

Issue Brief

Signs of Promise: Hispanic Student Achievement in Charter Schools

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Located about a dozen miles from the Mexican border in Texas, IDEA Academy was established in 2000 to provide a high-quality public education to the children of the Rio Grande Valley. Like many public schools in this community, IDEA primarily serves students that are Hispanic (94 percent at IDEA) and economically disadvantaged (80 percent).¹

But there's something fundamentally different about IDEA: Extremely high expectations and results for its students. "There's nothing they can't

do," according to IDEA founder and head Tom Torkelson.² The school's results prove the point. From 2003 to 2005, the percentage of IDEA's students who achieved proficiency on the state reading test was 88 percent, 91 percent, and 90 percent, respectively. On the math test, the results were similarly impressive. IDEA bested the state proficiency average on 10 of 12 reading and math tests.³

IDEA is part of an emerging phenomenon within public education: high-quality public charter schools

that are achieving spectacular results with Hispanic students. These schools are capitalizing on their autonomy to customize their budgets, staff, schedules, curriculum materials, and instructional methods based upon the unique needs of their students. They reach out to parents and community members in significant ways, addressing several values particularly important to the Hispanic community, such as dignity, respect, and love.

¹ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools



Public charter schools such as IDEA – and the myths they explode – are especially remarkable in light of the long struggles within traditional public schools to provide a high-quality education to Hispanic students. While Hispanics are performing better now than they did 25 years ago on national tests, they are still achieving at rates significantly lower than their Anglo peers.⁴ Perhaps most alarming: Only 53 percent of Hispanic students (and only 48 percent of Hispanic males) graduate from high school.⁵

The educational prospects of America's Hispanic population are a matter of national urgency. Quite apart from the obvious moral imperative, our economic and civic future depends upon dramatically improving educational results for Hispanic students. Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the

United States. The number of Hispanics living in California, Texas, Florida, and New York grew from 16 million in 1990 to 23 million in 2000. But there was equally dramatic growth outside these “traditional” Hispanic states – in places such as North Carolina (where the Hispanic population grew by 400 percent), Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Nevada.⁶

This issue brief presents a summary of recently released data about Hispanic achievement in charter schools plus snapshots of four successful charters that serve a predominantly Hispanic student body. It also provides policy recommendations for increasing the number of high-quality public charter schools serving Hispanic students.

RECENT ACHIEVEMENT FINDINGS OFFER PROMISING NEWS

A growing body of research is producing encouraging news about the performance of Hispanic students in charter schools. Four recent reports illustrate this emerging evidence.

Hispanic Students in Massachusetts Charters Overtaking Peers in Non-Charter on State Tests

A recent study commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Education examined charter student performance on state tests between 2001 and 2005. When a significant performance difference was found between a charter school and its sending district, it was much more likely to favor charter schools. Although that pattern existed for all student subgroups, it was most prevalent for African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income students.⁷

More specifically, the study found that Hispanic students at only 25 percent of charter schools (with at least 10 Hispanic students) performed significantly higher in 2001 than their sending district counterparts in English. By 2005, though, that number had grown to 58 percent. Furthermore, for all four years, Hispanic students at no more than one charter school each year performed significantly lower than their sending district.⁸

One myth about public charter schools is that they are havens for white, middle-class students and shut out such students as Hispanics and those who don't speak English as their first language. The data show that this clearly is not the case. Compared with non-charter public schools, charters enroll a higher percentage of Hispanic students and of English language learners (ELL) students (as well as more African-American students and higher proportions of students from poor families).

Source: National Center for Education Statistics April 2006.



A growing body of research is producing encouraging news about the performance of Hispanic students in charter schools.

In math, Hispanic students at only 22 percent of charter schools performed significantly higher than their sending district peers in 2001. That number jumped to 45 percent in 2005.

Hispanic students have not performed significantly lower than their sending district counterparts in math in any year at any charter school in the state.⁹

Hispanic Charter Students in Florida Start Out Further Behind, But Exceed Learning Gains of Non-Charter Students on Reading Test

In Florida, where about one-quarter of the public school population is of Hispanic background, a state-level 2004 study used a sophisticated growth analysis to compare student performance in charters and non-charters between 2000-01 and 2002-03. Consistent with evidence from California and Texas,¹⁰ the study found that charter students in Florida tend to start out academically behind their peers in non-charter public schools.¹¹ The Florida study found that Hispanic charter students, while starting out further behind, exceed the learning gains of non-charter students on a norm-referenced reading test. It also found that they match the learning gains of non-charter students in three other areas.¹²

Charters in Highly Hispanic Areas Hold "Proficiency Advantage" Over Non-Charters on 4th-Grade Reading and Math Tests

In a national comparison of charter and non-charter student performance on 4th-grade state tests, the typical charter school's "proficiency advantage" – the difference in the percentage of students who are proficient on state tests in charters versus non-charters – was 4.2 percentage points in reading and 2.1 percentage points in math. For charter schools located in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods, however, the proficiency advantage over non-charters was 7.6 percentage points in reading and 2.1 percentage points in math – the highest for any racial or ethnic group.¹³

Hispanic 4th-Graders in Charters Outpace Those in Non-Charters on National Reading Tests

The 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – known as "The Nation's Report Card" – documented positive results for Hispanic charter students. On the 4th-grade reading test, Hispanic charter students both outperformed non-charter students in 2005 and improved their performance at a faster rate than non-charter students between 2003 and 2005.

While these findings are promising, they are only snapshot results. As has been pointed out elsewhere,¹⁴ NAEP doesn't take into account students' starting points in its analyses of student performance. Therefore, we cannot draw strong conclusions about charters' effects on Hispanic students from the NAEP results.

2003-2005 NAEP Reading Results for Hispanic 4th-Graders

	Average Scale Score in 2003		Average Scale Score in 2005*	Change Between 2003 and 2005
Charter	201	211	10	
Non-Charter	199	201	2	

*Statistically Significant

These four reports offer encouraging news, but a note of caution is in order: While these gains are to be commended, they've taken place against a backdrop of distressingly low achievement. Much work remains to be done by and for Hispanic students in all public schools – both charter and non-charter.



FOUR SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOLS

While the data tell part of the story, it's also a good idea for policymakers to look closely at actual schools in order to see how they get terrific results. Some of the nation's strongest charter schools primarily serve Hispanic students. Their stories follow.

IDEA Academy (Texas)

In 2000, Tom Torkelson founded the IDEA Academy in Donna, Texas, to provide new high-quality education opportunities to the children of the Rio Grande Valley. (IDEA stands for Individuals Dedicated to Excellence and Achievement.) As a Teach for America teacher, Torkelson realized that his students were far behind and needed not only support but a boost in expectations as well. So he founded a charter school with an intense focus on preparing students for college. As noted on p.1 of this brief, IDEA's results are outstanding.

IDEA's college-bound focus is evident throughout the school, perhaps most

notably in the school's "tracking" system. There's a single "track" for all students: college bound. There aren't Advanced Placement (AP) and non-AP versions of certain courses. There's only the AP version. To make sure that home and school are on the same wavelength, IDEA spends a considerable amount of time educating parents about college acceptance standards, how to pay for higher education, and how parents can support their children's learning.

Around these high academic expectations for all students, IDEA builds frameworks for support, including a safe school environment, a longer school year and school day, and before, during, and after school tutoring sessions. The primary language of instruction is English. Starting in kindergarten, though, all students also learn to read, write, and speak Spanish. IDEA is aiming to give every family along the Rio Grande border access to an IDEA school. It is currently operating six charter schools serving 2,000





students. In seven years, IDEA hopes to be operating 24 schools serving 15,000 students.

Partnerships to Uplift Communities (California)

When they met in the late 1990s, Ref Rodriguez and Jacqueline Elliot found out they shared a common commitment to increasing the high school and college graduation rate among students within the Los Angeles area. While Rodriguez was focused on Northeast Los Angeles, Elliot was focused on the Northeast San Fernando Valley. First, Rodriguez helped Elliot open Community Charter Middle School in Los Angeles in 1999. Elliot in turn supported Rodriguez when he opened the California Academy for Liberal Studies (CALS) Middle School the next year and CALS Early College High School in 2003.

In 2004, Rodriguez and Elliot established Partnerships to Uplift Communities (PUC) to better support

each other's efforts in creating charter schools. PUC not only encompasses their schools but also a home office that provides services to the schools and their staffs. Rodriguez and Elliot also opened additional public charter schools in 2004, 2005, and 2006. As of the 2006-07 school year, there are seven charters within PUC, serving 1,300 students.

According to Rodriguez and Elliot, PUC school environments communicate the message that failure is not an option. PUC focuses on hiring exemplary instructional leaders and staff who continuously work with site leaders and teachers on the intersection of data analysis and instructional delivery. PUC also engages parents as active partners in the education of their children and develops college partnerships that support students.

As evidence of their success, Rodriguez and Elliot highlight several indicators: state test scores that have

demonstrated steady growth; average daily attendance rates of approximately 96 percent; high levels of parent engagement; a majority of the students in the two PUC high schools taking college coursework simultaneously with their high school coursework; and, projected 100 percent enrollment in college for the first graduating class from a PUC high school.

Looking to the future, PUC plans to grow to a minimum of 13 schools that will include expansion into additional communities that demonstrate the same demographics as Northeast Los Angeles and the Northeast San Fernando Valley.

Cesar Chavez Charter School (Colorado)

Simply stated, the charter bargain is autonomy in exchange for accountability for student results. At the Cesar Chavez Academy in Pueblo, Colorado, the K-8 charter school's leaders have used their independence to steer resources toward instruction, by providing enhanced teacher training, buying classroom supplies, and addressing students' learning needs.¹⁵ These investments have paid off, as the school has achieved impressive results with its mostly low-income and Hispanic students.

Pueblo natives Lawrence and Annette Hernandez led a group of community members in the founding of Cesar Chavez in 2001. The school uses the

Core Knowledge curriculum, and its schedule includes longer school days – from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. – and 25 training days for teachers beyond the 175-day school year. The school's staff works directly with families to prevent academic failure by addressing behavior and family issues that interfere with learning.¹⁶ At Cesar Chavez, every student is expected to learn or maintain a second language.

Cesar Chavez Academy received an excellent rating for both its elementary and middle school grades in the 2004-05 school year. In the elementary grades, 99 percent of the school's students were proficient or advanced in reading, 96 percent in math, and 92 percent in writing (versus 74 percent, 76 percent, and 59 percent in the district, respectively).



For the middle school grades, 85 percent were proficient or advanced in reading, 72 percent in math, and 78 percent in writing (versus 56 percent, 42 percent, and 48 percent in the district, respectively).¹⁷

The Hernandezes are building on the success at Cesar Chavez by opening more charter schools. In 2005, they started the Dolores Huerta Preparatory High School in Pueblo. Over the long term, they hope to serve more Pueblo students. They are also looking to open charter schools in other communities in Colorado, such as Colorado Springs.

Octavio Paz Charter School (Illinois)

The United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) has a long history of community organizing and development in Chicago, often in support of expanding education opportunities for the city's Hispanic students. With the enactment of a charter school law in Illinois in 1996, UNO had a unique chance to take its work to a new level by starting a public charter school – but not without great risk. As Juan Rangel, the chief executive officer of UNO, puts it: “We decided to put our credibility on the line. By founding a charter school, we now had an intensely personal stake in improving our schools, an element too often missing in our traditional public schools.”

In 1998, UNO opened Octavio Paz Charter School to serve K-8 students in Chicago (currently, about 90 per-

cent of the school's students are from poor families, 57 percent are Hispanic, and 42 percent are African-American). After some fits and starts with an educational management company, UNO decided to run the school itself.

Under UNO's leadership, Octavio Paz has created a strong focus on discipline through a quiet, orderly environment and student uniforms. It has implemented a challenging core curriculum for its students, utilizing the Direct Instruction method. And it uses an English immersion program for the 22 percent of its students who are English language learners, often taught by Spanish teachers from Mexico. From Rangel's experience, parents want their children to learn English quickly (the sooner, the better), but they don't want them to do so at the expense of their native language and culture. Therefore, students also learn and enhance their Spanish.

Since its rocky start, Octavio Paz has seen a sharp improvement in results. The percentage of its students who are proficient on state tests has jumped from 21 percent in 2000 to 61 percent in 2005. But Rangel believes they must do better – and for a larger number of students. As part of Chicago's Renaissance 2010 Initiative (which is closing struggling schools and opening up new smaller schools in their place), UNO is creating a network of charter schools. Its second school opened in 2005-06, two new schools opened this fall, and four more are on the drawing board. As

Rangel said: “We must make schools like Octavio Paz the rule, not the exception. By doing so, we’ll not only be providing great schools to the kids who need them the most, but we’ll also be issuing a challenge to other public schools who are serving similar students that they can – and must – do better. People will rise to the occasion.”

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These signs of promise are good reason for policymakers, educators, and parents to see public charter schools as a significant way to increase achievement for Hispanic children and youth. To ensure that public charter schools successfully meet this challenge, we recommend several steps.

Understand What Works for Which Students

Compared with traditional public schools, charters enroll a higher percentage of Hispanic students and English language learners (ELL).¹⁸ While these findings are encouraging on a national level, the results differ from state to state. Some states’ charters serve a higher percentage of Hispanic students than non-charters. For example, Hispanics make up 25 percent of Florida’s charter student population and 23 percent of its non-charter students. On the flip side, some states’ charter movements serve lower percentages of Hispanic students than non-charters. In Arizona, for instance, 32 percent of charter students are Hispanic, compared to 38 percent of non-charter students. The story is the same for ELL students.

The broad categories of “Hispanics” and “English language learners” mask important generational, geographic, language, and mobility differences within these communities – from middle-class, bilingual families who have been in this country for a few generations to those on the upward mobility path where the children are bilingual but the parents are Spanish-speaking to families who are recent immigrants and are highly mobile. In addition to Spanish-speaking families, English language learners also include non-Spanish speaking families from Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia, among other places.

As policymakers, educators, and parents increasingly turn to charter schools to better serve Hispanic students, they need to understand these important differences as well as what models work best for which students. In these efforts, particular attention should be paid to the relationship between charters’ freedoms and the cultures, practices, and results they establish.

Build Capacity of Hispanic Teachers, Leaders, and Organizations

While knowledge, skills, and experience should remain the chief criteria for teachers and leaders at charter schools, understanding – and even sharing – the background and culture of students can be an important asset in reaching students who are underserved. Compared to their non-charter counterparts, charter schools are making headway on this issue. According to a recent survey, 30 percent of teachers in charter schools

are from communities of color versus 17 percent in non-charter schools. More specifically, 10 percent of charter teachers are Hispanic versus 6 percent of non-charter teachers.¹⁹

Notwithstanding these encouraging numbers, charter supporters must still strengthen efforts to build the capacity of teachers, leaders, and organizations of color. One part of these efforts involves recruiting people of color into teacher and leader training programs. Other avenues to be pursued include recruiting community organizations of color into the charter sector, providing technical assistance to charter applicants from communities of color (particularly during the application and start-up phases), and giving help to skilled immigrants so that they pass teacher and leader certification exams.

Ensure Access to Capital

Perhaps most significantly, the charter movement must help teachers and leaders in underserved communities overcome the structural challenges that affect success, such as finances and facilities. A national leader on this front is the Raza Development Fund. The Fund provides a wide range of technical assistance to help charter schools that serve low-income, Hispanic students. In these efforts, the Fund helps charters finance their facilities. Since 1999, the Fund has provided facilities financing support for 38 charter schools in 26 communities in 16 states.

Fund the Replication of Charters That Are Successful With Hispanic Students

Several organizations currently exist that find successful charter schools and fund their expansion. Two prominent examples are the New Schools Venture Fund (NSVF) and the Charter School Growth Fund (CSGF), both of which primarily support schools that are educating underserved children. National, state, and local foundations should increase their investments in organizations that support the replication of high-quality charter schools, particularly in communities with a large number of chronically low-performing public schools.

Collect Better Data About Charter School Student Populations and Results

The quality of charter school data varies greatly from state to state, with several states still unable to produce basic information about charter schools, such as student demographics. If we are to better understand the charter school movement across the country, states must gather better data about who attends charters, especially regarding the race, ethnicity, and language proficiency of charter students.

Even more importantly, states, authorizers, and researchers must conduct more sophisticated evaluations of charter schools that include value-added analyses, distinguish among students who have been in a charter school for one year versus multiple years, and disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, language proficiency, and other categories. These evaluations need to include indicators of success beyond

test scores, such as the rate at which students test out of ELL status, post-secondary participation and graduation, and immediate employment. Rigorous analyses that account for students' previous academic achievement as well as their language proficiency are particularly important for charter schools serving Hispanic students.

By combining data about who attends charters with sophisticated analyses of charter performance, policymakers and charter supporters will get a better sense of which schools need to be replicated, which ones need support to improve, and which ones need to close.

CONCLUSION

The student population in this nation's public schools continues to change, with Hispanics being the fastest growing and largest minority group. Our public school system needs to adapt to these changes. One of the great strengths of public charter schools is their ability to be flexible and accountable. These innovative schools are not only agile, but they are also democratic – involving parents, students, and communities in deep and meaningful ways.

Not only does a growing body of research hold encouraging news about the performance of Hispanic students in charter schools overall, it also happens that some of this country's strongest charter schools primarily serve Hispanic students. As policymakers, educators, and parents look to transform public education for Hispanics, they should use the charter model as one of the linchpins of their efforts.

End Notes

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