

Dunn and Torkelson: Austin would benefit from charter schools

David Dunn and Tom Torkelson, Special Contributors

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Contrary to the American-Statesman editorial board's Oct. 26 editorial, we believe the Austin Independent School District's plan to collaborate with public charter schools in our community is right, bold and promising for Austin ("Proposals for schools need thoughtful study").

News to incorporate charters into overall facility plans for the 2012-13 school year will benefit our community. The collaboration between the Austin school district and charters comes at a remarkable time in the charter school movement here in Texas — both student demand and public support for charter schools are now at their highest statewide levels since the Texas Legislature created them in 1995.

A recent poll shows good news across the state regarding public support for charter schools. The survey, done by WPA Opinion Research on behalf of the Texas Charter Schools Association, shows strong support for creating more public charter schools and ensuring that they receive the same funding as other traditional neighborhood schools.

Overall, the favorability ratings for charters grew by 12 percent over the past year. This is impressive, given charter schools educate nearly 120,000 students in Texas, which is less than 3 percent of the total student population. The poll of 500 randomly sampled likely voters was conducted in Central Texas, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston and the Rio Grande Valley.

The Statesman editorial says, "As charters go, IDEA has an impressive track record, being ranked an exemplary district this year by the Texas Education Agency. But trustees pointed out that IDEA has no experience running an in-district charter."

Parents and school trustees should have no concerns about IDEA Public Schools. IDEA takes all students with disabilities and special needs. Ninety-four percent of IDEA students are Hispanic and 81 percent are from low-income homes, and there are currently 16,000 students on a waiting list to get into IDEA schools. All IDEA graduates have matriculated into college or university, and more than 90 percent are persisting or have graduated with a bachelor's degree.

Setting high expectations for all children has produced transformative results for children and families throughout the Rio Grande Valley. A partnership with the Austin Independent School District will produce similarly transformative results for Austin families.

The debate over charter schools is really about school choice, about parents and students being empowered to make the move to a school that's a better fit.

Austin Superintendent Meria Carstarphen's idea to incorporate charters in a collaborative way in Austin helps meet the growing demand for this type of education. We do not think the idea is half-baked or rushed. In fact, we think the community should feel urgency around the issue of continually failing schools.

The proposal makes sense. The district wins by choosing highly effective charters to provide specific educational solutions and deliver exceptional results to Austin school district students. The charter schools win by accessing available facilities in the communities they are looking to serve. Taxpayers win by revitalizing underused facilities that they have already paid to build and maintain. Most importantly, students and families win by having a richer portfolio of school options.

The conversation about charters is changing. It's time to stop pitting public charters against other public schools and start celebrating our strengths. Charters and regular public schools both have a central role to play, and parents and students want and need them both.

More districts and charters are working together to empower Texas students — and in doing so, they are absolutely transforming our communities for years to come.

Dunn is executive director of the Texas Charter Schools Association. Torkelson is founder and chief executive officer of IDEA Public Schools.

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