



TEXAS PUBLIC
CHARTER SCHOOLS
ASSOCIATION

TEXAS' HIDDEN ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

A CASE FOR THE EXPANSION
OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

It wasn't until a Texan took action that the United States began to seriously grapple with educational inequality.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, called for a landmark study “concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin.” The resulting Coleman Report of 1966 cast a glaring spotlight on the gaps in academic outcomes between students of color and their white peers. Researchers refer to these disparities as *achievement gaps*.¹

Unfortunately, President Johnson’s home state provides a cautionary tale for how these gaps can persist. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that Black vs. White and Hispanic vs. White achievement gaps in Texas were similar in 2019 as they were in the 1990s.²

More troubling still: These gaps are hidden in plain sight. Even at the “best” traditional public school districts (ISDs) – those graded A or B by the Texas Education Agency – students of color have worse academic outcomes than their white peers, often by wide margins.

These stubborn gaps have both moral and economic implications. Without closing them, for example, Texas cannot meet its goal of ensuring that 60% of adults hold a certificate or college degree by 2030 – and that its diverse workforce will be prepared for the jobs of tomorrow.

To date, one strategy for increasing equity has proven exceptionally successful: Creating new educational opportunities by expanding public charter schools. Charters have proven they can equip children of color to be just as college-ready as their white peers.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Public charter schools open in neighborhoods where parents ask for more educational opportunities. The needs of specific communities range from more rigorous instruction to safer environments to smaller class sizes.

Critics of public charter schools want to revise administrative rules and statute so that charters are blocked from opening within the boundaries of “high-performing” ISDs, usually defined as districts receiving an A or B letter grade on the Texas School Report Card. These critics argue that students in highly-rated districts already have the schools they need. For instance, in July of 2020, Dallas ISD’s board trustee Maxie Johnson stated that his B-rated district did not need any KIPP Texas charter schools to open in the Oak Cliff area.³

But the evidence tells a different story: Even in the state’s “highest-performing” school districts, children of color and low-income students are being left behind.

In this report, we examine achievement gaps at district schools that received an overall grade of A or B from the Texas Education Agency. The results are shocking. For example, consider that:

- At the average “high-performing” district school, white students meet grade-level standards at a rate 24 points higher than Black students.
- There are nearly 700 district schools in Texas where the gap between white students and Black students is double that (at least 48 points).

This hidden inequality across Texas has persisted for decades. But public charter schools, now 25 years old, are helping reverse these achievement gaps – and prove that traditionally underserved students, when provided with the support and opportunities they deserve, will thrive.

This report finds that public charter schools have made incredible progress. For example, consider how many students meet grade-level standards in Science:

- The White-Black achievement gap at top-rated district schools is 34 points, compared to 10 points at public charter schools. In other words, charters have narrowed the size of the gap by 71%.
- The White-Hispanic achievement gap at top-rated district schools is 8.5 points. At charters, the gap has been *eliminated*: Hispanic students actually outperform their White peers by about 5 points.



KEY FINDINGS

More than 4,500 Texas public schools earned an A or B grade on their “report cards” from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which measure schools’ academic performance. These strong grades are notable achievements. They indicate that schools are reaching overall achievement and growth targets as measured by how many students meet state standards in various subjects.

However, a simple A or B grade tells the public little about *which* students are achieving and growing toward “Meets Grade Level” test scores. Texans must ask whether *all* students are thriving on these campuses.

Our analysis of campus-level data reveals that academic achievement and growth is occurring at higher rates among white students in ISDs, compared with students of color. Results from Math, Science, Reading, Writing, and Social Studies exams show the following:

- At the average A or B rated district school, white students are more likely than Black students to meet grade-level standards by *more than 24 percentage points*.
- There are nearly 700 schools with an A or B grade where the gap is *double* that – at least 48 percentage points.
- The gap is particularly pronounced in Science, where the average gap between white students and Black students at A and B rated schools is *34 percentage points*.
- At the average A or B-graded campus, white students are more likely than Hispanic students to meet grade-level standards by *10 percentage points*.

The evidence is clear: Black and Hispanic students across the state – even those who attend A and B rated schools – need more opportunities within the public school system.

Methodology

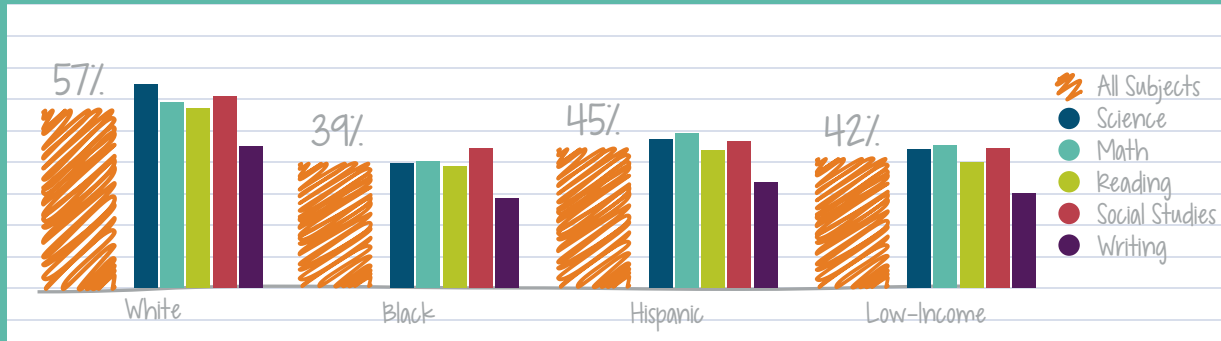
Achievement gaps in Texas are defined as the differences by campus in the percentages of students earning “Meets Grade Level” on STAAR exams (all grade levels). When students meet grade level on STAAR, the Texas Education Agency classifies them as on track to be college-ready. For this study, we focus on White vs. Black and White vs. Hispanic achievement gaps.

HIDDEN ACHIEVEMENT GAPS ACROSS THE STATE



There are pronounced achievement gaps at the highest-rated schools in Texas. About 60% of White students on these campuses meet grade-level standards, compared to about 40% of Black students, 45% of Hispanic students, and 42% of low-income students.

Achievement Gaps at the Top-Rated Schools in Texas



The below chart provides a snapshot of the gaps separating students of color from white students:

Achievement Gap	Avg. Gap Statewide	Gap at Avg. Campus
White-Black	19.8%	24.4%
White-Hispanic	9.9%	9.9%

Strikingly, these achievement gaps are even worse than they were two decades ago. Linton and Kester (2003) conducted a study applying our same methodology to 1996–2000 Texas standardized test scores for all schools – not just the highest-performing schools – and calculated smaller average achievement gaps for White-Black (7%) and White-Hispanic (5%).⁴

Texas is quietly paying a steep price. If these achievement gaps at the state’s A and B-graded schools were closed, it would mean:

- 86,584 Black students, a group equivalent in size to the total enrollment of Austin ISD, would be meeting grade-level standards
- 170,123 more Hispanic students, a group equivalent in size to the total enrollment of Houston ISD, would be meeting grade-level standards



ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN MAJOR METRO AREAS

In the state's four largest metro areas, the average White-Black achievement gaps across all A and B-graded schools are slightly smaller than the statewide average but still stark, ranging from 17% in Houston to 24% in Austin.

White-Black Achievement Gaps at Top-Rated Schools by Metro Area

Metro Area	# Campuses Graded A or B	Avg. Rate of Students Meeting Grade Level Standards		Avg. Gap for the Metro Area	Gap at Average Campus
		White Students	Black Students		
Austin	67	67.6%	43.8%	23.8%	25.2%
Dallas / Ft. Worth	116	65.2%	46.1%	19.1%	12%
San Antonio	23	64.4%	46.9%	17.5%	16.3%
Houston	118	64.1%	46.7%	17.4%	7.4%
Statewide	4,516	61.7%	41.9%	19.8%	24.4%

The average White-Hispanic gaps in the major metros are slightly higher than the statewide average, ranging from 11% in Houston to 15% in Austin.

White-Hispanic Achievement Gaps at Top-Rated Schools by Metro Area

Metro Area	# Campuses Graded A or B	Avg. Rate of Students Meeting Grade Level Standards		Avg. Gap for the Metro Area	Gap at Average Campus
		White Students	Hispanic Students		
Austin	67	67.6%	53%	14.6%	15.9%
San Antonio	23	64.4%	53%	11.4%	2.5%
Dallas / Ft. Worth	116	65.2%	54.3%	10.9%	0%
Houston	118	64.1%	53.3%	10.8%	4.3%
Statewide	4,516	61.7%	51.8%	9.9%	9.9%

ACHIEVEMENT GAPS IN WEALTHIER SUBURBAN DISTRICTS



We might expect highly-rated schools of the wealthier suburban districts within those same metro areas to have smaller achievement gaps, due to higher levels of resources. But the opposite is true: White students outperform their peers of color by even *greater* margins.

The following table shows the size of achievement gaps in suburban districts located in the same metro areas. These ISDs meet two criteria:

1. A majority of all campuses are rated A or B
2. The district is the wealthiest in its county (fewest economically disadvantaged students)

Achievement Gaps in Suburban Districts

Metro Area	District	# A/B Campuses	White-Black Gap at Avg. Campus	White-Hispanic Gap at Avg. Campus	Share of district students who are low-income
Austin	Lago Visto ISD	4	59%	19%	25.6%
Houston	Spring Branch ISD	25	27%	17%	58.9%
San Antonio	Alamo Heights ISD	4	18%	20%	19.7%
Dallas / Ft. Worth	Highland Park ISD	7	17%	2%	0.0%

For example: In Lago Vista, located just outside Austin in Travis County, the median household income is \$13,000 higher than the statewide average. Yet Black students are trailing their white peers by an average of nearly 60% at four highly-rated campuses.



PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Public charter schools are helping provide greater educational opportunities by closing achievement gaps between white students and children of color.

In every subject, Texas public charters have smaller achievement gaps between white students and their peers of color, especially Black students. This is true even when comparing all public charters (i.e. those receiving *any* grade, A-F, from TEA) with only A and B-graded ISD campuses.

The charts below compare average achievement gaps at top-rated ISD campuses statewide to those at all public charter schools. The first two rows in each chart show the gaps in the same format as the rest of this report – the difference between the percentage of White students meeting grade level standards and the percentage of Black or Hispanic students meeting them.

The shaded rows indicate how much smaller the gaps are at charters. In other words, if the gap at ISD campuses is 20% and the gap at charters is 10%, then the gap at charters is 50% smaller.

Statewide Average White-Black Achievement Gap

	All Subjects	Science	Math	Reading	Social Studies	Writing
ISD Campuses Graded A or B	24.4%	34.4%	26%	25.7%	32.9%	25%
All Public Charter Schools	15.2%	9.9%	10.1%	10.4%	12.2%	2.7%
Charter Narrow the Gap By	38%	71%	61%	59%	63%	89%

White-Black achievement gaps in Texas are smaller in public charter schools than ISDs by 10 to 25 percentage points, with the biggest differences in Science and Social Studies. This cannot be explained away by significant differences in the performance of white students, who meet grade level at similar rates at both school types (58% at charters vs. 61.7% at ISDs).

White-Hispanic achievement gaps are also smaller in public charter schools. Strikingly, public charter schools have **reversed the gap** in Science, Math, Social Studies, and Writing. Hispanic students are actually achieving at slightly higher levels than their white peers in these subjects.

Statewide Average White-Hispanic Achievement Gap

	All Subjects	Science	Math	Reading	Social Studies	Writing
ISD Campuses Graded A or B	9.9%	34.4%	8.5%	7.9%	10.2%	6.1%
All Public Charter Schools	7.9%	9.9%	-5.3%	1.6%	-4.7%	-7.2%
Charter Narrow the Gap By	20.5%	71%	100%	79.3%	100%	100%

The evidence tells an incredibly powerful story: Public charter schools are helping reverse generations-old achievement gaps, including and maybe *especially* in districts where the needs of Black and Hispanic students have been overlooked.



WHAT EXPLAINS HOW PUBLIC CHARTERS ARE CLOSING THE GAPS?

Students of color in public charters have better access to teachers of color.

When students of color can relate to their teachers, the outcomes are enormously positive. Research shows, for example, that Black students who have one black teacher by third grade are 13 percent more likely to enroll in college – and those who have two are 32 percent more likely.⁵ Teachers of color are also less likely than white teachers to doubt the academic potential of Black and Hispanic students.⁶

Black students have better access to Black teachers in public charter schools. At charters, the percentage of Black teachers (22%) is slightly greater than the percentage of Black students (17%). By contrast, the percentage of Black teachers in traditional public schools is one-third that of enrolled Black students.

% of Black Teachers, Average of Districts

	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017
Charter	22%	22%	23%
ISD	4%	4%	4%

Similarly, Hispanic students have better access to Hispanic teachers in public charter schools. Hispanic students account for 61% of all public charter enrollment statewide, and 50% of the total enrollment in all traditional public schools – an 11% difference. Meanwhile, the percentage of Hispanic teachers in public charters is almost double the rate in traditional public schools.

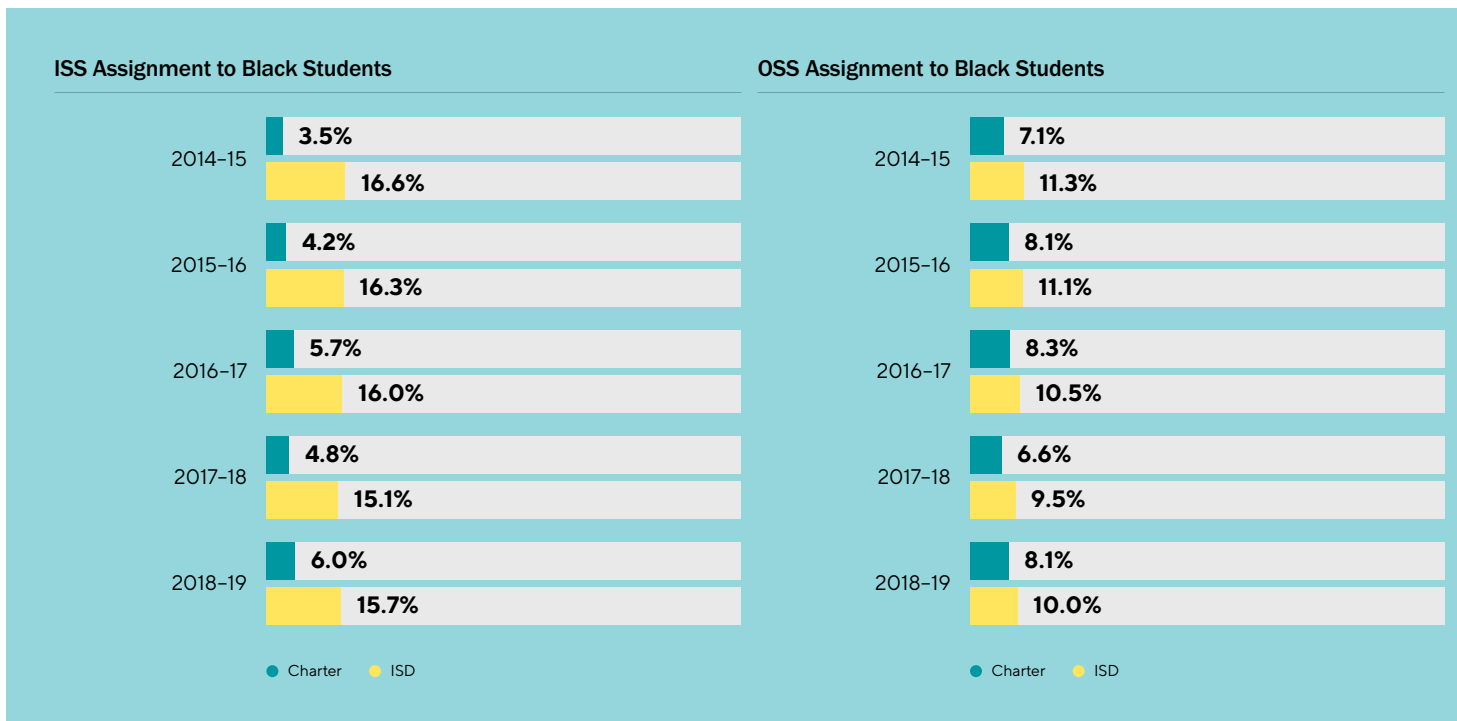
% of Hispanic Teachers, Average of Districts

	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017
Charter	25%	25%	23%
ISD	16%	16%	15%

Students of color in public charters get more instructional time because administrators suspend them less often.

When schools suspend students, they remove them from their regular classroom instruction. These suspensions can last from 1 to 3 days. Results from past studies indicate that suspended students’ lost classroom instruction causes lower standardized test scores, even if schools suspend students only once. Furthermore, suspension effects on student achievement persist into future years.⁷

Public charter schools assign in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS) to far lower percentages of Black students than traditional public schools. This means Black students in public charters receive days more of classroom instruction per year.



Students of color in public charters attend smaller than average campuses where it is easier to build relationships with teachers and school leaders.

School sizes in Texas have increased in the past four decades due to consolidation as districts attempt to take advantage of economies of scale. However, research shows that as school size increases, student achievement decreases, especially in math and reading. Economically disadvantaged students are among those disproportionately impacted by the way larger schools have less cohesive culture and behavioral norms.

Texas public charter school campuses tend to have smaller enrollment sizes than traditional public schools. The enrollment at the average public charter campus is one third that of the average traditional public school. Moreover, the larger standard deviation for traditional public schools shows that these traditional campuses have a bigger proportion of super-sized outliers. As a result, public charter students benefit more from smaller campuses than traditional public schools.

	Number of Campuses	Average Campus Enrollment	Standard Deviation, Campus Enrollment
Public Charter	782	431	322
ISD	8,084	637	548

Students of color in public charters are surrounded by more college-bound classmates who promote a culture of achievement.

Two of the largest and fastest growing public charter districts in Texas – KIPP Texas Public Schools and IDEA Public Schools – make commitments to families as early as Kindergarten that regardless of income, race or ethnicity, all students will go to college. This focus on higher education creates a college-bound culture that promotes scholastic excellence. As a result, these two charter districts (and others like them) have some of the highest college enrollment rates in the state, especially among students of color.

On average, public charters sent students to Texas colleges at a rate 9% higher than that of traditional public schools. In addition, the standard deviations for public charters and traditional public schools are similar (i.e. they have almost equal proportions of outliers, so it’s clear that the difference between school types isn’t driven by just a few schools with particularly high or low rates of college enrollment). This is evidence that public charter students benefit more from a stronger college-bound culture.

	Number of Campuses	Average College Enrollment	Standard Deviation, College Enrollment
Public Charter	120	63%	17%
ISD	1,395	54%	13%

conclusion

TOWARD A FAIRER PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

In July 2020, a member of the State Board of Education asked a pointed question to educators hoping to open a public charter school called Brillante Academy in McAllen: “Why do we need more charter schools in a high-performing district?”

This report makes the answer clear: Texas needs a public education system where all students can attend a school that is high-performing for *them*. Public charter schools are achieving that goal.

In McAllen, where the traditional school district boasts an A grade from the state, 70% of white students meet state academic standards — compared to 50% of Hispanic students. And it’s not alone. There are hundreds of districts like this, stretching across every corner of Texas.

For the past 25 years, public charter schools have opened to tilt the scales toward equity by helping more traditionally disadvantaged students thrive. Collectively, Texas charters tell a remarkable success story. It’s a story of smaller and smaller achievement gaps.

A story of what happens when we believe in every child.

We applaud the way in which many traditional school districts have worked toward more responsive, more successful public schools. Some have had resounding success.

But lawmakers must finally acknowledge, with courageous frankness, that even the “best” public schools are failing to deliver for the students who need it most. Denying public charter schools the ability to complement these schools and districts — to step in and help lift up families — shortchanges the entire state.

endnotes

1. Since then, most peer-reviewed studies have tied achievement gaps to low incomes.
2. National Center for Educational Statistics (2021). NAEP Report Cards: Mathematics and Reading. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education.
3. Maxie Johnson made this statement at a Press Conference on Jul 14, 2020. The Dallas Observer reported his claims on July 16, 2020. Linton, T. H., & Kester, D. (2003). Exploring the achievement gap between white and minority students in Texas. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 11, 10.
4. <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/11/12/black-students-black-teachers-college-gap/>
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7. Cooley, D. A., & Floyd, K. A. (2013). Small rural school district consolidation in Texas: An analysis of its impact on cost and student achievement. *Administrative Issues Journal*, 3(1), 7.
8. Egalite, A. J., & Kisida, B. (2016). School size and student achievement: A longitudinal analysis. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 27(3), 406-417.
9. Gershenson, S., & Langbein, L. (2015). The effect of primary school size on academic achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(1_suppl), 135S-155S.
10. Martinez, M. A., Vega, D., & Marquez, J. (2019). Latinx students' experiences with college access and preparation at college preparatory charter schools. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 18(1), 28-41.
11. This analysis only included standard accountability campuses. Alternative accountability schools were excluded, because public charters have 10% more of these campuses (13% vs. 3%) than traditional public school districts.
12. See: http://www.adminmonitor.com/tx/tea/charter_interviews/20200727/



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Dr. Timothy Mattison completed his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He earned two master's degrees in Global Policy Studies and Russian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he specialized in international trade and finance. He completed his B.S. in Political Science from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Dr. Mattison has published scholarly work on the factors influencing teacher labor supply in Texas, and on extending Medicare to Mexico. His dissertation focused on the factors influencing teacher happiness and psychological wellness. He has also completed research studies for the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Department of Agriculture, the Texas Historical Commission and the United States Foreign Agricultural Service. Before joining TPCSA, Timothy worked for six years as a High School Math Teacher, Instructional Coach and as an Assistant Principal in San Antonio.



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