at home.

The school also organizes monthly read-aloud nights for families where students read a story, get a snack of milk and cookies, participate in an activity related to the story, and take a copy of the book home with them. And when the calendar turns to Book-a-ween, everyone dresses up as the characters.

At the annual Community Helper Fair, staff transform the parking lot into a microcosm of the neighborhood—complete with guests from the local police department, fire department, and SPCSA. Children choose a specific community helper and pretend to fill that role, explaining and showcasing their "job" to families.



The fair is an extension of the academic program, which Ramos organizes around a simple but powerful idea: **play with purpose**. After a short "Language for Learning" lesson—which helps children speak in complete sentences—students choose and rotate among different stations in groups of three to four. Each station offers activities, from playing with blocks to reading books from a library, that correspond to the current language, math, science, or social studies skills being taught.

Ramos, a longtime educator who formerly taught pre-K in Dallas ISD, believes in building a **profoundly close-knit community**. That starts with the enthusiasm and commitment of her staff, most of whom have been together "since the beginning" in 2010 when the school first amended its charter to open Pre-K classrooms.

"Any obstacle we may run into, we push through it," Ramos says. "If you don't have that in your heart, you're not going to be successful."

Nearly all of her educators are Hispanic (like 99% of the students) and most are certified in bilingual education. They teach in both Spanish and English during the language portion of the school day as part of an "early transition" model.

Students can identify with and relate to their teachers, Ramos says, which helps them feel a sense of belonging.

"The students feel more comfortable when they see people like them," she says. "It's about trust."

"When we get kids at three years old, typically they stay with us until they're in eighth grade," Mantei says. "They want to go to the 'big campus.'"

Mantei says the school enrolls an increasing number of students with disabilities, and **works hard to include them in every part of the school day so they feel like a part of the school family**.

"We had a little girl who came to be tested for language, so she could qualify for pre-K, and she had no vocabulary—just sounds and crying," Mantei remembers. "But by December, you'd see her going to stations. She was doing her work. She was communicating."

Pre-K Success Stories from High-Performing Public Charter Schools



Last year, every pre-K student at Cedars Academy in Austin was from a low-income household—and every one emerged from the program prepared for kindergarten.

Tara Higley, a Cedars pre-K educator, shares her public charter school peers' convictions about "play with purpose." She explains that imaginative play helps her students develop language skills and makes them more likely to start experimenting with scientific concepts.

Ms. Higley believes in the power of students learning kinesthetically—remembering letters of the alphabet, for example, by associating them with "exciting facial expressions" and other movements.

At Cedars, educators focus on making students with disabilities feel safe and included. There are "peace corners" in every classroom, safe places where children who might get overstimulated can retreat. Pre-K teachers also have special toolboxes filled with objects that help give students sensory experiences that calm them down.



At Universal Academy in the Dallas area, nine out of 10 pre-K students are children of color and nearly half are learning English. Yet 100% complete their program prepared to hit the ground running in kindergarten.

"We must learn to prepare our early learners as thoroughly as we prepare college graduates," says Diane Harris, Founder, CEO, and Superintendent. "Universal Academy has used scientifically-based research strategies that have proven results infused with creative, interactive, child-centered, and fun activities which produce life-long learners."



La Academia de Estrellas, South Dallas



Universal Academy, Dallas



Rhodes School, East Houston



METHODS

We calculated Texas Pre-K enrollment statistics using a dataset we downloaded from the Texas Public Education Information Resource (TPEIR) <https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/> entitled "Texas Public Prekindergarten Programs." We analyzed Pre-K enrollment of 3 and 4-year-olds at the district level rather than campus level to prevent issues with data masking. We used 2019-20 data only, because it was the most recent year of data available.

We calculated total Pre-K statewide by adding together the district enrollments statewide, first by ISD and then by public charter schools. To calculate the Pre-K share of overall enrollment we divided the Pre-K enrollment of each district by the district's total enrollment reported in TEA's Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR). The Pre-K share of overall enrollment was almost identical to the previous 5 years except 2015-16, which is when public charter districts opened proportionately more middle and high schools. We represent these enrollment statistics in Tables 1 and 2, and in Figure 1.

We used the following TPEIR dataset to measure Pre-K student growth from 2016-17 to 2019-20: the "Texas Public Prekindergarten Assessment Results for 4-Year-Olds." This dataset provided counts of students by district and demographic that were kindergarten ready at the beginning of Pre-K and at the end. The dataset also provided the total count of students in Pre-K by demographic. We used these counts to calculate the percentages of Pre-K children that were kindergarten ready at the beginning of Pre-K and at the end. We then measured the percentage increase by demographic of children that were kindergarten ready by the end of Pre-K. We represented these data and calculations in Figure 2.

Finally, conducted interviews with 3 Texas public charter school leaders to understand their Pre-K programs better. We selected leaders from these three public charter school leaders, because they had some of the highest kindergar-

ten readiness rates statewide, even though they had high rates of historically underserved students. We wanted to find out how these charter school leaders explained their districts' higher-than-predicted Pre-K performance. We gathered this qualitative data through 1-hour phone interviews using a short list of standardized open-ended questions, and a series of follow-up questions. We then analyzed notes from each interview by identifying key themes that answered the broader question "How do you explain the performance of your charter district's Pre-K program?"

For questions about the findings in this research brief, or about the study's methodology, contact Dr. Timothy Mattison at tmattison@txcharterschools.org.

FOOTNOTES

1. PEIMS Standard Reports, Student Enrollment Reports, Texas Education Agency. <https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/student-data/standard-reports/peims-standard-reports>
2. TPEIR Reports, Texas Public Prekindergarten Programs, Texas Education Agency. <https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/>
3. It is important to note here that rates here for special needs students are low relative to the average for all grade levels in public charter and traditional public schools statewide (7% and 10% respectively). Public schools can identify special needs students as early as Pre-K, but must obtain parental consent, according to TEC Section 29.004. Some parents might be reluctant to label their children as special needs so early in their children's cognitive development, especially if their children's suspected disability is related to learning or emotional disturbances.
4. Average end-of-year kindergarten readiness rates for all subjects for pre-K students who are Black, Hispanic, and White