

## David Dunn: Charter Outcomes are Improving

**The head of the Texas Charter Schools Association offers a rebuttal to former SBOE Vice Chair Thomas Ratliff's argument that charter schools are failing to live up to their promises**

In two instances within the last month, former *State Board of Education* member and lobbyist **Thomas Ratliff** instigated a public revival of tired charges that students at Texas charter schools are underperforming as compared to students at traditional ISDs.

In both a press release for the [Texas AFT](#) chapter and a column that appeared in the *Quorum Report*, Ratliff calls for “legislative outrage for these substandard achievement numbers” in an effort to expose facts, all the while failing to disclose that he now counts the *Texas Association of School Boards (TASB)* as one of his clients. I can share with some authority that TASB’s educational priorities are not always aligned with those of public charter schools. In full disclosure, I was also once employed by TASB in the late 1990s.

I agree with Ratliff that facts and transparency are important, especially when it comes to using data to drive public policy, so let’s set the record straight once and for all. When the Texas Legislature established charter schools as part of the state’s public education system in SB 1 (1995), these public schools were provided certain flexibilities to allow for innovation, including the school year calendar, at-will employed teachers, and various models of charters with different missions.

Disaggregating the data pertaining to the various models of charters and their accountability is where Mr. Ratliff and I fundamentally part ways.

For context, some charter school models include high-performing college preparatory, STEM-focused, and specialized mission campuses. Separately, there are charters serving students at residential treatment centers, juvenile detention centers, and dropout recovery campuses, which are under alternative education accountability (AEA).

AEA charters serve some of the most vulnerable, at-risk student populations in the state. It is not an accurate comparison to measure a student who is receiving a charter education at a residential treatment center for a 90-day treatment program against a “traditional” student under standard accountability measures. Of course the data look skewed.

The state legislature understands this distinction and even put stricter accountability requirements in place for public charter schools in 2013. Public charter schools that fail to meet academic or financial

standards for three consecutive years (or three out of five years) automatically close and since the passage of SB 2, 27 charter campuses have closed. To be clear, the Texas Charter Schools Association supported this legislation because we strongly believe in providing a quality public education to students, and it is working.

The Texas Education Agency released its preliminary [2016-17 Texas Academic Performance Report data](#), which shows that public charter schools serve a higher proportion of poor and minority students and these students are thriving. Under the standard accountability system, charter school students with Limited English Proficiency outperformed their district peers in *all* subjects. Additionally, African-American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students at public charter schools did better in reading, writing, and social studies as compared to those at ISDs.

What's interesting is that in August 2017, CREDO of Stanford University released a [study](#) looking at charter school student performance in Texas for 2014-15 and like Mr. Ratliff, they included AEA charters. CREDO specifically applied a rigorous methodology for a more apples-to-apples comparison and the study identified that students at public charter schools are gaining an additional 17 days of learning in reading and have closed the achievement gap in math.

The message is clear: charter school student outcomes are improving and in many cases surpassing the performance of ISD peers. Further, parents want options within public education and have enrolled an undisputed 272,685 students at 675 public charter school campuses across the state. Student enrollment continues to grow at a rate of 12 percent a year, as compared one percent of overall public education in the state.

It's time to fully acknowledge Texas charter schools as a vibrant, growing sector of the state's public education system meeting the demand of Texas families and students at these public schools are flourishing. Let's focus on using data to achieve better outcomes for students, after all, that's who matters.

***David Dunn is the outgoing Executive Director of the Texas Charter Schools Association***

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