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New education choices grow locally

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Charter schools offer alternatives

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By Marie Leonard Friday, 18 November 2011

NORTHWEST HOUSTON — More than 360,000 Texas students attend a private school or a public charter school this year, compared to the nearly 5 million students enrolled at traditional school districts in Texas. However, public charter schools and private schools are expanding and finding a niche in growing communities such as Northwest Houston.

Why are charter and private schools continuing to grow in Northwest Houston and the state of Texas?

- Charter schools can serve different purposes, such as dropout recovery, special mission and college preparatory campuses
- Parents may be searching for an alternative to traditional public school districts
- Some private and charter schools offer small class sizes and flexible hours
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Students from any zip code may apply to attend a charter or private school Other:

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STATEWIDE EDUCATION OPTIONS

PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

- Funding sources: State and federal funds, local tax dollars, grants
- Tuition: None
- Testing requirements: TAKS and STAAR
- Entrance requirements: None
- Days of instruction: Must provide 180 days of instruction per academic year

CHARTER SCHOOLS:

- Funding sources: State funds, grants
- Tuition: None
- Testing requirements: TAKS and STAAR
- Entrance requirements: Lottery systems, interviews
- Days of instruction: Since they receive funding based on average daily attendance, most provide 180 days of instruction per school year to receive full funding

PRIVATE SCHOOLS:

- Funding sources: Tuition money, donations
- Tuition: Yes
- Testing requirements: Private school students are exempt from state tests
- Entrance requirements: Academic records, interviews, entrance examinations
- Days of instruction: Times and dates of instruction can vary by school

Sources: Texas Education Agency, Texas Charter School Association

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While many Texas public school districts this year experienced budget cuts and layoffs, charter schools and private schools continued to deal with separate funding issues.

Charter schools in Texas do receive state funding based on the average daily attendance of students, but they do not receive funds from local tax revenue like traditional independent school districts. However, in July, Gov. Rick Perry signed a law allowing public charter schools in Texas access to the state's permanent school fund bond guarantee, which means they may use AAA bond ratings to save money on the construction of new facilities.

While public school districts in Texas receive a certain amount of state-allocated dollars per pupil, private schools receive no state funding since they are not regulated by state agencies.

"I think parents get a good bang for their buck, and a good value for the tuition dollars," said Mark Pillsbury, executive director of advancement for Houston Christian High School. "We are vigilant about being good stewards of our money."

However, most private schools do not receive enough funding to cover all the needs of the students, so they must rely on gifts and donations.

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"When you look at charter schools, they are able to be flexible and innovative, and that's why they were created: to be more adaptive to the communities they were set out to serve," said Josie Duckett, vice president for public and governmental relations at the Texas Charter Schools Association.

A new public charter school opened its doors Nov. 14 to serve students in grades 9–12 who are interested in gaining two years of college credit by high school graduation. Responsive Education Solutions, which runs more than 20 charter schools in the state, opened the first Houston location of iSchoolHigh, which will be permanently housed at Lone Star College-University Park in January.

"[Northwest Houston] is a growing area, but it's an area that doesn't have a lot of educational options," said Thomas Terry, director of media

relations for Responsive Education Solutions. “Anywhere we go, we’re trying to find opportunities to give kids more options.”

A growing need

In 1999, the year the first charter school opened in Texas, there were 66 charter schools in the state, compared to 437 today, Duckett said.

“Texas is the second fastest growing charter state in the country,” she said. “In proportion to traditional school districts, we are still small; [charter school enrollment] is pushing 3 percent of the overall school population.”

There is a cap of 215 on the number of charters that can be awarded in Texas, but multiple campuses may be opened under one charter. However, since more than 56,000 students statewide are on charter school waiting lists, raising the cap will be a major priority for the TCSA in the next legislative session, Duckett said.

“We need that [cap] lifted because there are operators who want to come into the state of Texas,” she said. “Many people have contacted the association who want to come in and fill that demand.”

There are several types of charter schools statewide that serve different purposes, such as dropout recovery, special mission and college preparatory campuses. iSchoolHigh focuses on the college preparatory aspect, which stems from a partnership with LSC–UP.

“In working with LSC, my superintendent figured out there was a need for an early college high school on this side of town,” said Michael Laird, principal of iSchoolHigh.

When iSchoolHigh moves to its permanent location at LSC–UP in January, it will be able to house 150 students. Although students from any zip code in the area may apply to attend public charter schools, Laird said he has received the most interest from students in the Cy-Fair, Klein, Tomball and Spring Independent School Districts.

Array of choices

The state’s largest charter school network, Harmony Public Schools are college preparatory charter schools that focus heavily on math and science. Harmony has more than 10 campuses in Houston, five of which are located in Northwest Houston and opened within the last six years.

“Harmony tends to attract students interested in math and science who want a rigorous curriculum, because they hold students to a high standard,” said Jenifer Sarver, public relations and community outreach coordinator for Harmony.

Draws to charter and private schools may include class size, which can range from 10–15 students, and flexible hours. The Katy location of Calvin Nelms Charter Schools, at Fry Road and Clay Road, serves approximately 300 students from 6–12 grade, and offers flexible hours for older students.

“The [traditional] school districts are doing a fine job, but sometimes a kid needs to be in a different environment where they are safer than they thought they were somewhere else,” said Ron Nelms, superintendent of Calvin Nelms Charter Schools.

Enrollment at Cypress Christian School, a private college preparatory school, has grown by 40 students to 565 total students over the past four years, said Angie Ramirez, admissions director.

“The majority [of students] are from Cy-Fair ISD, although we do reach into the Spring, Klein and Memorial areas,” she said. “Cy-Fair has a wonderful school district, but we are just an alternative. The biggest difference is that everything is taught from a Christian perspective; it’s an amazing education, and I think our end results show that.”

Growth and challenges

Houston Christian High School, which serves 500 students from 55 zip codes, has expanded its campus to include 43 acres over the last decade, and the school’s board of trustees voted in March to begin a capital campaign to build a 35,000-square-foot student center. The new space will include food service, academic and performing arts areas. Although Houston Christian High School has seen an increase in enrollment over the years, the money raised every year from tuition dollars does not cover the entire budget, said Mark Pillsbury, executive director of advancement at HCHS.

“Although, nowhere in Houston is tuition cheap, but it’s quite a sacrifice for families to send their child to private school, so we have to always be sensitive to our parents,” he said.

Harmony, which will continue to expand as long as there is a demand, Sarver said, received a \$5 million federal grant in September, which will give Harmony the resources it needs to open seven new campuses in three years.

“To me, one of the most compelling statistics about Harmony is that they have 21,000 kids on a waiting list,” Sarver said. “If you step foot into a classroom there, you can see the students are attentive, very interested and they are there to learn.”

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Mr. Fuller (Edfullertx) serves as a consultant for the various teacher unions (ATPE, NEA, etc.) so please take that into consideration when reading his comment above downplaying the value of providing educational options to parents.

At Texas Parents Union (<http://txparentsunion.org>), we believe that Texas families need educational options from their district (magnet schools) and outside their district (charter schools). Follow us on Twitter or Facebook if you agree!

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