

TEXAS STUDENTS RISING

VOL. 1. ISSUE 2. SPRING 2021

Cedars International
Academy, Austin



TEXAS
PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS
ASSOCIATION

There are nearly **800** public charter school campuses in Texas, serving nearly **337,000** 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. 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.



Special education student from Great Hearts, San Antonio

About Texas Students Rising

2

Letter from Starlee Coleman, CEO of TPCSA

3

Preparing Special Education Students to Reach Ambitious Goals

4

How Texas Public Charter Schools Across the State Are Educating Children With Disabilities

6

Making Schools Work for All Children

8

Texas 2020 Public Charter School Teacher and Leader of the Year

10

Michael Burke Honored with Heroes for Children Award

11



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Gandhi once said, “**The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.**” When it comes to schools, there’s no question our most vulnerable are students with disabilities.



There’s also no question that historically Texas has not given them our best. The state has been embroiled in long-running legal battles over the way schools identify and educate students with disabilities. While we’ve turned the corner and eliminated some of our most destructive policies, there is still much to do to ensure that when students with special needs leave campuses, they are ready for the world.

When I hear stories from families about their experiences trying to find the right school for their children with disabilities, and who find that opportunity at a public charter school, I am genuinely filled with optimism. Here’s just one example:

Erica Martinez’s oldest son is on the autism spectrum and was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder at an early age. She quit her job and homeschooled him for a couple of years.

From the moment she first visited Lighthouse Public Schools in San Antonio, the staff accepted her son for who he is. Erica enrolled him in the charter school where both he, now in the 7th grade, and his two younger siblings are today.

The whole school was invested in her son’s success. Administrators invited her to speak with everyone on the staff to help them better understand children with autism. Lighthouse also provided additional training for faculty and engaged paraeducators to ensure everyone could help personalize instruction and support for him. Teachers went the extra mile to look out for Erica’s son, helping him to make friends and teaching him special handshakes.

When he was diagnosed, Erica was devastated by the doctor’s prediction that he would never live on his own or have functional language skills. But the community at Lighthouse made him feel comfortable and worked with him in the ways he needed. Today, he reads at a 5th-grade level, loves social studies, and excels in math. Erica told us: “I used to feel like I was the only one determined to prove that doctor wrong. But the Lighthouse teachers are as invested in his success as I am. I can’t put into words what that feels like.”

We answer a lot of questions about public charter schools and special education, so we wanted to use this issue of *Texas Students Rising* to answer some of the questions you might have and to introduce you to a few people who are making a difference for students. While all public schools must strive to get better, I’m proud of what the Texas public charter school community is doing to serve our most vulnerable children.

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

Texas Public Charters Prepare Special Education Students to Achieve Ambitious Goals

The TPSCA recently released a report demonstrating that Texas public charter schools are educating children with disabilities with amazing results. The report, *Texas Public Charters Prepare Special Education Students to Achieve Ambitious Goals*, is based on publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and provides an important analysis of how public charter schools are preparing special education students for success.

Public charter schools, like all public schools, must educate all students regardless of ability. In fact, public charter schools enroll relatively similar rates of students with disabilities as their Independent School District (ISD) counterparts. We also found that all smaller schools – charter and traditional – with enrollment between 500 and 1,000 children tend to have a lower percentage of special education students. This is because parents, particularly of children with more severe disabilities, tend to enroll their children in larger ISD schools under the assumption they will be better resourced. We see growing evidence that more families are choosing public charter schools where they believe that their children will be encouraged to reach their full academic potential.


Like all public schools, Texas public charter schools must also follow the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

and all Texas laws protecting students with disabilities. Special education teachers in public charter schools must be certified just like their peers in traditional district schools. And public charter schools respond to feedback from parents on the services and education their children are receiving. However, as outlined in the report, we see significant differences in how Texas public charter schools are preparing students for success.

The state of Texas set a goal that children with disabilities would be included in general education settings with non-special education students 80% of the school day. Public charter schools are exceeding this goal: nine out of 10 Texas public charters are meeting this inclusion goal, compared with just six out of 10 traditional public school districts. The Texas performance plan also set a floor for inclusion. Public schools are required to integrate each special education student in general education classrooms for at least 40% of the time. Almost 100% of Texas public charter schools are meeting this requirement.


Not only are Texas public charter schools reaching goals on inclusion, the report found that public charter schools increase reading proficiency for special education students in grades 4-8. In 2018, public charters moved an average of 500 more students with disabilities from non-proficient to proficient in reading.

Research Brief No. 2
MAY 2020



Texas Public Charters Prepare Special Education Students to Achieve Ambitious Goals

BY TIMOTHY MATTISON, Ph.D.
AND MICHELLE AGUILAR




Texas public charter schools are providing special education students with the tools they need to reach their highest potential. According to Texas Education Agency data, special education students enrolled in Texas public charter schools have higher reading proficiency growth, more inclusion in general education classrooms, and a greater likelihood of attending college.

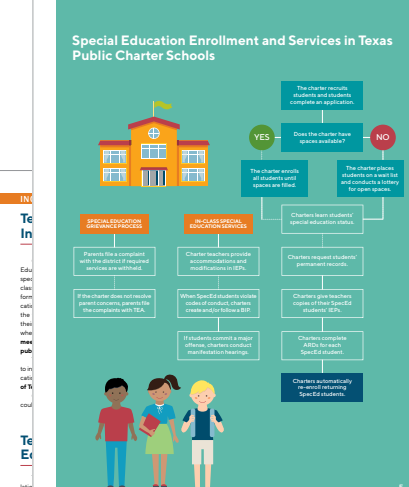
In Texas, our findings on reading proficiency growth and charter special education inclusion in general education classrooms contrast with national data. For example, data from the National Center for Education Statistics from 2016 show public schools nationwide place just over 60% of their special education students in general education classrooms, which is almost identical to Texas data in traditional public schools. By contrast, **Texas public charter schools place 92% of their special education students in inclusion settings.** This is especially significant, considering the segregation many special education students endured for decades.

Before the U.S. Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, many schools segregated children with disabilities into separate classrooms. This led to low academic expectations and social stigma for special education students. Notably, **Texas public charters are enrolling twice the rate of special education graduates to college as traditional public schools.** This means that Texas public charters are also sending a higher rate of special education students to college than higher-income, progressive states like Minnesota.



Year	General	Special	Other
2016-17	63.0%	33.0%	4.0%
2017-18	47.8%	48.0%	4.2%
2018-19	70.5%	27.0%	3.5%

Special Education Enrollment and Services in Texas Public Charter Schools



92% of special education students are enrolled in general education classrooms.

80% of special education students are included in general education classrooms for at least 40% of the school day.

162% of special education students are enrolled in general education classrooms for at least 40% of the school day.

40% of special education students are enrolled in general education classrooms for at least 40% of the school day.

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Importantly, Texas public charter schools not only send a higher percentage of students overall to college, but they are also enrolling nearly twice the rate of special education graduates in colleges as traditional public schools (43% vs. 23%). While we want to be sure all students are academically prepared to pursue college, we must pay particular attention to this outcome for students with disabilities given the dramatic wage inequalities between people with and without disabilities.

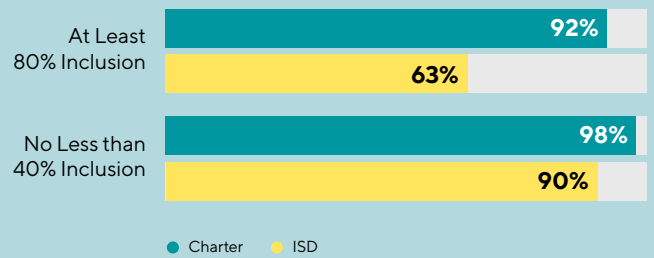
Another recent report published by the Texas Public Charter Schools Association, *Texas Public Charters Use Discipline Practices that Keep Students in School*, found that charter schools assign fewer in-school suspensions (ISS) to students with disabilities. When schools assign ISS, they place students in isolation away from their friends and classmates for one to three days. Students are given classwork, but often miss the direct instruction that enables them to complete their work.

The report found that Texas public charter schools are finding ways to address minor code of conduct violations, such as chronic tardiness, that keep students in class. This is especially critical for special education students, whose progress can often depend on inclusion in general education classes. Texas public charter schools assign 40% fewer in-school suspensions to special education students than traditional public schools.

Students with disabilities deserve to attend schools that put them first and prepare them for college and career. Texas public charter schools are doing just that. **To read the full report, visit bit.ly/TexasPublicEducation.**

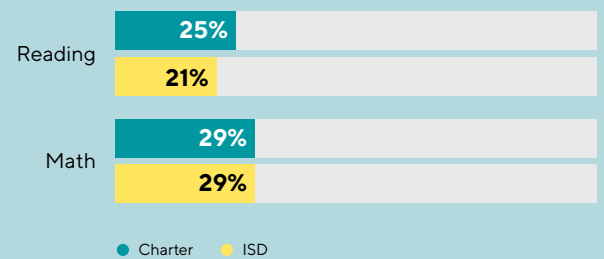
Texas public charters have more special education inclusion

Percentage of School Districts Meeting the State Inclusion Standards



Public charters increase reading proficiency for special education students

Average Rate of Gains in Proficient Students



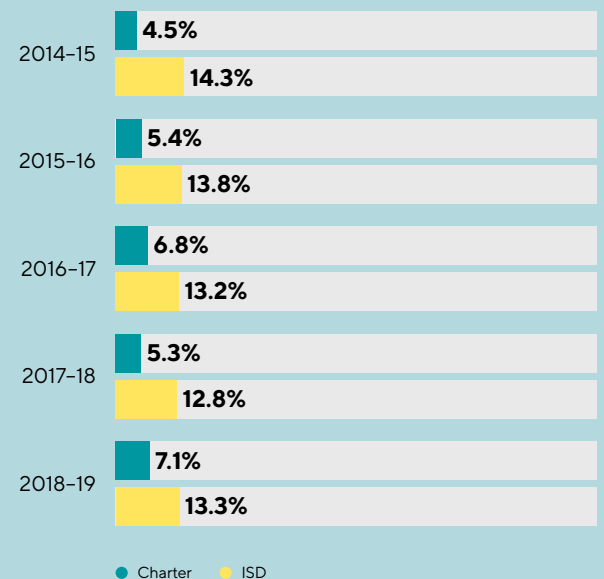
Texas public charters send more special education students to college

Average Rate of College Enrollment for Special Education Students



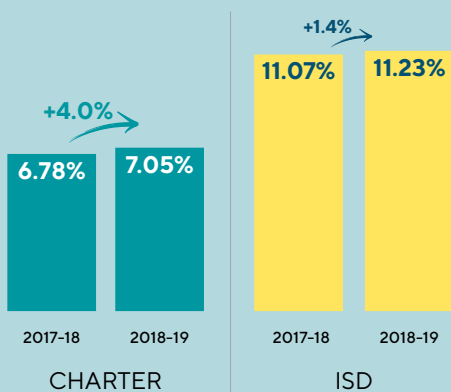
Public charter schools assign fewer in-school suspensions (ISS) than ISDs

ISS Assignment to Special Education Students



Texas public charter schools and ISDs enroll similar rates of students with disabilities

Trend by Year of Special Education Enrollment



Texas public charter schools are providing children with disabilities with the tools they need to reach their highest potential. Special education students enrolled in Texas public charter schools have higher reading proficiency growth, more inclusion in general education classrooms, and a greater likelihood of attending college. Here are a few examples of how public charter schools are educating children with disabilities, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LUBBOCK: The Betty M. Condra School of Education Innovation

The Betty M. Condra School of Education Innovation is focused on helping students achieve their potential in life by eliminating roadblocks to academic achievement. This is done with highly-specialized and individualized instruction along with a focus on multi-sensory instruction. While this approach is beneficial to all students, it is particularly helpful for students with dyslexia and/or ADHD.

EL PASO: IDEA Public Schools

IDEA Public Schools is committed to a vision of college for all children and ensuring every child succeeds. As schools closed for in-person learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, special education teachers not only provided materials tailored to each scholar and implemented flexible schedules by partnering with parents, they also identified learning materials frequently found in homes and videotaped how students could use them at home to ensure that their learning continued.

AUSTIN: Austin Achieve Public Schools

Post-school outcomes for scholars with disabilities are an essential component of Austin Achieve Public Schools' whole-child approach to education. Despite a global pandemic, the district launched an 18+ program this school year to provide continued services to scholars after graduation to prepare them for sustainable employment and independence. Led by Brooke Miller, a transition specialist, the program is already experiencing success, including one scholar fulfilling their dream of working professionally with animals by participating in an internship with Remington Pet Ranch. Focusing on their scholars' unique talents and strengths in alignment with the opportunities available is what allows Austin Achieve Public Schools to ensure the bar continues to be set high for all, regardless of any barriers a scholar may face.

RED OAK: **Life School**

Life School's Special Education Program, which serves 11% of its students, aspires to promote successful learning for students of all abilities. Through effective instructional interventions, access to the general education curriculum, quality social-emotional development, and access to appropriate life and career experiences, Life School provides opportunities for students to feel accepted and grow in their confidence. The LifeLeader character training program also allows students to discover their strengths and build skills for post-secondary success. Serving students with a wide range of needs, including intellectual disabilities and autism, the school also partners with parents by hosting trainings specific to the needs of their children.

TYLER: **Cumberland Academy**

Teachers at the Cumberland Academy teach the whole child with a well-balanced education. In addition to focusing on strong core classes and robust electives, Cumberland inspires an appreciation of the arts while leveraging technology and athletics. Children with disabilities are a special part of the school's history, which originally opened decades ago to educate children with dyslexia. Today, the unique needs of each student, including students with disabilities, are met in an adaptable learning environment that ensures students have access to the general curriculum as well as extracurricular opportunities.

GALVESTON: **Odyssey Academy**

Odyssey Academy uses a holistic approach to support students with special needs through a full inclusion model where students can reach their optimum potential. Odyssey intentionally focuses on rigorous instruction that uses a multi-sensory approach (both virtually and in-person), collaborative efforts to address both strengths and weaknesses in academics, social and emotional learning, and a daily immersion of functional skill development.

SAN ANTONIO: **Foundation School of Autism**

Foundation School of Autism was founded by ResponsiveEd in 2010 as a public charter school for children ages 3-7 on the autism spectrum. The school focuses on early intervention that is combined with small learning environments and intensive support for individual student success. Special training is also provided to parents to support their child's behavior and learning readiness.

Making Schools Work For All Children

BY BROOKE LUCERO

Justin spent 6½ weeks in the hospital. His parents and doctors rallied behind him after an intensive operation and rigorous therapy that they hoped would, in time, give him the ability to walk. Justin and his parents left the hospital eager to explore this new path to independence, but their optimism was cut short. Justin’s school at the time was unable to adapt to the new medical equipment that he needed to walk. They found it to be a potential liability, and initially refused to let it be used on campus despite doctors’ recommendations and his parents’ pleas.

When the school reluctantly allowed Justin to use the medical equipment at school, he was met with more resistance. Members of the school’s staff told him that he couldn’t do it, that it was just too hard, and Justin began to internalize their comments to the point where he would tell his therapists that he just couldn’t walk.

Justin’s parents called me in a moment of desperation. I have been a public school educator since 2006, and for 11 out of those 13 years, I have been a special education teacher. Having worked with Justin previously, his parents knew I would understand their struggles, and perhaps help them navigate the complex laws for special needs students. They felt they had no option but to either pull Justin out of the school or to acquiesce and not allow Justin to use the equipment that would help him walk again.

I faced a similar situation to Justin’s parents with my own daughter. At the time, I felt I didn’t have any good educational options that could help her succeed. I did extensive research and luckily, I found Great Hearts, a nonprofit network of public charter schools dedicated to student success. When I first visited Great Hearts Texas, I cried. I could tell right away it was the environment that would allow my daughter to thrive. I enrolled her at Great Hearts Texas and decided to teach there as well.

I found the right option for my daughter, so when I asked Justin’s parents if they had considered Great Hearts, they responded with confusion. “They

do that? A charter school?”

There is a widespread misunderstanding that public charter schools do not serve children with special needs. Justin’s parents – as I did before them – believed that public charter schools could cherry-pick their students or that they couldn’t (or wouldn’t) provide adequate services to children different from their target group.

That could not be further from the truth. Public and open to all, charter schools are built to give every child an opportunity for a great education in an environment where they can learn best, no matter where they’re from. As a result, we see thousands of children of all ability levels better served in the more inclusive setting that charters provide. In fact, charter schools in our state educate a comparable percentage of students with special needs as traditional ISD schools.

Like all public schools, charter schools are bound by the same federal and state laws regarding the education of students with special needs. At Great Hearts, for example, we provide physical therapy, vision therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy – anything that a child may need as part of an individualized education plan.

There are hundreds of public charters in our state that have set up their own customized services to be able to serve special needs students. And as a result, we see hundreds of families – especially parents of special needs kids – enrolling each year in public charter schools, to the point where there are waitlists in San Antonio for families waiting to enroll.

Justin is now one of my students at Great Hearts. He is taking three to four steps independently in the equipment that was deemed a liability by his former ISD school. He is



independently accessing different areas of the school through the use of a one-armed wheelchair. He constantly cheers on students around him and when faced with a math problem he gets wrong, he states "I'll get it next time!" Gone are the comments that he cannot do it.

We all know a one-size-fits-all approach to education doesn't work. That's why public charter schools offer students of all kinds the personal attention, creativity and passionate teaching that they need to really learn.

Ensuring My Son's Success Meant Finding the Right School for Him

Texas Students Rising spoke with Monica McDonald whose son Chandler is a 7th grader at IDEA Burke.

Monica had been seeking the right school for her son Chandler to ensure his unique needs could be met. When IDEA Public Schools was opening a school in their area, she decided to enroll him. Chandler has sensory processing disorder, epilepsy, hearing loss and short-term memory loss, so she knew she needed a school with responsive teachers and staff who would partner with her.

IDEA Burke has proven to be that school. By the end of kindergarten, Chandler was reading and today he is a seventh grader likely to make the honor roll this quarter. The school does "the max" to help him — such as giving him special seating and extra time on exams. Teachers use clear, see-through masks so that he can continue to read lips.

Virtual learning was really challenging for Chandler, and he's relieved to be back on campus and have access to his teachers. He tells his mom, "I have somebody I can talk to." Chandler has been making great strides academically and Monica knows her son will go to college — and that his teachers at his school are doing everything they can to make that happen.

And that's why students like Justin — and like my daughter — are finding public charter schools are the best choice for them.

Brooke Lucero is a parent of a special needs child, a special education teacher at Great Hearts Texas, and 2017 Texas Charter School Teacher of the Year. She lives in San Antonio. This column was originally published by the San Antonio Express-News.

Charter School Gave All the Resources Our Son Needed to Learn

TPCSA spoke with Joey's mom about her son's experience at the Foundation School for Autism.

When Joey was just two years old, he was diagnosed with autism. His mother was uncertain about Joey's future. She wondered how he would overcome the challenges he was sure to face and whether they would be able to find a school that worked for him. She researched private and public school options and even thought about moving out of state to make sure he got the resources he needed.

Fortunately, after one year in the local public elementary school, Joey's case manager recommended the Foundation School for Autism, a charter school serving kids ages 3-7 in San Antonio and Austin.

It was life changing. When Joey started at the school he was non-verbal with very little social interaction. He quickly went on to use words and pictures to communicate and is now able to interact socially with adults and some peers. Joey's mom says, "The Foundation School gave us all the resources we needed. It has a very advanced curriculum and our son is doing things a regular kid his age is doing. Our son is actually able to succeed and learn academically."

Texas 2020 Public Charter School Teacher and Leader of the Year are Fierce Advocates for Students

The Texas public charter school community is comprised of dedicated and fearless advocates for students and their families. Last fall, the Texas Public Charter Schools Association was proud to honor Cristina Correa, from IDEA College Preparatory in San Juan as Teacher of the Year, and Edward Conger, Superintendent of International Leadership of Texas as Leader of the Year. Here are their stories:



Cristina Correa is a Latina, a single mom and a veteran art teacher. When accepting the award, Cristina shared that it was the idea of school choice that led her to join Rio Grande Valley IDEA College Preparatory campus 12 years ago. The opportunity to innovate, create, and develop solutions to help ensure all of her students have access to a high-quality rigorous education was the driving force behind her decision to be a Texas public charter school teacher. But school choice does not just influence her professional actions. School choice also helped inform her decision as a parent to enroll her son at IDEA 10 years ago, a choice that she says gives her peace of mind.

She is the first to admit that the work is hard. But she also feels that school choice calls teachers like her to do this hard work, to listen and to hear with intention, and to strive to ensure communities remain intact and thriving. As an educator, she says she focuses on helping her students to visualize their bright futures and to really feel that they belong. She will do whatever it takes to ensure her students are exercising their imaginations.

There can be no doubt that Ms. Correa loves teaching. In fact, she cannot imagine doing anything else. During the pandemic, she has shared her insights and ideas with other educators by collaborating on articles and presentations about effective remote art teaching. She also did not want her students to miss out while learning at-home so she designed a series of prompts to encourage her students to improvise art supplies from common materials and objects they could find at home.

Her colleagues recognize Ms. Correa as a fierce advocate for students, parents, and the broader charter school community. She has a clear message to her fellow edu-

cators – to understand “their why” for teaching at a Texas public charter school, to stand up and speak up, and to be the loudest voice in the room on behalf of all public school students.

After serving 20 years as a United States Marine Corps Infantry Officer and traveling to numerous countries throughout the world, Eddie Conger understands the importance of ensuring that all children have access to a high-quality education. Although Eddie jokes he has the easiest job because of his outstanding leadership team, principals, and educators, as Founder, CEO, and Superintendent of International Leadership of Texas (IL Texas), Eddie is laser-focused on providing that high quality education to the more than 21,000 students attending IL Texas schools. He likes to say that there are only two kinds of adults at IL Texas: those people who teach and those people who support the people who teach.



As a successful middle school and high school principal, Conger knows that when students are held to high expectations for both academic excellence and appropriate civil behavior, they will rise to that high standard. As a result, all IL Texas schools provide students with character and servant leadership development while students also master three languages – English, Spanish, and Chinese. Eddie describes the IL Texas experience as a safe, secure, and nurturing learning environment where all students are held to a high standard so that they will be prepared for the highly competitive, international world.

The pandemic has not slowed Eddie down on his commitment to his school communities. He skillfully piloted his schools through this challenging time by creating frameworks for both in-person and remote learning that

2020 award recipients urge their colleagues to be a voice for all public school students.

are models for the rest of the state and the nation. He not only successfully led the transition of his schools to online instruction to ensure IL Texas' existing students would continue learning, he also seized the moment to create a high-quality online program open to students anywhere in Texas that offers the school's signature trilingual curriculum. His dedication to students combined with flexibility, creativity, hard work, and decisive action has ensured that even in this time of great need, any child

can access a great education.

Anyone who interacts with Eddie recognizes immediately that he is a servant leader role model demonstrating to his students how to serve, respect, and encourage others. IL Texas students pledge that upon graduation they will be "a healthy person with a strong mind and character who speaks three languages and will change the world." Eddie lives that pledge every day.

Energy CEO and Lifelong Texan Michael Burke Honored with Heroes for Children Award

As a CEO of four multi-billion dollar energy corporations, Mike Burke spent his career focused on leading and empowering teams to perform at high levels. Now retired, Mike is committed to engaging in effective K-12 education transformation and character development. A lifelong Texan, Mike is committed to making sure Texas children thrive in school and go on to pursue fulfilling work. He believes deeply in giving back to his community and spurs other leaders to do the same.

He founded the Pk-12 Education Forum to coalesce civic, business, education, nonprofit, and philanthropic leaders around issues facing the public education system, early learning, building a quality teacher pipeline, and ensuring economic success for San Antonians. He also helped to launch Early Matters San Antonio and to bring several high-performing schools to the region. And he and his wife are major supporters of high-performing charter schools like Great Hearts and IDEA.

In 2020, TPCSA was honored to nominate Michael Burke for the Heroes for Children Award. The Heroes for Children Award program was established by the Texas State Board of Education in 1994 to recognize excellence in advocacy for education and to highlight the many outstanding volunteers whose efforts represent significant contributions to public school education in Texas. The award recognizes Mike's lifelong commitment to community, and in particular his support for public education.

In addition to his support for public charter schools, Burke works on environmental initiatives and supports highly effective technology-based blended learning like Reasoning Mind as well as Catholic services like ACTS Missions and Catholic Charities. When he is not volunteering at individual schools and fulfilling his responsibilities as a director on school and university boards, Mike is busy with his wife, guiding, teaching, loving, and entertaining his five young grandchildren, including writing more than 40 children's books for them.





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