

# Federal grant spurs charter school expansion in Austin area

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Some of Texas' most in-demand charter schools will open new Austin campuses in coming years with the help of a federal grant aimed at extending the reach of high-performing charter schools.

Harmony Public Schools and KIPP-Austin last week each received a sizable chunk of a \$25 million expansion grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

To win the competitive grant, the charter school operators had to have a proven record of improving the academic performance of low-income students.

"This is a validation of our model that we've built carefully over the past 10 years," said Soner Tarim, Harmony's superintendent.

Harmony has 36 campuses across the state, five of which are in the Austin area.

The \$5 million grant will allow Harmony to open seven more schools in Texas — including one in Austin — and beef up its science, math and engineering curricula, particularly its robotics program, Tarim said.

Harmony's new Austin school would open in the fall of 2013 at the earliest. Its location has not been determined.

With its \$1 million grant, KIPP-Austin plans to open two new middle schools in East Austin next fall to complement its five existing schools, spokeswoman Evelyn Nazro said. The additional schools will expand to locations away from KIPP's sprawling facility on FM 969.

KIPP schools in San Antonio and Houston also received the grant money.

Texas has made it easier for proven, high-performing charter schools to expand operations by streamlining the administrative process.

But the state doesn't provide the startup money for those new campuses that it gives to nascent charter operations, Nazro said.

"That policy is a barrier to growth for charter schools," Nazro said. "The federal government is helping resolve that problem by giving us what the state isn't. It has a transformative ability for high-performing charter schools to grow and replicate."

Charter schools are privately managed public schools that receive state dollars but are not subject to many of the constraints of traditional public schools. They are intended to function as laboratories of innovation for improving the academic performance of students at risk of failure.

For instance, more than 90 percent of the students at KIPP-Austin are from low-income families, and almost all are minorities.

Nazro said KIPP's fifth-graders come in far behind their peers across the state. By eighth grade, they are performing on par with wealthy, suburban school districts.

"We have consistently proven that ZIP code does not define destiny," Nazro said. "The population that we serve is just as capable of learning and going on to higher education as any other population."

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