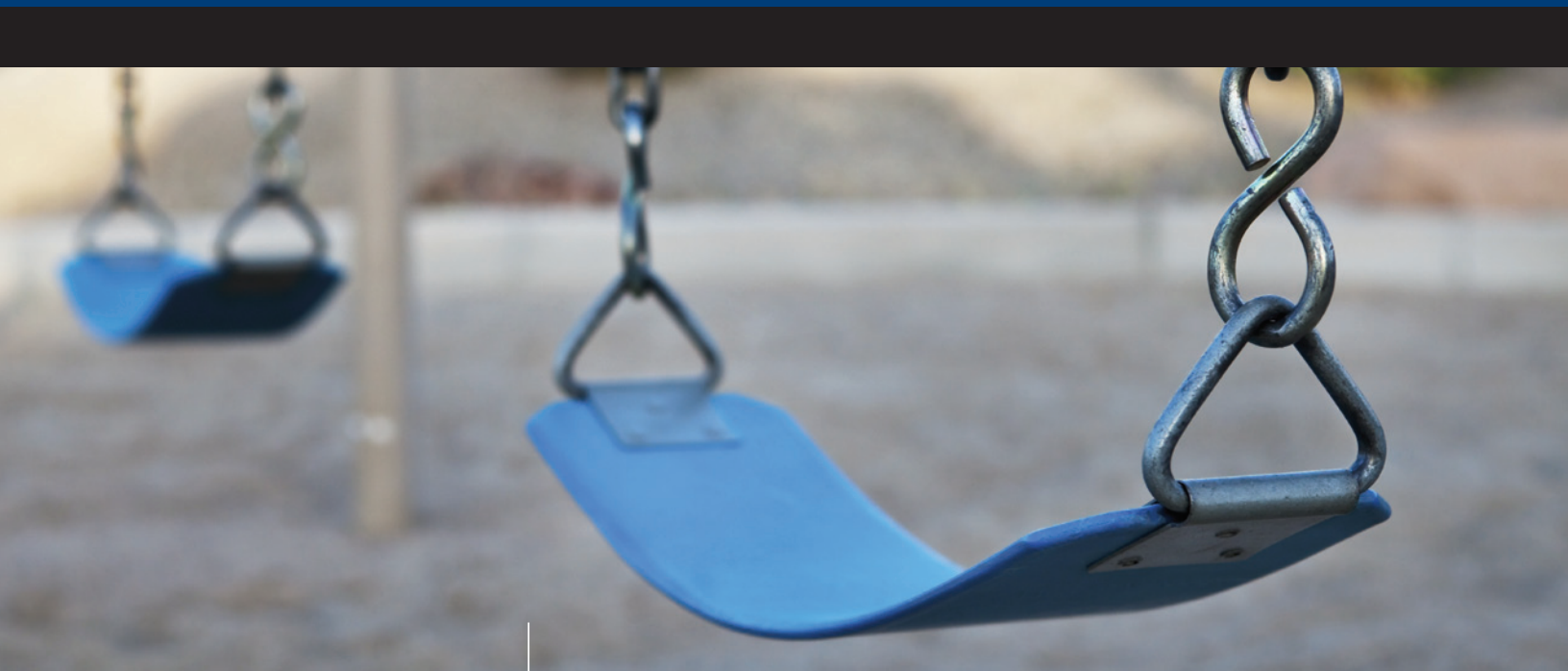


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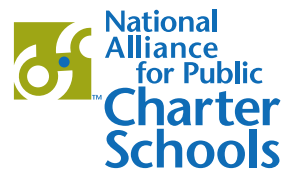
HOW FUNDING DISPARITIES HURT TEXAS' CHARTER SCHOOLS



JUNE | 2011



COLORADO LEAGUE of
CHARTER SCHOOLS
focus on achievement



This report was created as a collaboration by the above organizations.

INTRODUCTION

THE TEXAS CHARTER SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION, the Colorado League of Charter Schools, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools present this report of a recently completed survey detailing the state of Texas charter school facilities.

In fall 2010, the above three organizations worked to collect evidence that would accurately portray both the adequacy of charter school facilities (compared to Texas Education Agency standards or standards derived from them, regional standards, and typical new school construction standards) and the average spending for facilities out of charter schools' operating budgets. Collectively, the results described in this report will help form the Texas Charter Schools Association's policy agenda, and further bolster the argument that charter school students in Texas are not treated equitably.

In order to ensure that the policy recommendations of this effort were research-based and supported by reliable data, Hutton Architecture Studio—a leader in educational facilities architecture—consulted on the project to provide a set of reasonable expectations for school facilities' size and amenities. The Colorado League of Charter Schools ("the League") is the pioneering organization behind the creation and development of the facilities survey, and the League worked closely with the Texas Charter Schools Association ("TCSA") to collect and analyze the data to produce this report.

This report is based on survey data collected in 2010–2011 and enrollment and funding data collected during the 2009–2010 school year. Survey responses were received from 214 of Texas' open-enrollment charter school campuses, representing 108 of the 208 Texas charter holders—or 52 percent. The schools that participated in the survey differed in no systematic way from the schools that did not participate, including enrollment, grades served, percent of minority students served, total 2009–2010 funding received, instructional type, or stand-alone versus multiple campus charters. Therefore, the results of the survey are thought to represent the state of charter school facilities across Texas.





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings

Overall, the survey results show that Texas charter schools are required to spend a significant percentage of their operating funds addressing facility needs. Despite these expenditures, a large percentage of Texas charter school facilities are inadequate in almost every category addressed by the survey. Without policy changes, the situation is likely to get worse as charter school enrollment expands to address the demands of the more than 56,000 students on waiting lists, and as the number of unresolved maintenance issues increases.

- **Charter schools are the only public schools in Texas forced to spend a significant part of their operating funds on facilities.** Unlike other public schools, charter schools cannot access a local tax base for school facilities, are ineligible for state programs that help other public schools meet facility needs (the Instructional Facilities Allotment and Existing Debt Allotment), and cannot access the Permanent School Fund bond guaranty as do school districts.
- On average, charter schools in Texas spend **\$829 per student** from Foundation School Program funding to address facility needs. Based on an average enrollment of 295 students for charter schools included in the survey results, this translates into \$244,555—**enough to hire four additional teachers**¹.
- About one-third of Texas charter schools reported that they are saving money from Foundation School Program revenue to purchase or renovate a facility. The median amount saved is \$1687 per pupil, which further reduces the money available for classroom instruction.
- **Charter school facilities are inadequate.** When total facility size falls well below the standard, educational quality can be compromised by cramped classrooms, limited specialized instructional spaces such as a library or computer lab, or lack of amenities like a space exclusively used for a gymnasium or lunch room.

1 Based on the average Texas charter school teacher's salary and benefits.

- *Inadequate Size:* Only 11 percent of Texas charter schools meet the standard for overall facility size, which is based on grade levels served and enrollment. Standards were derived from regional standards and national best practices (see Appendix B for more detailed description). Overall square footage for 83 percent of Texas charter school facilities is more than 20 percent below the standard.
- *Inadequate Classrooms:* Only 39 percent of charter school general education classrooms meet the Texas size standards. About one-third of classrooms fall more than 20 percent below the Texas standard.
- *Inadequate Specialized Classrooms:* Many charter schools lack the specialized classrooms that are part of the core instructional program: 57 percent of charter schools do not have a library and 35 percent of charter schools serving secondary students do not have a science lab. Even where schools do have science labs and libraries, more than 80 percent do not meet the Texas size standard. Charter schools also lack the specialized classrooms that are part of a comprehensive educational program – 56 percent of Texas charter schools do not have either an art or a music room.
- *Inadequate Kitchens:* Texas charter schools have limited capacity to serve meals to lower-income students. 61 percent of Texas charter schools surveyed do not have kitchen facilities that qualify them to provide federally-subsidized free and reduced price meals for students from low-income families, putting them at a disadvantage when trying to meet the needs of these students.
- *Inadequate Athletic Spaces:* More than 69 percent of Texas charter schools do not have their own athletic fields or access to one nearby, limiting recreational and physical education options for charter school students. Likewise, 18 percent of charter schools with elementary grades do not have their own playground or access to one nearby.
- *Inadequate Gymnasiums:* Indoor physical education opportunities are limited for Texas charter schools as well. 40 percent of charters do not have a gymnasium or access to one that is in reasonable proximity. For those schools that do have a gymnasium, only about one-third meet the Texas size standard for the grade levels served. About a third of charter schools that do have a gymnasium also use it as the school's lunch room.
- *Inadequate Environmental Characteristics:* Facility characteristics also impact student learning. Charter schools are challenged in this respect too: 44 percent of respondents said that most classrooms do not have enough natural day-lighting, sufficient to occasionally turn off electric lights; 42 percent said that most classrooms do not have windows permitting views of the outside.

- **Without comprehensive changes to policy, charter schools will continue to have facility challenges and the situation will very likely get worse** – more operating funds may be needed to address facility issues, and the growing number of charter school students will not benefit from the quality facilities that other public school students have come to expect.
- Almost 88 percent of Texas charter schools plan to increase their enrollment by 2015. More than 55 percent of those growing schools report that they do not have adequate space to serve their expected 2015 population.
- About 60 percent of Texas charter schools are in facilities for which they pay rent. These rent payments will go on forever without assistance to purchase or build a facility or gain access to a district school.
- 33 percent of charter schools utilize modular classrooms, which have a much shorter useful life and require more maintenance than permanent school structures.

Despite these facilities challenges Texas charter schools are serving students well. In particular, Texas charter schools have been found to have better test performance, graduations rates, and dropout rates among both minority and low income students² than traditional public schools.



2 See the Texas Charter School Association's publication, *Success in the Texas Charter School Movement, 1995-2011*, for more details.

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BACKGROUND

Facilities Initiative Background

In the summer of 2007, the Colorado League of Charter Schools (“the League”) launched its Facilities 2010 Task Force. The Task Force was established to identify prominent shortcomings in the charter school capital landscape and develop a blueprint of public policy and private sector changes leading to a comprehensive, long-range system of adequate public school facilities or facility funding sources that are accessible to charter schools. At the direction of the Task Force, the League developed a comprehensive Charter School Facilities Survey in partnership with a national leader in school facilities, Paul Hutton, AIA, of Hutton Architecture Studio, and local experts in school planning, Wayne Eckerling, Ph.D, and Allen Balczarek.

In April 2008, the first report of the Colorado results was published. As a result of the report, the League was able to successfully obtain more capital construction funds for charter schools, make legislative changes that required districts to include district-authorized charter schools in bond election discussions, and provide for the inclusion of charter schools as eligible applicants in the Colorado Building Excellent Schools Today program, a competitive grant program that provides funding to school districts and charter schools for capital construction projects.

Facilities Initiative Partnership

Seeing the success of the Colorado facilities initiative, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (“the Alliance”) partnered with the League to use the Colorado facilities survey model in other states to assess the charter facilities landscape across the country. The League and the Alliance, worked in conjunction with the Texas Charter Schools Association (“TCSA”) to collect and analyze the data used to create this report.

Charter Schools in Texas

Texas’ charter school statute was enacted in 1995 with the authorization of 20 open-enrollment charter schools. The state’s first charter schools opened in 1997. During the 75th legislative session in 1997, the statute was changed to authorize 100 open-enrollment charter schools and an unlimited number of charter schools that were designed to serve students who had dropped out of school or were at risk of dropping out. In 2001, the statute was changed again to set a cap of 215 open-enrollment charter schools inclusive of the dropout recovery schools.

As of the 2009-10 school year, 119,597 students or 2.5% of all students in Texas attended a charter school. Eighty-three percent of the students attending Texas charter schools are minorities and 70 percent come from lower-income households.

Charter School Facilities in Texas

Texas law does not provide open-enrollment charter school campuses with access to local public school facilities or facilities funding to the same extent as is provided to traditional public schools. Therefore, open-enrollment charters are at a disadvantage when compared to the other types of charters and other public schools, as they do not have access to either adequate public school buildings or sufficient funding for the purchase or lease of an adequate facility. Texas' law puts the burden of obtaining and paying for facilities on the charter schools themselves. As a result, open-enrollment charter schools have struggled to find suitable and affordable facilities.

When completing its legislative agenda survey, the Texas Charter School Association's ("TCSA") membership routinely identifies quality facilities as their top challenge.

Due to the special circumstance of the open-enrollment charters schools in Texas, the study described in this report focused on those schools alone. The struggle for facilities is unique to open-enrollment charters as facilities are provided by traditional public schools for district charters. Following the Colorado model, all open-enrollment charters were asked to complete an extensive and thorough survey asking about their facilities (for a detailed description of the survey, see Appendix A). TCSA led this data collection effort, and provided supplemental data on school enrollment and funding. Fifty-two percent of Texas charter holders completed the survey between October, 2010 and January, 2011.

The standards cited throughout this report were identified using either Texas Education Agency standards, when available, or a set of derived standards based on Texas standards, regional standards, or national best practices (see Appendix B for more detailed description). To ensure accuracy in data collection and interpretation, the League consulted with two industry experts; Paul Hutton, AIA, a leader in school facilities construction and Wayne Eckerling, Ph.D., an expert on charter schools, facilities planning, research, and bond planning and implementation.

KEY FINDINGS

Key Finding #1: Charter schools are forced to spend operating dollars on facilities.

Charter schools are the only public schools in Texas forced to spend a significant part of their operating funds on facilities.

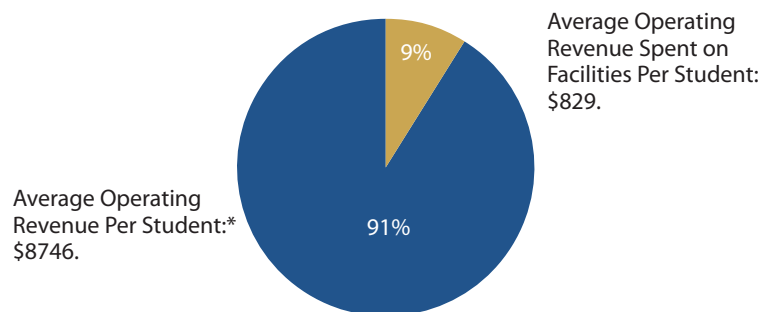
Unlike other public schools, Texas charter schools cannot access a local tax base for school facilities, are ineligible for programs that help other public schools meet facility needs (the Instructional Facilities Allotment and Existing Debt Allotment), and cannot access the Permanent School Fund bond guaranty that is made available to school districts. As a result, charter schools across Texas are forced to spend operating dollars on their facility needs. In many cases, this results in a drop in the funding available for operating expenses to a level significantly below comparable public school funding.

- On average, charter schools in Texas spend **\$829 per student** from Foundation School Program funding to address facility needs. Based on an average enrollment of 295 students for charter schools included in the survey results, this translates into \$244,555—**enough to hire four additional teachers**³.
- About one-third of Texas charter schools reported that they are currently saving money from Foundation School Program revenue to purchase or renovate a facility. The median amount saved was \$1687 per pupil, which further reduces the money available for instruction.



³ Based on the average Texas charter school teacher's salary and benefits.

Average Percentage of Charter School Foundation School Program Revenues Spent on Facilities



*Average amount based only on schools that participated in the survey.

Adding to the financial burden is that 50 percent of Texas charters have undertaken a major capital project in the last five years. Seventy-seven percent of these schools have used Foundation School Program revenues to help finance these projects. These revenues financed 27 percent of project costs.



Key Finding #2: Charter school facilities are too small.

Charter school buildings and classrooms are considerably smaller than the standards used for this study.

- **Only 11 percent** of charter schools meet the standard for overall facility size, which is based on grade levels served and enrollment. Standards were derived from published regional standards, new school construction guidelines, and national standards. Overall, square footage for 83 percent of Texas charter school facilities is more than 20 percent below the standard.
- **60 percent** of general education classrooms are below Texas Education Agency standards and almost one-third are more than 20 percent below the standards.
- **Only six percent** of Texas charter schools surveyed meet the standard for site size, and about 85 percent of charter school students are in schools with sites that are more than 20 percent below the standard.

When total facility size is too small, charter schools are challenged to provide the same quality instructional spaces that are enjoyed by other public school students; such as a library, computer labs, or a space exclusively used for a gymnasium or lunch room. Even when these specialized instructional spaces are present, they frequently do not meet the size standard. Results from the 2010 Texas Facilities Survey bear this out and are reviewed on pages 8-10 of this report.



**Charter schools in Texas are
20 percent smaller than Texas
Education Agency Standards.**

Key Finding #3: Charter schools have limited capacity to serve meals to lower-income students.

Cafeteria facilities are commonly considered a “given” in public school buildings. In the world of charter schools, however, kitchen facilities are a luxury that the majority of charter schools are forced to do without. Whether in a new school building or a commercial facility that has been converted into functional educational space, the cost of adding a federally-compliant kitchen is prohibitive when taken out of operating expenses. Without a federally-approved kitchen, charter schools struggle to meet the needs of low-income students.

Approximately 70 percent of Texas charter schools students qualify for free or reduced priced meals. However, only 39 percent of Texas charter schools have kitchen facilities that meet the federal standards. According to the TCSA, those charter schools providing a free and reduced lunch program without kitchen facilities must seek other sources for meals, such as external catering, often at costs far in excess of the federally-subsidized rates—further eating into operational dollars.



Key Finding #4: Physical education and recreational opportunities are limited for charter schools.

Physical education and opportunities to participate in sports, both via extracurricular activities and during school time, are an important component of any student's educational program. According to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, "Physical education in school provides the best opportunity for a child to learn and develop lifelong health and fitness skills. Without opportunities for school physical education, many children have no access to safe, supervised physical activity of any kind." However, gymnasiums dedicated to physical education and safe, functional athletic fields are, for many charter schools, an important component of the students' overall educational program that they must do without.

- More than **69 percent** of Texas charter schools do not have their own athletic fields or access to one nearby, limiting recreational and physical education options for charter school students. For those that do have an athletic field, 21 percent report that it is inadequate for normal school activities.
- **18 percent** of Texas charter schools with elementary grades do not have their own playground or access to one nearby. For those that do, 49 percent say that there is not a separate playground for early childhood and Kindergarten students.
- **40 percent** of Texas charters do not have a gymnasium or access to one that is in reasonable proximity. Even for those schools that do have a gymnasium, the activities that can be offered are limited by the size of the space and its use for other activities: only about one-third of charter school gymnasiums meet the size standard for the grade levels served and about the same percentage of gymnasiums are also used as the school's lunch room.



ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE THAT THE LACK OF FACILITIES FUNDING FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS HAS A NEGATIVE IMPACT

Specialized Instructional Spaces

Most instruction during the school day takes place in generic classrooms, however, specialized instructional spaces such as science labs, libraries, and music rooms are an important part of a comprehensive educational program. Texas charter schools have a limited number of these types of spaces and, even when present, they frequently do not meet accepted standards.

- 57 percent of Texas charter schools do not have a library; and of those that do have libraries, 88 percent do not meet the size standard, and 43 percent do not have an online reference area.
- 35 percent of Texas charter schools serving secondary students do not have a science lab; and of those that do have science labs, more than 91 percent do not meet the Texas size standard.
- 56 percent of Texas charter schools do not have either an art or a music room. For those schools that do have these kinds of specialized classrooms, only 7 and 13 percent, respectively, meet or exceed the size standard.
- Art and music rooms in Texas charter schools are also inadequately equipped: 36 percent of the art rooms do not have a functioning sink with water, and 46 percent of the music rooms lack a storage closet.

School Environment

Recent studies demonstrate a link between the quality of the physical environment within a school facility and educational outcomes. Facility characteristics that are believed to have a negative impact on student learning are: acoustics, access to views through windows, presence of natural day lighting, thermal comfort, and indoor air quality. Questions within the survey relate to these qualitative aspects of charter school facilities. Selected relevant findings are:

- 44 percent of respondents said that most classrooms do not have enough natural day-lighting, sufficient to occasionally turn off electric lights.
- 42 percent of respondents said that most classrooms do not have windows permitting views of the outside.
- 25 percent of respondents reported that noise generated from corridors or other classrooms is disruptive in the classrooms.

Energy

In the last few years new school construction has become much more energy efficient. The result of energy efficient school construction is that new schools typically pay less in combined utility costs per square foot per year than older school buildings. The survey gathered information on the cost to charter schools for utilities in their buildings. The median utility cost for the surveyed Texas charter schools was higher than the typical utility costs for Texas' urban schools.

- The median utility (gas, propane, and/or electricity) cost for the surveyed charter schools was \$1.76 per square foot, compared to the average utility cost (\$1.49) for Texas urban schools.
- However, 25 percent of Texas charter schools pay more than \$2.64 cents per square foot. For a larger charter school this means an annual utility cost of up to \$95,040.

Looking Ahead

Charter school facility challenges – paying more for facilities, a high percentage of which do not meet generally accepted standards – will continue or get worse without a comprehensive action program.

- Almost 88 percent of Texas charter schools plan to increase their enrollment by 2015. More than 56 percent of these growing schools report that they do not have adequate space to serve their likely 2015 population.
- About 60 percent of Texas charter schools are in facilities for which they pay rent. These rent payments will go on forever without assistance to purchase or build a facility or gain access to a district school.
- 33 percent of Texas charter schools utilize modular classrooms, which have a much shorter useful life and require more maintenance than permanent school structures.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All Texas public school students deserve to be in adequate facilities. The results from the 2010 Texas Charter School Facilities Study clearly indicate that students attending Texas charters are not, with only 11 percent of the charters surveyed meeting local standards for facilities size.

The standards used in this study reflect schools and classroom sizes that are needed to provide charter school students with the same opportunity as other Texas public school students. This is not an issue of favoritism; it is an issue of equity. Texas charter school students are public school students too. Families who send their children to a school that fits their educational needs should not have to do so at the expense of opportunities for participating in athletics, art, music or other programs that provide students with a well-rounded education.

Texas policymakers can do more to improve this inequity by instituting legislation that ensures equitable funding, and access to capital funding and facilities. Pursuant to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' model charter law that was released in 2011, the menu of options to support and improve charter schools' facility needs includes the following:

1. A per-pupil facilities allowance that annually reflects actual average district capital costs.
2. A state grant program for charter school facilities.
3. A state loan program for charter school facilities.
4. *Equal access to tax-exempt bonding authorities or allow charters to have their own bonding authority.*
5. *A mechanism to provide credit enhancement for charter school facilities.*
6. Equal access to existing programs available to traditional public schools.
7. Right of refusal to purchase or lease at or below fair market value a closed, unused, or underused public school facility or property.
8. Prohibition of facility related requirements that are stricter than those applied to traditional public schools.

Currently, Texas has only two of the eight statutes in place (italicized in the list above). The Texas Charter Schools Association continues to work with Texas policy makers to make the other items in the model law a priority for charter schools across the state.

Despite the facilities challenges faced by charter schools, there are about 56,000 students on waiting lists to attend one of Texas's charter schools, and charter schools in Texas are serving minority and low-income students better than the traditional public schools. According a report produced by the Texas Charter Schools Association, *Success in the Texas Charter School Movement 1995-2011*, a higher percentage of ethnic minorities and low-income students that attend charters pass the state assessments and graduate from high school than minority and low-income students that attend traditional public schools. Additionally, a lower percentage of minorities and low-income students attending charters drop out of school.

Providing access to, and funding for, Texas' charter school facilities would help to widen programming options offered by charter schools, help to increase the quality of the educational experience for students attending charters, and increase the number of seats available to waiting students.



APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire Development

A critical first step in the analysis of charter schools was to develop the best possible set of data and information about charter school facilities and their needs.

To accomplish this, the Colorado League of Charter Schools commissioned Hutton Architecture Studio. The firm's principal architect, Paul Hutton, AIA, has designed a variety of schools and is known for his creative, cost effective, and environmentally conscious facilities. Hutton has designed numerous new charter schools and charter school additions. Wayne Eckerling, Ph.D., a former assistant superintendent with the Denver Public Schools with responsibilities for supervision of charter schools, educational planning, and research, was also selected to assist in the design of the survey and analysis of the data. In addition to his public school facilities expertise, Dr. Eckerling has experience with general obligation bond planning and implementation.

A questionnaire was developed that included more than 300 items. Some items required multiple responses meaning that, for each charter school, more than 1300 pieces of information might be provided, depending primarily on school size. The questionnaire addresses topics that include the following:

- Demographic information including grades served, year of inception, and number of students on the waiting list.
- Future facility plans.
- Facility information including year of construction and site size.
- Facility ownership, financing, and annual payments.
- Facility and classroom size and information technology resources.
- Facility amenities such as gymnasiums, lunch rooms, libraries, and playgrounds.
- Facility adequacy, condition, and maintainability.
- Facility funding.

The questionnaire was reviewed by the League's facility task force, League staff, and others with expertise in school construction and educational policy. A draft questionnaire was then field tested with a small group of charter schools to ensure clarity and comprehensiveness of the items. Based on this, as well as visits to a number of charter schools, further revisions to the questionnaire were made.

Texas Survey Procedures

The Colorado League of Charter Schools' questionnaire was revised to address Texas-specific issues through a collaborative effort of the Texas Charter Schools Association, the Colorado League of Charter Schools, Mr. Hutton, and Dr. Eckerling. Texas Charter Schools Association staff assisted schools with completing the questionnaires to ensure both timely and accurate responses. Submitted questionnaires were reviewed again for accuracy and completeness. Follow-up was done with the schools as necessary.

While the completed questionnaires are the primary source of information for this study, information from the Texas Education Agency was used to provide data on pupil membership, per-pupil funding and free and reduced price lunch eligibility.



APPENDIX B: SCHOOL FACILITY STANDARDS

This section provides information about the standards used in this report. Some standards come directly from the Texas Education Agency, while others were derived from published regional standards, new school construction guidelines, national best practices, and/or extrapolating from the Texas standards.

General classroom standards are shown in Table 1. These standards came directly from the Texas Education Agency. Adjustments were made for Montessori and Expeditionary Learning programs to reflect that larger classrooms are required to implement the educational program.

Table 1. General Classroom Standards	
School Level	Texas Facility Standards
ECE/Pre-K	36 SQ FT/Student
K -1	36 SQ FT/Student
Grades 2-6	32 SQ FT/Student
Grades 7-8	28 SQ FT/Student
Grades 9-12	28 SQ FT/Student

Site size and square feet per student total facility standards are shown in Table 2. Facility standards are based on an enrollment of 525 students. Standards are adjusted for larger and smaller enrollments with square feet per student typically declining as enrollment increases above 525. For smaller schools, per student square feet is larger than the standards for 525 students. These standards were derived from published regional standards, new school construction guidelines, and national best practices.

Table 2. School Site and Facility Standards		
School Level	Texas Facility Standards	Standards for 525 Students
Grades K-5	5 acres + $((1 \times \text{FTEs})/100)$	124
Grades K-8	10 acres + $((1 \times \text{FTEs})/100)$	138
Grades K-12	13 acres + $((1 \times \text{FTEs})/100)$	156
Grades 6-8	12 acres + $((1 \times \text{FTEs})/100)$	147
Grades 6-12	17 acres + $((1 \times \text{FTEs})/100)$	169
Grades 9-12	20 acres + $((1 \times \text{FTEs})/100)$	184

Table 3 shows standards for some specialized instructional spaces. All of the standards with the exception of the lunch room come directly from the Texas Education Agency. Lunch room standards assume three lunch periods and are derived from regional standards and best national practices.

Table 3. Specialized Instructional Spaces			
	Elementary	Middle	High
Gymnasium	3000 SQ FT	4800 SQ FT	7500 SQ FT
Computer Classroom	36 SQ FT/Student	36 SQ FT/Student	36 SQ FT/Student
Science Lab/Class	41 SQ FT/Student	50 SQ FT/Student	58 SQ FT/Student
Lunch Room (without kitchen)	4.5 SQ FT/Student	4.5 SQ FT/Student	5.0 SQ Ft/Student
Library - 100 or fewer pupils	1400 SQ FT		
Library - 101 to 500 pupils	$1400 \text{ SQ FT} + ((4 \times (\text{FTEs} - 100))/100)$		
Library - 501-2000 pupils	$3000 \text{ SQ FT} + ((3 \times (\text{FTEs} - 500))/100)$		

Standards for art and music were based on regional standards and best national practices.

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Shortchanged Charters: How Funding Disparities Hurt Texas' Charter Schools, was prepared by the Colorado League of Charter Schools on behalf of the Texas Charter Schools Association and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

