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Is Choice a Panacea? An Analysis of Black Secondary Student Attrition from KIPP, Other Privately Operated Charters, and Urban Districts

Julian Vasquez Heilig,[a1] Amy Williams,[a]
Linda McSpadden McNeil,[b] and Christopher Lee[a]

[a] University of Texas at Austin
[b] Rice University

Abstract

Public concern about pervasive inequalities in traditional public schools, combined with growing political, parental, and corporate support, has created the expectation that charter schools are the solution for educating minorities, particularly Black youth. There is a paucity of research on the educational attainment of Black youth in privately operated charters, particularly on the issue of attrition. This paper finds that on average peer urban districts in Texas show lower incidence of Black student dropouts and leavers relative to charters. The data also show that despite the claims that 88-90% of the children attending KIPP charters go on to college, their attrition rate for Black secondary students surpasses that of their peer urban districts. And this is in spite of KIPP spending 30–60% more per pupil than comparable urban districts. The analyses also show that the vast majority of privately operated charter districts in Texas serve very few Black students.

Keywords: KIPP, Charters, Urban Education, African Americans, Secondary Student Attrition

Blacks have endured arduous experiences within the U.S. educational system. A history of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation has created separate and unequal schools for successive generations of Black students (Vasquez Heilig, Reddick, Hamilton, & Dietz, 2011). Despite the active struggle of Black individuals for civil rights via litigation, state and federal legislation, and local activism throughout the 20th century, a legacy of severely under-resourced schools remains (Walker, 1996). Although conditions have improved, continued isolation in inner cities and rural localities has resulted in unrelenting segregation and inequitable provision of vital educational resources (Noguera, 2008). In the modern era, Black children in the U.S. continue to be undereducated, as educational attainment tracks closely with residential segregation, family wealth or poverty, and the historical unequal funding of schools by race and ethnicity (Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1991). Therefore, the opportunities for Black parents to

[1] Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Julian Vasquez Heilig, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Administration, The University of Texas at Austin, George I. Sanchez Building (SZB) 374D, 1 University Station D5400, Austin, TX 78712-0374, Tel: (512) 897-6768, http://julianvasquezheilig.info

obtain a high-quality education for their children in a structurally discriminatory system have been uneven at best (Anderson, 1988).

The confluence of these disheartening realities has resulted in unfortunate educational and life outcomes for many Black students. The impact of lower quality educational experiences is dire as Black students obtain lower levels of educational attainment nationwide. A recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study reported alarming trends for Black students: A 21% grade-failure rate, a national dropout rate of 8%, and a graduation rate of 60%. Particularly troubling is that the Black graduation rate is 30% below that of Asian students, 20% less than White students, and 2% lower than Latina/o students (Aud, Fox, & Kewal-Ramani, 2010). Notably, the NCES-reported graduation rates paint a more positive picture of Black student completion, as research from non-governmental advocacy organizations locate the graduation rates of Blacks much lower. For example, former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell's organization, America's Promise Alliance, released a study that reported a national graduation rate for Black students at 53% (Swanson, 2008). Jay Greene of the Manhattan Institute (2006) reported that only 48% of Black males are graduating from high school. Moreover, when Black graduation rates are disaggregated by gender, there are large disparities for males (Vasquez Heilig & Reddick, 2008).

Even this cursory survey of data on Black students and their educational outcomes provides a vivid and persisting reality of the modern separate and unequal experiences. Solutions to the oft-exclaimed crisis in urban education have been and are currently being sought. Choice was proposed two decades ago as a "panacea" for the ills of the traditional public school system (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Since that time, proprietors of charter schools have slowly gained traction in the public policy arena by offering their schools as a potential remedy to failing public schools and the achievement gap (Klein & Sharpton, 2009). Among minority parents, charter schools—both public and privately operated—are popular because they provide a free alternative to traditional public schools. Teachers and students associated with public district-managed charters, such as Challenge Early College High in Houston, are district employees and students. The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and other privately operated charter school organizations receive tax dollars for each student but are typically independent of school districts. Burgeoning political, corporate, and parental support has created fertile ground for the growth of public and privately operated charter schools. Concomitantly, charter schools experienced rapid growth throughout the late 1990s and the last decade (Garcia, 2008).

In urban areas with concentrations of economically disadvantaged families, charter schools offer an alternative to public schools that have historically exhibited poor academic performance. Growing discontent with the nation's public schools, especially for urban locales, has been keenly expressed in recent, nationally popular, documentaries including *Waiting for Superman* and *The Lottery*, where advocates of privately operated charter schools have highlighted their virtues as superlative to traditional public schools. However, critics of the highly publicized charter school documentaries have posited that the claims of these films "rely on self-contradictory premises, distortions of the research

evidence, and serious omissions of fact" (National Education Policy Center, 2010, p. 1).[2] Regardless, charter schools are featured prominently in the media and are ingrained in the public consciousness as viable alternatives to traditional public schools.

KIPP is often identified as a model privately operated charter organization. A popular book by Mathews (2009) described KIPP charters as the "most promising schools" for addressing the persisting educational attainment gaps and the life outcomes of poor and minority students. KIPP's Empower Academy, a highly lauded charter school in Los Angeles, along with KIPP campuses across the nation, have become incredibly popular, attracting the interest of urban families, foundations, and politicians due to their guarantee—and apparent delivery—of student academic success. In Texas, the birthplace of KIPP, the Austin campus was profiled on a recent Oprah television show for maintaining high expectations and creating a college-going culture (Culpepper, 2010). KIPP's purported success and presence in the national educational policy conversation has positioned it as the vanguard of the privately operated charter school movement in the public eye.

The success of privately operated charters relative to their peer urban districts is under debate in the research literature. One important indicator of school quality is the number of students measured as proficient in core subjects on achievement tests. Numerous studies have examined the achievement of students attending charter schools. Some of them find that charters are "spurring learning gains," while other studies find "no clear edge" (Education Week, 2011). Another measure of student success is the school completion rate, expressed in terms of graduation rates or rates of students dropping out without graduating. While achievement tests have some value in measuring student success, the persistently high dropout rates of Black and Latina/o students makes completion an obvious indicator for comparing educational quality provided by charters in comparison to regular public schools in the same communities (Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Despite reported success on achievement tests, there is very limited research on whether privately operated charter schools have exhibited a lower incidence of student attrition (dropouts and transfers) within their minority populations relative to peer urban districts. More specifically, there is a paucity in the research literature on the phenomena of Black attrition from privately operated charter schools. Thus, using descriptive analyses of aggregated individual-level data provided by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), we examined Black student attrition from privately operated charter districts in comparison to their urban public school district peers. We also discuss the growth of privately operated charter schools in Texas, consider longitudinal leaver and dropout rates, and specifically examine KIPP student leavers. This study addresses the following questions: How does Black secondary student enrollment and attrition (i.e., dropouts and leavers) in privately operated charters, such as KIPP, compare to urban districts in Texas over the past decade? Are the claims of choice advocates that charter schools, in

[2] This could be considered a politics of knowledge, where what passes for facts—what we know as a society—is determined by those who have authority, power, and funding for films and research.

particular privately operated charters, are the answer to Black students' educational attainment justified by longitudinal dropout and leaver data?

A Brief History of Texas Education Reforms

Understanding charter school reform requires a look at the history of education reforms in Texas. In a state that is rich in resources and talent, internationally influential in its creativity and innovations in medicine, space sciences, technology, agriculture, and the arts, it is disconcerting that the persistent systemic problems of public education have received so little of that creative, innovative attention and even less of the kind of investment over time that is essential for creating and sustaining institutions of the highest quality. Instead, since 1986, Texas public schools have lost three million students from school prior to graduation—equal to the entire combined populations of Houston and Austin (Johnson, 2010). Many more graduate with such a thin academic background that they must incur the costs of remedial coursework prior to being able to enroll in freshman-level college courses (Texas State Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009). Recent research shows these figures to be most dire for Black and Latina/o youth, recent immigrants, and students whose first language is not English, as well as rural youth (Vasquez Heilig, 2011). The school attainment of these youth has been compromised because they have attended schools that, over the decades, have been underfunded and inadequately staffed to address their needs and potential. These conditions have been exacerbated as those schools have too often been turned into test-prep factories under the high-stakes accountability system (L. McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Vasquez Heilig, 2008).

As decades of school finance equity lawsuits in Texas demonstrate, it is rare that the Lone Star State has made the sustained investments needed to assure high levels of success in all our public schools (Vasquez Heilig, Williams, & Jez, 2010). A plan for improving education would—it has frequently been argued—take many years, a strong public consensus, and hard work (L. McNeil et al., 2008). Instead, the response from policymakers has been to seek out what appear to be quick fixes, which are either system-wide, ignoring the needs of any particular school and its community, or making changes at the margins but not addressing the systemic issues of quality and equity.

The embrace of charters by policymakers falls into that latter category. As a purported remedy, it follows the path of the state's most famous (and exported) "reform" policy: the high-stakes test-based accountability system. Both charters and standardized accountability offer the promise of remedying persisting underachievement and delivering equity, with those promises rising to the level of mythology. The early years of the accountability system showed rising test scores for all students, even when disaggregated by race, but this later became known as the "myth of the Texas miracle" when subsequent studies revealed a widening achievement gap.

The effects of high-stakes testing policies in Texas have been debated (Carnoy, Loeb, & Smith, 2001; Haney, 2000; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000; Linton & Kester, 2003; L. McNeil et al., 2008; Toenjes & Dworkin, 2002; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). The arc of the "Texas miracle" myth is well documented. Empirical data released by Haney (2000) and others emerged to show that the achievement gap was in fact growing, not being reduced, and that graduation rates had

not improved. The response by the legislature and Texas Education Agency was to test their way out of the controversy by changing the exams, altering the cut scores needed to pass, and closing obvious loopholes. The investments and reforms were focused on modifications to the testing and accountability system rather than teaching, and thus masked existing inequalities and created new ones (Vasquez Heilig & Nichols, in press). The policy response to data showing the harmful effects of the accountability system was to expand and prop up the accountability system rather than re-examine its underlying premises and redirect our investments. Seventeen years after the inception of standardized accountability, Texas has not substantively improved its relative position in national education rankings nor significantly reduced student attrition. In the context of the failed accountability policies, charter schools emerged as the next legislated panacea. It is in the context of this Texan mythology that we investigate student success of Black students in charter schools.

Review of Existing Literature: Mixed Findings on Charter School Success

Mathews (2009) argued that charter schools are one of the more effective models of school reform for increasing student achievement, especially in urban districts. Proponents proffer that the academic success of charters is rooted in the increased influence from school staff, parents, and community stakeholders, which results in growth in student success and accountability (Bancroft, 2009). However, the research literature has debated the overall efficacy of increasing student achievement in charter schools. While the rationale for the creation of charter schools has included improving student achievement, the actual achievement results of charter schools have been mixed in the most recent research literature (Barr, Sadovnik, & Visconti, 2006; Berends, Goldring, Stein, & Cravens, 2010; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Oliveri et al., 2011).

KIPP supporters have continuously emphasized research that purports that their students' academic performance exceeds that of children in traditional public schools (Mathews, 2009). For example, a recent report from SRI International analyzed five KIPP middle schools in California's Bay Area (Woodworth, David, Guha, Wang, & Lopez-Torkos, 2008). They found that the students made above-average achievement gains when compared to their peers on the state and national level. A more recent investigation of achievement by Mathematica found, "For the vast majority of KIPP schools studied, impacts on students' state assessment scores in mathematics and reading are positive, statistically significant, and educationally substantial" (Tuttle, Tech, Nichols-Barrer, Gill, & Gleason, 2010, p. xi). Although student outcomes were generally positive in the Mathematica study, it is important to highlight that two of the KIPP schools had a significant negative effect on reading achievement and one school had a negative effect on math achievement.

Financial efficiency has also been cited as a benefit of charters. In describing their staffing, budgetary, and operationally flexible structure, many charters have an inimitable financial position (Payne & Knowles, 2009). For example, recent research in Texas suggests that charter schools are receiving as much as 13.7% less public funding (Finn, Hassel, & Speakman, 2005). This can occur for some charters because the largest type of charter schools in Texas, open-enrollment charter districts, do not collect local property taxes (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2008). Some charters save money by

operating in warehouses and office buildings not built for educational purposes (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2009). Furthermore, despite the rhetoric of cost-savings, many charter schools in the Lone Star State have concurrently utilized a variety of external resources beyond public funding to boost their revenue streams and actually outspend their traditional public school counterparts (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2009).

Michael Feinberg, one of the founders of KIPP, said in a 2005 PBS interview, "It takes the same amount of money [to run a privately operated charter] that it takes to run a public school in whatever community those public schools are operating" (Smith, 2005). However, Miron et al. (2011) found that KIPP schools across the nation received, on average, $6,500 more per pupil than other schools in local districts. KIPP disputed their findings and posited that they only spent $2,500 more per pupil (Zehr, 2011). KIPP schools in Texas also spend more money than the urban public school districts in which they operate. In the 2008-2009 academic year, KIPP Inc. Houston received $3,361 more (about 33%) in total revenue per student than Houston Independent School District (ISD), and KIPP Austin Public School Inc. received $6,619, 62% more in total revenue per student than Austin ISD (TEA, 2009). KIPP's Texas campuses have also benefited from external financial resources as they have recently received several large grants including $10 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation (Radcliffe & Mellon, 2007) and $50 million from a U.S. Department of Education's I3 innovation grant (M. McNeil, 2010). Thus, while charter schools take fewer resources from tax funds, it is not the case that they are simply running high-quality schools with less, or even equal, funding than public schools.

Extant literature has demonstrated that charter schools are increasing segregation. Garcia (2008) noted the national overrepresentation of Black and Latina/o students in charter networks such as KIPP, many of whom come from low-SES, urban backgrounds. In fact, recent studies have found that charter schools across the nation are more segregated than comparable local districts (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010). Texas charter schools exhibit a similar pattern as they serve a larger percentage of minorities and low-income students than traditional public schools, 83% and 65%, respectively (Terry & Yelverton, 2009), and they are more racially and economically segregated than other public schools (Ausbrooks, Barrett, & Daniel, 2005). While it is known that charters in Texas are more likely to serve poor and minority students, a measure of the segregation of Black students in charter schools using individual-level data is very rare in the literature.

Some have praised charter schools as open-access and an extension of democracy, while others have argued that charter schools often serve fewer students with special education needs or English Language Learners (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002). This issue became particularly salient in post-Katrina Louisiana where charter schools were rapidly established as the panacea to the long-standing academic underperformance of students. In New Orleans, where charters serve about 70% of students, the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a complaint that schools were turning away special needs children (Mock, 2010). Nationally, Miron et al. (2011) found that KIPP schools enrolled fewer students with disabilities than their local school districts. In Texas, there is also evidence that charter schools such as KIPP are not serving the special

populations that their public school counterparts are obligated to educate. In 2008-2009, KIPP Inc. spent fewer than 5% of their program expenditures on special and bilingual programs while Houston ISD spent over 25% of their budget on these programs (TEA, 2009). Austin ISD has allocated 38% of their program budget to special education and bilingual programs while KIPP Austin Public Schools Inc. allocated about 21% of their budget to these programs (TEA, 2009).

Supporters often argue that charter schools have lower dropout rates and higher completion rates compared to traditional public schools. Yet, the most recent literature has cast some doubt on advertised success of charters for improving school completion rates. For example, data from the New York State Education Department (2011) show that charter schools graduate 49% of their students relative to the 64% in New York public schools. In Texas, a 2010 report from the Texas Education Agency compared charter school and statewide dropout and graduation rates. The study reported that standard charter schools had a state average dropout rate of 1.1% compared to 1.6% in traditional public school districts (TEA, 2010b). Completion data showed that traditional school districts maintained completion rates of 83% compared to 75% at charters (TEA, 2010b). An eight-point disparity in graduation rates certainly casts concern on the efficacy of charters in the Lone Star State.

Empirical research suggests that KIPP also has some student attrition challenges. The previously mentioned Mathematica study reported that there were not "systematically higher (or lower) levels of attrition among…KIPP middle schools" (Tuttle et al., 2010, p. xiv). However, the study also found that a third of the KIPP schools nationwide did have higher attrition rates than comparable public schools in the same district (Tuttle et al., 2010). A study conducted by SRI of four KIPP schools in the California Bay Area found that 60% of students that started the 5th grade in four KIPP schools were no longer enrolled at the end of the 8th grade (Woodworth et al., 2008). They also found, "On average, those who leave KIPP before completing eighth grade have lower test scores on entering KIPP" (Woodworth et al., 2008, p. xi). Their finding suggests that lower-achieving students were more likely to leave KIPP. Critics have argued that KIPP "backfills" their grades with high-achieving students as low-achieving students leave—thus producing illusory achievement success noted in the SRI study (Kahlenberg, 2011).

Notably, neither the SRI nor Mathematica studies systematically examined the attrition of Black students. However, Miron et al. (2011) examined federal Common Core data (school-level data) and found that Black students in KIPP schools had the highest probability of leaving across the nation. Critics of the Miron et al. study have argued that the school-level data is inadequate for determining the reason for student departure and does not provide reliable information about student attrition relative to surrounding districts (Zehr, 2011). Thus, this paper seeks to extend the current research base by using aggregated individual-level Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data to study Black secondary student attrition from all of Texas' privately operated charter schools, including KIPP schools. Widespread departures from charters relative to peer urban districts, low levels of enrollment, and high attrition rates would indicate that school choice is not emancipating Black students from deleterious schooling situations. Additionally, high rates of Black leavers from KIPP would signal that the network might not be meeting KIPP's goal of sending all children "to and through college" (KIPP, 2011)

or addressing historical racial inequalities. This paper utilizes a decade of Texas PEIMS data to examine the rarely attended theme of Black secondary student attrition by conducting longitudinal analyses of dropouts and leavers.

Methods

Descriptive Analyses

We conducted a variety of descriptive analyses to examine the scale and proportionality of Black enrollment in Texas charter schools. We first scanned the enrollment and growth of charter schools by examining the expansion of Black-serving charter schools. We define "Black-serving" as charter school districts serving secondary students that enroll more than 100 Black students and charter districts that are majority Black (exceeds 50%). In this way, we were able to examine the scale of Black enrollment in privately operated charters to understand dropout and leavers in schools with a high concentration of Black students. By considering proportionality, we are also able to examine student outcomes in charter districts where the majority of students are Black. In our analyses, we compare a decade of dropouts and leavers from Black-serving charter school districts side by side with comparable urban districts and the state. The descriptive analyses also consider the overall growth of secondary education in Black-serving charter school districts and, more specifically, KIPP charter schools from 1998-2008.

We descriptively examined dropout and leavers over a decade, by contrasting the average proportion of dropouts and leavers with the comparable urban districts, Black-serving charter districts, and all other charter districts. The mean percentages of dropouts and leavers over time were calculated by $\bar{x} = \frac{\sum x}{n}$. The mean of the percent of dropouts per district and leavers per district (calculated in separate analyses) for 1998-2008 is denoted by $\bar{x}$; the sum of the percentages of total leavers and dropouts is represented by $\sum x$; while n denotes the total number of districts with reported dropout and leaver data. Following our statewide analysis of dropouts and leavers over time, we conclude with a decadal analysis of leavers from KIPP Houston by year and type. We used Predictive Analytics SoftWare (PASW) to conduct our analyses.

Overview of Data Set

The PEIMS was created in 1983 to provide a uniform accounting system for Texas to collect all information about public education, including student demographics, academic performance, personnel, and school finances. Considering that PEIMS data systems lie at the heart of Texas' educational policy and student accountability system, the wealth of information gathered from school districts offers the opportunity to study charter districts' dropout and student leavers data.

We submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to TEA and received PEIMS data to construct a district-level dataset of variables for all public Texas districts for 10 years (1998–2008). The PEIMS data received from TEA was then programmed into a panel format to facilitate longitudinal analyses of attrition by race/ethnicity and district type. Of note, this paper focuses solely on secondary education (7-12), as they are the only grades for which dropout rates are reported in Texas.

The data provided by TEA facilitates district-level analyses of privately operated charters and comparable urban districts. Charters can be a single campus or part of a multiple-campus district. By 2011, the state of Texas had awarded a total of 289 charters since the 1990s, 79 of which were removed for various reasons, including charters being revoked or rescinded (TEA, 2011). Currently, there are 97 charter districts that have multiple campuses (TEA, 2010b). Even among similarly branded charter school districts, the numbers of actual campuses vary. For example, KIPP, Inc., located in Houston, has twelve schools under its charter while KIPP Austin Public Schools, Inc. currently has only three.

In this paper, we compare students leaving from charter school districts to districts in three urban metro areas where the majority of charter schools are located in Texas: Houston, Dallas, and Austin. These urban districts are fairly typical of peer urban districts across the nation, as they serve mostly low-income students who are predominantly Latina/o and Black. In 2007–2008, all of the urban districts enrolled large proportions of students of color, English Language Learners, and low-income students (see Table 1).

Table 1
Percentage Student Demographics for Texas Districts and Large Urban U.S. School Districts (2007–2008)

Demographic	Houston	Dallas	Austin	Los Angeles County	Chicago	New York City (District 1)
Black	28.5	28.7	12.1	9.6	46.5	19.0
Latina/o	60.3	65.3	58.0	62.4	39.1	48.0
White	8.0	4.8	26.4	15.4	8.0	13.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.2	1.0	3.3	8.2	3.3	19.0
Native American	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	1.0
Econ. Disadvantaged	79.5	84.7	60.8	59.2	83.6	58.0
English Language Learners	29.5	32.5	28.3	28.7	14.8	12.0

Sources: Chicago Public Schools, 2008; Ed-Data, 2011; New York City Geographic District 1, 2008; TEA, 2010a.

Dropouts and Leavers

Dropout data has been collected since the inception of PEIMS. However, student leaver data were not collected by TEA until the 1997-1998 school year. Dropout and leaver data are only collected for students in grades 7-12. A student is considered a drop out by TEA by the following definition:

> A student who is enrolled in Texas public school in grades 7-12, does not return to Texas public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not graduate, receive a GED, continue high school outside the Texas public school system or begin college, or die. (Texas Education Agency, 2006, p. 1)

Students coded as leavers are not considered dropouts. TEA defines a leaver by the following definition:

> A leaver is a student who is enrolled in Texas public school in grades 7-12 and does not return to Texas public school on the first day of school in the following fall. A student who moves or officially transfers from one Texas public school district to another is not counted as a leaver. A leaver may be a student who graduates, receives a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, continues high school outside the Texas public school system or begins college, is expelled, dies, or drops out. (Texas Education Agency, 2006, p. 1)

The three most commonly used leaver codes of 2008-2009 were: withdrew from/left school to enroll in school outside Texas (41.9%), withdrew for home schooling (23.3%), and returned to home country (17%) (TEA, 2010c). In 2008-2009, more than 90,000 students exiting school were coded as official leavers while 40,923 were coded as dropouts (TEA, 2010c).

A Pearson correlation (r=-.35) conducted using the PEIMS secondary student leaver data demonstrates that charter schools that reported fewer dropouts reported more leavers and vice versa (results not shown). Orfield and colleagues (2004) argued that Texas leaver codes are often a proxy for dropout because, depending on the leaver reason, limited documentation is required by TEA required to confirm whether the leaver code is valid.

Limitations

Due to FERPA restrictions on data cells with fewer than five students, our data did not include every student leaver in the state, which is consistent with other research conducted on data publicly available from the TEA. As a result, we chose not to focus on the total number of dropouts and leavers divided by the total number of students because of the absence of FERPA restricted students in the data. Instead we decided to examine the mean of the percentages. A weakness of this approach is that the proportions do not represent fractions of the same total. However, we chose this approach because we were interested in the average dropout rate regardless of total students in a particular charter district. For example, a charter school district may have 10 dropouts and 20 total students. In that same school, four students could have been leavers. We would be able to calculate from the data the 50% dropout rate; however, we would not be aware of the

leavers due to FERPA restrictions. Due to these missing students, a simple calculation of student leavers divided by the total number of students statewide in charter districts would bias our results downward because they would not be included in the numerator. This bias would not occur for the large urban districts because of the large numbers of Black students that they serve. Due to the fact that the vast majority of charter districts serve very few Black students, we argue that there would be a greater downward bias on dropout and leaver rates for charter districts. Thus, by considering the mean of the percentages we avoid the bias inherent in the FERPA-restricted data. Using this method we sought to understand the average dropout and leavers between charter and urban districts over time. This method has its limitations, and should be considered with care, but it does provide a way to calculate an overall average of dropouts and leavers between districts over time in the absence of data on FERPA-restricted students.

Another important limitation is the ongoing debate about the validity of dropout data collected by the state. Data reported by the state of Texas has long been accused of inaccuracy in the accounting of student departure from school (Haney, 2000; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). The data used in the following analyses are the same data that has drawn criticism from researchers that have argued that the dropout problem is underreported. We believe the actual dropout rates to be much higher than the publicly reported data (See also L. McNeil et al., 2008). However, for the purposes of this paper, we assume the underreporting of dropouts to be distributed similarly across districts, whether they are charter or comparable urban districts.

If anything, data from some charter schools may be even more underreported than comparable urban district data. In 2003, a Performance-Based Monitoring System (PBMS) was developed by TEA to validate the data submitted to the state. Audits are triggered when TEA suspects serious falsification of dropout reporting. To study this issue, we submitted a public information request to TEA seeking recent PBMS audits conducted by the agency on district dropout data. Recent audits showed that charters were more likely to report false student dropout data. A review of TEA audits from 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 revealed that 10 of the 22 PBMS audits that found discrepancies were conducted on charter school districts. As a result, we believe that all of the student dropouts data discussed in this paper are likely conservative estimates, and even more so for charter districts.

Findings

We begin the discussion of findings from our descriptive analyses of the growth of privately operated charters in Texas over the past decade. Then, we discuss Black secondary student enrollment and attrition for charters and comparable urban districts statewide. We conclude the findings section with an analysis of KIPP Black secondary student leavers.

Growth of Charter Schools in Texas

The Texas legislature first allowed the creation of charters with the authorization of 20 open-enrollment charter schools in 1995 (Ausbrooks et al., 2005). While there are four classes of charters authorized by the Texas Education Code, the vast majority of charter

schools in Texas operate under open-enrollment charters, which are granted by the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE). In Table 2, we examined the most recent decade of available data representing charter school district growth in Texas (districts can contain all four classes of charters). The total number of charter school districts serving secondary students almost tripled from 61 in 1998 to 175 in 2008. While the number of Black-serving (by proportionality and scale) charter school districts increased until 2005, the number of districts with a majority of Black students and serving fewer than 100 Black students declined between 2005 and 2008. By 2008, a minority of charter districts in Texas (23%) enrolled more than 100 Black secondary students and were majority Black (16%). Majority Black charter districts enrolled 194 Black students on average, while those districts that were not majority Black enrolled 69 students on average. Charter districts that enrolled more than 100 Black students matriculated 325 Black secondary students on average while districts with fewer than 100 enrolled 17 Black students on average. These findings suggest that Black students are segregated in Texas charter schools.

Table 2
A Decade of Charter District Growth in Texas (1998-2008)

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Majority Black	8	23	28	36	39	39	36	40	39	29	28
Not Majority Black	53	119	131	148	147	151	155	154	152	169	147
>100	8	21	31	36	35	37	42	45	43	41	41
<100	53	121	128	148	151	153	149	149	148	157	134
Total	61	142	159	184	186	190	191	194	191	198	175

KIPP Houston was the birthplace of the lauded charter school network and was the only district in the privately operated network that served Black secondary students in each year of the analysis period. KIPP Houston provided five secondary grades early on, but enrolled fewer Black secondary students as the century turned. In 2005, KIPP Houston had Black students classified in the 11th grade while KIPP campuses in San Antonio, Dallas, and Austin also began to serve Black secondary students. By 2008, all of the KIPP districts in Texas were serving Black secondary students—albeit in different grade spans (see Table 3).

Table 3
Growth of KIPP Secondary Education for Black Students in Texas (1998-2008)

District	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
KIPP Aspire Academy (San Antonio)								7	7-8	7-8	7-8
KIPP Truth Academy								7	7-8	7-8	7-8
KIPP Austin Public Schools Inc							7	7-8	7-8	7-8	7-9
KIPP Inc Charter	7-10	7-11	7-9	7-9	7-9	7-8	7-9	7-11	7-11	7-12	7-12
KIPP Southeast Houston											7

Black Secondary Student Enrollment

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that at 2.5 million individuals, Texas has the third largest population of Black citizens in the United States, trailing only California and New York (U.S. Census, 2008). Together, Austin, Dallas, and Houston serve more than 60,000 Black secondary students (see Table 4). Notably, while the Texas school-aged population of Black children has grown from 559,708 in 1997-1998 to 676,523 in 2009-2010, the number of Black secondary students enrolled in urban districts has steadily decreased. This could be explained by a variety of factors such as Black migration out of the urban areas (Castillo, 2010), increasing dropout rates (Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008), or the school to prison pipeline (Cole & Vasquez Heilig, 2011).

Table 4
Total N of Black Students in 7-12 Served by Comparable Urban Districts (1998-2008)

Year	Austin Independent School District	Dallas Independent School District	Houston Independent School District
1998	5,993	27,523	30,188
1999	5,807	25,822	29,162
2000	5,559	26,079	27,942
2001	5,417	26,010	26,991
2002	5,292	25,542	26,737
2003	5,028	24,809	26,728
2004	4,806	24,085	26,610
2005	5,124	25,233	30,103
2006	4,912	23,153	26,587
2007	4,693	21,961	25,336
2008	4,634	20,467	24,262

In Texas, a majority (about 60%) of charter schools have been high schools and middle schools (Ausbrooks et al., 2005). Table 5 shows that only eight charter districts with more than 100 Black students enrolled the vast majority of students in 1998—about 83% Black secondary students. At 32%, majority Black charter districts enrolled a minority of Black students relative to non-Black majority charter districts.[3] By 2008, a total of 41 charter districts with more than 100 Black secondary students were educating the vast majority (85%) of Black students enrolled in Texas charter schools. Majority Black charter districts educated about 35% of Black secondary students. Because the data is district-level data, it is unknown whether the segregation of students is higher in Black-serving charter schools by scale or proportionality. However, what is known is that Black secondary students are concentrated in charter districts that have large numbers of Black students.

[3] How do the categories overlap? Incidentally, in 1998, three charter districts were considered Black-serving in both scale and proportionality, while the other five are spread between the two definitions (analysis not shown).

Table 5
Total N of Black Students in 7-12 Served by Black-Serving and All Other Charters (1998-2008)

Year	Majority Black	Not Majority Black	>100	<100
1998	1,322	2,897	3,511	708
1999	3,492	5,990	7,671	1,811
2000	6,894	6,918	11,967	1,845
2001	8,838	6,978	13,687	2,129
2002	8,008	8,631	14,013	2,626
2003	7,570	10,188	14,884	2,874
2004	6,539	12,009	15,791	2,757
2005	6,664	11,456	15,519	2,601
2006	6,256	11,717	15,630	2,343
2007	6,715	10,670	14,984	2,401
2008	5,444	10,195	13,309	2,330

Table 6 shows that KIPP schools served an average of 27 Black secondary students between 1998 and 2004. In 2005, KIPP Houston experienced a huge influx of Black secondary students that were Katrina evacuees (Elliot Whitney, Chief Academic Officer of KIPP Houston, personal communication, March 9, 2011). When the evacuees left Houston in 2005 and 2006, the number of Black students enrolled in KIPP Houston was reduced by half and then moved modestly upwards over the next few years. The only other KIPP charter districts serving more than five Black secondary students were Dallas and Austin. Over a four-year period, KIPP Austin served an average of 16 Black students while KIPP Dallas enrolled an average of 32 Black secondary students. In 2008, KIPP Southeast Houston, an expansion campus, first enrolled Black secondary students (n =157).

Table 6
Total N of Black Students in 7-12 Served by KIPP (1998-2008)

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
KIPP Aspire Academy (San Antonio)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
KIPP Austin Public Schools Inc	—	—	—	—	—	—	12	18	20	18	14
KIPP Inc Charter (Houston)	20	30	18	18	33	35	37	208	114	137	145
KIPP Southeast Houston	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	157
KIPP Truth Academy (Dallas)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	22	34	27	47

Black Secondary Student Attrition

As mentioned in the literature review, charter school proponents often argue that charter schools have lower dropout rates and higher completion rates than comparable public schools. In Texas, the descriptive analysis of average Black dropout rates shows that Houston, Dallas, and Austin public schools outperform privately operated charter districts on average (see Table 7). Notably, charter districts have three times the dropout rate reported in the comparable urban districts (4% versus 13%). At 11%, Black-serving charters (by scale and proportionality) have an average dropout rate that is 2% less than charter districts that are not majority Black and half the dropout rates of charter districts with fewer than 100 Black students, 13% and 22%, respectively.

Table 7
A Decade of Black Dropout in Texas (1998-2008)

	Majority Black	Not Majority Black	>100	<100	All Charters	All Texas Districts	Comparable Urban Districts
Mean	.11	.13	.11	.22	.13	.04	.03
N	47	120	208	37	245	1,315	33
Std. Deviation	.111	.118	.092	.155	.111	.07	.02
Median	.10	.10	.09	.21	.10	.05	.03

Leavers encompass a variety of departure types in the PEIMS data. Findings derived from the descriptive means analysis of average Black leaver rates are similar to the dropout analysis—Austin, Dallas, and Houston outperform all Texas privately operated charter districts on average. Table 8 shows that charter districts exhibit about double the leavers reported in comparable urban districts. Charter districts with higher concentrations of Black students (scale and proportionality) have lower average rates of secondary student leavers. Charter districts that serve more than 100 Black students averaged about 5% fewer leavers than charters that served fewer than 100 Black students. Additionally, majority Black charter districts average about 3% fewer leavers than non-Black majority charter districts.

Table 8
A Decade of Black Leavers in Texas (1998-2008)

	Majority Black	Not Majority Black	>100	<100	All Charters	All Texas Districts	Comparable Urban Districts
Mean	.12	.15	.13	.18	.15	.07	.05
N	65	178	268	105	373	2,215	33
Std. Deviation	.09	.10	.084	.122	.098	.07	.02
Median	.10	.13	.12	.15	.13	.05	.05

Tables 7 and 8 show that comparable urban districts are outperforming all Texas charter districts in terms of dropouts and leavers. On average, charter districts trail their urban district peers. All other charters are also underperforming Black-serving charters. To understand the longitudinal distribution of dropout and leavers in Black-serving charters, Figures 1 and 2 also show a decade of minimum and maximum attrition rates. The scatter plots show that charter schools exhibit a wide range of dropout and leaver rates (See Figures 1 and 2). While some charter districts had very low attrition rates, it is clear that there are districts that had rates as high as 50% of their Black students leaving and 90% dropping out. Although the standard deviation of Black-serving charter districts

(SD = .08) is less than all other charters (SD =. 12), the performance of charter schools in terms of dropout and leaver rates varies widely.

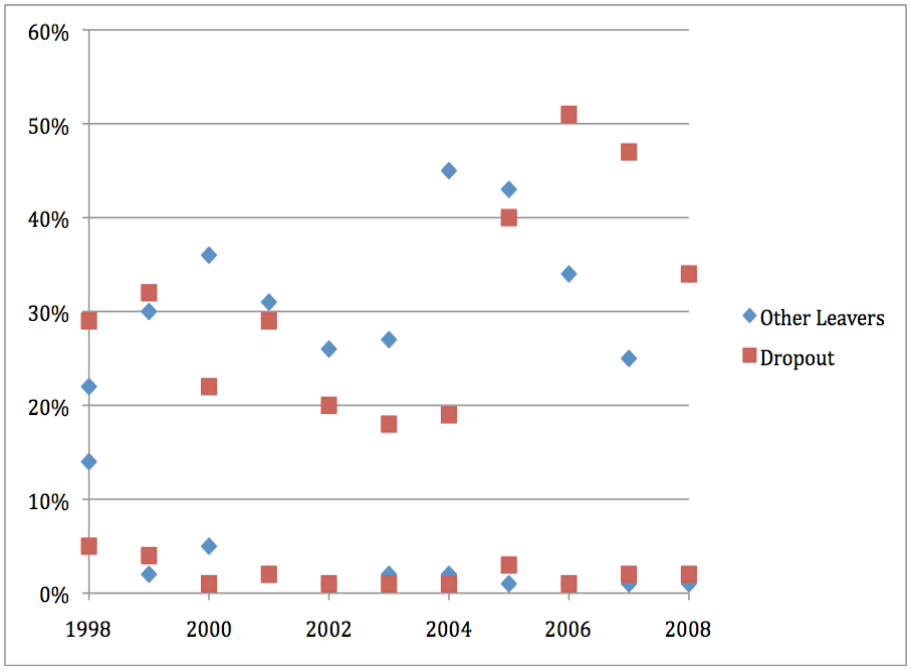

Figure 1. Min and max percents of Black leavers (7-12) from charter districts with >100 Black Students (1998-2008).

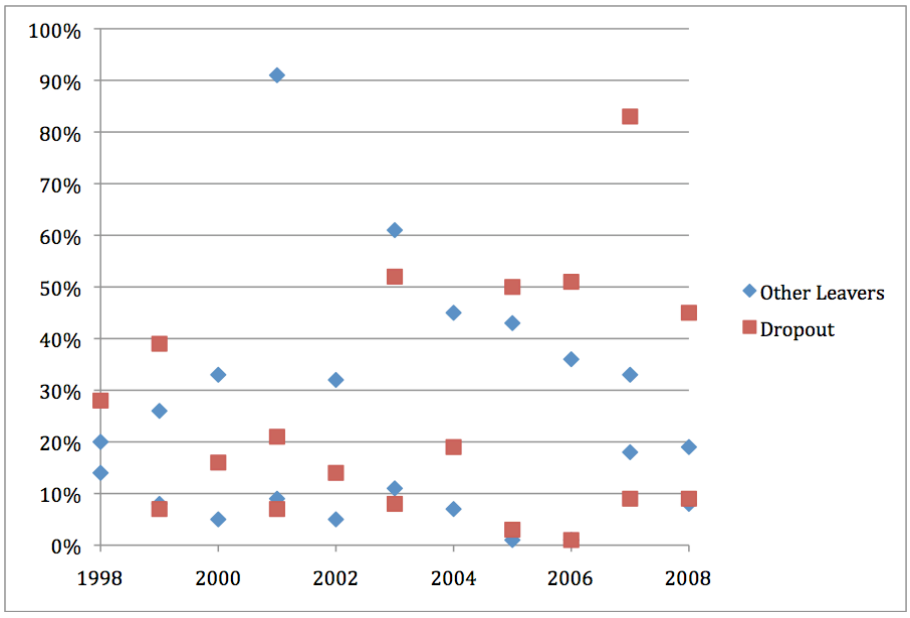

Figure 2. Min and max percents of Black leavers (7-12) in charter districts with <100 Black Students (1998-2008).

KIPP Black Secondary Student Leavers

KIPP Houston is the only campus in the network with a decade of data where we can examine Black secondary student leavers. As a result, we focus our KIPP leaver analysis on the Houston charter district. We do not include an analysis of dropout data, as KIPP Houston has consistently reported a 0% dropout rate for the decade under study. As mentioned above, considering that charter schools that report low dropout rates concurrently report high leaver rates (r=-.35), we would expect KIPP to exhibit high Black secondary student attrition.

Between 2000 and 2005, KIPP Houston had between 27% and 50% of their Black secondary students leave the campus (see Table 9). There was some improvement in 2005, as Katrina evacuees increased the total number of students served by about 150 students. In 2006, the exit of Black students coded as moving out of state (presumably students who had come to Houston the prior year as a part of the post-Katrina relocation) raised KIPP's leaver rate to 44% (See decadal analysis of KIPP leavers in the next section). By 2007, although the total number of leavers remained the same, the increase in Black students served by KIPP Houston reduced the proportion of leavers to 10%. It appears that KIPP Houston has improved their Black student leaver problem in recent years. However, their Black secondary student leaver rate was higher than comparable urban districts by 7%. Over the past decade, large proportions of Black secondary students have left the KIPP network, and these high leaver rates call into question KIPP's reported 0% dropout rates.

Table 9
KIPP Inc. Black (7-12) Enrollment and Leavers

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
KIPP Inc Enrollment	18	18	33	35	37	208	114	137	145
Total Leavers	9	9	9	13	17	6	50	10	14
Percent Leaving	50%	50%	27%	37%	46%	3%	44%	7%	10%

The analysis of leaver codes shows the reported types of Black secondary student leavers from KIPP Houston's schools (see Table 10). The lion's share of KIPP's Black secondary student leavers departed to attend public schools, ranging from 2% to 30% between 2000 and 2008. A decreasing number of KIPP students left for private schools—peaking early in 2001 at 25%. Some Black students were coded as leaving KIPP to go out of state. During the time period studied, between 2% to 12% of Black students were coded as departing out-of-state. Katrina evacuees explain the large number (43%) of students that were coded by KIPP as leaving the state in 2006 (Elliot Whitney, personal communication, March 9, 2011). In sum, about 30% of Black students are coded as leaving KIPP schools.

Table 10
KIPP Inc. Black (7-12) Leavers by Type

PEIMS Code Used	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Public School	28%	17%	3%	14%	30%	2%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Private School	22%	28%	12%	14%	16%	N/A	1%	2%	9%
Outside Texas	N/A	6%	12%	9%	N/A	N/A	43%	5%	1%

Discussion

Charters are continually featured in film documentaries, print, and other U.S. media, particularly as an educational benefit for Black students. The promise held out by charter advocates, and the readiness of legislatures to grant public tax monies to privately operated charters on the basis of that promise, warrants close examination of the validity of these claims. The findings in this paper run contrary to these accounts. In essence, we provide a counter-narrative to current popular representations of privately operated charters. This paper shows that, in Texas, the vast majority of privately operated charter districts serve very few Black students. Furthermore, peer urban districts, on average, show lower incidence of Black student dropouts and leavers relative to charters. The data also show that despite the claim that 88-90% of the children attending KIPP charters go on to college, their Black secondary student attrition rate surpasses that of peer urban districts. And this is in spite of spending 30–60% more per pupil. The high attrition rates of Black students from privately operated charters require more careful study of this reform.

These findings also highlight the issue of per-pupil expenditures, and the sources of those dollars, in the public search for solutions to persistent inequities in our educational system. Thus, this analysis is not a look at "Which kind of school is better?" or "Do charters save Black kids from bad public schools?" Rather, it poses the larger question, how should student leaving be considered in the debates about charter-school effectiveness? We know that kids leave schools for many reasons, and many may have left KIPP and other charters not to drop out, but to return to their neighborhood public schools for a broader array of courses, athletics, the arts, and extracurricular activities. Some may have left because their family and work obligations conflicted with the longer school days in many charters. More research will be needed to discern the reason privately operated charters have high rates of leavers. Nevertheless, public schools welcome these students back. The public's schools take every child, including English

Language Learners and those needing special education services. We proffer schools that take all children are in need of our utmost investment.

The data suggest that charters are not a cure-all in Texas. The results presented here show that charters, even the most publicized ones, are not a panacea for Black youth. Just as good data helped reveal the weaknesses and flaws in the "Texas Miracle" myth, it is essential to have a transparent policy conversation and to make data-based decisions on whether charters are delivering on their promise. We of course acknowledge that there are high-quality charter schools. We have taught in them, we have studied them, and we appreciate them. However, on average, over the last decade, the high attrition rates of privately operated charter schools in Texas reveal a failure to create the equality of opportunity for Black students that dominates the popular discourse on charter schools.

Conclusion

The history of unequal, even discriminatory, schooling for Black students in Texas over the past century has created structural inequities that call for structural remedies. We conclude this piece on a hopeful note with a discussion of the great potential of other policies that target Black youth. That students of color year after year achieve at a level far below that of their White and Asian peers is an indicator, not that the children cannot learn, but that our state and our communities have not provided every child with an academically rich education. We have failed to provide well-resourced classrooms taught by teachers who are highly educated in their subjects, knowledgeable about children and learning, and well compensated and valued.

There are, of course, many talented and dedicated teachers and many public schools that serve their children well, launching students into productive, even exciting, futures. There exists in the extant literature within the profession a rich repertoire of instructional approaches, curricular resources, and ways of organizing the life of the school, which could provide a foundation for the improvement of all schools. Furthermore, there is a reservoir of good will and interest among makers and shapers of policy and the public to establish traditional public schools as incredible places of teaching and learning, places where children flourish, discover, and develop their capabilities.

At this intersection of great need for our youth and exceptional capacity, as evidenced in the state's leadership in so many areas of science, commerce, and the arts, it appears to be the prime moment for a serious, sustained effort to improve public education and make it more equitable. The somber economic times in Texas and the rest of the country call for a watershed moment. In our educational system lies the pivotal opportunity for an uplifting investment, comparable to that which created the world's largest medical center in Houston or the constellation of arts organizations linking the state's largest cities with the most remote rural outposts. The key barrier in this scenario is *investment*. And the missing operational concept is *sustained*.

When the Texas legislature's $4 billion cut to education for the 2011-2013 biennium is considered in conjunction with the Lone Star State's abysmal national rankings in student academic performance, graduation rates, enrollment in higher education, and numerous other indicators of educational attainment, current decisions on public education funding are properly read as a value statement. It is not an accident or anomaly. Texas continues to lag the nation in teacher pay and per pupil spending, and lacks a plan

to remedy the historical deficits of unequal support for public schooling. Structural solutions are not as politically popular or media-catchy as charters, but would yield over time the educational quality and attainment our collective future requires. We raise the larger question, how should the public direct its investments in the education of the public's children? In a time of scarcity, is it reasonable to shift public tax dollars to privately operated entities? Shifting tax dollars into charters turns out, despite the publicity, not to be a panacea for Black students, but an apparent diversion of tax dollars and public attention away from the real possibilities that could come from a sustained investment in Texas and the nation's public schools.

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