What is a charter school? The difference between ISD schools and Texas public charter schools

One of the questions we hear most from prospective parents interested in applying to Harmony Public Schools is “I’ve been looking at schools near me, but I don’t understand – what is the difference between a charter school and an ISD public school?”

Public charter schools have grown exponentially in the past 25 years – both in Texas, and around the country – but we understand why many parents who grew up in a traditional Independent school district setting themselves may still have questions.

That’s OK. We’ve got the answers to all of your biggest questions about charter schools.

So, what exactly is a charter school?

A charter school is a public school, and in many ways very similar to a traditional ISD school as you might think of one.

- Charter schools do not charge tuition or application fees.
- Charter schools accept every student who applies, as long as the school or grade level has not reached its enrollment capacity.
- Charter school students take the same core classes and state tests (ex., STAAR) as ISD students.
- Charter schools are held to strict standards of financial and overall accountability by the Texas Education Agency.
- Charter schools offer a full range of special services, including special education, English as a Second Language (ESL), Dyslexia, and 504.

However, what makes charter schools different is what we believe makes them special. In a word, that difference is “choice.”

Way back in 1995, the Texas State Legislature decided that even though there were a lot of great schools in Texas, a one-size-fits-all approach to education might not work for all families. Each child is unique; some with special gifts, others with special challenges, and all with special dreams for their futures.

To help better serve every Texas student, the Texas public charter school system was created to allow Independent, education-based nonprofit organizations called Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) to open and operate free public schools for Texas students with the promise that they would provide a new school choice in education for local Texas families.

For some charter schools, that new choice might be a curriculum that focuses on dual-language learning. For others, it might be helping students who have dropped out of the traditional school setting reclaim their path to graduation.

At Harmony Public Schools, we specialize in hands-on, project-based learning with a heavy emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), as well as advanced college preparedness and character education.

DID YOU KNOW?

Of the roughly 100 schools in Texas certified as official Texas STEM Academies by the Texas Education Agency, 23 are Harmony Public Schools high schools – more than any other school system in Texas!

Thirteen Harmony high schools have also been named among the Best STEM Schools in the U.S. by Newsweek.
Who can attend a charter school?

As long as a student lives within its geographic boundaries of the school, any child can attend a Texas public charter school. However, unlike traditional ISD schools where students usually must attend whichever nearby campus they are “zoned” to, public charter school geographic boundaries are generally very large – often covering multiple communities or counties. These large geographic boundaries are another way Texas public charter schools offer Texas families a choice in their student’s education, and are unique from traditional ISDs. For example, rather than sending their child to an ISD campus near their home address, a parent may prefer for their child to attend a school near a grandparent’s home, or the parent’s place of work. Or they may prefer to send their child to a campus that specializes in a specific curriculum, like STEM, or with a higher TEA accountability rating than their neighborhood ISD school. All of these are options with Texas public charter schools.

Do public charter schools charge tuition?

Texas public charter schools are free to attend. Applying to a Texas public charter school is also free.

How do charter schools choose who gets to attend?

They don’t. Charter school students are never “cherry picked” from an applicant pool. Any student who applies to attend a charter school will be accepted, so long as they meet three basic criteria:

1. They live within the school’s geographic boundaries;
2. They are applying to a grade taught by that specific school;
3. Available seats are open in the grade-level to which the family is applying. At Harmony, if more students apply than there are available openings, the campus will hold a “blind” lottery to ensure fair an equal opportunity for enrollment to all new applicants.

RELATED: Learn more about Harmony Public School’s application, enrollment and lottery processes

When and how can a student apply to a charter school?

A student can apply to a charter school at any time during the school year and be accepted if space is available. However, most Texas public charter schools also offer an open enrollment period each year specifically for prospective new students. During this time, families can learn more about their charter school options and enter their name for the enrollment lottery, which is held in the event there are more applicants than available seats. For Harmony Public Schools, open enrollment runs each November 1 through February 10.

MORE INFO: Learn more about how to apply to Harmony Public Schools.

How is a charter school funded?
As opposed to a traditional ISD school, which receives its funding primarily from the taxes local homeowners pay each year combined with additional funding from the state, charter schools receive their primary funding from the state and federal governments. Additionally, charters often receive both public and private grants to fund many of their innovative academic programs. For example, in recent years Harmony Public Schools has received grants of varying amounts from the U.S. Department of Education, the Texas Education Agency, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and the Elon Musk Foundation, among others.

**Are Texas public charter schools for-profit?**

No. By law, Texas public charter schools must be nonprofit entities. All funds received are used in the service of our students and school teams.

**Do charter schools require uniforms?**

That's a decision that's up to each charter school. At Harmony Public Schools, we do have a uniform policy. (Our students do get regular "free dress" days, though.)

**Do charter schools offer the same types of programs and extracurricular activities as ISD schools?**

Charter schools offer almost all of the same programs and extracurricular activities as ISD schools, though just like at an ISD school, the exact selection of extracurricular opportunities varies from campus-to-campus. Traditionally, charter schools specialize in offering a wide variety of academic-focused extracurriculars. For example, at Harmony Public Schools, some of our most popular extracurricular activities are our groundbreaking eSports clubs, LEGO robotics, rocketry, computer coding, and biomedicine. Our schools also compete in a wide variety of sports, including basketball, volleyball, soccer, and football.

**What level accountability do charter schools have to maintain?**

Just like traditional ISDs, Texas charter schools must remain in good academic and financial accountability with the Texas Education Agency. That includes annual inclusion in the TEA’s Financial Integrity System of Texas (FIRST) and Overall Accountability ratings. Charter schools that do not meet these standards face closure by the TEA. Finally, to help families easily understand how their charter school is performing, the TEA has created a Charter School Performance Framework (CSPF), which grades charter districts on overall academic performance and closing achievement gaps.

**What other differences are there between charter schools and traditional ISD schools?**

There are a few other differences between Texas public charter schools and ISDs, but most don't impact the day-to-day campus life of our students. For example, charter school boards consist of appointed volunteers with a unique interest in education, rather than private individuals who have chosen to run for election. However, charter school board meetings are still open to the public to attend and participate.
What about ..?

We couldn't possibly share all the things that make charter schools a unique and important part of the Texas educational environment in just one article. So if you have more questions, we'd love the opportunity to tell you more. Just tell us what you want to know in our Let's Talk family communication platform, and we'll reach out with an answer soon!