



Texas Charter Growth and Special Education: Insights from Major Cities and Large CMOs

February 2026

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The impact of charter growth matters

Overview

Charter schools and Charter Management

Organizations (CMOs) in Texas are publicly funded but governed by private, non-elected boards and enroll students through open-enrollment rather than geographic assignment. Traditional public schools (TPSs) and Independent School Districts (ISDs) are overseen by locally elected boards and are legally required to serve all students residing within their boundaries. Texas law grants CMOs greater flexibility in governance, staffing, operations, and budgeting. ISDs must meet broader statutory obligations and provide services to every student in their attendance zones.

The Texas charter sector has expanded rapidly over the past twenty years. This growth has important implications for the state's constitutional responsibility to maintain an efficient system of public education and ensure full access to special education services for students with disabilities. This report presents statewide and city-level evidence on enrollment patterns, service responsibilities, and spending, with particular attention to large CMOs and large ISDs.

Key Findings at a Glance

- **Rapid charter growth, slight TPS growth.** From 2009–2025, charter enrollment rose **+313%** (114k → 472k) while traditional public schools (TPSs) increased **+9%** (4.41M → 4.80M). In 2025, within the geographic boundaries of major Texas ISDs, charter schools accounted for roughly 32% of all publicly funded student enrollment in Houston, 29% in Dallas, 30% in Fort Worth, 33% in Austin, 47% in San Antonio, and 18% in El Paso.
- **Lower special education enrollment in charters.** In 2024–25, students with disabilities made up **12%** of charter enrollment versus **15.8%** in TPSs statewide. The ten largest CMOs average **11.4%**, with notably lower representation in higher-cost categories (e.g., autism, intellectual disabilities).
- **Districts shoulder more intensive services amid enrollment losses.** As charters expand, districts such as Fort Worth ISD, San Antonio ISD, Austin ISD, and El Paso ISD serve a higher share of students with disabilities than nearby charters even as overall district enrollment declined **10%–24%** since 2009.
- **ISDs spend more per student with disabilities than major CMOs.** In 2023–24, every large ISD in this study outpaced both the state average and major CMOs in special education spending per student with disabilities.

Legal Framework & Policy Concerns

The Texas Constitution requires the Legislature to “establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools.” (Tex. Const. art. VII, § 1). Texas Education Code § 29.001 directs TEA to design, consistent with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a statewide system so that a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is available to all children with disabilities. Charters are explicitly subject to public school laws and special education requirements (Tex. Educ. Code § 12.103(a); § 12.104(b)(3)(F)).

Current TEA commissioner rules guiding charter expansion allow approvals deemed “in the best interest of students” and permit consideration of “any relevant information,” but they do not require analysis of systemwide impacts on district enrollment, finances, or special education capacity (19 TAC § 100.1035(b)(3)–(4)). A 2017 change added district notification for proposed expansions (19 TAC § 100.1035(f)) but still does not mandate fiscal or capacity review.

Some observers attribute charter growth to parental preference. While families do choose schools for many reasons, lower special education enrollment in charters, lower per-student special education spending in many CMOs, and district enrollment declines coupled with higher-need caseloads indicate structural dynamics that go beyond individual parent choices. These dynamics raise questions about whether Texas is meeting its constitutional mandate for an efficient system and its statutory and federal obligations under IDEA across all publicly funded schools.

Purpose & Scope of Study

The purpose of this report is to:

- **Illuminate statewide and city-level trends** in charter growth and special education, with a focus on large CMOs and major ISDs (Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio).
- **Assess differences in special education enrollment and spending** between CMOs and ISDs, including representation of higher-cost disability categories.
- **Inform policymakers, education leaders, journalists, and families** with clear, comparable evidence to support improvement, oversight, funding alignment, and transparency.

Data & Limitations

This report uses longitudinal Texas Education Research Center/State Longitudinal Data System data from 2009–2025. The report also uses publicly available data from the TEA, and data from public information requests made to TEA. All analyses rely on state administrative data, which are the most comprehensive available but depend on accurate reporting from districts and CMOs. These data do not capture on-the-ground service quality, local program variation, or informal practices that may shape a child’s education or a family’s experiences. We used UT Austin’s protected Microsoft Copilot platform and Grammarly for editorial support, with all analysis and conclusions developed independently.

Key Terms

Charter School: A publicly funded school that operates independently of traditional school districts. Charter schools have more flexibility in curriculum and operations but must meet state accountability standards.

Charter Management Organization (CMO): A network of charter schools operated by a single organization. CMOs centralize governance, curriculum, and operations across multiple campuses.

Independent School District (ISD): A public school district in Texas that operates independently of municipal or county governments. ISDs manage traditional public schools within defined geographic boundaries and are governed by locally elected school boards.

Traditional Public School (TPS): A school operated by a local school district, funded primarily through state and local taxes, and required to serve all students within its attendance zone.

Local Education Agency (LEA): A public authority—such as a school district or, in some cases, a charter school or charter management organization—responsible for administering and overseeing public elementary and secondary education within a defined geographic area under state and federal regulations.

Special Education Services: Supports provided to students with disabilities under the federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These services can include specialized instruction, therapies, and accommodations.

Enrollment vs. Membership: Enrollment refers to students registered at a school, while membership often reflects average daily attendance or other state-defined measures.

IDEA Compliance: IDEA is a federal law that requires all public schools—including charter schools—to identify students with disabilities, evaluate their needs, and provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Compliance includes developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), delivering required services, and meeting procedural safeguards outlined in IDEA.

Acknowledgements

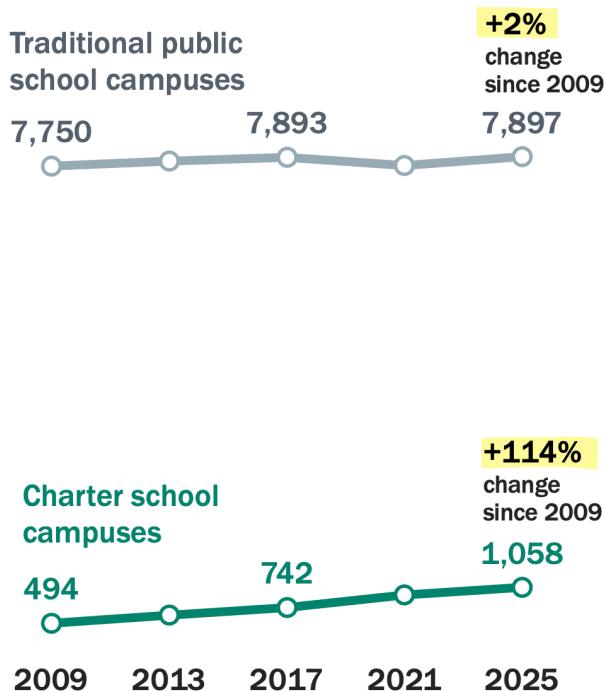
We are grateful for the contributions of the many individuals that made this work possible. We thank Drs. Andrea Chevalier, Shelby Cosner, Andrew Pendola, and Federico Waitoller as well as several other individuals for their thoughtful conversations and reviews. We are especially grateful to the families of students with disabilities and the district administrators who have long asked for a study of this kind but lacked the time, resources, or institutional capacity to undertake it themselves.

Charter enrollment surged while traditional public school (TPSs) enrollment remained flat

Charter campuses grew by 114% while TPSs increased by only 2%.

From 2009 to 2025, the number of TPSs increased from 7,750 to 7,897 (+2% change), while charter schools expanded from 494 to 1,058 (+114% change).

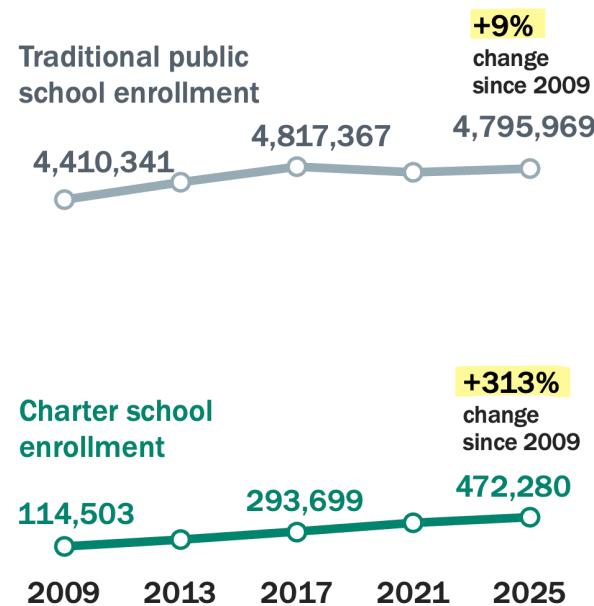
of campuses from 2009-2025



Charter enrollment surged 313%, reshaping Texas's enrollment landscape.

From 2009 to 2025, enrollment in TPSs increased from 4.41 to 4.80 million (+9% change), while charter school enrollment increased from 114,503 to 472,280 (+313% change).

of students enrolled from 2009-2025



Why this Matters

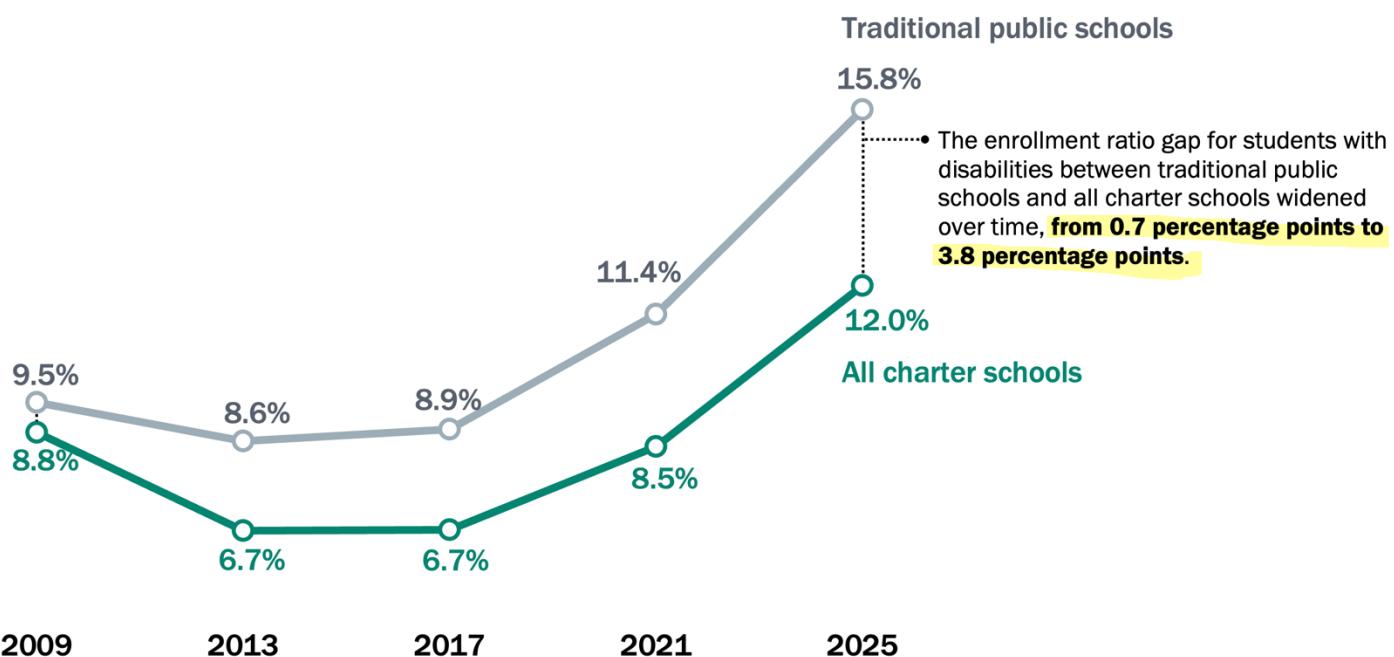
Rapid charter growth changes how enrollment and funding are distributed across the state's public schools. As districts develop and plan staffing models, budgets, construction bonds, and long-range priorities, these trends raise questions about the state's ability to maintain an efficient public school system and ensure all students receive the services they are entitled to under the law.

The gap between traditional public schools (TPSs) and charters in enrolling students with disabilities grew by more than fivefold

TPSs saw twice the enrollment growth of students with disabilities as charter schools over time.

From 2009 to 2025, TPSs increased from 9.5% to 15.8% (+6.3 percentage points), while charter schools increased from 8.8% to 12.0% (+3.2 percentage points). Over the same period, the statewide enrollment ratio increased from 9.4% to 15.5% (+6.1 percentage points).

% of students with disabilities enrollment ratio from 2009-2025



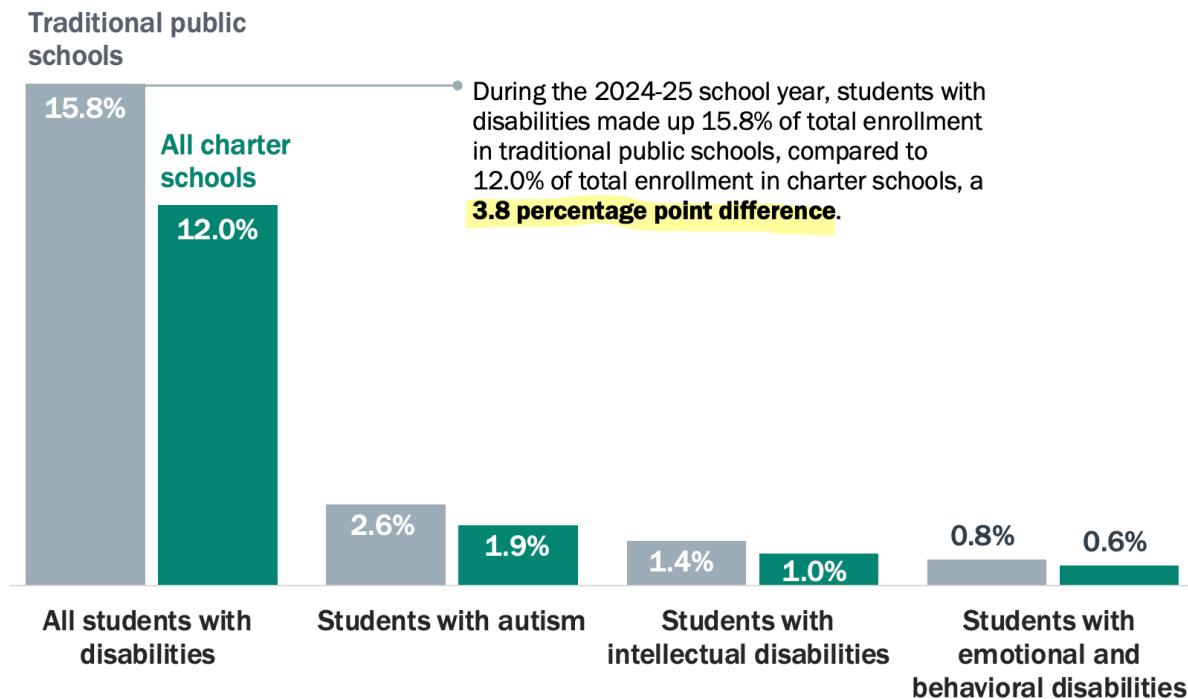
Why this Matters

The widening gap in special education enrollment means that TPSs are carrying a disproportionate share of higher-cost services. This raises fundamental questions about whether Texas is meeting its constitutional duties to maintain an efficient system of public schools and ensure access to special education for all students with disabilities across all publicly funded schools.

Charters enroll fewer students with higher cost disabilities than Traditional Public Schools (TPSs)

TPSs enroll a higher proportion of students with autism, intellectual disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disabilities.

% of students with disabilities (2024-25 school year snapshot)



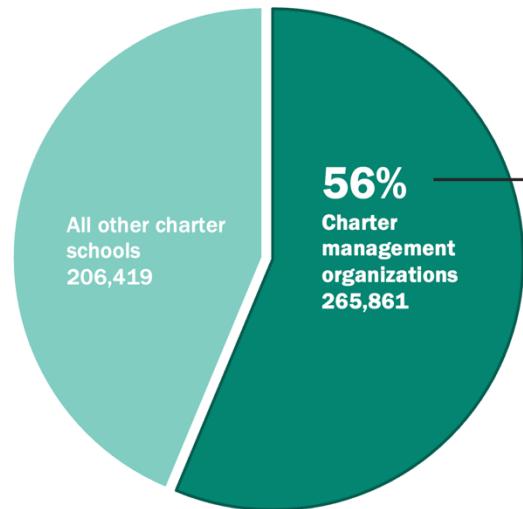
Why this Matters

Charter schools enroll a smaller share of students with disabilities overall, and this same pattern holds across disability groups that typically require more intensive and costly supports, including autism, intellectual disabilities, and emotional/behavioral disabilities. **These students often need specialized teachers and aides, more intensive individualized instruction, and additional related services and behavioral supports that districts must provide regardless of enrollment shifts.** When charters enroll proportionally fewer students in these higher-cost categories, TPSs absorb a disproportionate share of high-cost services while losing enrollment and funding to charters. These dynamics strain district budgets, limit program quality, and raise questions about whether families have fair access to IDEA-required services across all publicly-funded schools.

Nearly 60% of charter seats controlled by 10 Charter Management Organizations (CMOs)

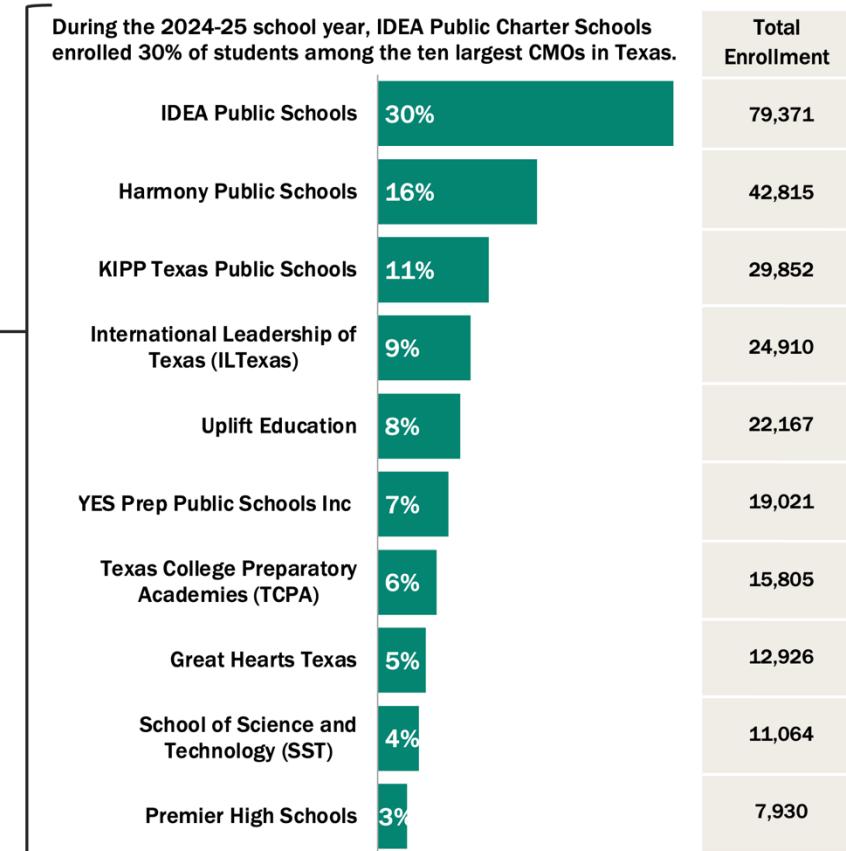
Ten largest CMOs enroll 265,861 students – Driving most charter growth in Texas.

% of total enrollment in Texas charter schools
(2024-25 school year)



% of students enrolled from ten largest charter management organizations (CMOs) in Texas (2024-25 school year)

During the 2024-25 school year, IDEA Public Charter Schools enrolled 30% of students among the ten largest CMOs in Texas.



Why this Matters

The concentration of charter enrollment among a small number of CMOs matters because these same operators enroll fewer students with disabilities and spend less per student with disabilities than large ISDs. As charter enrollment becomes increasingly concentrated, responsibility for serving students with more complex needs remains disproportionately with districts, even as enrollment and revenue shift toward charters.

Large Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) enroll fewer students with disabilities, including students in higher-cost disability categories

Ten largest CMOs average 11.4% enrollment of students with disabilities.

% of students with disabilities in large charter management organizations (2024-25 school year snapshot)



Ten Largest Charter Management Organizations (CMOs)	All students with disabilities	Students with autism	Students with intellectual disabilities	Students with emotional and behavioral disabilities	Total Enrollment
SST	14.4%	2.2%	0.5%	0.6%	11,064
Premier High Schools	13.4%	1.4%	0.6%	2.4%	7,930
Great Hearts	12.3%	1.8%	0.5%	0.6%	12,926
UPLIFT	11.9%	2.9%	1.0%	0.5%	22,167
KIPP	11.5%	1.7%	1.2%	0.5%	29,852
TCPA	11.4%	1.4%	0.3%	0.6%	15,805
IDEA	11.2%	2.5%	1.5%	0.4%	79,371
ILTEXAS	11.1%	1.8%	0.9%	0.4%	24,910
Yes Prep	10.9%	2.1%	1.1%	0.4%	19,021
Harmony	10.2%	2.0%	0.7%	0.5%	42,815
Average for Ten Largest CMOs	11.4%	2.1%	1.0%	0.5%	
Average for all Texas TPSs	15.8%	2.6%	1.4%	0.8%	

Why this Matters

The ten largest CMOs enroll fewer students with disabilities overall compared to TPSs, and this lower enrollment extends across disability categories, including autism, intellectual disabilities, and emotional and behavioral disabilities. Given their size and scale—serving thousands to tens of thousands of students—these CMOs have the capacity to make substantial investments in special education staffing, programs, and services, yet they enroll a smaller share of students with higher-cost needs.

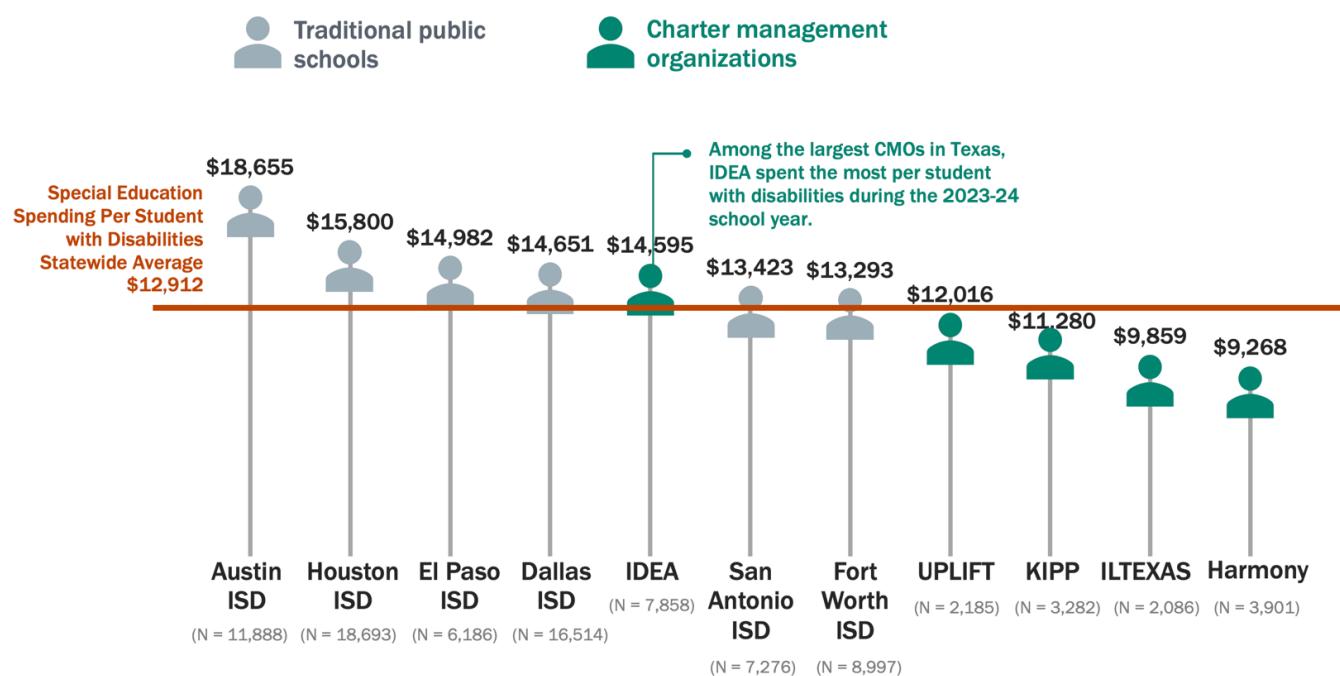
Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) spend less on special education – ISDs outpace them by thousands per student

Every major ISD exceeds the state average for special education spending per pupil – Most CMOs fall short.

The graphic below shows the amount of special education spending each large ISD and CMO spent per student with disabilities during the 2023-24 school year.

Special Education spending per student with disabilities from 2023-24 school year
(N = membership for students with disabilities from 2023-24 school year)

Note: Spending includes all funds for students with disabilities (Program Intent Codes 23, 33, and 43) based on operating expenditures. Dyslexia or Related Disorder Services (PIC 37) are excluded. Student counts are based on membership rather than enrollment



Why this Matters

Austin ISD spends far more per student with disabilities than other ISDs and far more than any CMO, which raises questions about what drives such high levels of investment. Yet, Harmony, ILTexas, and KIPP spend thousands less per student than the state average and even less than other large CMOs. The CMOs with the lowest spending also enroll fewer students with disabilities, especially those with higher-cost disabilities. Lower enrollment of students with disabilities and more significant needs allows these CMOs to operate leaner special education budgets while nearby districts must maintain more intensive staffing and service models for all the students in their boundaries.

City-Level Trends: Austin ISD (AISD)

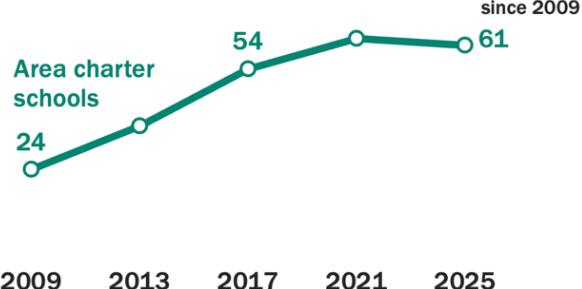
Charters grow 438% as AISD faces school closures and declining enrollment.

From 2009 to 2025, the number AISD schools increased by 3, while the number of charter schools in the area increased by 37. By 2025, charter schools accounted for 33% of all publicly-funded schools, and enrollment in AISD schools had fallen by 13% since 2009.

of campuses in Austin from 2009 to 2025



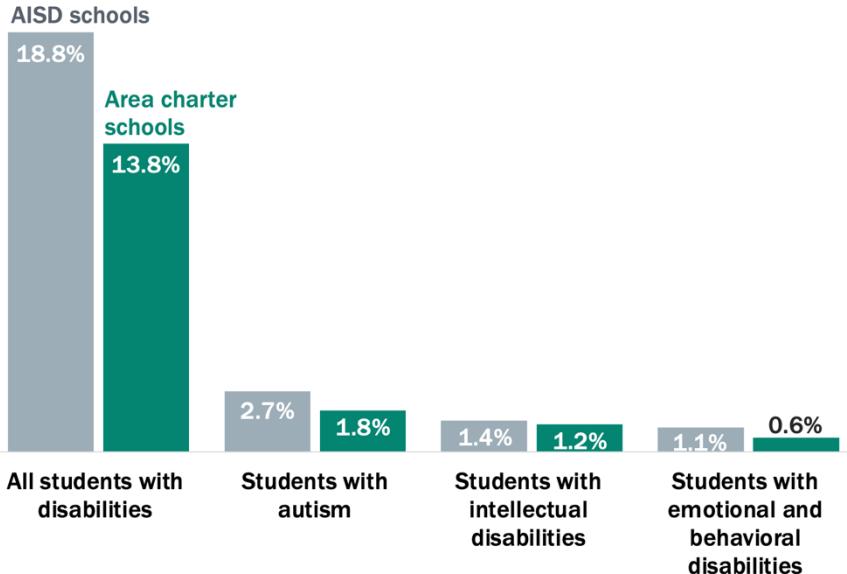
of students enrolled in Austin from 2009 to 2025



AISD served a higher share of students with disabilities than area charter schools.

During the 2024-25 school year, students with disabilities made up 18.8% of total enrollment in AISD schools, compared to 13.8% of total enrollment in area charter schools, a **5-percentage point difference**.

% of students with disabilities (2024-25 school year)



City-Level Trends: Dallas ISD (DISD)

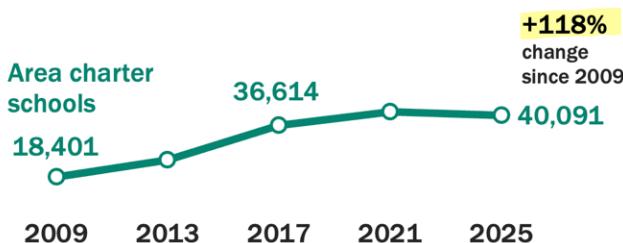
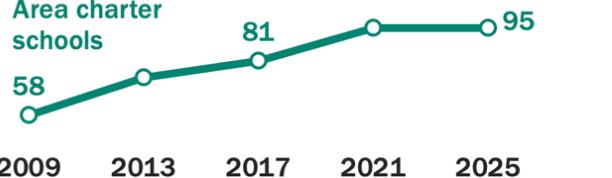
In 2025, about 3 in 10 schools in the DISD catchment zone were charter schools, which helps explain DISD's declining enrollment.

From 2009 to 2025, the number of DISD schools increased by 4, while the number of charter schools in the area increased by 37. By 2025, charter schools accounted for 29% of all publicly funded schools in the DISD catchment area, and enrollment in DISD schools had fallen by 13% since 2009.

of campuses in Dallas from 2009 to 2025



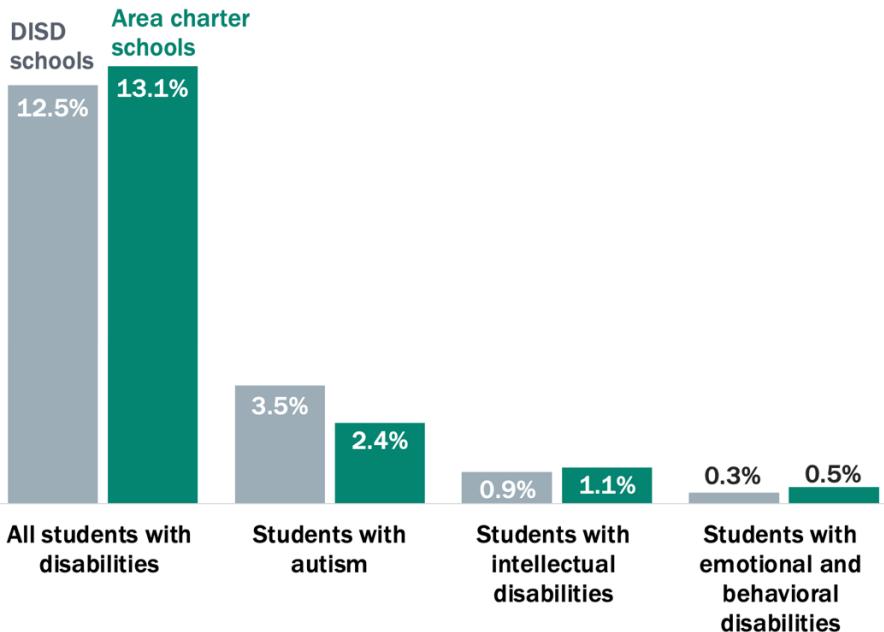
of students enrolled in Dallas from 2009 to 2025



In 2025, charter schools in the area served a higher share of students with disabilities than DISD.

During the 2024-25 school year, students with disabilities made up 13.1% of total enrollment in Dallas area charter schools, compared to 12.5% of total enrollment in DISD schools, a **0.6 percentage point difference**.

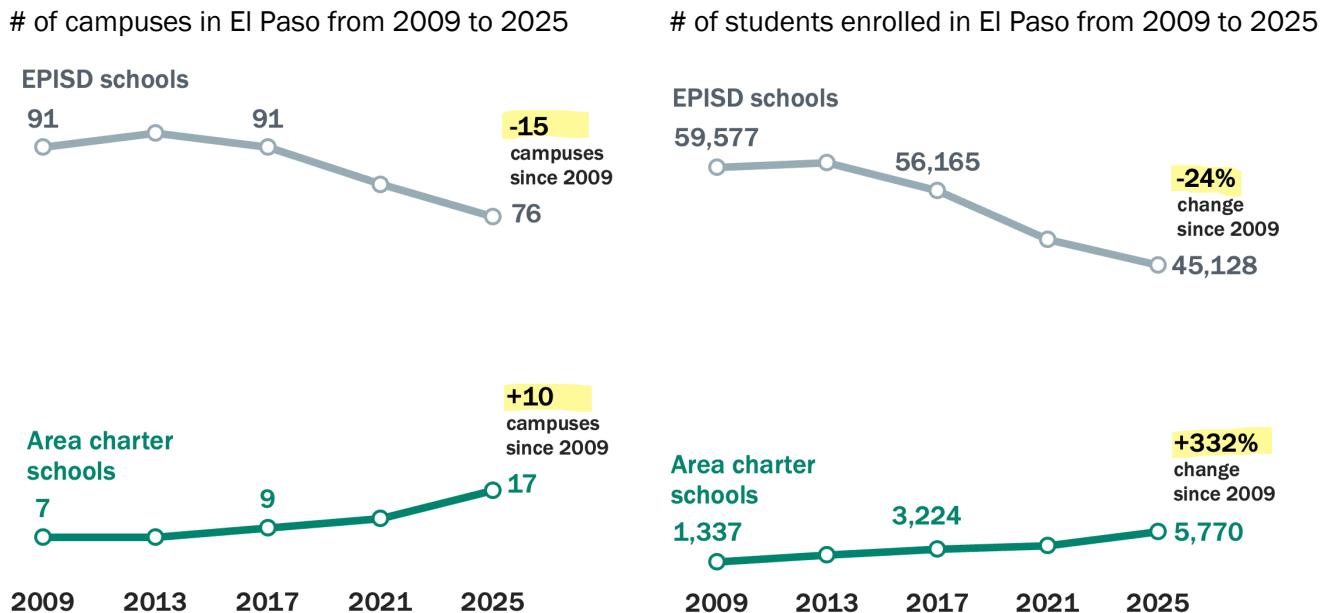
% of students with disabilities (2024-25 school year)



City-Level Trends: El Paso ISD (EPISD)

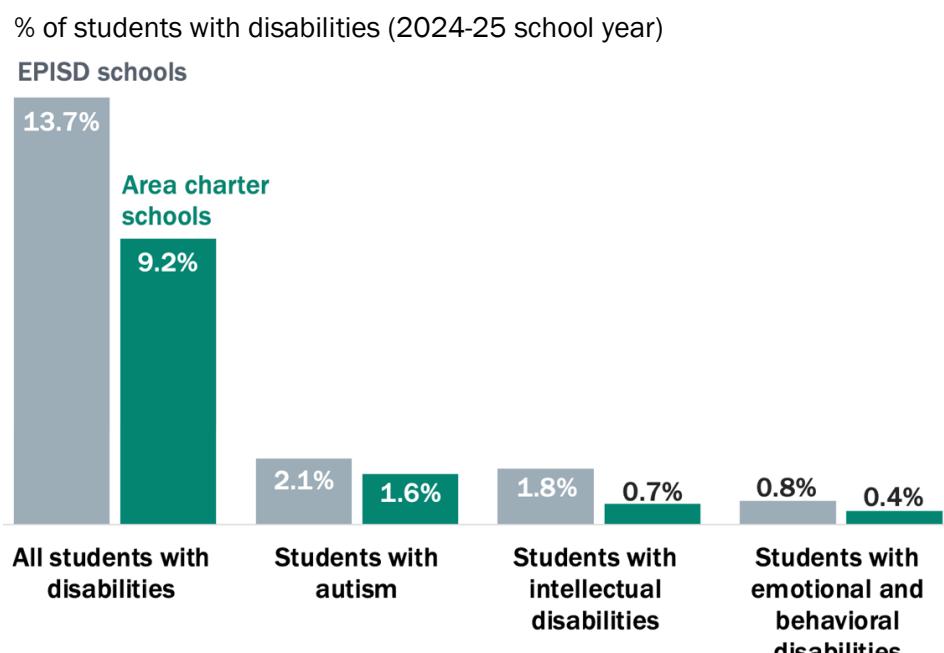
Charter enrollment climbs 332% as EPISD closes at least 15 campuses amid declining enrollment.

From 2009 to 2025, the number of EPISD schools declined by 15, while the number of charter schools increased by 10. By 2025, area charter schools accounted for 18% of all publicly-funded schools, and enrollment in EPISD had fallen by 24% since 2009.



EPISD served a higher share of students with disabilities than area charter schools.

During the 2024-25 school year, students with disabilities made up 13.7% of total enrollment in EPISD schools, compared to 9.2% of total enrollment in area charter schools, a 4.5 percentage point difference.

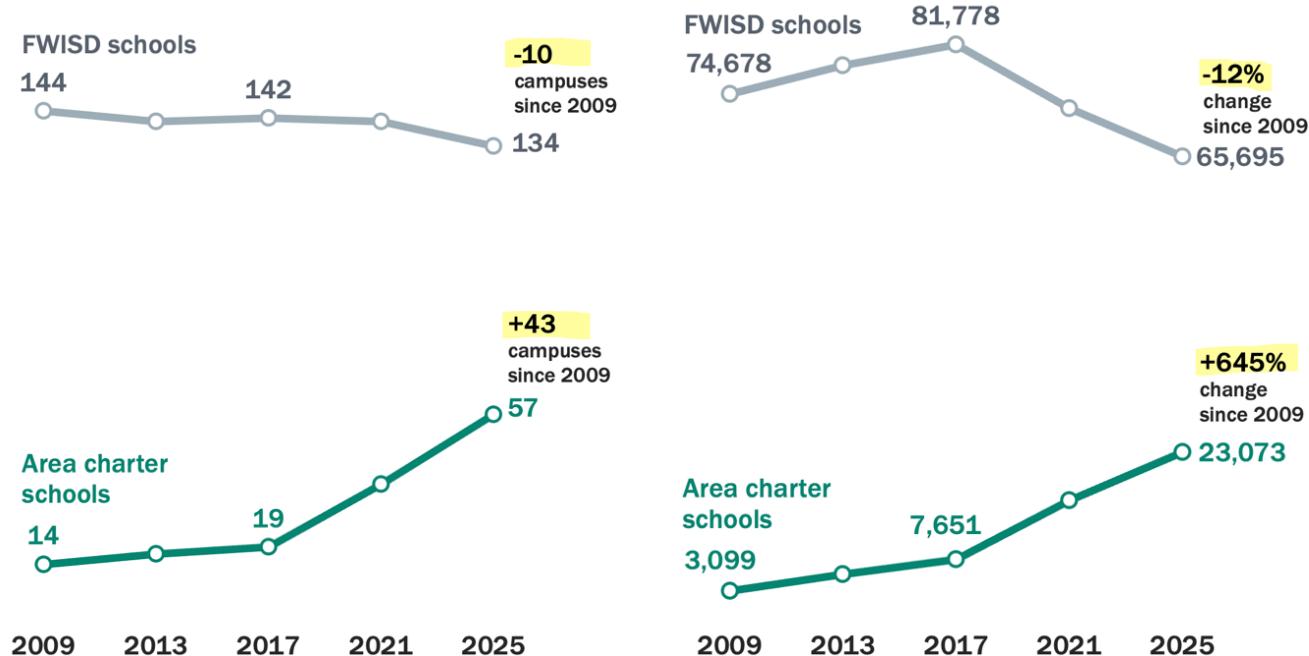


City-Level Trends: Fort Worth ISD (FWISD)

Fort Worth area charter enrollment surges 645% amid FWISD declines.

From 2009 to 2025, the number of FWISD schools declined by 10, while the number of charter schools in the area increased by 43. By 2025, charter schools accounted for 30% of all publicly funded schools in the FWISD catchment area, and enrollment in FWISD schools had fallen by 12% since 2009.

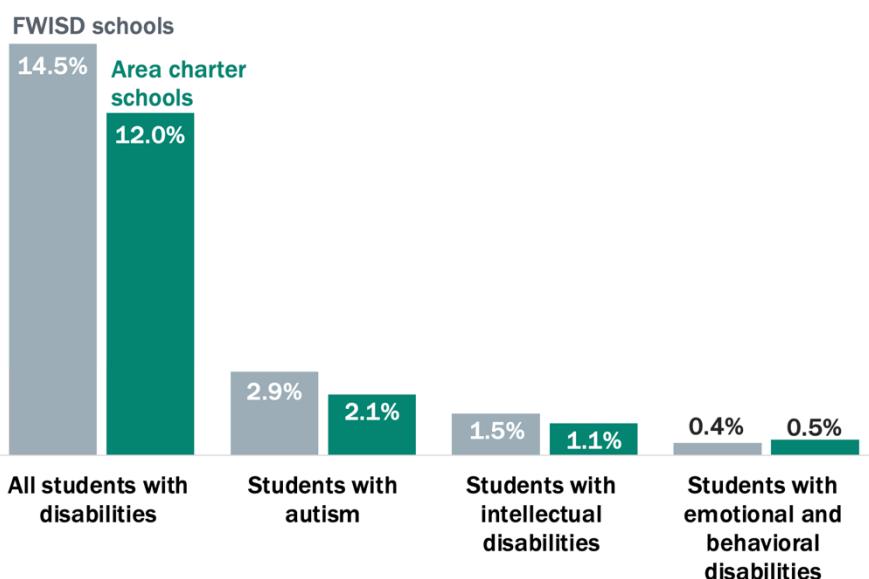
of campuses in Fort Worth from 2009 to 2025 # of students enrolled in Fort Worth from 2009 to 2025



FWISD schools served a higher share of students with disabilities than area charter schools.

During the 2024-25 school year, students with disabilities made up 14.5% of total enrollment in FWISD schools, compared to 12% of total enrollment in area charter schools, a **2.5 percentage point difference**.

% of students with disabilities (2024-25 school year)



City-Level Trends: Houston ISD (HISD)

Charters now make up one-third of publicly funded schools in the HISD catchment zone while HISD closes schools and sees declining enrollment.

From 2009 to 2025, the number of HISD schools declined by 20, while the number of charter schools in the area increased by 19. By 2025, charter schools accounted for 32% of all publicly funded schools in the HISD catchment area, and enrollment in HISD schools had fallen by 10% since 2009.

of campuses in Houston from 2009 to 2025



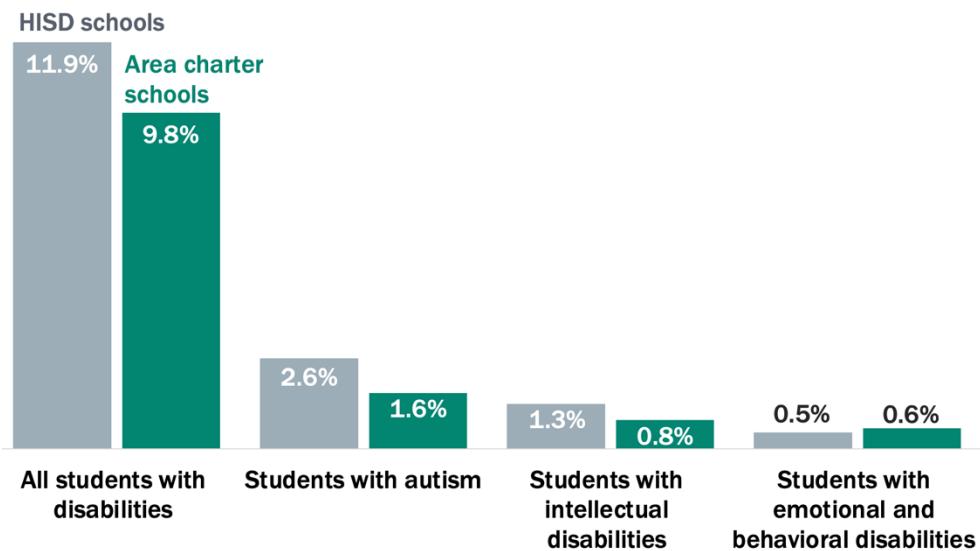
of students enrolled in Houston from 2009 to 2025



HISD served a higher share of students with disabilities than area charter schools.

During the 2024-25 school year, students with disabilities made up 11.9% of total enrollment in HISD schools, compared to 9.8% of total enrollment in area charter schools, a **2.1 percentage point difference**.

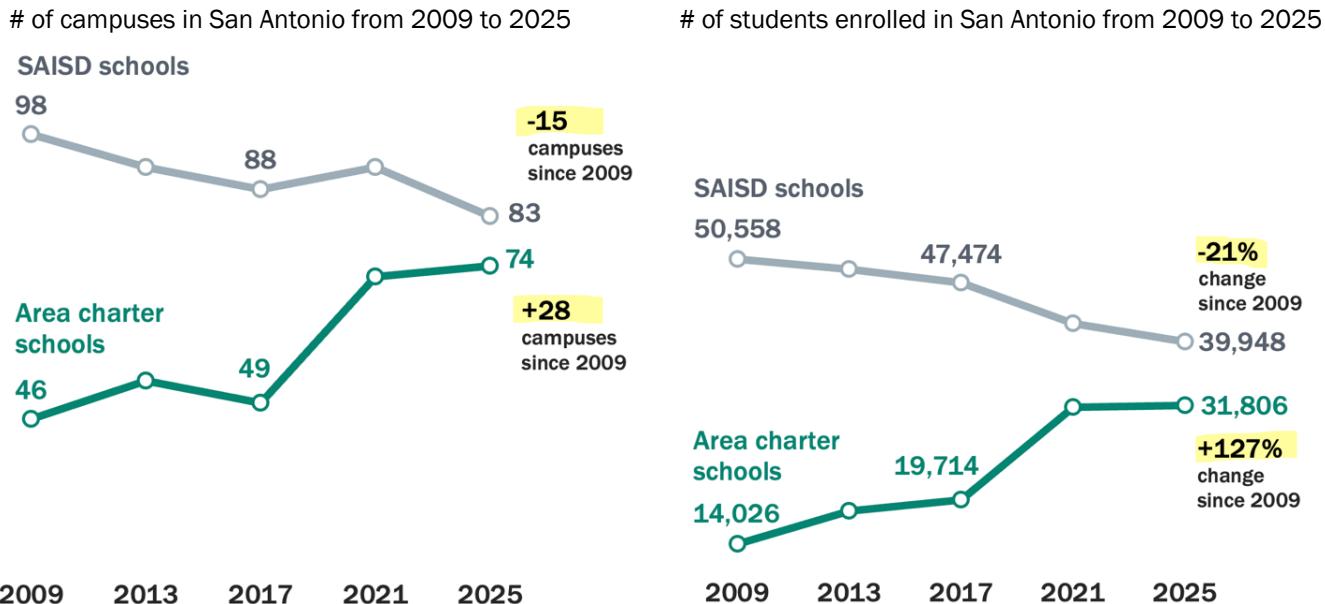
% of students with disabilities (2024-25 school year)



City-Level Trends: San Antonio ISD (SAISD)

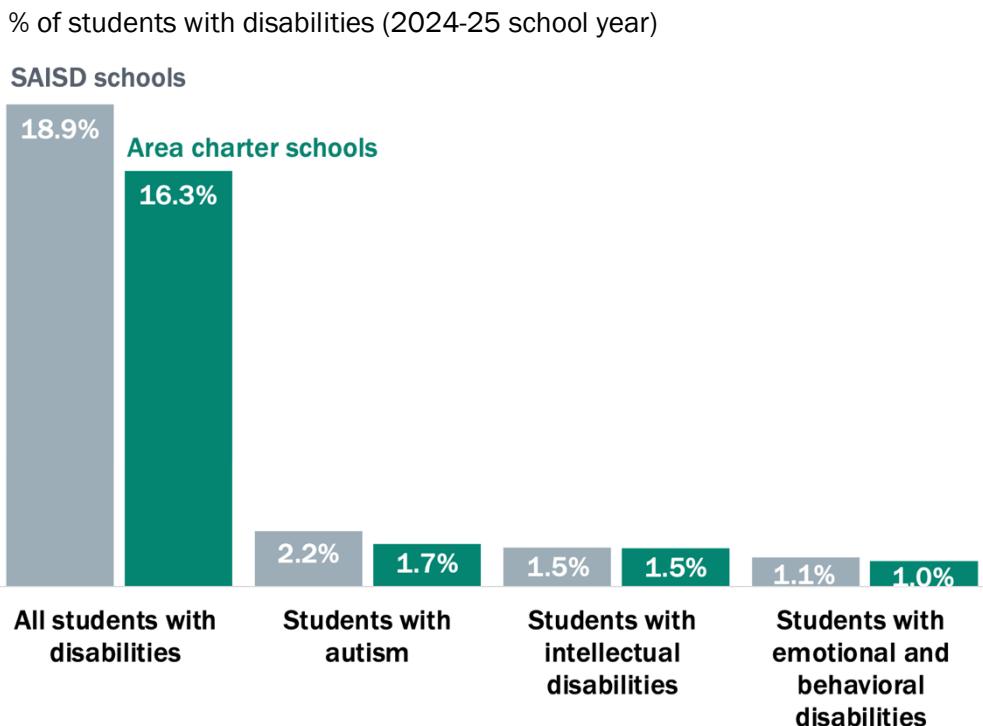
Charters reach near parity as SAISD closes schools and loses enrollment.

From 2009 to 2025, the number of SAISD schools declined by 15, while the number of area charter schools increased by 28. By 2025, charter schools accounted for 47% of all publicly-funded schools in the area, and enrollment in SAISD had fallen by 21% since 2009.



SAISD schools served a higher share of students with disabilities than area charter schools.

During the 2024-25 school year, students with disabilities made up 18.9% of total enrollment in SAISD schools, compared to 16.3% of total enrollment in area charter schools, a **2.6 percentage point difference**.



Recommendations and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

- Charter growth has reshaped Texas's public school landscape. From 2009–2025, charter enrollment rose +313% while TPS enrollment rose +9%, and charters now make up roughly 18%–47% of publicly funded campuses across the six featured ISD catchment areas. This shift changes how enrollment and dollars flow through the system.
- Charters enroll fewer students with disabilities—especially in higher-cost categories. In 2024–25, students with disabilities were 12% of charter enrollment versus 15.8% in TPSs statewide; the ten largest CMOs average 11.4%, with lower representation in autism, intellectual disabilities, and emotional/behavioral disabilities.
- ISDs carry the heavier special education load and spend more per student. Every major ISD in the study exceeds the statewide special education spending average per student with disabilities, while most large CMOs spend less. ISDs simultaneously serve a higher share of students with complex needs.
- A small number of large CMOs shape the charter market. The ten largest CMOs enroll 56% of all charter students, and most of these operators enroll fewer students with significant disabilities and spend less per student with disabilities than large ISDs—concentrating service responsibilities in districts as enrollment and revenue decline.

Bottom line: Without stronger transparency, funding alignment to service intensity, and targeted oversight, Texas risks a public system in which districts shoulder most high-cost services while large CMOs expand without comparable special education responsibilities.

Recommendations & Conclusions

- Texas needs transparent, comparable information about special education across all LEAs.**

Families, educators, policymakers, and oversight bodies need clear, publicly available data on identification, disability categories, service settings, staffing, and per-student spending so that differences between ISDs and CMOs are visible and actionable. This level of transparency is essential for evaluating access to services and understanding how enrollment shifts affect students.
- Texas needs a funding system that truly reflects service intensity and cost.**

Although the state is moving toward a service-intensity model, current funding levels likely remain insufficient to cover the real cost of serving students with complex disabilities. Texas needs weights and formulas that match verified costs across disability types and intensity of need, as well as targeted support to stabilize related-service staffing in regions experiencing rapid charter growth.
- Texas needs oversight mechanisms that match the scale and concentration of charter growth.**

As large CMOs enroll tens of thousands of students and control most charter seats, Texas needs stronger oversight of charter expansion, including impact analyses, minimum special education capacity expectations, and regional planning structures that ensure continuity of services and efficient use of public dollars.

Audience-specific actions

The Texas Legislature plays a central role in implementing the recommendations outlined above. To support transparency, funding alignment, and stronger oversight, the Legislature should strengthen statutory requirements for comparable reporting across all LEAs, ensure that the new service-intensity funding model is fully and adequately resourced, and require impact analyses before charter expansion decisions. The Legislature is also uniquely positioned to stabilize the special education workforce through targeted scholarships, residencies, and financial incentives that address shortages in high-growth charter markets.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is responsible for translating statutory direction into operational systems that families, districts, and policymakers can rely on. TEA must build and maintain a statewide special education transparency dashboard that provides comparable information across ISDs and CMOs. Transparency efforts should extend beyond the scope of this report's analysis and include broader aspects of IDEA monitoring (e.g., Child Find, FAPE, LRE, disciplinary removals) into authorization and renewal processes. Moreover, TEA should publicly track compliance and corrective actions. These responsibilities position TEA as the primary steward of data quality, transparency, and consistent enforcement across sectors.

Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) must expand their special education staffing, programs, and related-service capacity to match their market presence. CMOs should work (or expand efforts and investments) to enter inter-LEA/CMO agreements for shared related services and specialized programs and participate in regional planning groups to coordinate program placement, transportation, and continuity of services for students who move between schools.

Families and community organizations have a vital role in shaping system accountability and ensuring that services meet real community needs. Families can use transparent data systems to compare services, monitor evaluation timelines, and raise concerns about access and implementation. Community organizations can help interpret data, organize resources, and bring family experiences to policymakers and oversight bodies, anchoring reforms in lived experience.

Journalists help the public understand how system trends affect students. By connecting enrollment, spending, and special education capacity data with family stories, tracking corrective-action progress, and examining how charter growth intersects with district school closures, performance, or staffing patterns, journalists play a crucial role in explaining the implications of sector differences and fostering public oversight.