

Unconventional Education May Lead to Higher Test Scores

Seven out of ten charter schools in the Austin area averaged a higher passing rate than the Austin Independent School District on the 2011 TAKS test showing that a traditional education may not truly be on par with Texas' student standards.

According to data from the Texas Education Agency, overall the charter schools in Austin averaged a 73.2% passing rate. However, seven out of ten charter schools in Austin had passing scores above AISD's rate of 75%.

These results show that although charter schools are often thought of as unconventional most are producing better testing scores than conventional and traditional district affiliated public schools. The variance in test results may be attributed to the difference in schedules, atmospheres, and teaching styles of AISD schools compared to charter schools.

Charter schools are free public schools, but they are not part of the Austin school district. Enrollment takes place through a lottery system because most schools have a waiting list due to limited staffing and funding. Although they are not state funded schools, they are still required to teach according to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, also known as TEKS, curriculum. The TAKS test is based on these standards.

The schools prepare their students in many different ways for the state tests. Eden Park Academy offers tutoring where students are given special attention depending on their needs. "If I have a child who's having a hard time with division, she'll go to tutoring for 30 minutes and get one on one help just for

division,” said fourth grade teacher Sandy Rathmell. According to Rathmell, the students take three standardized benchmark tests throughout the year. Because Eden Park is a year-round school, the tests widely spread out taking place in August, November, and March. “The tests tell us which TEKS and standards the students are missing,” said Rathmell.

Unlike Eden Park Academy, NYOS does not administer standardized benchmark tests to prepare students of the TAKS test. Elizabeth Petty, a third grade teacher at NYOS, said that the teachers create tests based on things they want their students to master throughout the year. “The teacher created tests help us to know how we need to guide our instruction,” said Petty. “We aim beyond just passing the test.” NYOS is also a year-round school, but they have a “looping” system with their students. Teachers stay with their students for two consecutive years teaching them for both grades. Petty says that this system very beneficial to the student teacher relationship. “You know where the kids are and you know what they need,” said Petty.

This individual student attention is much harder to attain in AISD schools where the class average is 19 students per class opposed to the maximum 18 students in both NYOS and Eden Park classes. AISD schools are not year round, so the students have less time with their teachers and have much more time to forget valuable information during their summer break.

However, Alma Chapa-Moore, assistant principle at Kiker Elementary, says that AISD students still get individual instruction because teachers examine the results of the three standardized district-wide benchmark tests to make

“individual education plans” for each student. “The scores are sorted to know who is struggling with what so that we can help them with that subject,” said Chapa-Moore. “The tests measure the teaching standards, so we teach the standards.”

While they each teach in different ways, each educator agreed that teaching the Texas standards and cognitive learning is more important than teaching to the test. “We teach the curriculum and then everything else just falls into place,” said Rathmell.