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Texas' charter-school owners are replicating their success

BY SHIRLEY JINKINS
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FORT WORTH — Harmony Science Academy sits on the corner of Walton Avenue and Westcreek Drive in a former supermarket that now looks like a gated office building. Enrollment is 560 in the public charter school, which offers grades K-10.

Across the street is bustling Westcreek Elementary School, a traditional Fort Worth school district campus with 742 students. Its presence doesn't seem to deter Harmony's growth, or its mission to provide an alternative public education choice.

"We have 1,400 applications for 350 openings," said Teyfik Eski, superintendent of the 3-year-old academy, one of 19 affiliated schools across the state operated by the nonprofit Cosmos Foundation of Houston. Operators of multiple charter schools often replicate programs and methods over several campuses, and these systems are sprouting up like school districts of their own across the state. About 35 percent of charter schools are operated by organizations with franchiselike programs.

"Charters have certainly grown," said David Dunn, executive director of the Texas Charter Schools Association. "It's really because there's a range of missions in charter schools. Charter operators can tailor schools to the specific needs of student populations."

About 30 percent of Texas charter schools are secondary schools designed for students who have dropped out or been unsuccessful in other public schools, Dunn said. Another 30 percent are focused on elementary students, and still others offer college preparatory programs for low-income students.

Some 15 to 20 of the state's 160 charter holders have multiple charters and/or campuses. But that small group operates about 160 to 200 of the approximately 460 charter schools statewide, according to the charter schools association.

Is this duplication of programs good for the independent charter-school movement?

"Once innovative educators design a program that's effective, they want to replicate that program for as many students as can be helped by it," said Dunn. "Charter school operators are do-gooders."

Strong science and technology programs, smaller class sizes and fewer distracting discipline problems draw parents to his open-enrollment school, Eski said.

More than 16,000 students are on waiting lists for charter schools around the state, Dunn said.

"It's all about parents having public school options for kids," said Chuck Cook, chief executive officer of Lewisville-based nonprofit Responsive Education Solutions. "For the high school kids, it's the second or last chance in the system before their funding runs out."

Responsive, originally known as Eagle Academies of Texas, operates 31 schools with a total enrollment of about 4,000. It is the largest charter school system in the state, both in numbers of schools and students.

Cook said Responsive tries to cap school enrollment at under 200 students. When waiting lists grow, Responsive opens another school. Kaleb Burns, 16, has made progress since transferring to Responsive's Premier High School of Fort Worth, said his mother, Susan Burns.


"It's really boosted his self-confidence," she said. "He's making great grades, and he's really putting forth some effort, which he didn't do before."

Kaleb has attention-deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, his mother said, and his school history was one of falling behind and getting into trouble in traditional public schools.

Anne Ivy's son Dmitry, adopted from Russia five years ago, also attends Premier.

"He had a hard time retaining knowledge," Ivy said, adding that the Fort Worth district's school for international

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students didn't help her son, who was the only Russian speaker among many Spanish speakers in his class.

"Teachers have more time to work with the kids, and it's more like a one-on-one tutoring situation," Susan Burns said. "The students have their own pace, and yet it's goal-oriented."

Charter schools in Texas The Texas Legislature approved the establishment of charter schools in 1995. The oldest charter schools opened in 1996.

A charter school is a type of public school, and students attend for free. A "charter" is a type of contract granted by an educational entity such as the State Board of Education or the board of trustees of an independent school district.

Though charter schools do not collect property taxes like public schools districts, they do receive an allotment from the state for each student enrolled. They must rely on their operating funds to build or expand.

Most charter schools in Texas are open-enrollment charters. The three other types of charters allowed under the Texas Education Code are campus charters, college or university charters, and home-rule school district charters.

Since charter schools serve gifted and talented students as well as those who need extra help, state academic ratings range from academically acceptable to exemplary, much like other public schools. Charter schools that are consistently ranked academically unacceptable can lose their state accreditation.

In November the state-mandated limit of 215 open-enrollment charters was reached.

The state has 465 approved charter schools. The average has 194 students.

Sources: Texas Education Agency, Rand Corp., Center for Education Reform

At a glance Premier High School, Fort Worth

2008 TEA academic ranking: academically acceptable

Target group: credit recovery for high school students

Grade levels: 7-12

Parent company: Responsive Education Solutions (formerly Eagle Academies of Texas), Lewisville

Budget (2006-07): \$17.8 million

Fund balance: \$5.5 million

Harmony Science Academy-Fort Worth

2008 TEA academic ranking: exemplary

Target group: students with strong science skills

Grade levels: K-10

Parent company: Cosmos Foundation, Houston

Budget (2006-07): \$30.5 million

Fund balance: \$3.4 million


Source: Internal Revenue Service filings

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