

## Charter schools no cure-all for black students, says study

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(Phys.org) -- Despite being promoted as a viable alternative to traditional public schools, privately owned charter schools in Texas have higher attrition rates for black students than comparable urban public schools, says a University of Texas at Austin study.

Dr. Julian Vasquez Heilig's research shows that, although many privately operated charter schools claim that 90 percent or more of their students go on to college and many, such as the Houston-based KIPP chain of schools, spend 30-60 percent more per pupil than comparable urban school districts, more black students drop out and leave charter schools.

"Since the mid-'90s, charter schools have been heavily promoted as a panacea for minority students, a means of delivering to them the kind of high-quality education that public schools cannot," says Vasquez Heilig.

An analysis of Texas Education Agency data of average black dropout rates in Texas secondary schools shows that Houston, Dallas and Austin public schools outperform privately operated charter districts, with charter districts having three times the dropout rate reported in the comparable urban districts (4 percent versus the charters' 13 percent).

"Leavers" are included in a separate category from dropouts, and that category addresses students who depart a school for any number of reasons, such as to pursue an education at a different institution.

Vasquez Heilig found that on average Austin, Dallas and Houston [public](#)

[schools](#) also outperform all Texas privately operated charter districts when it comes to leavers, with charter schools reporting about twice as many leavers as comparable urban school districts.

“In urban areas where there’s typically a higher concentration of economically disadvantaged families, charter schools have given parents a free alternative to the ‘failing’ public school system,” says Vasquez Heilig.

“The thing is, prior to this there were no real examinations of just how successful the charter schools have been at retaining minority students and raising their school completion rates. While some charter districts have had pretty low attrition rates, it’s clear that there are districts with as many as 50 percent of their black students leaving and 90 percent dropping out.”

According to Vasquez Heilig’s research, not only have Texas charter schools failed to retain black students, they also, on average, do not have large black student enrollments.

As of 2008, a minority of charter districts in Texas (23 percent) enrolled more than 100 black secondary students, and only 16 percent had a majority of black students enrolled. Districts that were not majority black enrolled about 69 [black students](#), on average.

“This is a preliminary study and not meant to answer the question, ‘Which kind of school is better?’” says Vasquez Heilig. “Rather, it highlights the issue of per-pupil expenditures as we search for solutions to persistent inequities in the education system. And it focuses attention, I hope, on the larger question of how student ‘leaving’ should be considered in the debates about [charter schools](#)’ effectiveness.

“It also emphasizes the importance of having transparent policy

conversations and making data-based decisions about how successful schools are at delivering on their promises. Whatever we elect to do [in Texas], the aim always must be to create equal education opportunities for all of our students.”

University of Texas at Austin doctoral students Amy Williams and Christopher Lee as well as Professor Linda McNeil from Rice University were study co-authors. The findings were published in the Berkeley Review of Education and will be presented April 15 at the American Educational Research Association’s annual conference.

**More information:** The study is available online:  
[escholarship.org/uc/item/0vs9d4fr](https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0vs9d4fr)

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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