



Charter schools are reimagining education, one student at a time

Parents, educators and administrators share their thoughts on the impact of charter schools.

When Beatrice Cordova's oldest son was diagnosed with ADHD, she and her family set out to find the best school fit for his needs. As it would happen, that school was Legacy Preparatory Charter Academy, where both her sons are now enrolled — and thriving.

"We knew our oldest was going to need a different type of school other than the 'traditional.' We looked into charter, private and home-schooling options but, of course, once we weighed all our options, charter was best for us," she says. "We get all the benefits of private school — uniforms and smaller class sizes — but without the large tuition rates. Charter for us has made my children love to come to school. We don't worry about what to wear and feel [that] they are getting what they need from their teachers."

Cordova adds that the teacher-student bond is strong and her voice as a parent is not only heard, but valued.

What the data shows

According to the Texas Public Charter Schools Association (TPCSA) 2019-2020 annual report, 335,000 students were enrolled in charter schools across the state. Though that's a small percentage of the more than 5.5

million students enrolled that same academic year, it represents a growing trend among parents seeking alternatives to traditional public schools. A vast majority of charter schools are located in urban sectors, but data shows that suburban charter schools are growing in popularity as well.

"From their very beginning, charter schools have been champions of change. They've reimagined education with students at the center, closed racial and economic achievement gaps, and helped special education students flourish," says TPCSA CEO Starlee Coleman. "They've rethought everything about education, from how to reward great teachers to how to bring greater fairness and equity to student discipline. Students who might never have dreamed of going to college are now proud college graduates because they attended a charter school."

Because charter schools may place emphasis on different curricula, sometimes parents will seek out a school that's the best fit for their children's interests and abilities — not just simply the one that is closest to home.

Parents and families share their stories

Parent Lindsay C. has a daughter with special needs who attends a charter school.

Not only is she excelling in her classwork, but she's also on track to graduate a semester earlier than she would have at her previous public high school.

Unlike many traditional public schools where students see multiple teachers per day and new teachers each year, charter schools often provide more consistency, which can genuinely make a difference for kids with special needs. Lindsay says that concentrating on only four subjects per term is the perfect match for her daughter's needs.

"My daughter has built relationships with teachers and staff that she sees each year for multiple classes," Lindsay says. "She is able to develop those relationships and know what is expected consistently with having the smaller number of teachers. She can carry that from year to year, instead of starting over each year."

Charter schools may also offer a certain amount of flexibility for students. This was an appealing factor for Ruth Baez, the mother of three charter school girls.

"I chose Evolution Academy because my daughters had the option [of] early release from school at 11:50 a.m.," Baez says. "They also had the opportunity to graduate in a shorter period of time. Students have the option to go to morning or evening classes too."

Flexibility can also benefit older teens who might have a better shot at a part-time job because of an accommodating academic schedule. In some cases, self-pacing can be a big deciding factor (some students even graduate at their own pace). This allows students who need more time to focus on learning at their own speed without being left behind, while others can work at an accelerated pace.

Educators' thoughts

There are benefits on the teaching side of the equation too. Ailee Heras-Medina has been teaching for 11 years, eight of which have been at a charter school. She is currently teaching first grade at Legacy Preparatory Charter Academy.

"I enjoy teaching at a charter school compared to other public education options because of the autonomy that is given to me to address the academic needs of diverse students while adhering to the state standards," Heras-Medina says, noting the smaller teacher-student ratio as one of the major perks for everyone involved.

Staci Weaver, interim superintendent at Legacy Preparatory Charter Academy, believes the attention to individual needs leads to more checks and balances in the system too.

"Charter schools are given greater flexibility to serve the individual needs of students, and with that flexibility comes greater oversight than traditional public schools. Charter schools are held accountable to high financial, academic and managerial standards by oversight boards made up of parents, teachers and community members," Weaver says. "We develop and inspire innovative, critical-thinking scholars who influence our global society. We facilitate educational experiences through teaching that engages, a culture that empowers and technology that enables scholars to be college, career and military ready."

Rigorous academic accountability testing, which includes review of curriculum, faculty and the school environment, also helps ensure that the school is meeting or exceeding state and federal education standards.

Yet the personal connection and extra time between teachers and students are a frequent source of praise. Because of this slowed and caring pace, teachers can offer more of their attention and be mindful of their students' well-being.

"I can focus on the social, emotional, psychological and [nutritional well-being] of each student," says Charles Brown, a teacher at Evolution Academy for 18 years. "Once those factors are met, the student can focus on their education."

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