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# Troubled Schools Try Mimicking the Charters

By **SAM DILLON**

HOUSTON — Classrooms are festooned with college pennants. Hallway placards proclaim: “No Excuses!” Students win prizes for attendance. They start classes earlier and end later than their neighbors; some return to school on Saturdays. And they get to pore over math problems one-on-one with newly hired tutors, many of them former accountants and engineers.

If these new mores at Lee High School, long one of Houston’s most troubled campuses, make it seem like one of those intense [charter schools](#), that is no accident.

In the first experiment of its kind in the country, the Houston public schools are testing whether techniques proven successful in high-performing urban charters can also help raise achievement in regular public schools. Working with Roland G. Fryer, a researcher at Harvard who studies the racial achievement gap, Houston officials last year embraced five key tenets of such charters at nine district secondary schools; this fall, they are expanding the program to 11 elementary schools. A similar effort is beginning in Denver.

“We can’t sit idly by and let parents think that only the quality charter schools can educate poor kids well,” said Terry Grier, Houston’s hard-charging superintendent. “If you see something good, why not try to replicate it?”

When first conceived 20 years ago, charter schools — which are publicly financed but independently operated — offered two distinct promises: to serve as an escape hatch for children in failing schools, and to be incubators of innovation that, through market forces, would invigorate neighborhood schools. There are scores of examples of the former, but almost none of the latter. Instead, years of bickering have ensued among charter advocates, school boards and teachers’ unions.

“One of the rationales for charters was that they would figure out practices that could be adopted by school districts,” said Grover J. Whitehurst, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and former federal education official. “I hope Roland succeeds, because if he does it’ll be a very important demonstration that bad public schools can be fixed.”

Houston is an apt laboratory. It is the birthplace of the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, a

national charter chain, as well as home to 105 charters **that compete with the district's 300 schools for students and tax dollars**. Texas also bars union shops, so school districts often have more leeway in managing teachers' work than elsewhere.

The experiment, which is known as Apollo 20 and cost \$19 million in its first year, has had mixed results: Lee High School saw double-digit gains on state tests last spring, moving to "acceptable" on the Texas school report card system after many years of being rated "unacceptable." But four of the nine Apollo schools remained on the unacceptable list, and at some the percentage of students passing state tests actually dipped.

Dr. Fryer, an economist and head of Harvard's EdLabs, a research group, has gained national attention in recent years as the architect of incentive programs that offered students cash for improved performance, including one in New York City that was discontinued after being deemed ineffective. In recent years, he has visited scores of charter schools nationwide. "Some should be closed down this afternoon," he said, but others have virtually erased the achievement gap between poor minority students and their white peers.

In 2009, Dr. Fryer identified five policies common to successful charters, including those run by KIPP and the Harlem Children's Zone: longer school days and years; more rigorous and selective hiring of principals and teachers; frequent quizzes whose results determine what needs to be retaught; what he calls "high-dosage tutoring"; and a "no excuses" culture.

He then set about trying to find a public schools superintendent willing to embrace them. Neither Joel I. Klein in New York nor Michelle Rhee in Washington bit; officials in Omaha decided the political risks of copying charters were too high.

But in February 2010, Dr. Fryer spoke by phone with Dr. Grier, who had been on the job in Houston for six months. As a superintendent in eight other districts over 25 years, Dr. Grier had won plaudits from some educators for trying things like pay for performance and teacher bonuses. "How soon can you get down here?" Dr. Fryer recalled him asking.

Over the next six months, the two men selected the Apollo schools, hired several new principals and scores of new teachers and recruited and trained about 200 math tutors. In the process, the district paid \$6 million in severance to 100 teachers who chose to retire rather than participate, and agreed to pay others for working extra hours (something charters often do not do). The Houston Federation of Teachers, the city's largest union, took no formal position on the project.

The preparations were intense: half an hour before Dr. Fryer's wedding in June last year, Dr. Grier called his cellphone to review some details.

"Literally, I said, 'Terry, I've got to go, I've got to get married. I'll call you back,'" Dr. Fryer recalled.

One person watching the experiment closely is Mike Feinberg, who co-founded the first KIPP

school here in 1994, and now serves on the program's national board and runs its 20 Houston-area charters. Mr. Feinberg sees Houston's education marketplace as akin to when FedEx emerged to challenge the United States Postal Service. The result: Priority Mail.

"They've been trying to fix Lee High School for 20 years," he said. "But up until now, there's been no competitive pressure for them to really get crazy and do transformational things."

One of those transformational things at Lee High was hiring 50 full-time math tutors, who are paid \$20,000 a year — less than \$14 an hour — plus benefits and possible bonuses if their students do well.

"I don't get this," Jennifer Martinez, a junior wearing an "I love boys" bracelet, told her tutor, Gerald Frentz, an engineer, one day last week.

They were talking about integers. Mr. Frentz, 56, retired from the Navy in 1986 and has since worked at Wang Computer and been a tae kwon do instructor and substitute teacher. Jennifer's puzzlement visibly faded as he explained how negative 7 and positive 7 have the same absolute value — **definition: distance from zero** — but are separated by 14 ticks along a number line.

"It's an addictive experience," Mr. Frentz said of the tutoring.

Lee High's new principal, Xochitl Rodríguez-Dávila, described a torrent of challenges, including the exhaustive review of transcripts and test results to organize class schedules and tutoring for 1,600 students; persuading parents to sign KIPP-style contracts pledging that they would help raise achievement; and replacing about a third of Lee's 100 teachers.

"Teachers by far have been the biggest struggle," said Ms. Rodríguez-Dávila, 39, who previously was a middle school principal.

In faculty meetings, she said, some people insisted that Lee's immigrant students would never master biology or physics. Other veterans, though, told the complainers to stop belly-aching and get on with the turnaround.

Dr. Fryer, who has made 17 trips to Houston over the past year, is watching not only the Apollo schools but a parallel control group of other Houston schools with similar demographics and prior test results, to rigorously analyze the effectiveness of the three-year experiment.

Even without the formal study, Dr. Grier knows that the mimicking of charter practices is, at best, partial. The academic year started Aug. 15 at the nine Apollo secondary schools, a week ahead of the rest of the district — and the same day as KIPP. But even with Apollo's lengthened days, KIPP students had still more instructional hours last year: about 1,735, compared with about 1,435 at Lee High School.

**“We got close, but we didn’t get there completely,” Dr. Grier said.**