

EVALUATION OF NEW TEXAS CHARTER SCHOOLS (2007–10)

INTERIM REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
JUNE 2009



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As interest in expanding the number of high quality charter schools available to parents and students has grown, policy makers have increased their focus on identifying and providing support to new charter programs that have the potential to improve student outcomes and satisfy parent and student needs. Since 1994, the U. S. Department of Education (USDE) has provided funding for new charter schools through a system of Charter School Program (CSP) grants. CSP funding is available to new charter schools for a period of 3 years, of which no more than 18 months may be used for school planning and design and 2 years may be used to implement the educational program. CSP grants are awarded to state education agencies, which then award funding to approved charter schools through a system of subgrants. As a condition of CSP funding, state education agencies are required to evaluate new charter schools using objective criteria and quantitative and qualitative data (Federal Register, 2007).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) was awarded CSP funding in 2007, and specified that the required evaluation—the Evaluation of New Texas Charter Schools—would focus on the experiences and outcomes of new charter schools authorized to begin serving students across 4 school years: 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10. TEA categorizes charter schools in terms of “generations” that roughly align with the years in which schools are authorized to serve students as charter schools, which frames the evaluation in terms of Generation 11 (2006-07), Generation 12 (2007-08), Generation 13 (2008-09), and Generation 14 (2009-10) charter schools. The evaluation will produce three reports—two interim reports (spring 2009 and fall 2009) and a final report in summer 2010. Across years, the evaluation will answer the following research questions:

1. How are federal start-up funds used to implement new charter school programs?
2. What processes and practices guide the planning of new charter schools?
3. What processes and practices guide the implementation of new charter school programs?
4. How effective are new charter schools at designing and implementing successful educational programs?
5. How do students at new charter schools perform academically relative to comparable students at traditional district schools?
6. What is the effect of charter school maturity on students’ academic outcomes?

The findings presented here are those of the evaluation’s first interim report. Because Generation 13 and 14 charter schools were not serving students in 2007-08, they are not included in the first interim evaluation report (spring 2009). However, Generation 13 charter schools will be included in the second interim report (fall 2009), and all four generations will be included in the evaluation’s final report (summer 2010).

The first interim report addresses Research Questions 1 through 4 and incorporates statistical analyses of the characteristics of Generation 11 and 12 charter schools, as well as an analysis of charter schools’ use of federal CSP grant funds in their start-up years. Statistical analyses rely on archival data collected through TEA’s Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) and its Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS), and results are presented for new Generation 11 and 12 charter schools, as well as for established charter schools in Generations 1 through 10. The first interim report also includes findings from spring 2008 surveys of principals, teachers, and students in Generation 11 and 12 open-enrollment charter schools, as well as a summer 2008 survey of parents of students attending such schools. The first interim evaluation limited surveys to respondents in open-enrollment charter schools in order not to burden respondents in campus charter schools who responded to a similar survey in the fall of

2007. Future evaluation reports will include survey results for new campus charter schools, as well as for open-enrollment and university charters.¹

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS

There were 24 Generation 11 and 15 Generation 12 charter schools operational in 2007-08. Compared to Generation 1 through 10 schools, a larger proportion of new charter schools were campus charter schools. However, a lower proportion of new charter schools were alternative education campuses. Compared to the more established Generation 1 through 10 schools, in the newer charter schools there were proportionately more students at kindergarten and Grades 1 through 7 and proportionately fewer students at the Early Childhood and Pre-kindergarten levels and Grades 8 through 12.

On average, charter school enrollments were less than the average enrollment across the state. On average, traditional public schools enrolled 568 students in the 2007-08 school year. In comparison, Generation 11 charter schools, with the largest average enrollment of charter schools, had an average enrollment of 321 students. Generation 1 through 10 charter schools had an average enrollment of 256 students and Generation 12 charter schools had an average student enrollment of 157 students.

A larger proportion of charter school students are economically disadvantaged. The percentages of economically disadvantaged students were 72% in both Generation 1 through 10 charter schools and Generation 11 charter schools and 55% in Generation 12 charter schools. These percentages compare to the state average of 55%. On average, all generations of charter schools reported larger populations of minority students than the state average.

While administrator salaries varied across charter school generations, in general, charter school administrators earned less than administrators at traditional public schools. Although Generation 11 campus administrators earned more than the state average salary, administrators at Generation 1 through 10 charter schools and Generation 12 charter schools earned less than the state average.

Charter school teachers earned less than the state average. This was likely due to the larger proportion of teachers with lower levels of experience teaching in charter schools relative to teachers working in traditional public schools. In the 2007-08 school year, average teacher experience across the state was 11 years, while Generation 11 teachers had an average of 7 years of experience and Generation 12 teachers had an average of 6 years of experience.

NEW CHARTER SCHOOLS' USE OF CHARTER SCHOOL PROGRAM (CSP) GRANT FUNDS

Federal CSP grants provide funds for the planning and implementation of new charter school programs. New open-enrollment charter schools may receive up to 18 months of planning funds prior to opening, but campus charters are excluded from planning funds because of their levels of district support. Both open-enrollment and campus charter schools may receive up to two years of funding to be used for implementation of their programs.

¹ Three types, or classes, of charter schools currently operate in Texas: open-enrollment, campus, and university charter schools. Open-enrollment charter schools are authorized by the State Board of Education (SBOE) and may be operated by independent nonprofit entities or governmental entities. Campus charter schools are authorized by traditional districts and may be converted district programs or programs operated under contract with an external provider of educational services. University charter schools are authorized by SBOE and operated by public colleges or universities. No university charters were authorized in Generations 11 and 12.

Open-enrollment and campus charter schools allotted CSP funds differently, likely due to district support of campus charter schools. While both open-enrollment and campus charter schools used a large portion of funds to support instruction, campus charter schools spent proportionately more on instruction than open-enrollment schools. Campus charter schools enjoyed the support of their local district in paying for general school maintenance and operation. In contrast, open-enrollment charter schools allocated larger shares of CSP funds to maintenance and operation.

SURVEY ANALYSES

The interim evaluation included surveys of principals, teachers, and students in new open-enrollment charter schools, as well as a survey of parents of students attending such schools. The following sections summarize the findings from surveys.

Survey of Principals in New Texas Charter Schools

Most new charter schools were located in spaces that were not designed for educational purposes. Seventy-five percent of schools were located in renovated facilities, many of which were previously used for non-educational purposes (e.g., warehouses, churches, office buildings, and so on) and required renovations. Nearly all new charter school operators made substantial payments toward a mortgage, lease, or monthly rent during 2008.

School administrators used a variety of strategies to recruit students and staff. New charter school principals indicated that they recruited students using flyers, brochures, postings on school websites, and parent and student word of mouth. New charter schools recruited teachers through advertisements in newspapers and participation in recruitment fairs at universities and education service centers. Generation 11 and 12 principals indicated that it was difficult for charter schools to compete for teachers with traditional districts that offered higher salaries.

Despite challenges, a majority of principals reported satisfaction working in new charter schools. Ninety-three percent of surveyed principals responded that they were either *satisfied* or *very satisfied* working in charter schools.

Survey of Teachers in New Texas Charter Schools

Many teachers who work in new charter schools lack experience. A majority of teachers responding to the spring 2008 survey held certifications in the subject they were currently teaching. However, on average, survey respondents had only taught 4.5 years prior to their current position, and approximately half of these years were spent in a traditional public school. The average experience for teachers who did not respond to the survey is not known, and may explain the difference between the average cited here and that cited in the “Characteristics of New Charter Schools” section of this summary.

A majority of new charter school teachers reported satisfaction with their positions. Teachers appreciated that their charter schools offered small class sizes, classroom autonomy, and positive relationships with colleagues. Ninety percent of new charter school teachers indicated that they were *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with their work environment.

New charter school teachers designed lesson plans that promoted student collaboration. Many teachers in new charter schools reported organizing students in small groups or pairs during classroom instruction and often assessed students using teacher-made tests and student performances.

New charter school teachers estimated they participated in an average of 10 days of professional development during the 2007-08 school year. Training was generally provided on-site and addressed schools' missions and expectations. Most new charter school teachers indicated they were assessed using Texas' Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS).

Teachers reported that they took on additional responsibilities working in new charter schools. Teachers indicated that they assisted with administrative tasks and other aspects of school management.

Survey of Students Attending New Texas Charter Schools

A majority of new charter school students previously attended traditional public schools. Students indicated that parental influence and parents' perceptions of the school's quality were common factors in the decision to enroll in a charter school. Parents and students also considered teacher quality, specialized courses, smaller class sizes, and reduced student conflicts in the decision to attend a charter school. Most students responding to the survey indicated they were satisfied with their school and intended to return the following school year.

Students in new charter schools spend relatively little time on homework. Most students (78%) attending new charter schools reported spending less than an hour on homework per day, and a small percentage of students indicated that their grades had dropped since enrolling in a new charter school.

Survey of Parents of Students Attending New Texas Charter Schools

Parents' decisions to enroll their child in a new charter school were influenced by education programming and teacher quality. Parents reported that new charter schools provided educational options that were not available in traditional district schools (i.e., programs for special needs students, language immersion programs, and dual credit offerings) and nearly all surveyed parents (94%) were either *satisfied* or *very satisfied* with their child's charter school.

While many charter school parents sign agreements to participate in their child's education, overall levels of parent involvement did not increase when students enrolled in charter schools. Parents reported increases in some activities the year in which their students enrolled in a new charter school; however, comparisons with survey results of parents of children in Generation 1 through 10 charter schools suggest that parent involvement may decrease as schools become more established.

THE ONGOING EVALUATION

The ongoing evaluation will expand to include quantitative analyses of new charter schools' effect on student outcomes, including standardized test scores, indicators of college readiness, and graduation rates. Statistical analyses will examine the effectiveness of new open-enrollment charter schools relative to the traditional district schools students previously attended, and the analysis of campus charter schools will consider whether the change in structure affects student outcomes. Analyses also will examine whether new charter schools' performance changes as schools overcome start-up challenges and gain greater experience serving students. The final evaluation report (summer 2010) will present findings from case studies of seven Generation 13 charter schools that began serving students in the fall of 2008. The case studies will describe the individual challenges faced by new charter schools and the strategies and support charter school operators use to overcome challenges.

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