



IDEA works with Austin, San Antonio districts to expand.

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South Texas school officials have offered IDEA Public Schools few dependable allies, many cold shoulders and sometimes outright bitter rivalries as the charter district expanded to 20 schools in 10 Rio Grande Valley communities since 2000.

But a preliminary plan to allow the young charter to take over some under-performing schools in Austin could warm relations with Valley districts and has already done so in San Antonio, said Mike Rhodes, chair of IDEA's board of directors.

"The deal with Austin is so huge it's already started to open doors in San Antonio, and it will open them here, too," Rhodes said.

"Once the word is out that Austin (schools) approached us to help fix their problems, how can the districts in the Valley ignore that?" he asked.

"Every district down here should be thinking about it."

Since March, IDEA and the Austin Independent School District have brainstormed how and if the charter could operate within the traditional district to turn around some under-performing campuses.

Three draft scenarios would center on eastern Allan Elementary, Martin Middle and Eastside Memorial High schools, which have struggled to maintain "academically acceptable" state accountability ratings and sometimes dropped to the worst, or "academically unacceptable," category.

In contrast, IDEA as a whole and five of its campuses reached the highest, or "exemplary," rating this year, and 100 percent of IDEA's graduates have entered college.

"Ultimately the vision that we've set for ourselves is sending 1,500 students a year to college," IDEA CEO and co-founder Tom Torkelson said. "That will, in the aggregate sense, move the needle on the Hispanic college graduation rate in Texas."

But as his 11-year-old district sets its sights on other parts of the state, IDEA officials stressed they would not let their presence in the Valley crumble.

'THE NEXT STEP'

On the contrary, Chief Growth Officer Matt Randazzo expects his efforts to enter the Austin and San Antonio markets will invigorate partnerships along the U.S.-Mexican border.

"My biggest hope is someone in the Valley picks up the newspaper (and) says, 'Goodness, this is something we haven't considered. How can we collaborate?'" Randazzo said.

He specifically referenced Brownsville, where he said the school board left a new campus unused due to state budget cuts.

Randazzo suggested IDEA could arrange agreements with Brownsville and other Valley districts similar to the one the charter and AISD are trying to sell to parents in Austin.

According to board documents, AISD will likely foot an annual \$1.7 million to \$4.1 million bill to fund IDEA's in-district charters, on top of granting access to facilities worth more than \$60 million.

Both district's boards are weeks from considering any formal contract. But a final document would dictate how IDEA could spend its savings after AISD covers up to \$8,000 in per-pupil reimbursement and utilities, transportation, food service and landscaping costs.

And while IDEA hopes to retain full authority over hiring and curriculum, AISD would be able to take credit for any student progress in state and federal accountability ratings.

"I think this is simply the next step," said Rhodes, who acknowledged not all Deep South Texas schools have met his charter with open arms.

He looked forward to breaking that competitive relationship and instead returning to the original vision of charters as laboratories to find best teaching practices that could be shared across the education system.

The Austin expansion represented a first step in that direction, Rhodes said.

"We will finally be able to start implementing these processes in our neighboring districts," he said. "To us it's really clear and what all of the (IDEA) funders, me included, have dreamt from the beginning."

EYEING SAN ANTONIO

AISD seems to share that sentiment and has been hunting for what Chief Academic Officer Ramona Treviño called "the highest quality charter" in the state for nearly a decade.

In 2001, the Austin school board authorized applications for an in-district charter but only made firm progress on that option this year after IDEA and two other Texas charters submitted proposals.

IDEA looks "like a perfect match because they've had such a great success rate with" English-limited, low-income and Hispanic students residing in East Austin, Treviño said.

"IDEA's a model for not every school, but it works for them and this population," she said. "It provides a choice for parents who want a college-bound culture."

Torkelson admitted "there are still about 15 to 16 ways that this could not work" but he remains focused on working to open an elementary and secondary campus in Austin by fall 2012.

And in San Antonio, where some districts previously greeted the charter with a cold shoulder, some school leaders have reconsidered and now want to meet with IDEA, too.

"I did the outreach and due diligence with several San Antonio ISDs and could barely get my foot in the door, let alone a meeting," Chief Growth Officer Matt Randazzo told IDEA's board last week.

He now has a meeting scheduled with the San Antonio ISD superintendent and last week secured a \$1 million commitment from a private foundation based in San Antonio to launch IDEA's first campus there.

That feat will require a total of \$30 million to achieve, Randazzo said. But he and Rhodes felt confident a successful move into Austin could convince more foundations to help fund their expansion.

Randazzo also wants to explore the possibility of in-district charters or other partnerships with San Antonio-districts with high enrollments of low-income and Hispanic students, like Edgewood, Harlandale, South San Antonio and Southside schools.

And growth will continue in the Valley, where IDEA is set to open a second McAllen and Brownsville campus next year with a new presence in Starr County by 2013.

Educators "are saying, 'We can either have you as a partner where you're helping to drive better student achievement ... or we can have you come in and take 14,000 students out of public schools and put them into charter seats,'" Randazzo said.

"All of these districts are serving kids, and ultimately those school boards and superintendents want to do what's best for them."

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