

## Charter schools, Spring Branch ISD become partners

By ERICKA MELLON, HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Like sports rivals, traditional public school districts and charter schools historically have competed - for students, funds and a winning reputation.

A new, unusual pact between the Spring Branch Independent School District and the KIPP and YES charter schools will have the competitors playing on the same team.

The arrangement, announced Tuesday, allows the group to apply for a piece of a \$40 million grant plus \$100,000 in start-up costs from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is trying to encourage cooperation between districts and charter schools.

Even if they don't win a large award, Spring Branch ISD, pending approval from the school board, plans to house a KIPP campus within Landrum Middle School and a YES campus within Northbrook Middle.

They will operate as "schools within schools," with different principals and teachers - though the Spring Branch and charter staffs will be expected to work together to share ideas and best practices. The KIPP and YES students will be able to participate in activities such as sports and band that aren't always offered at the charter schools.

"That's probably the general perception - that charter schools are competitive, cut-throat entities," said KIPP co-founder Mike Feinberg. "What the Gates compact is showing and what Spring Branch, YES and KIPP are trying to do is show the opposite. We can advance the ball a lot further if we're not at each other's throats."

### ***Facility struggles***

The group has not detailed yet how any Gates funding would be spent.

Charter schools, which are taxpayer funded but exempt from some state regulations, often struggle to afford facilities to expand because they can't go to voters with bond referendums.

Spring Branch Superintendent Duncan Klussmann said he hopes the charter schools will help the district double the number of its students attending college over the next five years.

"We have to have very strong partnerships to do that," Klussmann said.

KIPP and YES are Houston-based charter schools with a track record of getting strong academic

results from minority students and those from low-income families. The schools have longer hours and tout their dedicated teachers who share their cell phone numbers to help students around the clock.

The KIPP and YES schools will not have academic entrance requirements and will conduct a lottery if the number of student applicants exceeds the available space (about 100 students per grade level).

KIPP will open its school with a fifth-grade class, and YES will start with sixth graders. Each will add one grade level a year and will combine to start a high school at North Brook in 2015.

### ***Unique arrangement***

The charter schools already contract with traditional districts - YES runs a school in North Forest ISD and KIPP runs one in Galveston ISD - but the Spring Branch deal is unique because the entities will share buildings and have the support of a powerful foundation.

YES operated a school within HISD's Lee High School for two years but severed ties in December 2009, with the charter leaders saying there wasn't enough space or incentive to sharing the building.

The Spring Branch partnership is called SKY, taking the first letter of each entity's name.

### ***Collaborative effort***

Spring Branch joins 13 other school districts - including larger districts such as Chicago and New York - in signing the Gates Foundation's "collaboration compact."

"Spring Branch is setting an example for school districts and charter school leaders across the country to work corroboratively, learn from each another and build upon successful practices," Vicki Phillips, a Gates Foundation director, said in a statement.

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