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# Charter schools growing

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By Samantha Bryant Friday, 09 September 2011

### Schools open, expand in Williamson County

Rebekah Wright transferred to Gateway College Preparatory School her sophomore year of high school from Georgetown ISD. Her mother, Lisa, said her daughter is quiet, and though she was receiving a quality education at Georgetown ISD, Lisa said she thought a charter school might be a better option for Rebekah.

TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS		vs. PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS	
	Public school		Public charter school
<b>Ownership</b>	Public entity		Private nonprofit corporation
<b>Governance</b>	Publicly elected school board		Board members appointed by current board members in accordance with corporate bylaws
<b>Employment</b>	Employment contracts		Employment "at will"
<b>Funding</b>	State school revenue formula based on per-pupil funding and tax revenue for facilities		State school revenue formula per-pupil, cannot access tax revenues for facilities
<b>Tuition</b>	None		None
<b>Academic accountability</b>	State Academic Excellence Indicator System and federal No Child Left Behind		State Academic Excellence Indicator System and federal No Child Left Behind
<b>Size</b>	Approximately 1,034 districts		215 statutory cap

Source: Orenda Education CFO Richard Riskey, Texas Charter Schools Association

“She needed something a little smaller than what her situation was,” Wright said.

Her daughter is now a senior at Gateway, a member of the National Honor Society and manager of the dance team.

“Everybody knows her, and she’s loved it,” Wright said.

This school year, parents in Williamson County who wanted to send their children to a charter school had more options.

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Gateway increased the number of grades the school serves and will host ground breaking ceremonies on a building expansion project Sept. 22 and 23. Also serving Williamson County students, Meridian School kicked off its first school year in Round Rock with a kindergarten through eighth-grade program and a projected enrollment of 700.

In 1995, the Texas Legislature authorized the creation of charter schools, public schools that have a greater amount of flexibility to adapt to students' needs.

“[Charter schools] were created to bring about innovation in public education,” said Richard Rickey, CEO of Orenda Education, the nonprofit organization that sponsors Gateway.

In Texas, there are a maximum of 215 charters that can be issued to nonprofit corporations that sponsor the schools. Josie Duckett, a spokeswoman with the Texas Charter Schools Association, said that there are about 11 charters left that could be issued before the cap is reached. There are 463 existing charter schools in the state, according to the TCSA.

## Gateway College Prep

Gateway opened in 2009, and Rickey said the open-enrollment school serving Williamson County and parts of Travis County focuses on preparing students for college.

In its first year Gateway served grades 9 and 10, the second year it expanded to grades six through 11, and for the 2011–12 school year, it operates a full kindergarten through 12th-grade program. Student enrollment has jumped from last year's 200 to about 600 students this year.

“We started small on purpose,” Rickey said. “We wanted to get the right leadership in place.”

Rickey said each graduating class will have about 100 students to maintain an intimate learning environment.

In late September, construction will begin on a permanent campus next to the modular buildings out of which the school currently operates. The first construction phase is a \$7.4 million project that includes a 12,000-square-foot multipurpose building, a competition auxiliary gym floor, a track, a soccer/lacrosse field and existing baseball and softball field upgrades. Additional construction phases call for a performance center and student union.

The school received its candidacy status in May from the International Baccalaureate organization for students ages 11 to 16. The IB is an education foundation that has a curriculum with three programs based on age. The process to become a IB World School can take up to two years, and Rickey said Gateway plans to apply for IB status for 16- to 19-year-old students in the future.

In keeping with a charter school's mission of innovation, Gateway has about 10 percent more instruction time per school year than traditional public schools and separates the genders during middle school years in core subject classes.

“We think there are more benefits to dividing [the classes] up,” Rickey said. “We can teach it differently.”

All students in middle school and high school received tablet computers this semester, which Head of School Steve Werlein said is meant to provide students and parents another resource to access the learning environment.

“Learning doesn't end at 3:30 [p.m.],” he said.

In Georgetown, Orenda Education also runs Gateway Tech High School, a school that offers a four-hour instructional day for students who need an alternative to the traditional school day.

## Meridian School

After signing a lease in May for a building at 2555 N. I-35 in Round Rock, renovations were complete 96 days later at the former light assembly manufacturing building, and Meridian School staff began to set up for the new school year.

Karalei Nunn is a member of one of the seven families who helped found Meridian School, a process that began in 2007.

“Meridian is a grassroots effort,” she said.

The school has received candidate status from the IB for the kindergarten through sixth-grade program.

“It’s an inquiry-based program, so it allows you to go deeper into the subject matter,” Nunn said, referring to the IB curriculum.

In addition to emphasizing the IB curriculum, Nunn said Meridian focuses on service learning and foreign language. Spanish is taught from kindergarten and is a course requirement in seventh grade.

The cafeteria serves made-from-scratch, healthy food, and there are also sports programs.

Although the school started off with grades kindergarten through eighth, Nunn said plans are to add an additional grade each year until Meridian has a full high school. There is already a waiting list for the kindergarten through sixth.

Nunn said that while traditional public schools are able to accommodate most students, charter schools offer an alternative education option for Williamson County families who may not be able to afford private school tuition.

“There is a desire for choice,” she said. “It’s difficult to say that one size fits all anymore.”

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[Jacqui Ainsworth](#) 2 months ago

My kids are loving Gateway. You can tell everyone cares. My 7th grader says that all of the teachers really respect the kids. This is our first year and the secretary knows my kids' names. It's a long drive from Pflugerville for us but it's worth it.

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