TEXAS

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Texas's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of Texas's public-school sectors. The vast majority of Texas's low-performing district and charter schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. Furthermore, neither sector was particularly successful at *closing* persistently low-performing schools: Only 11 percent of low-performing charters closed over five years, as did only 3 percent of district low performers. (These closure rates were well below the overall rates for the ten states in the study.) Overall, 74 percent of the charters and 77 percent of the district schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 were still in existence and still low-performing in 2008-09.

Characteristics of Texas's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is

BACKGROUND ON TEXAS'S CHARTER SECTOR

Texas passed charter legislation in 1995. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 387 charter schools operated in Texas during 2009-10,[1] serving over 147,000 students, or 3 percent of all public-school pupils in the state.[2] Thirty-eight charter schools have closed since 1995, representing 9 percent of all charters ever opened.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 76 percent of Texas's charter schools are independently operated, while 22 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 2 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Texas's charter law was ranked twenty-first (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits local school boards and the State Board of Education to authorize charters. The number of state-authorized open-enrollment charters is capped at 215, though existing charters can expand through additional campuses.[4]

consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 108 Texas charter schools and 5,064 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that thirty-five charter schools (32 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did sixty district schools (1 percent). The fact that the Texas charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools than its district sector may reflect, in part, the large fractions of charter schools that offer alternative educational programs and that are located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Texas Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	32% (n=35)	1% (n=60)	2% (n=95)
Others	68% (n=73)	99% (n=5,004)	98% (n=5,077)
Total Schools	108	5,064	5,172

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Texas Education Agency (2010).

Table 2 (see page 106) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 673, compared with 557 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 303, compared with 250 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Texas's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	66.7	38.7	39.0	80.0	71.2	74.1
Rural	21.7	25.9	25.8	8.6	9.6	9.3
Other	11.7	35.4	35.1	11.4	19.2	16.7
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	83.8	55.5	55.9	72.8	57.9	62.7
Special Education	13.8	11.9	11.9	16.1	10.4	12.3
Limited English Proficiency	25.2	15.7	15.8	5.9	10.0	8.7
Hispanic	56.8	41.2	41.3	39.6	32.4	34.7
Black	31.3	12.8	13.1	43.4	37.4	39.3
# Schools	60	5,004	5,064	35	73	108
Avg. Enrollment	673	557	558	303	250	267

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

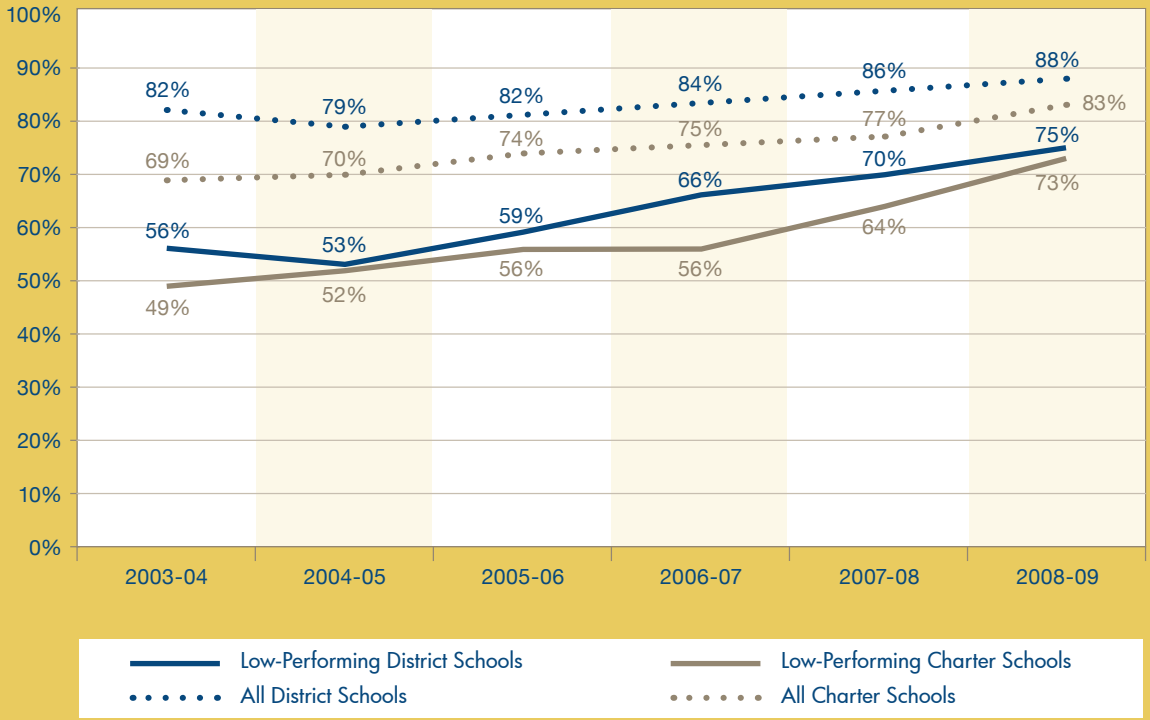
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 107) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Texas schools improved over the five-year period.[6]

Average school proficiency rates for all Texas schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were lower in the charter sector than in the district sector, and comparing the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other in performance gains.[7] As far as Texas's low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in proficiency trends.[8]

Figure 1. Texas's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on sixty low-performing district schools, 5,064 total district schools, thirty-five low-performing charter schools, and 108 total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Texas Education Agency.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Texas from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 108) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[9]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 109) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Texas's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Four notable findings emerge:

- Most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained low-performing five years later. That was the case with 74 percent (n=26) of charter schools and 77 percent (n=46) of district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.)

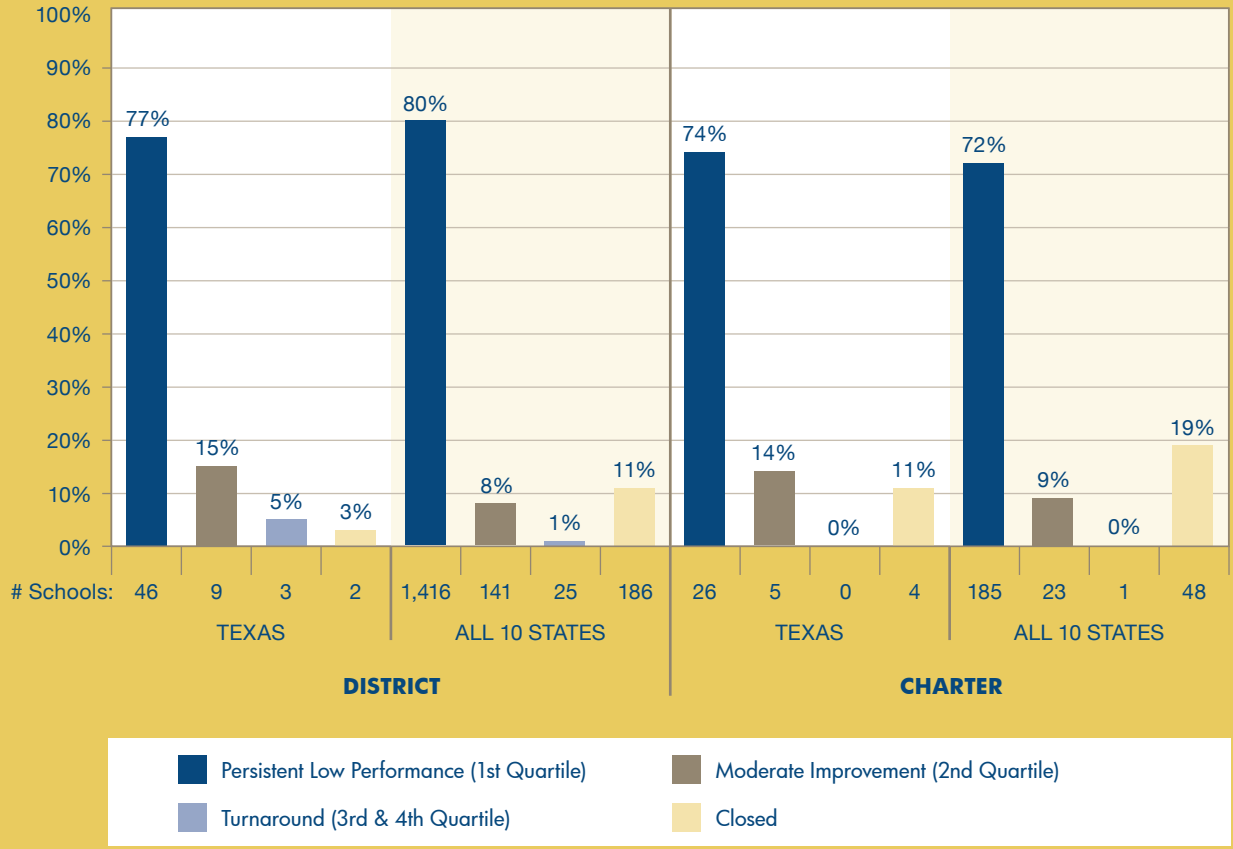
- None of Texas's low-performing charters and just three of its low-performing district schools (5 percent) qualified as "turnarounds." Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.

- Texas's charter and district sectors were home to the largest proportions of moderately improved schools among the ten states in the analysis. Fourteen and 15 percent of Texas's low-performing charter and district schools demonstrated moderate improvement, respectively.

- As with all ten states in the study, low-performing charters were more likely to close in Texas than low-performing district schools. Eleven percent (n=4) of the former closed before the 2009-10 school year, compared with 3 percent (n=2) of the district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.) Texas's charter and district closure rates were both well below the overall rates for the ten states in the study.

In sum, this analysis reveals that weak school performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in both of Texas's public-school sectors. Seventy-four percent of Texas's charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make notable improvement over a five-year period, as did 77 percent of low performers in the district sector. In both sectors, a negligible fraction made dramatic turnarounds. The findings underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite having greater operational autonomy, are no better at turnarounds than their district counterparts.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Texas Education Agency and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Only 11 and 3 percent of Texas's low-performing charter and district schools were closed over the course of the analysis, respectively. Texas's school-closure rates were low among the ten states in this analysis, but the Lone Star State saw more examples of moderate improvement, placing it in the middle of the pack in terms of eliminating low-performing schools.

Both sectors in Texas need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. The state's public-education system may benefit more by ramping up efforts to close low-performing schools than from investing time and resources in school turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes the school will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Texas schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of the state's low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

The first case describes the closure of a chronically low-performing charter school. As Texas is home to three of only twenty-six school turnarounds among all ten states in the analysis, the other highlights the rare successful turnaround of a district school.

I Am That I Am Academy

I Am That I Am Academy was a Dallas charter school that closed after 2006-07. As with many low performers in this study, it was afflicted by both financial mismanagement and low academic performance. Still, the authorizer waited for the school to founder from financial misconduct rather than close it on academic grounds.

In 2002, I Am That I Am Academy opened to serve at-risk students in grades seven to twelve who had failed one or more grades or been previously expelled. Ninety-six percent of the school's students were African American, 4 percent were Hispanic, and 83 percent were poor. Enrollment fluctuated between sixty and 150 pupils throughout the school's tenure, and student-mobility rates regularly topped 25 percent. In 2002-03, the school's overall reading and math proficiency was 26 percent, placing it in the bottom 1 percent of schools statewide. By 2006-07, proficiency had only inched to 29 percent, and the school still ranked in the 1st percentile.

Unacceptable performance was accompanied by questionable fiscal practices. The superintendent hired three of her four children to work at the school. In 2002, one of them reported inflated attendance figures to the Texas Education Agency; the Academy was subsequently forced to return $200,000 to the state.[10] In 2005, it was discovered that the school had been charging seniors $30 for every day of school missed—a clear violation of state law. At the time of closure, the board and superintendent were tangled in a lawsuit regarding the disappearance of $750,000 in state funds. I Am That I Am Academy finally closed voluntarily in February 2008 because it ran out of money, displacing seventy-three students in the middle of the school year. Though plenty of evidence surfaced to justify closing the school for financial misconduct and academic failure, the Texas Education Agency chose not to do so.

Juarez-Lincoln Elementary School

Five percent of the district schools in our Texas sample (three of sixty) met the criteria for turnarounds, including Juarez-Lincoln Elementary School in Laredo. This K-5 school served close to 400 students; in 2008-09, the student body was entirely Hispanic and 96 percent poor.

The school made dramatic performance gains over five years. In 2003-04, it earned an overall proficiency rating of 51 percent, ranked in the lowest percentile of schools statewide, and failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target. By 2008-09, however, it ranked in the 75th percentile statewide and 95 percent of its pupils scored proficient in reading and math. The school earned an "Exemplary" rating from the Texas Education Agency in 2008-09 and 2009-10.

The school's remarkable improvement is largely attributed to a concentrated effort to align curriculum, instruction, and assessment to the state standards. Staff was provided ongoing professional development to learn how to successfully map instruction to the state curriculum. In addition to alignment efforts, the school implemented the federal Reading First program and a structured after-school program.

REFERENCES

1. *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools 2010*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Education Reform, 2010), http://www.edreform.com/download/CER_Charter_Survey_2010.pdf.
2. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Public Charter School Dashboard, http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/home.
3. Todd Ziebarth, *How State Charter Laws Rank Against the New Model Public Charter School Law* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010), http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/DB-ModelLaw_Report_01-12-10.pdf.
4. Center for Education Reform, "'Race to the Top' for Charter Schools; Which States Have What It Takes to Win: Charter School Law Ranking and Scorecard 2010—Texas," http://www.charterschoolresearch.com/laws/texas.htm.
5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 8,110 public schools in Texas in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 5,172 schools after excluding 119 schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 1,426 schools designated by NCES as high schools, 186 schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 1,207 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Texas Education Agency.
6. Increases were also observed in 4th- and 8th-grade math and reading scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/).
7. This analysis is insufficient to lend conclusions to the overall effectiveness of Texas's charter and district sector. More rigorous student-level analyses on the effectiveness of Texas's charter schools suggest that academic growth is lower, on average, for charter-school students than similar district students. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found the average growth of Texas's charter school students is 0.05 standard deviations lower, on average, than similar district students (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
8. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sector could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Texas, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
9. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure that the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
10. Karen Ayres Smith, "Founder, Board Blame Each Other for Lynacre Academy's Demise," *Dallas Morning News*, February 17, 2008, http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/localnews/stories/021708dnmetdeadcharter.3bdcbf0.html.