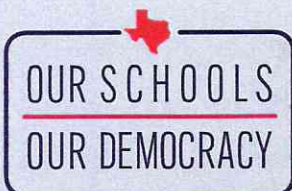


FACING FACTS: CHARTER SCHOOLS IN TEXAS

after thirty years it's time for change



It's time for Texas parents and the public to have more power over the decisions that impact the education of our children and cost taxpayers billions of dollars.





Special Report from Our Schools Our Democracy

Thirty years ago, Texas charter schools started as an experiment. In 1995, the Texas Legislature authorized up to 20 “open-enrollment charter schools” and gave the elected State Board of Education the power to approve charter school applications.

Thirty years later, we have the data to assess the outcome of this experiment: unlimited charter expansion approved by one appointed state official, low enrollment at new charter schools, closure of more than one-third of charter schools approved since 1995, and a harmful loss of revenue to local school districts.

We have also seen millions of Texas taxpayer dollars funneled to out-of-state charter management organizations, alarming related-party real estate deals and incidents of nepotism, the use of charter school funds to acquire condominiums and purchase a boutique hotel, and a charter school board that voted to lease a private jet for use by charter executives.

These problems are due to insufficient state oversight, unchecked expansion of charter schools, and failure to provide opportunities for public input and decision-making. The facts also underscore how unlimited charter school expansion undermines neighborhood schools and puts students at risk.

BOTTOM LINE

It's time to change how charter schools operate in Texas.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

More power for parents and taxpayers over decisions to open new charter campuses in their local communities.

An end to unlimited charter expansion that ignores the impact on local neighborhood schools and costs taxpayers about 17% of all state aid for public schools for about 8% of Texas students.

Stronger guardrails and state oversight to safeguard taxpayer dollars, including an end to nepotism and related-party real estate deals.

More transparent information for parents about charter schools so that they can make well-informed choices for their children.

A cap on the small and mid-size allotment for charter schools with enrollment of 5,000 students or more.

An end to the policies that allow charter schools to exclude certain students from enrollment and that allow expulsion for any reason. Charter schools receive public funds and should be required to accept and enroll all students, just like public school districts.

A prohibition on outsourcing key educational and financial decisions to private charter management organizations, many of which are located out-of-state. These organizations should not drive decisions that impact Texas schools and students.



Facing Facts: Charter Schools in Texas: after 30 years it's time for change

It's time for Texans to have more power over the decisions that impact the education of our children and cost billions of our taxpayer dollars.

State lawmakers authorized open-enrollment charter schools 30 years ago in Texas.¹ Texas has spent over \$35 billion state taxpayer dollars on charter schools since 2011, a massive investment of public funds.² Now that more information and data are publicly available about how state-approved charter schools operate and how they spend Texas taxpayer dollars—there's clear evidence that it's time to change the charter school system.

With little input from parents or taxpayers, multi-billion-dollar decisions are being made by one appointed state official and unelected charter school board members. These decisions affect all Texas school children who choose to attend their local public school districts and adversely impact public school districts in every corner of the state.

From Brownwood to Brownsville—every community in Texas is impacted by unlimited charter school expansion. That's because every taxpayer in Texas pays for charter schools whether there is a charter school in their community or not.

*We cherish our local public schools and want to believe they will always be there for our children and grandchildren—from the beloved neighborhood school down the street to Friday Night Lights, arts and music education, and highly experienced teachers. **But we can no longer take these things for granted.***

Charter schools should be held to the same high standards as public school districts. Even though charter schools are private organizations, they receive public funds and should be accountable to parents and the public and transparent about how they spend our taxpayer dollars.

This report provides facts from the public record that demonstrate why change is needed for Texas' charter school system to ensure that public school districts have the resources they need to guarantee a quality education for all students.

.....
The stakes are high. The future of our local public schools that are dedicated to educating all children is at risk.
.....

About Our Schools Our Democracy

Our Schools Our Democracy (OSOD) is a new Texas-based nonpartisan and independent 501c3 nonprofit organization established to educate and inform parents, taxpayers, and decision-makers about the impact of unlimited charter school expansion on our public school districts, neighborhood schools, students, and our democracy.



1. Charter schools leave too many students behind

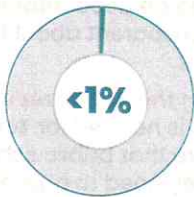
Charter schools spend less on students and more on central administration costs.

Through budget and policy decisions, many charter schools fail to provide key programs, services, and experienced teachers that contribute to student success and ensure equal opportunities for all students. This is the case even though additional state funding is often available for these programs and services. Meanwhile, charter schools spend a much higher percentage of their budget on central administration expenses than public school districts.

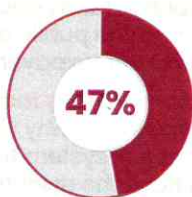
Transportation³



Nearly half of charter schools spend **NOTHING** on transportation for students.



Public School Districts
Less than 1% spend nothing on transportation



Charter Schools
47% spend nothing on transportation

Transportation is a hidden cost to many charter school parents.

Forcing parents to provide transportation means that many students lose out on educational opportunities unless their families have a reliable vehicle and the flexibility to drop-off and pick-up students daily.

Charter schools know this: Polls by charter-affiliated organizations show that over 50% of prospective students said they could not attend a charter school unless transportation was provided.⁴

Charter schools could receive additional state funding for transportation just like public school districts, but most choose not to.⁵ However, 29 charter schools have stepped up and now spend at or above the state average per student on transportation.⁶

Instruction⁷



Charter schools spend an average of **\$512 less** per student on instruction than public schools.



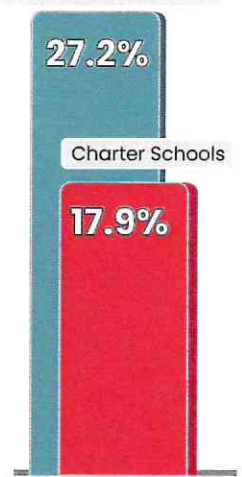
That's a loss of over \$11,000 for a typical classroom of 22 students – and an estimated **\$193 million** loss statewide.⁸

Career and Technical Education (CTE)⁹



High schools in public school districts routinely offer students multiple opportunities for both college and career preparation that match the interests and career goals of a diverse student body. However, students enrolled in charter schools have fewer opportunities to participate in CTE programs than students at public school districts and miss out on opportunities that can jumpstart access to college, careers, and well-paying jobs.

Percentage of Students Participating in CTE
Public School Districts



34% fewer charter students are enrolled in CTE programs compared to students in public school districts.



Central Administration Costs¹⁰

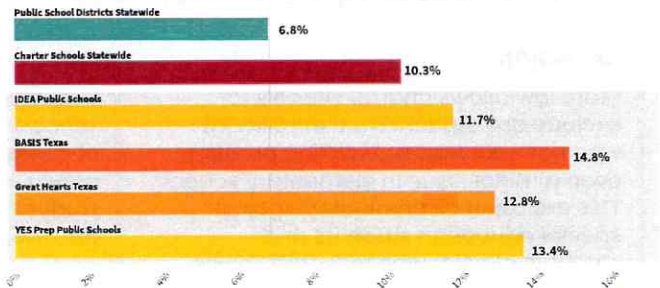


Charter schools statewide spent 51% more of total annual operating expenditures on central administration costs in 2022-23 compared to public school districts. Some of the largest charter schools in Texas spent an even higher percentage of their budget on central administration compared to the statewide charter average.

CHARTER SCHOOLS COULD SAVE an ESTIMATED \$165 MILLION EVERY YEAR¹¹

Charter schools currently spend an average of \$437 **more** per student for central administration expenses compared to public school districts. If charter schools spent the same average percentage as districts, they could save an estimated \$165 million annually that could be used to expand student support or pay for facilities.

Percentage Spent on Central Administration Expenses



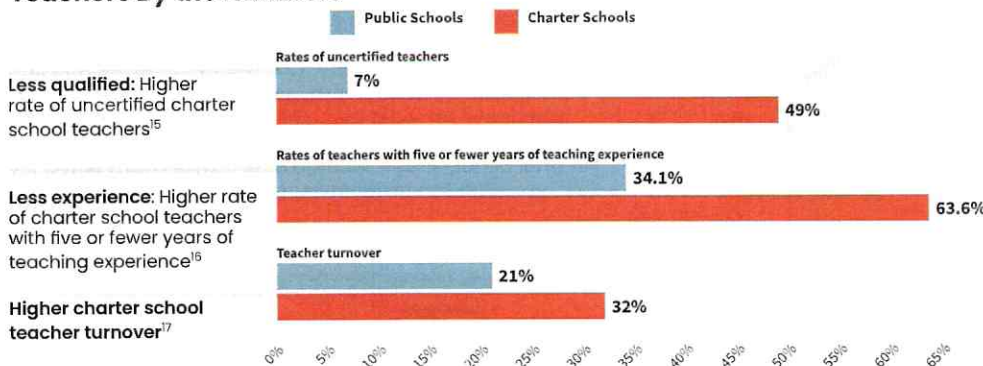
Charter School Teachers: Less Experience. Less Qualified. Higher Turnover.



Charter schools lag far behind public school districts in the percentage of certified teachers in the classroom. That's because Texas law does not require certified teachers at charter schools,¹² except for special education and bilingual teachers, even though research shows that having a certified teacher in the classroom positively influences student performance.¹³ The state of Texas sets certification standards through a test-based license that ensures teachers are qualified, and most importantly, provides parents with the assurance that their child's teacher is prepared for the job.

"A new research brief on teacher certification in Texas presents evidence showing that "uncertified teachers are linked to declines in student achievement." Texas Tech University policy brief (Summer 2024)¹⁴

Teachers By the Numbers

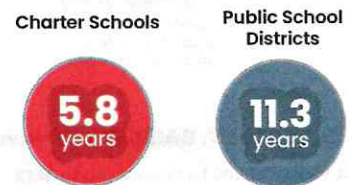


Less qualified: Higher rate of uncertified charter school teachers¹⁵

Less experience: Higher rate of charter school teachers with five or fewer years of teaching experience¹⁶

Higher charter school teacher turnover¹⁷

Public school teachers have nearly double the average years of teaching experience.¹⁸



Charter schools have a 52% higher teacher turnover rate than public schools. An average of almost 1 in 3 charter school teachers did not return to the classroom in 2022-23.

52% higher teacher turnover rate

2. Charter schools fail to serve all students

Charter schools can exclude certain students and underserve others.

Charter schools can exclude certain students from enrolling in a “public” charter school and easily expel others for discretionary reasons, while also serving significantly fewer special education students. Charter schools receive public funds and should be required to accept and enroll all students, just like public school districts.

Exclusion¹⁹

State law allows charter schools to exclude any student from enrollment who has ever had a discipline problem, even a minor issue in elementary school. This exclusion discriminates against special education students and students of color who research shows have a higher percentage of reported discipline actions.²⁰

Expulsions²¹

Unlike public school districts, charter schools can create a student code of conduct that includes undefined behavior expectations that allow students to be expelled for actions that are open to discretionary interpretation.²²

Based on data received from TEA, **84%** of charter school expulsions in 2023-24 were for discretionary reasons, not for offenses requiring mandatory expulsion.

5X Charter schools expelled students at over 5 times the rate of public school districts

Students Expelled

1 in 295 Charter Schools
1 in 1,474 Public School Districts

Fewer Special Education Students

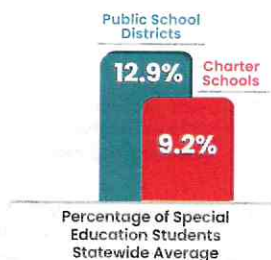
Charter schools have historically underserved special education students statewide compared to public school districts. That disparity is often much greater between charter campuses and nearby district campuses that serve similar student populations. These disparities are important because research shows that special education status can impact student performance and campus/district accountability ratings.²³

92% of charter schools spend less than the state average to provide needed services for the special education students they serve.²⁴

1/3 Over 1/3rd of charter schools report having **ZERO special education teachers** even though they enroll special education students.²⁵

29%

The percentage of special education students served by charter schools is **29% less** than the percentage served by public school districts.²⁶



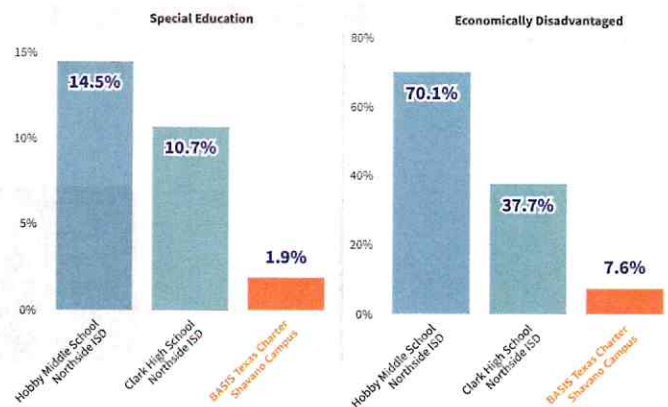
CASE STUDY: Wheatley High School, Houston
Wheatley High School's failure to receive a passing score on the state assessment for five years running was a primary reason for the state takeover of the entire Houston Independent School District in 2023.²⁷ Yet, Wheatley has historically served a much higher percentage of special education students compared to the YES Prep 5th Ward charter school that is located only 1.1 miles from Wheatley and serves far fewer special education students.

CASE STUDY: BASIS Texas, San Antonio

It's important to consider student demographics before believing charter spin about high student performance. Charter schools often compare their performance to district public schools without also comparing differences in student demographics that can impact student performance and campus ratings.²⁹

While the BASIS Texas charter school touts its A-rated Shavano campus in San Antonio as one of the highest-performing high schools in Texas,³⁰ it serves far fewer special education and economically disadvantaged students than nearby district campuses located less than two miles away. Shavano has graduated **ZERO special education students** over the last five years, and only **28 economically disadvantaged students**.³¹

Percentage Special Education and Economically Disadvantaged Students³²



3. Public school districts lose billions in revenue to charter schools—all Texas students pay the price

The loss of revenue to charter schools means a loss of opportunities and choice for students who choose to attend their public school district.

REVENUE LOSS:

When a public school district loses a student to a charter school, the per-student revenue is lost to the district. However, **the costs to the district don't simply transfer to the charter school. That's not the way it works.**

- A school district can't simply cut costs dollar-for-dollar to the loss in revenue when a student transfers to a charter school.
- The district's fixed costs—such as insurance, utilities, bus transportation, and maintenance—remain largely the same.
- A public school district can't cut a teacher when a charter school draws only 2-3 students from any given classroom because the district is still responsible for educating all of its remaining students and is subject to class size limits.

WHY IT MATTERS:

With largely the same fixed costs, but fewer dollars, public school districts must cut expenses. Non-mandated programs and services that provide educational opportunities for students throughout the district are most frequently on the cutting block. **Some neighborhood schools will even be forced to close to save money.**

★ THE TEXAS TRIBUNE SEP. 19, 2023

Facing declining enrollment and charter school competition, San Antonio and Plano consider closing campuses³⁴

School officials in San Antonio announced earlier this week that they are looking at closing about 20% of their campuses while Plano school officials are starting those discussions.

BY BRIAN LOPEZ, SEPT. 19, 2023, 6 PM CENTRAL

ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS HIT THE HARDEST:

Charter schools are concentrated in urban areas within public school districts that see the greatest revenue loss from charter transfers and impact a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Five of the largest public school districts in Texas, with up to **89%** economically disadvantaged students,³³ lost an estimated **\$5.3 billion** to charter schools over the last five years.

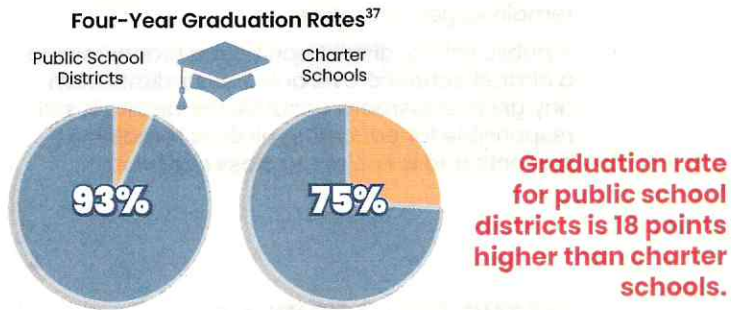
District	5-year estimated revenue loss to charter schools 2020-2024 ³⁵	Number of students lost to charter schools 2023-24 ³⁵	
Houston ISD	\$1,892,247,213	51,965	28%
Dallas ISD	\$1,669,977,849	33,421	24%
Austin ISD	\$624,927,517	12,636	17%
Fort Worth ISD	\$634,717,401	15,042	21%
San Antonio ISD	\$490,470,090	11,858	27%
TOTAL LOSS	\$5,312,340,070		

4. Public school districts consistently outperform charter schools statewide

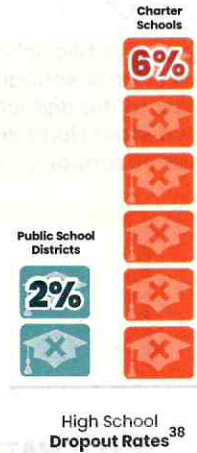
Charter schools lag behind public school districts in high school graduation rates.

Charter schools promise higher student performance in return for receiving exemptions from certain state laws that apply to public school districts. However, after operating for 30 years in Texas, charter schools lag behind public school districts in statewide high school graduation rates and many statewide performance measures.

1. Public school districts have **higher** graduation rates and **lower** dropout rates than charter schools.



Charter schools' dropout rate is three times higher than public school districts.

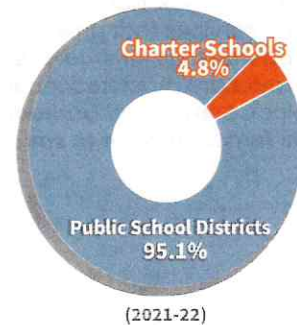


2. Public school districts account for 95% of all public high school graduates in Texas.³⁹

Charter schools serve about 8% of all students in Texas, but they graduate less than 5%.

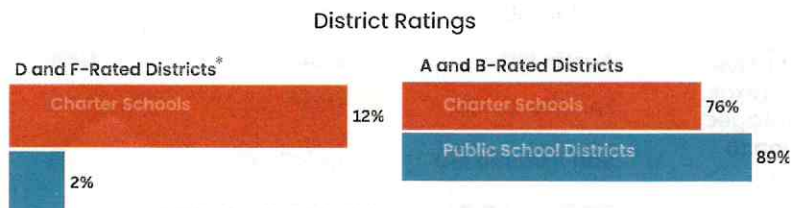
Statewide Total:	368,686
Public School Districts:	350,656 (95.1%)
Charter Schools:	17,670 (4.8%)

All High School Graduates

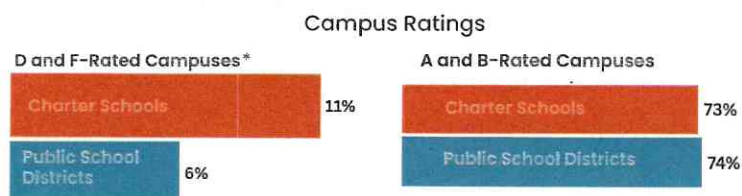


3. Charters have a higher percentage of D and F-rated districts and campuses and a lower percentage of A and B-rated districts

2022 STAAR Ratings:⁴⁰



Charter schools have 6 times the percentages of D and F-rated districts.



Charter schools have almost double the percentage of D and F-rated campuses.

*Not rated Senate Bill 1365⁴⁰

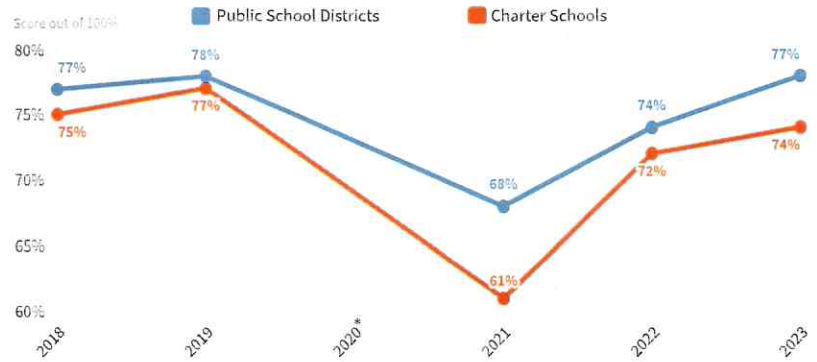


4. Over the last 20 years, public school districts have outperformed charter schools on statewide STAAR performance for All Students/All Subjects and in most individual subject areas.⁴²

Statewide STAAR over the Last Five Years: 2018–2023

All Students/All Subjects

(At/Approaches Grade Level or Above—which is the passing standard for Texas)



*STAAR test not administered in 2020 due to COVID-19 pandemic

Every Student Should Count

Publications from the Texas Public Charter School Association (TPCSA) often use data indicating that charter schools perform higher than public school districts.⁴³ Why does TPCSA show performance results that may differ from data provided in reports from the Texas Education Agency (TEA)?

The TEA includes all students in the annual performance data provided on Snapshot reports—whether they are enrolled in standard accountability schools or alternative education accountability schools (AEA).⁴⁴ In contrast, TPCSA often excludes

charter students from its performance data who are enrolled in AEA campuses,⁴⁵ which are primarily for students at risk of dropping out. Because 17.1% of all charter campuses are AEA, compared to only 2.8% of public school district campuses,⁴⁶ the TPCSA data may skew performance results because it does not provide performance data for all students. This report includes all charter and district campuses and students when referring to data from TEA's Texas Academic Performance Report and TEA Snapshot.⁴⁷

For the Record:

Charter Schools by the Numbers

School Year 2023-24⁴⁸

422,930

Students enrolled



916

Charter campuses

186

Charter operators



123

Number of new campuses approved by Commissioner



\$4.4 billion

State funds to charter schools

5. Many Texas laws that apply to public school districts to protect taxpayers do not apply to charter schools

This report provides concrete examples of how charter school officials are leveraging the flexibility provided to them in statute to take advantage of lax state oversight and spend funds for questionable purposes with Texas taxpayers picking up the tab:⁴⁹ related-party real estate deals, nepotism, and transfer of millions of dollars to out-of-state charter management organizations.

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Lax Texas charter school laws allow splashy land buys, profits for leaders⁵⁰

JAN. 22, 2023

In some cases, administrators own school facilities and collect millions from charging the schools rent.
By Edward McKinley, Erik Deschaine, Austin Runzo
Jan 22, 2023

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

A Houston charter school lacks a playground, but pays for a high-rise condo⁵¹

School operations deserve oversight from the Texas Education Agency.

CASE STUDY: Questionable use of charter funds

Over the years the media has uncovered questionable use of funds, including “numerous allegations of financial and operational misconduct.”⁵²

IDEA Public Schools:

- ▶ Voted to **lease a private jet for \$15.8 million** and only changed its decision after reports in the press.⁵³
- ▶ Leased a **luxury box at a sports arena** in San Antonio for \$400,000 per year.⁵⁴
- ▶ Purchased a **boutique hotel for \$1 million** and sued the Texas Attorney General to keep the deal quiet.⁵⁵
- ▶ Placed under a **conservatorship** by the TEA in 2024 “after a years-long investigation into improper spending.”⁵⁶
- ▶ Used state funds to **repay \$28 million** to the U.S. Department of Education after an independent audit revealed serious concerns over how federal dollars were spent.⁵⁷

“What does any of this out-of-control spending have to do with educating students?”⁵⁹

San Antonio Express News
March 8, 2023

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

POLITICS // TEXAS POLITICS

Aug. 8, 2022

IDEA Public Schools signed \$15M lease for luxury jet despite being under state investigation⁵⁸

By Edward McKinley, Austin Runzo
Published Aug 16, 2022 1:28 a.m.



CASE STUDY: State nepotism rules don't always apply

The president and secretary of the five-member Board of Directors for Faith Family Academy in Dallas are a married couple.⁶⁰ They are also the uncle and aunt of the current superintendent for Faith Family.⁶¹ The superintendent's contract was signed by her uncle, the Board President.⁶²

Charter schools were exempt from state nepotism laws that would prohibit this type of family connection until 2013 when the law was extended to charter schools.⁶³ However, charter staff employed before 2013 were grandfathered into the law.⁶⁴ The current Faith Family superintendent was hired in that position in 2012,⁶⁵ so the Texas nepotism law does not apply.

Over the last five years, despite enrollment at Faith Family that never exceeded 2,882 students, the Faith Family Board approved total compensation for the superintendent that far exceeds the compensation of most superintendents in the state, even those with much higher student enrollment.⁶⁶ In 2020-21, the Faith Family superintendent received total compensation of \$594,046 which included “other reportable compensation” of \$220,415.⁶⁷

CASE STUDY: Related-party real estate deal

Unlike public school districts, superintendents of charter schools are allowed by law to lease property they own to the charter school they operate.⁶⁸ The superintendent of Horizon Montessori Public Schools leased property he owned in Weslaco to the Horizon charter school for 20 years starting in 1999.⁶⁹ He collected an estimated \$2 million in lease payments⁷⁰ from his own charter school during this time. The property was appraised at only \$307,364 in 2003.⁷¹ In 2022, the same superintendent sold his property to Horizon for \$1.9 million, almost double the \$845,138 appraised value of the facility at the time.⁷²

“How is it not illegal for a superintendent to lease property that he personally owns to the school that he runs? Quite clearly, state lawmakers need to tighten loopholes to ensure such questionable land deals and other spending comes to an end.”

San Antonio Express News Opinion Editorial, March 8, 2023⁷³



CASE STUDY: Purchase of luxury horse ranch

A nonprofit organization formed by Universal Academy in North Texas spent an estimated \$10-12 million to purchase a luxury horse ranch and equestrian center in Denton County.⁷⁴ According to the Houston Chronicle, "the 12-building complex features 'a show barn designed with Normandy-style cathedral ceilings' and a 120,000 square-foot climate controlled riding area."⁷⁵ The nonprofit planned to lease the property to Universal for a new charter campus, approved by the TEA in 2022, that would offer riding lessons to charter students as an after-school activity advertised at \$9,500/student per year.⁷⁶

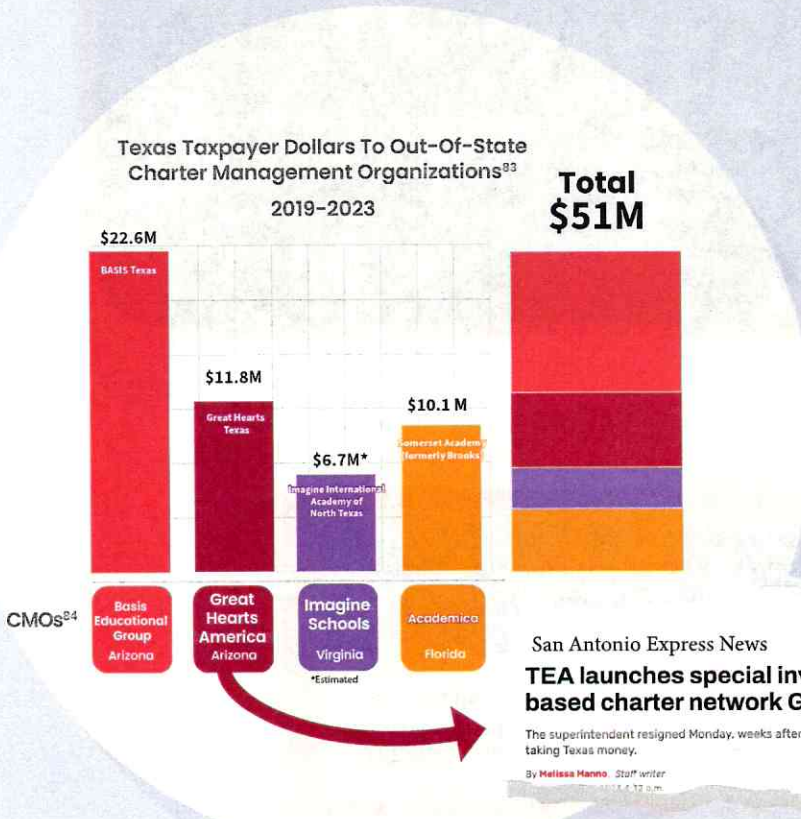
"An analysis by Hearst Newspapers found cases in which charter schools collected valuable real estate at great cost to taxpayers but with a tenuous connection to student learning."⁷⁷

Houston Chronicle, Jan. 22, 2023

CASE STUDY: High rise condos for ... records storage?

Accelerated Learning Academy purchased two luxury condominiums: one in a high-rise building in the Houston Galleria area and another in Dallas's Metropolitan Club for "records storage" at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Dallas purchase was made even though "the school already had a 9,600-square-foot, nearly empty campus in nearby Lancaster."⁷⁸ Real estate listings for the two properties noted that "The Dallas unit came with hardwood floors, stainless steel appliances, a wine cooler, granite countertops and access to a rooftop deck with a hot tub. The 1,118-square-foot Houston condo has floor-to-ceiling windows, hardwood floors and access to a pool with skyline views."⁷⁹

"Personally, I cannot imagine that the state of Texas would allow the use of state funds to purchase this property." – Harris County appraisal district official⁸⁰
Houston Chronicle Jan. 22, 2023



MILLIONS OF TEXAS TAXPAYER DOLLARS GO TO OUT-OF-STATE CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS (CMOs)

Millions of taxpayer dollars flow to private out-of-state charter management organizations (CMOs) that operate without sufficient transparency or accountability over how they spend Texas public funds, yet they often drive important decisions for Texas charter schools and students. For example, four Texas charter schools paid a total of over \$51 million to out-of-state CMOs over five years.⁸¹ This large-scale transfer of funds to out-of-state organizations means that fewer taxpayer dollars stay in Texas to support local economies. In addition, these out-of-state CMOs are not generally subject to public records requests and open meetings laws.⁸²

6. No cap on charter school enrollment

Charter schools can open an unlimited number of new campuses anywhere in Texas.

No limit to charter expansion: While state law limits the number of charter operators to 305,⁸⁶ there is no limit on the number of new charter campuses that existing charter schools can open through a charter expansion amendment and no limit on charter school student enrollment.

A single appointed state official controls most charter growth:⁸⁷ Since 2010, the Governor-appointed Texas Commissioner of Education has approved 1,128 new charter campuses through charter expansion amendments—123 new campuses in 2024 alone.⁸⁸

Parents and taxpayers left behind: Little, if any consideration, is given to the impact of the new campus on local neighborhood schools and students, and public involvement is minimal.

No vote by an elected body: The request for a new charter campus is made by self-appointed charter school board members who often do not live in the communities where they plan to open a new campus, and some may even live out-of-state. While the elected State Board of Education has authority to veto new charter applications, it has no authority over the approval of charter expansion amendments.⁸⁹

“Parents and the public should have input into any proposal to locate a new charter campus in their community through a charter expansion amendment. A democratically-elected entity accountable to the public should have final approval. An elected body is likely to reject the expansion of under-performing charter schools or those with a low enrollment.”

Pat Hardy

Former member of the elected Texas State Board of Education
R-Fort Worth, District II
(2002–2024)

CHARTER EXPANSION AMENDMENTS: LITTLE OR NO ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE PUBLIC

X NO....

- X** NO general notice to the public
- X** NO public meeting
- X** NO public vote
- X** NO vote by any elected body
- X** NO accountability to the public
- X** NO guarantee of “quality”—the Commissioner has expanded charter schools with low-performing campuses
- X** NO appeal process for the affected community

IDEA Public Schools

1

One campus for IDEA Public Schools was approved by the **elected** State Board of Education through a new charter application (2000)⁹⁰

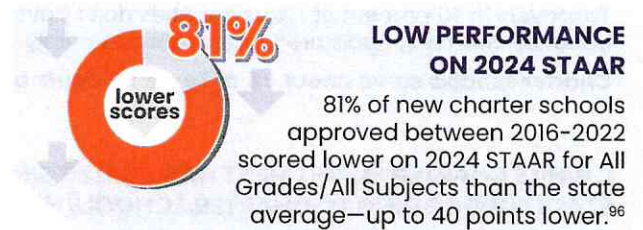
135

135 campuses were approved by one **appointed** state official through charter expansion amendments (2006–2024)⁹¹

7. Taxpayers foot the bill for new charter campuses

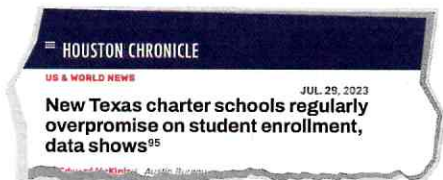
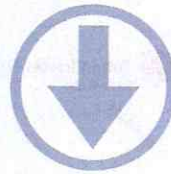
Millions of taxpayer dollars are spent on an inefficient parallel system of publicly-funded charter schools.

When seeking approval to open a new campus, charter schools routinely provide little or no evidence to justify the need for the new campus.⁹² The state's failure to fully investigate and verify the actual need often results in low enrollment at new charter schools and subpar student performance, in addition to duplicative administrative, academic, staff, and facility costs.



LOW ENROLLMENT

The Houston Chronicle reported that of the 19 new charter schools approved since 2017 that have opened in Texas, 18 fell short of their enrollment projections.⁹³ In Harris County, for example, Legacy School of Sports Sciences projected to have 1,850 students by school year 2023-24, while actual data shows its enrollment was 447 students —75% below the projection in its charter application.⁹⁴



CASE STUDY: New charter campus approved in an A-rated district

In 2021, the Texas Commissioner of Education approved two new International Leadership of Texas (ILTexas) charter campuses near Mansfield ISD (MISD)⁹⁷ that were within three miles of three newly opened MISD campuses. At that time, MISD was an A-rated district with 91% A and B-rated campuses, no D or F-rated campuses,⁹⁸ and a stable teacher workforce. In contrast, 28% of ILTexas' campuses were rated D or F,⁹⁹ and its teacher turnover was far higher than the state average.¹⁰⁰ The decision to apply for this new campus was made by the seven ILTexas Board members, while the new MISD campuses were approved by 65% of Mansfield voters in a 2017 bond election.¹⁰¹



CASE STUDY: New charter campus falls 75% short on enrollment

In 2020, the Texas Commissioner of Education approved the opening of a new Pioneer Technology & Arts Academy STEM charter school campus in Richardson ISD (RISD)¹⁰⁵ within 2.3 miles of 11 A or B-rated RISD campuses that all had multiple academic distinctions.

Pioneer claimed that the new 1,200 student campus (Pioneer North Campus) was needed to provide a STEM curriculum for economically disadvantaged students and to meet the needs of students who commuted to other Pioneer campuses.¹⁰⁶ However, RISD's Westwood Math and Science Leadership Magnet school was located only a few blocks away from Pioneer's campus. In 2019-20, Westwood already served a diverse student body, including 57% economically disadvantaged students.¹⁰⁷

Pioneer has not come close to meeting its 1,200 student enrollment projection at this campus. With only 297 students enrolled in 2023-24,¹⁰⁸ Pioneer was 900 students (75%) short of the 1,200 students projected by its fourth year of operation, calling the need for the new campus into question. What's more, Pioneer had a student attrition rate of 43% in 2022-23 and 35% in 2023-24.¹⁰⁹

UNDER-ENROLLED BY 75%

8. Every Texas taxpayer pays for charter schools

Taxpayer Alert: Cost of charter schools has quadrupled and increases every year.

Taxpayers in 70 percent of Texas counties don't have a charter school—but they still pay for them.¹¹⁰ That's because charter schools are funded almost entirely with state taxes generated from all across Texas.

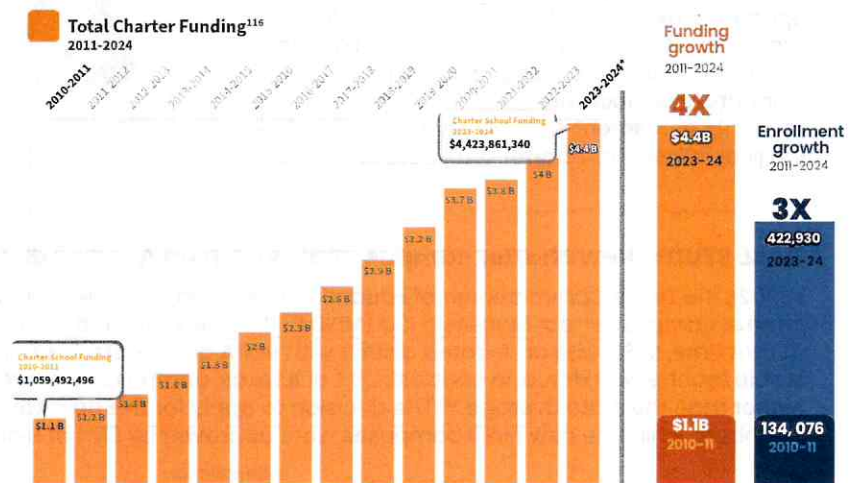
Charter schools serve about 8% of Texas students but receive nearly 17% of all state aid for public schools.¹¹¹

1. WHILE CHARTER ENROLLMENT HAS **TRIPLED** SINCE 2011,¹¹² THE AMOUNT OF STATE FUNDS GOING TO CHARTER SCHOOLS HAS **QUADRUPLED**.¹¹³

Charter schools have received over \$35 billion from Texas taxpayers since 2011.¹¹⁴

Charter funding will continue to increase, costing all Texas taxpayers more money every year.¹¹⁵ Why? Because there is no cap on the number of new charter campuses approved in Texas and no cap on charter school student enrollment.

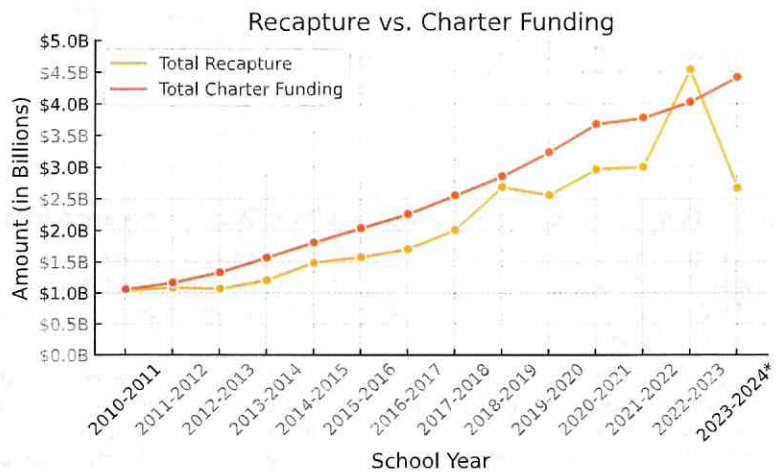
As a result, the cost of charter schools to the state—and to taxpayers—will continue to escalate as more and more new charter campuses are approved every year, often without evidence of actual need for a new charter campus, or assurance of quality.



2. RECAPTURE PAYMENTS FROM DISTRICTS TRACK CHARTER FUNDING.

Recapture of local property taxes in property-wealthy school districts was created to distribute state aid to less property-wealthy school districts—a system widely known as “Robin Hood.”

But as less-wealthy districts’ property values have grown, reducing their state aid, recaptured local property taxes seem to have been funding charter school growth instead. In fact, in many years, the growth in charter school state aid tracks recapture growth almost dollar-for-dollar.¹¹⁷



*The data for 2023-24 is “near final”. Recapture dropped in 2023-24 due to legislative action and funding of property tax reductions

3. THE LARGEST CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE A FUNDING ADVANTAGE OVER PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

This funding advantage is largely because all charters—regardless of their size—receive the average per student amount of the small and mid-size state allotment—over \$1,000 per student in 2023-2024.¹¹⁸

This allotment is intended to help smaller public school districts (fewer than 5,000 students ADA*) address economies of scale.

However, charter schools with over 5,000 students receive the allotment, while public school districts with over 5,000 students receive NOTHING.¹¹⁹

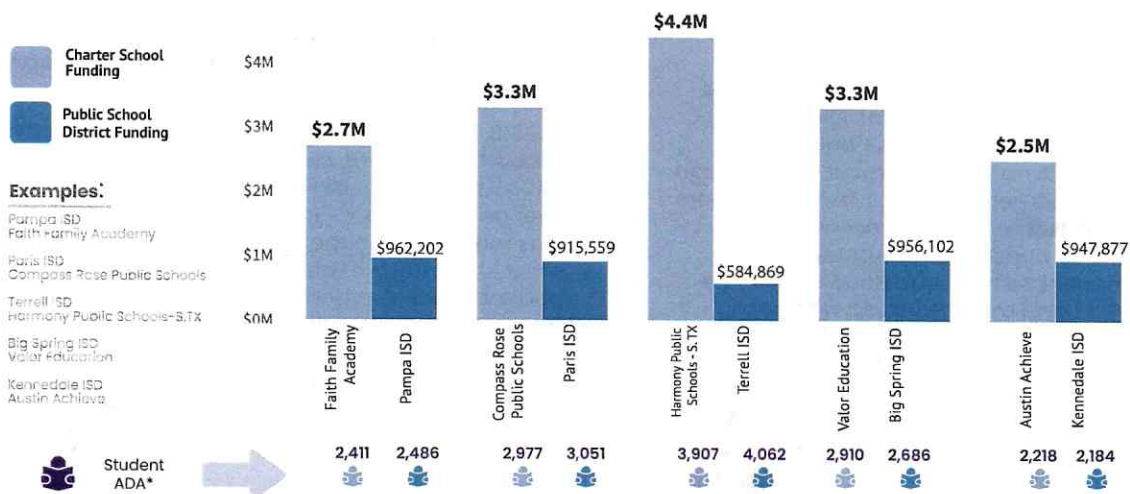
The 15 charter schools with enrollment (ADA*) of over 5,000 students received a total of over \$245 million from the allotment.¹²⁰

Example: In 2023-24 IDEA Public Schools with a statewide enrollment of nearly 77,000 students at 126 campuses received almost \$75 million from this allotment,¹²¹ while public school districts of similar size received NOTHING.¹²²

*ADA- Average Daily Attendance

MID-SIZED CHARTER SCHOOLS RECEIVE UP TO SEVEN TIMES MORE FROM THE SMALLER DISTRICT ALLOTMENT THAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH A SIMILAR ENROLLMENT.¹²³

Small to Mid-Size Allotment



*ADA - Average Daily Attendance

9. Charter schools are not accountable to the public for major decisions

Taxation without representation: parents and the public have little say on charter expansions or spending.

Unlike public school districts, charter schools lack direct public accountability for the most critical decisions they make that affect millions of Texas children in public school districts and thousands of students in charter schools.

For too long, parents and taxpayers have been left out of the loop on decisions that have a significant impact on their local public schools and on the public funds that are spent on charter schools and charter school facilities.

“Our neighborhood was shocked to accidentally find out that a new charter campus we didn’t ask for and didn’t need was proposed for our community. Its location was just a half mile from our newly-opened public elementary school that was approved by 75% of our voters in a bond election. We received no public notice, and no one asked us whether we even wanted a new charter school.” – Claire Campos O’Neal (Central Texas parent)

FACTS

FACT: 34% OF ALL CHARTER SCHOOLS APPROVED SINCE 1995 IN TEXAS HAVE CLOSED¹²⁴

110 charter campuses closed within the last six years.¹²⁵

The closure of charter schools and charter campuses disrupts the education of thousands of Texas students, often forcing parents to find an alternative educational setting for their children with little lead time. For example, Rocketship Education in Fort Worth announced the closure of its second campus mid-year on December 4, 2024 because of “mounting financial pressure and lower than expected enrollment.”¹²⁶



FACT: CHARTER SCHOOL BOARDS ARE SELF-APPOINTED—NOT ELECTED AND NOT ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PUBLIC

Charter schools in Texas are private nonprofit organizations, but receive public funds. Unlike the boards of public school districts who are elected by voters:

- Charter board members are self-selected and cannot be voted out of office by the public.
- Charter board members often don’t live in the community where the charter campus is located, and some members may even live out-of-state.
- Charter parents or community members who disagree with charter policies or actions have little recourse.

FACT: TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION—NO PUBLIC VOTE ON CHARTER BOND DEBT

Unlike public school districts that require voters to approve bond debt for new facilities, charter board members incur billions in bond debt for new facilities with no voter approval, even though the debt will be largely repaid by Texas taxpayers from state funds that charters receive.¹²⁷ Most of those charter bonds are guaranteed by the Texas Permanent School Fund Bond Guarantee Program (PSF) and may be repaid with public funds if charter schools default. Most concerning? Of the \$4.93 billion in PSF-guaranteed charter school bonds (as of October 31, 2024),¹²⁸ several charters’ underlying bond ratings already have been downgraded to “junk bond” status.¹²⁹



CASE STUDY: Largest-ever charter bond deal in United States—\$400 million in debt approved by only five charter board members

In 2018, the five-member board of the International Leadership of Texas charter school (ILTexas) approved \$400 million in bonds—“believed to be the largest-ever deal for charter schools.”¹³⁰ No voter approval was required even though Texas taxpayers will repay most of the debt.¹³¹ Facing financial difficulties and a budget deficit, the bonds were non-investment rated (i.e., “junk bonds”) with a much higher interest rate that increased the total cost of the bonds by millions of dollars.¹³²





CASE STUDY: Charter expansions often don't address waiting lists

Unlike public school districts that expand to meet student demand, charter schools are not required to serve all students who apply even if they have not met their maximum approved enrollment. In fact, instead of providing extra capacity to serve students at a campus with a waiting list, charter schools often apply to open new campuses that can be hundreds of miles away.

For example, BASIS Texas reported a waiting list of 7,529 students primarily at its existing campuses in San Antonio and Central Texas in 2023-24.¹³³ Instead of expanding campuses in these areas to meet the need where there was a waiting list, BASIS requested four new campuses in Plano and Richardson in February 2024, expanding to the Dallas area where BASIS had no existing campuses and therefore, no apparent waiting list.¹³⁴

FACT: NO LEGISLATIVE HEARING FOR A \$4.4 BILLION CHARTER BUDGET

All Texas universities and state agencies that receive state funds must justify their budgets to legislators every two years during legislative hearings. **Not so with charter schools**—even though they received \$4.4 billion in state taxpayer dollars for school year 2023-24—and over \$35 billion since 2010-11.¹³⁵ **The Legislature has never held a budget hearing on charter schools' growing percentage of state funds.**

One charter network alone—IDEA Public Schools received over \$800 million in state revenue in 2023-24 and nearly \$3.5 billion over the last five years.¹³⁶ That level of state general revenue funding for one charter network dwarfs every Texas university and all but the largest state agencies.

State Agency or University	State general revenue for FY2024 (School Year 2023-24)	Legislative hearing for budget
All state-approved charter schools ¹³⁷	\$4.4 B received	NO
IDEA Public Schools ¹³⁸	\$846 M received	NO
University of Texas at Austin ¹³⁹	\$454 M appropriated	YES*
Texas Tech University ¹⁴⁰ System and its five institutions	\$613 M appropriated	YES
Texas Commission on Environmental Quality ¹⁴¹	\$390 M appropriated	YES

*As part of UT System hearing

Public School Districts...More Accountable to the Public

	Charter Schools	Public School Districts
Governing Board elected by voters and accountable to the public	X	✓
Board members reside in the local community ¹⁴²	X	✓
Some board members can live out-of-state	✓	X
Voter approval required for bonds to finance new facilities	X	✓
Meetings and records/communications subject to open records and open meetings legislation ¹⁴³	✓	✓
STAAR exams required	✓	✓
Generally, all teachers must be certified	X	✓
Generally, class size limits for grades K-4	X	✓
Laws on nepotism apply in all cases	X	✓
Superintendents are prohibited from related party transactions with their own school ¹⁴⁴	X	✓



Endnotes

Abbreviations used in citations:

LBB: Legislative Budget Board

TEA: Texas Education Agency

TEA PEIMS FSP: Financial Standard Report

TEA TAPR: Texas Academic Performance Report

TEA SOF: Summary of Finances

TEA SOF CSSS: Summary of Finances Charter School Statewide Summary

TPEIR: Texas Public Education Information Report

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FACING FACTS: CHARTER SCHOOLS IN TEXAS

after thirty years it's time for change

It's time for Texans to have more power over the decisions that impact the education of our children and cost billions of our taxpayer dollars.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REPORT:

Charter schools leave too many students behind

- Unlike public school districts, charter schools can exclude certain students from enrolling and expel a student for any reason.
- The percentage of special education students served by charter schools is 29% less than the percentage served by public school districts.
- Almost half of Texas charter schools spend NOTHING on transportation for students.
- Charter schools spend an average of \$437 more per student on central administration than public school districts.

Public school districts lose billions in revenue to charter schools

- Charter schools serve about 8% of Texas students but receive about 17% of all state aid for public schools.
- Five urban public school districts have lost \$5.3 billion in revenue over the last five years due to unlimited charter expansion.

Public school districts consistently outperform charter schools statewide

- Charter schools have more than triple the high school dropout rate of public school districts.
- Public school districts have scored higher than charter schools on statewide STAAR exams for All Students/All Subjects and in most individual subject areas for the last 20 years.

Many Texas laws that apply to public school districts to protect taxpayers do not apply to charter schools

- Unlike public school superintendents, charter superintendents can lease their own property back to their charter school despite the conflict of interest.

No cap on charter school enrollment

- Existing charter schools can expand anywhere in Texas through a charter amendment with the sole approval of the appointed Texas Commissioner of Education and without a vote by any elected body.
- Since 2010, 1,128 new charter campuses have been approved by one appointed state official with no public notice, vote, or meeting.

Charter schools are not accountable to the public for major decisions

- Charter schools have incurred billions in bond debt for facilities without any voter approval.
- Charter school boards are self-appointed, not elected and not accountable to the public and taxpayers.

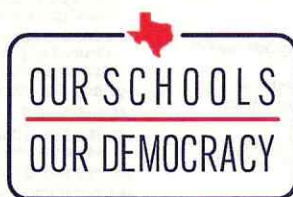
The largest charter schools have a funding advantage over public school districts

- All charter schools receive more than \$1,000 per student in state funds regardless of their size from a state allotment to help small to mid-size school district.
- IDEA Public Schools with almost 77,000 students received nearly \$75 million from the allotment in 2023-24, while public school districts of similar size received NOTHING.

**All citations for this page are included on pages 18-19 of this report*

The stakes are high.

The future of our local public schools that are dedicated to educating all children is at risk.



About Our Schools Our Democracy

Our Schools Our Democracy (OSOD) is a new Texas-based nonpartisan and independent 501c3 nonprofit organization established to educate and inform parents, taxpayers, and decision-makers about the impact of unlimited charter school expansion on our public school districts, neighborhood schools, students, and our democracy.