

For Immediate Release
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HOW LONG DO WE HAVE TO WAIT?

When charter schools recently were accused of sub-standard performance, the Texas Charter School Association defended charter school performance as “steadily improving” over time.

While charter schools have seen improvement over the 20 years since their inception, it’s clear from five years of TEA data, that charter schools underperform as a whole compared to their ISD counterparts. This isn’t an opinion; it’s the facts.

The evidence is in the past five years of TEA Snapshot Data available on TEA’s website. Keep in mind, this isn’t based on the A-F Accountability System (which I agree is far from perfect). These are the raw numbers, and the data shows the following:

Since 2012, charter schools have had fewer students in special education, career and technical education, and gifted and talented education programs. Not just by a little, but a lot. It’s interesting that a “random lottery” of public school students generates such a skewed student population compared to the state as a whole. Maybe if a charter doesn’t offer those programs, the students don’t bother applying to attend that school? Just a thought.

From 2012 through 2016, charter schools had a dropout rate of 3.5 times that of ISDs. The five-year average was 5.7% for charters and 1.6% for ISDs. The high was 7% in 2012 for charters and a low of 4.7% in both 2015 and 2016. So, the Charter School Association is correct. Their dropout rate has improved, but they still fall well behind ISDs.

From 2012 through 2016, charter schools had a four-year graduation rate of 59.9% while ISDs achieved 90.8%. Again, the Charter School Association is correct. They improved from 52.8% in 2012 to 64.9% in 2016. While this is an improvement, it is still nowhere close to ISDs.

From 2012 through 2016, charter schools tested an average of 43% of their students for “college admissions” tests like ACT and SAT. At the same time, ISDs tested 68%. So, given this difference, you would assume that charter schools outperform ISDs on the ACT and SAT tests, right? Wrong.

For the past 5 years, ISDs have outperformed charter schools on ACT and SAT test scores, except for the 2016 SAT test where charters outperformed ISDs by 6 points (1399/1393). This is partly due to only testing 50% of their students while ISDs test almost 70% of their students.

Say what you will about the STAAR tests, but over the past 5 years, ISDs outperformed charter schools on the STAAR tests. Enough said. Moving on to the next point.

Charters talk about how they have less money per student than the “average” ISD. This is a point of disagreement that I won’t go into here, but let’s look at how that money is spent.

From 2012 through 2016, charter schools spent an average of 51% of their “actual expenditures” on “instructional” expenses. During the same time, ISDs spent 57.5% on the same expenses. Charters improved from 51% in 2012 to 51.4% in 2016. Not much improvement here.

From 2012 through 2016, charter schools spent an average of 13% of their “actual expenditures” on “central administrative” expenses. During the same time, ISDs spent 6% on the same expenses. Charters improved from 15% in 2012 to 11.5% in 2016. As you can see, while they are improving, charters still spend far more on central administrative expenses than ISDs.

Finally, if we give a nod to the state’s accountability system and look at districts that “met standard” or “alternative standard” (this is only available to dropout recovery charters), the charter schools have lagged behind the ISDs since 2012. Charters have improved, however, from 80% to 85% of their districts having “met standard or alternative standard” while the ISDs have 97% of their districts achieving that measurement.

A few observations:

1. Charters are improving, but they are still lagging well behind the ISDs across the board after 20 years of charter schools in Texas.
2. ISDs leave the “college door” open longer by giving more of their kids the ACT & SAT.
3. ISDs graduate a far greater percentage of students on time.
4. ISDs spend more money in the classroom and less in the central office.
5. We only know all of this because charters are ACCOUNTABLE to the state for these tax dollars, unlike virtually every voucher proposal floated out this year at the legislature.

So, we have to ask ourselves a few questions after reading this data.

1. Where is the legislative outrage for these substandard achievement numbers?
2. If we can’t or shouldn’t “*throw money at the problem*” then why did the legislature INCREASE state aid for charter schools by \$1.46 billion while DECREASING state aid for ISDs by \$2.6 billion (based on the adopted state budget)?
3. If “competition” is supposed to help kids, how long will the state subsidize lower-performing competitors just for the sake of “competition” in public education?

Finally, “How long do we have to wait for the charters to fulfill their promise of improving student learning” compared to the ISDs that educate EVERY child that walks in the door?” If this is “steady” improvement, how many more years will it be before charters meet or exceed ISDs and how many kids will be negatively impacted while we wait?

Thomas Ratliff is a former member of the State Board of Education where he served two terms as the board’s Vice Chairman.