

Charter Schools 101

By Brooke Dollens Terry

Even though charter schools have been around for more than a decade, many Americans don't know very much about them. In fact, one recent national poll found that only 20 percent of Americans know that a charter school is a public school. Charter schools are innovative and free public schools funded with public dollars that are open to all students.

One of our focuses this past year has been to educate lawmakers, policymakers, and the general public about charter schools. We put together a com-

prehensive Q&A sheet which provides facts about charter schools in Texas and nationwide. This tool has been helpful to lawmakers and parents and can be downloaded from the Foundation's website at www.TexasPolicy.com.

As we were conducting our research on charter schools, we heard time and again that there were not enough seats to accommodate all of the students that wanted to attend a charter school in Texas, but there was no actual measurement of parental and student demand. During the summer of 2008,

we set out to determine the unmet demand for Texas charter schools by contacting open-enrollment charter schools across the state and tallying their waiting list numbers.

What we found is telling of how many traditional public schools are failing to meet the needs of students and parents. Nearly 17,000 Texas students were on a waiting list to attend a charter school in the 2007-08 school year because of space constraints. This problem was made worse when Texas hit the state cap on charter schools, preventing new charters from opening in November of 2008.

Texas' large waiting list, which demonstrates that demand clearly outweighs supply, led several state lawmakers to file proposals to eliminate the cap on charter schools or raise the cap incrementally by 10 or 20 per year. Many education associations representing teachers, administrators, school board members, and others fought to preserve the status quo and prevent the number of charter schools from expanding.

Unfortunately, politics prevailed over good public policy and the charter school bill died on the House floor on a point of order during the last hours of the legislative session.

We conducted a second statewide survey of demand this fall and found that



From left: State Senator Dan Patrick; Brooke Terry, TPPF; Anthony and Lupe Arenivar; David Dunn, Executive Director, Texas Charter School Association; and Justin Keener, TPPF, at a press conference releasing the latest statewide waiting list numbers at Harmony elementary charter school in Austin, Texas.



Attendees at a tour of KIPP elementary charter school in San Antonio, Texas. **Back Row:** Peter Clark, office of Rep. Villarreal; Matthew Jones, office of Rep. Castro; Don Jones, office of Rep. Menendez; Matt Matthews, Texas Charter School Association. **Front Row:** Mark Larson, Superintendent of KIPP SA; Brooke Terry, TPPF; Amanda Thomas, Texas Charter School Association; Amber Hausenfluck, office of Sen. Van de Putte; Pat Kelly, office of Sen. Wentworth; and Clifton Walker, office of Rep. Farías.

the waiting list number more than doubled. For the 2008-09 school year, there were more than 40,000 Texas students on waiting lists unable to attend the school of their choice.

In addition to one-on-one meetings with legislators, testifying before interim committees, and many other outreach activities, we have used the medium of film to educate policymakers and the public about charter schools. Over the last six months, we held movie screenings of two award-winning education documentaries, *Flunked* and *The Cartel*. These films used research and personal interviews to show the need for education reform and how charter schools can be part of the solution.

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We have also coordinated several tours of charter schools in Austin, San Antonio, and Dallas for legislative staff and business leaders to give them a personal glimpse of successful charter schools in action. We plan to coordinate more tours during the interim in our efforts to educate policymakers and the public on how successful charter schools are

providing new opportunities for many Texas students and their families.

It is important for parents to be fully informed and to know all of their choices in k-12 education. Charter schools are one of many education options and are worth exploring in your community. ★

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