

No Way Out: Public and Charter Schools in Dallas and Detroit

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Abstract: *A variety of databases were used to answer questions about charter and public schools with regard low-income students, special education students, and academic performance. Charter schools in Dallas and Detroit served comparable numbers of poor children, but charter schools enrolled far fewer students in special education. “High-performing” charter schools had 1) fewer poor students 2) fewer special education students 3) anomalous test scores 4) a location on the outskirts of a school district and 5) selective admissions. Although charter schools have been promoted as “better” than public schools, only 9% of charter schools in Dallas and Detroit surpassed the average pass rate posted by public schools on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test. For eighth graders in Dallas and Detroit, especially those in the center city, charter schools offered no advantages over public schools.*

Keywords: Charter schools, public schools, student achievement

Since 2009, charter school enrollment in the United States has more than doubled and today, over three million students attend a charter school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). Texas has been one of the most “charter-friendly” states with 7% of Texas students attending over 800 state-authorized charter school campuses (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020; Texas Education Agency, 2021). About 100 of Texas’ charter schools are located in Dallas (Gumbert, 2020).

Michigan is even more “charter-friendly” than Texas, with 10% of k-12 students attending about 300 charters (Mack, 2019). Like Dallas, Detroit has one of the largest charter school enrollments in Michigan, and about 50,000 students attend almost 100 charters (Baines, 2022a). In 2021, charters in Detroit had higher enrollments and received more funding than did Detroit Public Community Schools (Baines, 2022b).

The Center for Education Reform (2022) website claims that charters serve more lower income students and that average test scores in charters are higher than in comparable public schools. Similarly, The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2022) asserts that “study after study across methods and samples, has shown that the average student in a public charter school experiences equal or higher achievement growth in English...than that of a district school peer.” In a study sponsored by the Thomas Fordham Institute, Griffith (2019) contends that students enrolled in charters posted higher reading scores on standardized tests than students enrolled in public schools.

With regard to special education, most studies (including Bergman & McFarlin, 2020; Gross & Lake, 2014; Syftestad, Wolf, Tucker, & Rhim, 2021) acknowledge that charters enroll fewer students with special needs than publics. However, Smith (2022) alleges that “charter schools do not enroll a significantly different percentage of students with disabilities” than public schools.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to seek answers to four questions:

- Question 1. Do charter schools in Dallas and Detroit serving eighth-grade students enroll more low-income students than public schools?
- Question 2. Do charter schools in Dallas and Detroit serving eighth-graders enroll fewer students with special needs than do public schools?
- Question 3. Do charter schools in Dallas and Detroit serving eighth-grade students post higher pass rates on the reading/language arts test than public schools?
- Question 4. What are characteristics of high-performing charter schools that serve eighth-graders in Dallas and Detroit?

TERMS AND METHODOLOGY

In this study, a *charter school* is a school that operates under state legislation allowing for the establishment of a school that is funded with public money, but acts independently of a school district, and is typically created to serve specific neighborhoods, purposes, or geographic areas. The term *charters* is used to refer a particular group of charter schools. A *public school* is run by a recognized school district. The term *publics* is used to refer to a particular group of public schools.

The publics in this study were part of either the Dallas Independent School District (Dallas I.S.D.) or the Detroit Public Community Schools (Detroit P.C.S.). Dallas I.S.D. schools are referred to as *Dallas public schools* and only schools that administered the eighth-grade language arts/reading test and were located within Dallas city limits were part of the study. Dallas I.S.D. schools located outside Dallas city limits, such as those in Wilmer-Hutchins, were not included.

Similarly, only schools that administered the eighth-grade reading/language arts test and were located within Detroit city limits were included. School districts that were located within Detroit city limits but were separate from Detroit PCS, such as Hamtramck Schools, were not included. A list of schools that administered these tests can be found in the Appendix.

The federal government requires that both charter and public schools post the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch. This combined number (free + reduced lunch) was used to denote the percentage of *low-income students* in a school.

The *pass rate* for a school was derived based upon the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on an eighth-grade reading/language arts test. Of course, school closures can skew results (students might move from a closed charter to public school, for example) (Hacker & Hobbs, 2010). Both cities experienced quite a few closures of charter elementary and high schools, so data was taken from schools’ eighth-grade test results for reading/language arts (Zernike, 2016). Also, to avoid the variability of enrollment and testing that came with COVID, test scores from 2017-2018 were used.

In Michigan, the eighth-grade test was the M-STEP reading/language arts test, which was scored using a four-point scale: Advanced, Proficient, Partially Proficient, Not Proficient (Michigan Department of Education, 2022a). The percent of students who met or exceeded the standard on the M-STEP (advanced or proficient) was used as the measure for “pass rate.”

In Texas, the assessment was the eighth-grade STAAR reading/language arts test. With STAAR, student scores also were reported using a four-point scale: Masters Grade Level, Meets Grade Level, Approaches Grade Level, and Did Not Meet Grade Level (Texas Education Agency, 2022b). The number used as an indication of “pass rate” was the percentage of students in eighth-grade who performed at the “meets grade level” or “masters grade level.” As with the Michigan data, the total number of eighth-grade test takers was noted for each school. Only data from schools in Detroit and Dallas that administered an eighth-grade reading/language arts test during 2017-2018 were considered.

“*High-performing charters*” were the three charters in each city that had the highest pass rates on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test. School district maps, property tax records, mapping software, state department of education databases, and real estate websites were used to analyze schools, neighborhoods, and student performance (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b).

Schools that administered the eighth-grade reading/language arts test in 2017-2018 in Dallas and Detroit were identified. Then, data for each, individual school was downloaded from a variety of databases, including the National Center for Education Statistics (2022a, 2022b), *Nation’s Report Card* (2022), Michigan Department of Education (2022a, 2022b), Texas Education Agency (2021, 2022a, 2022b), *The Texas Tribune* (2022), Dallas Independent School District (2023), Detroit Public Community Schools (2022), the Detroit Schools Guide (2022), and other sites. Online resources, such as realtor.com, Zillow.com, redfin.com, and Google Maps were used to map the physical locations of schools within school district boundaries and to calculate distances between homes and schools.

RESULTS

QUESTION 1. DO CHARTER SCHOOLS IN DALLAS AND DETROIT SERVING EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS ENROLL MORE LOW-INCOME STUDENTS THAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

About 10,863 eighth-graders were enrolled in one of 22 public schools within the district boundaries of Dallas Independent School District (Dallas I.S.D., 2023; Texas Education Agency, 2022b). Of this group, 9559 eighth-graders, or 88%, were considered low-income (*The Texas Tribune*, 2022; Joint Education Task Force, 2018).

Twenty-three charter schools in Dallas enrolled about 3077 eighth-graders. Of this group, 2707 eighth graders, or 88%, were considered low-income (Texas Education Agency, 2022b).

In Detroit, about 2613 students attended eighth-grade in one of 49 public schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2022a). Of these 2613 students, about 2273, or 87%, were low-income (Catolico, 2020). About 3473 eighth-graders enrolled in one of 40 Detroit charter schools. Eighty-seven percent, or 3022 students, were low-income in Detroit charter schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2022a).

The answer to question 1, “Do charter schools in Dallas and Detroit serving eighth-grade students enroll more low-income students than public schools,” is “No. Charters and publics educated about the same percentage of low-income students. In Dallas, low-income students

comprised 88% of the student populations in both charters and publics. In Detroit, low-income students comprised 87% of the student populations in both charters and publics.”

QUESTION 2. DO CHARTER SCHOOLS IN DALLAS AND DETROIT SERVING EIGHTH-GRADERS ENROLL FEWER STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS THAN DO PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Twelve percent of eighth-graders in Dallas public schools were in special education while 9% of the eighth-graders in Dallas charters were in special education (*Texas Tribune*, 2022; Texas Education Agency, 2022a). Seventeen percent of eighth-grade students enrolled in Detroit public schools were in special education (*Nation’s Report Card*, 2022), while 10% of students in Detroit charters were in special education (Michigan Department of Education, 2022a).

The answer to “Do charter schools in Dallas and Detroit serving eighth-graders enroll fewer students with special needs than do public schools,” is “Yes. Charter schools in Dallas and Detroit, on average, served fewer special education students than did public schools.”

QUESTION 3. DO CHARTER SCHOOLS IN DALLAS AND DETROIT SERVING EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS POST HIGHER PASS RATES ON THE READING/LANGUAGE ARTS TEST THAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

In Dallas public schools, the average pass rate per school for eighth-graders on the reading/language arts test was 38%. In Dallas charters, the average pass rate per school for eighth-graders on the reading/language arts test was 34%.

For Detroit public schools, the average pass rate per school for eighth-graders on the reading/language arts test was 11%. For Detroit charters, the average pass rate per school for eighth-graders was 24%.

The answer to question 3, “Do charter schools in Dallas and Detroit serving eighth-grade students post higher pass rates on the reading/language arts than students enrolled in public schools,” is “Sometimes. Dallas charters posted lower pass rates on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test than public schools, despite having fewer special education students. Detroit charters posted higher pass rates on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test than publics, but 17% of students attending Detroit publics were in special education (compared to 10% in Detroit charters).

QUESTION 4. WHAT ARE CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-PERFORMING EIGHTH-GRADE CHARTER SCHOOLS IN DALLAS AND DETROIT?

The top three performing charters in each city were selected based upon mean pass rates on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test and were considered “high-performing.” The high-performing charters in Dallas were Nova Academy Prichard, Ume Academy, and East Grand Preparatory (Texas Education Agency, 2022a). The high-performing charters in Detroit were Cornerstone Jefferson-Douglass, University Yes, and Detroit Edison (Michigan Department of Education, 2022a). As can be seen from Table 1, the highest-performing charters in Dallas and Detroit enrolled significantly fewer numbers of low-income students. The differences were startling.

- 58% enrollment of low-income students in high performing Dallas charters vs. 88% low-income enrollment outside of the top three charters.
- 72% low-income in high-performing Detroit charters vs. 87% low-income outside of the top three charters.

Table 1
High-performing charter schools in Dallas and Detroit

	Average pass rate	% low-income	% special education
Texas, eighth-grade state average, public schools	46%	60%	11%
Mean, top 3 charter, Dallas	53% (average Dallas charter pass rate=31%)	58% (Dallas public school average =88%)	5% (Dallas public school average =12%)
Michigan, eighth-grade state average, public schools	43%	49%	13%
Mean, top 3 charter, Detroit	62% (average Detroit charter pass rate=19%)	72% (Detroit public school average =87%)	6% (Detroit public school average =17%)

Obviously, one characteristic of high-performing charter schools serving eighth-graders in Dallas and Detroit was that they enrolled fewer poor children. A second characteristic of high performing charter schools was that they had significantly fewer special education students. The differences in special education enrollments were considerable.

- 5% enrollment in special education in high performing Dallas charters vs. 12% special education outside of the top three
- 6% enrollment in special education in high performing Detroit charters vs. 17% special education outside of the top three.

A third characteristic of high performing charters is that an individual school’s high pass rate was atypical. That is, very few charter schools posted pass rates higher than the public’s state average.

- The pass rates of the three highest performing Dallas charters was 53%, but the mean pass rate for the other 20 charters was only 31%.
- The pass rates of the three highest performing Detroit charters was 62%, but the mean pass rate for the other 47 charters was only 19%.

A fourth trait of high-performing charters in Dallas and Detroit had to do with their locations. In both Dallas and Detroit, high-performing charters tended to be located on the edges of the school district attendance zones. In Detroit, University Yes Academy was located south of 8-mile road near the northwest school district boundary, Cornerstone Jefferson-Douglass was located along the northeast boundary, and Detroit Edison was located just above the Detroit River

near the southern boundary line (Google maps, 2023b). In Dallas Ume Academy was in the far southwestern corner of the school district near newly built subdivisions, while Nova Academy Prichard and East Grand Preparatory Academy were located in the east, in recently gentrified neighborhoods close to downtown (Google maps, 2023a).

A fifth characteristic of high-performing charter schools in Dallas and Detroit was that, in order to be admitted, students had to complete a complicated application process that often required in-person interviews, qualifying entrance exams, and evidence of a child's previous behavior, grades, and dispositions (Charter school success, 2020; Detroit schools guide, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The average school pass rate on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test for public schools in the state of Texas was 46%. Only 2 of 23 Dallas charters exceeded the public's 46% pass rate. The average school pass rate on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test in Michigan was 43%. Only four of 40 Detroit charters posted pass rates higher than the public's 43%. In sum, only around 9% of charters in Dallas and Detroit managed to equal or surpass the average pass rate on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test for public schools.

The website for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools states that charter schools are "open to all students" and that "charter schools deliver an excellent education to every student" (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2022). From data gathered from charter schools in Dallas and Detroit for this study, both statements are false. Charter schools were not open to all. They enrolled fewer students in special education and could refuse admissions to any student for any reason. Even with selective admissions, and fewer special needs children, ninety-one percent of charters in Dallas and Detroit performed worse than the neighborhood public school on the eighth-grade reading/language arts test. The only high-performing charters in these two cities enrolled relatively fewer poor students and fewer special education students.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Imagine being a parent living in central Detroit. In your neighborhood school, perhaps 0% of students meet the standard on the reading/language arts test. You try to get your child into a charter school, only to discover that it, too, has a passing rate of 0% on the reading/language arts test. In fact, you might discover that all five of the schools within five miles of your home have 0% pass rates. The only relatively high-performing charter school may be located many miles away, on the outer fringes of the city, accessible only by car.

If you do not own a car, or if your child has special needs, does not perform well on tests, is susceptible to illness, or has any history of misbehavior, admission to a high-performing charter would be implausible. A recent study of transportation to school confirmed that many parents and children routinely crisscross cities in search of a "better school," but rarely find one (Cowen, Edwards, Sattin-Bajaj, & Cosby, 2018).

The real choice for parents in poor neighborhoods in Dallas and Detroit is not between high-performing and low-performing schools, but between a plethora of poorly-performing schools. While promoters of school choice (Edchoice, 2022) like to highlight high-performing, successful charter schools in poor neighborhoods, this study found that, in Dallas and Detroit, high performance among charter schools in poor neighborhoods was anomalous and artificial. Students in successful charters were less likely to be poor, and were much less likely to be in special

education (Mack, 2019). Also, the most successful charter schools tended to be located outside of high-poverty neighborhoods (Miron, Gulosino, et. al, 2021).

Parents in Dallas and Detroit seeking high-quality education for their children may see no way out of their predicament. While it is certain that some charter schools have made their owners incredibly wealthy (Baines, 2019), it is less certain that charter schools have made a positive impact on the lives of poor, struggling children in the urban neighborhoods of Dallas and Detroit (Barnum, 2019).

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APPENDIX

Dallas I.S.D. eighth-grade programs that administered the eighth-grade reading/language arts test

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|--|---|
| 1. Benjamin Franklin International Exploratory Academy | 11. Ignite Middle School |
| 2. Billy Earl Dade Middle School | 12. J. L. Long Middle School |
| 3. D. A. Hulcy STEAM | 13. Jesus Moroles Expressive Arts Vanguard |
| 4. Dallas Environmental Science Academy | 14. John Lewis Social Justice Academy at Oliver Wendell Holmes. |
| 5. E. B. Comstock Middle School | 15. Kennedy-Curry Middle School |
| 6. Francisco F. “Pancho” Medrano Middle School | 16. Piedmont Global Academy |
| 7. George Bannerman Dealey Montessori Academy | 17. Robert T. Hill Middle School |
| 8. Harold Wendell Lang Sr. Middle School | 18. T. W. Browne Middle School |
| 9. Hector P. Garcia Middle School | 19. Thomas C. Marsh Preparatory Academy |
| 10. Henry W. Longfellow Career Exploration Academy | 20. W .E. Greiner Exploratory Arts Academy |
| | 21. W. H. Gaston Middle School |
| | 22. Zan Wesley Jr. Holmes Middle School |

Dallas Charter Schools that administered the eighth-grade reading/language arts test

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|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1. A+ Secondary School | 8. Inspired Vision Academy Middle |
| 2. Academy Of Dallas | 9. KIPP Destiny Middle |
| 3. Aw Brown-Fellowship Charter School | 10. KIPP Oak Cliff Academy |
| 4. East Grand Preparatory | 11. KIPP Pleasant Grove Middle |
| 5. Gateway Charter Academy - Middle - | 12. Kipp Truth Academy |
| 6. Golden Rule Charter | 13. La Academia De Estrellas |
| 7. Harmony School Of Nature And Athletics - Dallas | 14. Life School Oak Cliff |
| | 15. Nova Academy Prichard |

16. Oak Cliff Faith Family Academy
17. Pegasus School of Liberal Arts & Sciences
18. Trinity Basin
19. Ume

20. Universal Academy - Dallas
21. Uplift Hampton Preparatory Middle
22. Uplift Peak Preparatory Middle
23. Uplift Pinnacle Secondary

Detroit Public Schools that administered the eighth-grade reading/language arts test

1. Bridge Academy West
2. Cornerstone Jefferson-Douglass Academy
3. David Ellis Academy
4. David Ellis Academy – West
5. Detroit Academy of Arts and Sciences
6. Detroit Community Schools
7. Detroit Edison Public School Academy
8. Detroit Enterprise Academy
9. Detroit Innovation Academy
10. Detroit Leadership Academy Middle/High
11. Detroit Premier Academy
12. Detroit Merit Charter Academy
13. Detroit Service Learning Academy Campus
14. Dove Academy of Detroit
15. Flagship Charter Academy
16. George Crockett Academy
17. Henry Ford Academy: School for Creative Studies (PSAD)
18. Hope Academy
19. Hope of Detroit Academy Middle/High
20. Joy Preparatory Academy
21. Legacy Charter Academy

22. Madison-Carver Academy
23. Martin Luther King, Jr. Education Center Academy
24. Marvin L. Winans Academy of Performing Arts
25. McDowell Academy
26. New Paradigm Loving-Glazer Academy
27. Old Redford Academy – Middle
28. Regent Park Scholars Charter Academy
29. The James and Grace Lee Boggs School
30. Trix Performance Academy
31. Universal Academy
32. University Preparatory Academy (PSAD) – Middle
33. University Preparatory Art & Design Middle/High
34. University Preparatory Science and Math (PSAD) Middle School
35. University Yes Academy
36. Voyageur Academy
37. Warrendale Charter Academy
38. W-A-Y Academy – Vernor Site
39. WAY Michigan
40. Weston Preparatory Academy

Detroit Charter Schools that administered the eighth-grade reading/language arts test

1. A.L. Holmes Academy of Blended Learning
2. Ann Arbor Trail Magnet School
3. Bates Academy
4. Bow Elementary-Middle School
5. Brenda Scott Academy
6. Brewer Academy
7. Bunche Preparatory Academy
8. Burns Elementary-Middle School
9. Burton International Academy
10. Carstens Academy of Aquatic Science at Remus
11. Carver STEM Academy
12. Catherine Blackwell
13. Clippert Multicultural Magnet Honors Academy
14. Cooke STEM Academy (6th)
15. Davison Elementary-Middle School
16. Detroit International Academy for Young Women
17. Detroit Lions Academy
18. Dixon Educational Learning Academy
19. Dossin Elementary-Middle School
20. Durfee Elementary-Middle School
21. Edward 'Duke' Ellington Conservatory of Music & Art at Beckham Academy
22. Emerson Elementary-Middle School
23. Fisher Magnet Upper Academy
24. Foreign Language Immersion and Cultural Studies School (FLICS)
25. Garvey Academy
26. Golightly Education Center
27. Gompers Elementary-Middle School
28. Greenfield Union Elementary-Middle School
29. Hamilton Elementary-Middle School
30. Henderson Academy
31. Hutchinson Elementary-Middle School at Howe
32. J. E. Clark Preparatory Academy
33. John R.King Academic and Performing Arts Academy
34. Mackenzie Elementary-Middle School
35. Marion Law Academy
36. Marquette Elementary-Middle School
37. Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary-Middle School
38. Munger Elementary-Middle School
39. Nichols Elementary-Middle School
40. Noble Elementary-Middle School
41. Nolan Elementary-Middle School
42. Palmer Park Preparatory Academy
43. Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy
44. Priest Elementary-Middle School

45. Pulaski Elementary-Middle School
46. Ronald Brown Academy
47. Sampson-Webber Leadership Academy
48. Spain Elementary-Middle School
49. Thurgood Marshall Elementary School