



TSTA NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 25, 2024

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Education commissioner asks board to approve lackluster charter applications that will cost school districts additional millions of dollars

This week, the State Board of Education will consider five new charter school applications recommended by Commissioner Mike Morath and the Texas Education Agency. The Texas State Teachers Association urges the board to reject all of them.

“With many school districts across the state already suffering serious budgetary shortfalls following Gov. Greg Abbott’s decision to shut the door on additional state funding last year, this is no time to increase the amount of tax dollars being drained from traditional public schools by charters,” TSTA President Ovidia Molina said.

“Texas public school districts already are losing more than \$4 billion a year to charter schools, many of which are lower performing than the neighborhood schools they are raiding for students and tax dollars. The five charter applications that the commissioner and TEA are recommending this year are lackluster at best and offer little expectation they will improve educational opportunities for students in their proposed attendance zones.”

All five applications would cut financial corners to the detriment of students. Some would decline to offer classes such as PE, foreign languages or fine arts. One says it would offer special education without planning to hire a special education teacher in its first year. Some would not offer transportation services. But all, if approved by the board, would take students and tax dollars from existing school districts.

Maybe the worst application to get the commissioner’s endorsement is the proposed Unparalleled Preparatory Academy, which would try to eventually enroll as many as 1,120 students from grades 6-12 in Manor ISD, near Austin.

A key person involved in this application is a fellow of Building Excellent Schools (BES), a Massachusetts-based organization that trains, supports and mentors charter leaders. Eleven charter schools involved with BES have been approved in Texas since 2016, and most have been plagued by poor academic performance and low enrollment. Only one has come close to meeting its enrollment projections, and, at last report, seven were underenrolled by more than 50 percent.

Five of the BES-involved charter campuses evaluated under the state accountability system in 2022 were not rated for student achievement because of low STAAR scores. Had the state not made an exception for low scores following the pandemic, each would have received an F in student achievement. One BES-affiliated school got a C in student achievement, and the remaining campuses were not rated because they did not serve tested grades or opened later than 2022, the last year school accountability ratings have been released to the public.

The proposed Unparalleled Preparatory Academy's application claims there is little charter enrollment in Manor ISD. In truth, Texas Education Agency data show that Manor, a district with fewer than 10,000 students, lost 36 percent of its enrollment, more than one-third, to charter transfers last year. This was one of the highest percentages of charter transfers from any school district in the state.

There are at least six charter schools already in Manor ISD, and the IDEA charter chain has a school near the district. IDEA alone took about 800 students from Manor schools last year.

"Manor has lost an estimated \$115 million in tax revenue over the past five years to charters moving into the district and taking its students. Now, the district has been trying to close a \$6 million deficit," Molina said. "Why in the name of good public education and financial sense would the commissioner and TEA want to allow a proposed school connected to other charter schools with such poor academic records poach even more tax dollars from this district?"

The proposed Unparalleled Preparatory Academy plans to offer a Career and Technical Education (CTE) component to develop an "entrepreneurial mindset" among students. Manor ISD already has 16 strong CTE programs offering students opportunities for well-developed course sequences in careers such as finance, biomedical science, graphic arts and applied agricultural science. The school district already has established business partnerships with such companies as Dell, Tesla and Samsung.

"Commissioner Morath wants to keep adding charter schools, while school district budgets grow tighter and tighter," Molina said. "His boss, Gov. Greg Abbott, denies public schools additional state funding while promoting a huge tax giveaway for private schools. This is a triple whammy that threatens to destroy the public school system."