

Group praises Austin school board's approval of charter programs

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The Texas Charter Schools Association is commending Austin Superintendent Meria Carstarphen and Austin school board President Mark Williams for their part in the board's split decisions last month to form partnerships with two charter school operators.

In a letter dated Dec. 21, David Dunn, executive director of the Texas Charter Schools Association, commended Williams' and Carstarphen's "leadership and steadfast determination to provide the students and parents of East Austin with a range of choices in public education."

The board voted 6-3 to collaborate with IDEA Public Schools on Dec. 20; approval of a partnership with Responsive Education Solutions came Dec. 12.

Responsive Education Solutions will run a dropout recovery program at Lanier and Travis high schools.

The IDEA partnership, which allows the South Texas-based charter operator to run a college preparatory charter school program at Allan Elementary and Eastside Memorial High schools in East Austin, was particularly controversial. Some critics called into question the charter operator's academic performance, and others said the district shouldn't hand off responsibility for educating its students.

Carstarphen recommended the plan, saying the in-district charter design allows underenrolled schools in danger of closing to stay open.

Williams, who argued the charter proposal offered East Austin parents another academic choice, was one of the six board members who voted for it.

"This bold move took both courage and a willingness to face adversity, knowing that the long-term benefits outweighed the contention," Dunn wrote.

"Faced with a wave of misinformation and resistance to change the status quo, you persevered. After hours of debate, delays, and the intense contract negotiations, the district will move forward in two unique partnerships with two of our member schools."

In his letter, Dunn, formerly the chief lobbyist of the Texas Association of School Boards and a chief of staff for former U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, also pledged to lend his support. The association represents about 390 schools statewide.

"We stand ready to engage with the East Austin community about the success of the charter school movement in Texas," Dunn wrote.

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