



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® of Tarrant County

September Unit Topic - Charter Schools

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At the 2014 LWV-TX Convention, V.P. Janet Imhoff announced, “*We strongly support a system of public education, and we feel that charter schools draw students and money away from our regular public schools, thereby weakening them. We don’t have a position opposing charters schools; we just support public education most strongly.*” In 2017 we still do not have a position on charter schools.

History

According to Texas Education Agency, the Texas Legislature authorized the establishment of charter schools in 1995. Some of the first charters have been in operation since Fall 1996. There are four types of charters in Texas. They include:

- **Subchapter B Home-rule School District Charters** - There are no home-rule school district charters in Texas.
- **Subchapter C Campus or Campus Program Charters** - Independent school districts authorize and oversee these charters.
- **Subchapter D Open-enrollment Charters** - Most charters in Texas fall under this category. The commissioner authorizes these charters.
- **Subchapter E University or Junior College Charters** - The commissioner authorizes Subchapter E charters. Eligible entities include public colleges and universities.

Description

According to the Texas Charter School Association, “*Public charter schools are free, public options for families to choose to send their student. There is the same academic and financial accountability as traditional school districts. There is no cost to attend. There is no requirement or test for enrollment.*”

Charter schools are subject to fewer state laws than other public schools. The legislation encourages more innovation and allows more flexibility, though state law does require fiscal and academic accountability from charter schools. The state monitors and accredits charter schools just as the state accredits school districts.

Some “flexibility” for open-enrollment charter schools includes:

- An open-enrollment charter school may not charge tuition.
- As a general rule, charter schools are open enrollment and must accept any student who applies. There are exceptions though. A charter is only allowed to serve students in the grades in its approved charter. The school may also only accept students who live in the charter's approved geographic boundary. A charter also will have a cap on the total number of students it may serve.
- The charter must provide meals if 10% of the students qualify for free or reduced breakfast.
- A charter school does not have to provide transportation for students unless it is a condition in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- The charter for the school sets any student-teacher ratios or class size limitations.
- Teachers at an open-enrollment charter school must have at least a baccalaureate degree plus state certification when required by law. The governing body of a charter holder may set the qualifications for teachers at a standard above what state law requires.
- Charter schools are not required to hire a school nurse.
- State law does not require that charters enter into employment contracts with professional employees.
- Charter schools are not required to offer special education classes.

Funding

Charter schools receive state funds based on the average daily attendance of students (same as traditional public schools). However, they do not receive funds from local tax revenue and the majority, including Texas charters, do not receive state facilities funding.

So how can charter schools function if they do not receive sufficient funding from the state? Private donors, corporations and partnerships that are classified as a community development entity and non-profit organizations are the answer. There are provisions in the Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000 that provide tax incentives for seven years to businesses that locate and hire residents in economically depressed urban and rural areas. It is called the New Markets Tax Credit and it gives a 39% tax credit over 7 years to individuals, businesses and non-profits that invest in charter schools. Investors are also allowed to combine this credit with other tax breaks they may be eligible for.

Fort Worth Charter Schools

- Chapel Hill Academy - affiliated with Lena Pope Home
- East Fort Worth Montessori Academy
- Fort Worth Academy Of Fine Arts - houses Texas Boys Choir and Texas Girls Choir
- Harmony School Of Innovation
- Harmony Science Academy
- International Leadership Of Texas
- The Olive Tree Montessori Academy
- Uplift Meridian School
- Uplift Mighty School - former site of the historic Masonic Children's Home

Conclusion

The debate on charter schools has been overshadowed in legislative sessions by “School Choice” discussion of vouchers. However, every session has included bills allowing for more charter schools. Publicity reveals that there are under-performing schools as well as high achieving ones. Quality concerns are added to the concern that these schools are draining funds from public schools.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think about charter schools? Do you think they provide a good alternative to public schools?
2. Charter schools divert state money away from public education. Is this good or bad?
3. Do you think charter schools challenge schools or school districts to improve in order to retain students?
4. Do you think that tax breaks should be given for investing in charter schools in economically depressed areas?