

HOW MEXICO'S
DRUG WAR IS
CHANGING TEXAS
by Nate Blakeslee

BIG 12
- 2
= DOOM
by Paul Burka

CAN CHARTER
SCHOOLS
SAVE OUR KIDS?
by William Martin

Kinky's Advice
FOR RICK AND BILL
(SEE PAGE 78)

Texas Monthly[®] *August 2010* **Get Away!** (While you still can.)

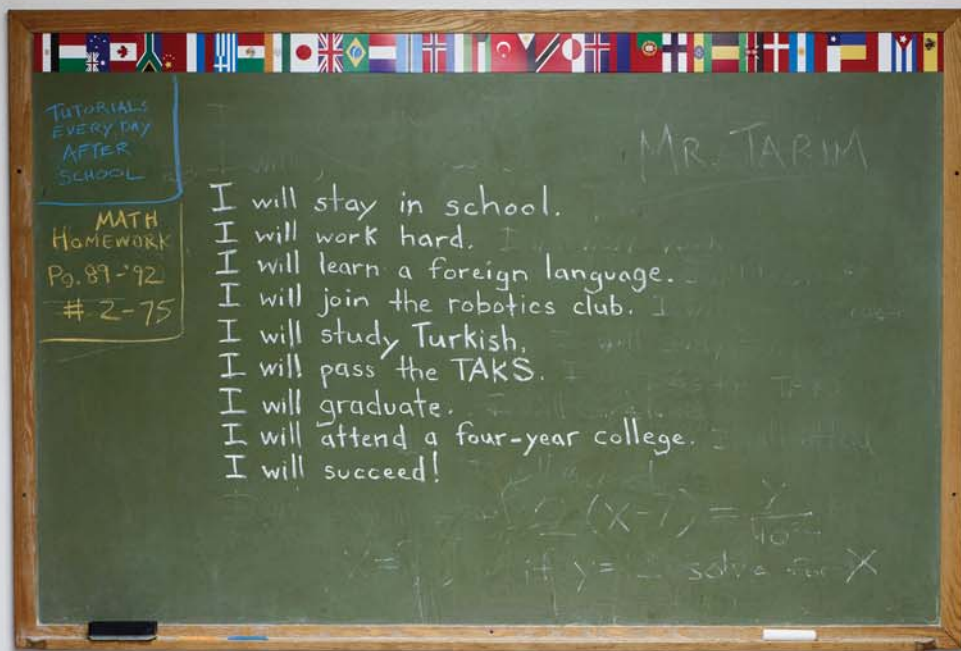
Five perfectly planned vacations to take before
the summer ends. *by Jordan Breal*



texasmonthly.com | \$4.95

0 8 >





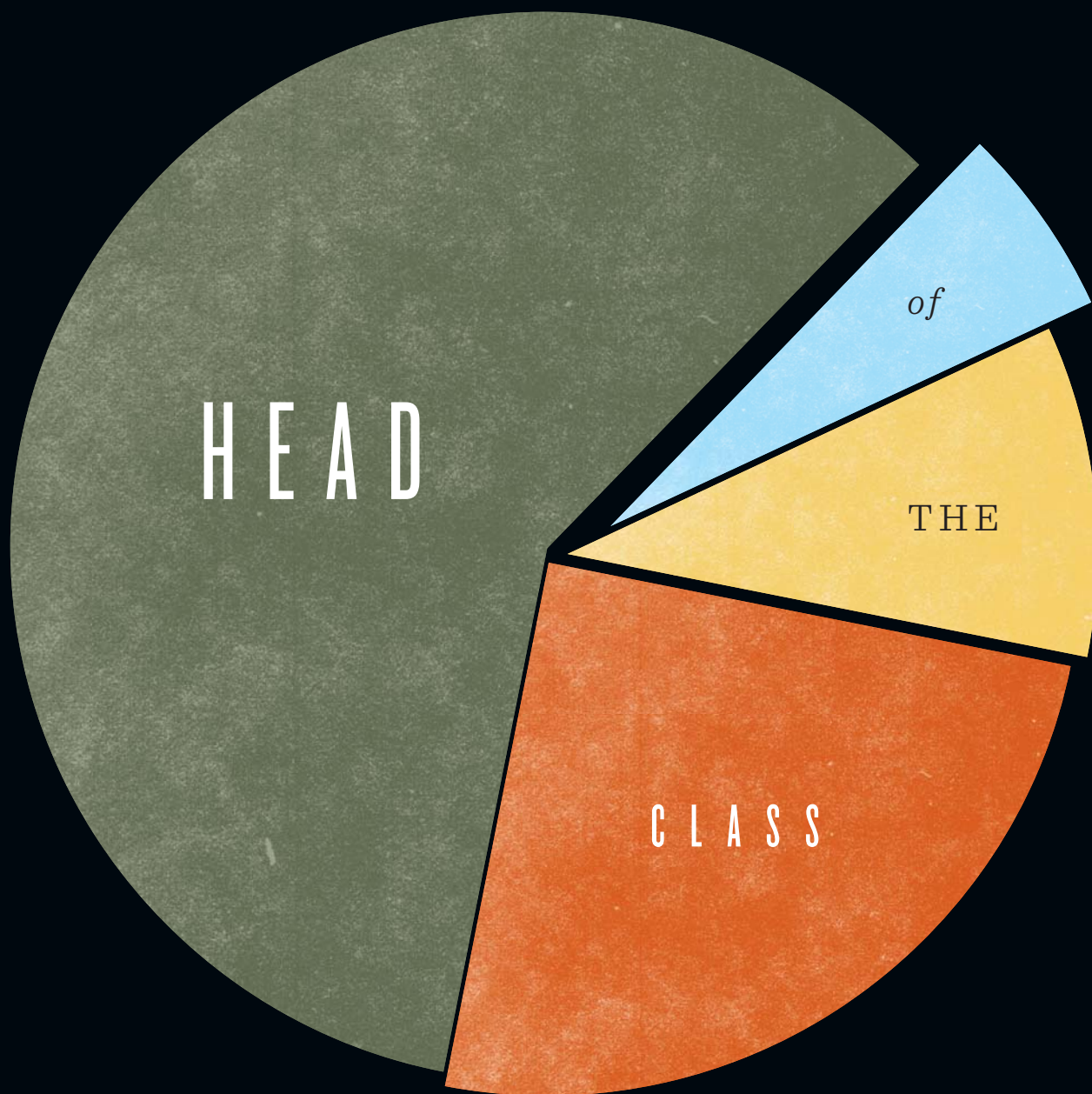


WITH TEST SCORES DOWN AND THE DROPOUT RATE UP, EVERYONE'S LOOKING TO FIX TEXAS'

SCHOOLS. HAS A TURKISH MUSLIM WHO HAS BEEN INFLUENCED BY THE TEACHINGS OF AN OBSCURE PHILOSOPHER

FOUND AN ANSWER? JUST ASK THE HUNDREDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS WHO HAVE GRADUATED FROM HIS

CHARTER SCHOOLS.



by William Martin

photograph by ADAM VOORHES

THE BEIGE BUILDING ON SOUTH BRAESWOOD BOULEVARD
LOOKS RUN-DOWN FOR THE MEYERLAND SECTION OF HOUSTON,
WHICH HELPS EXPLAIN WHY THE HEBREW
ACADEMY FORMERLY HOUSED THERE LEFT FOR BETTER

quarters. The interior offers little to improve that first impression. Painted in shades of light yellow and green, the narrow hallways, though lined with pennants from dozens of colleges, do not inspire. The library/computer lab is a dark, low-ceilinged room partly lit by a string of white Christmas lights. The lunchroom area is more like a wide hallway, with banks of blue lockers along the walls. To make the space seem gracious, several large pictures of the sort one sees in a grandmother's house hang high above the lockers: landscapes, sailing ships, skylines at eventide. The gym is new, but the basketball court is not regulation size, and the sidelines come within a couple of feet of the walls. It is about what one would expect in a school where 70 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged and 80 percent are either Hispanic or black. At one point in the tour, the principal, Dr. Edib Ercetin, smiled and said with a shrug, "It's like an old woman. No matter how much makeup she puts on, you can tell."

It was a matter-of-fact acknowledgment, not an apology. The truth is that Ercetin's school, the Harmony Science Academy, is one of the best in the country. It received an "exemplary" rating from the Texas Education Agency for the 2008–2009 school year, reflecting its outstanding test scores and its zero dropout rate, placing it in the top 8 percent of all public high schools in the state. This year the HSA received the Silver Medal in *U.S. News and World Report's* America's Best High Schools, putting it in the top 3 percent in the entire nation.

The name may not be familiar to most readers, but the Harmony Science Academy is part of a growing movement in Texas that may revolutionize our educational system. It is a charter school, which is a public school funded by taxpayer money but run by a nonprofit organization or a for-profit business (Harmony is the former). In Texas, the State Board of Education grants the charter, and the TEA monitors the school's academic progress. The charter establishes a new school district, which can have multiple campuses. Each charter receives \$450,000 in start-up money and about \$6,000 a year for each student enrolled, approximately \$1,200 less than the allotment for students in regular public schools. As compensation for lower funding, charter schools have considerable freedom to operate as they see fit. They set their calendar and the length of their school day, and they

have wide discretion as to how and what they teach.

Texas has been particularly hospitable to charters, which began to spring up in the mid-nineties. In 1994 Houston teachers Mark Feinberg and David Levin created the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). In Irving, a group of concerned citizens opened the first Uplift Education school, in 1997. In 1998 Chris Barbic founded YES Prep in Houston, and that same year Teach for America's Tom Torkelson and JoAnn Gama launched IDEA Academy—its motto is "No Excuses!"—in Donna. Today, Texas ranks third in the number of charter schools in the country, with 464 campuses and nearly 120,000 students.

The Harmony Public Schools are the largest charter school system in the state. Since the opening of the Meyerland campus, in August 2000, Harmony has grown to include 25 campuses in seventeen Texas cities, most serving economically disadvantaged minority children and often housed in big-box buildings reborn as schools—a Walmart in San Antonio, an Albertsons in Waco, a warehouse in Laredo. Seven more campuses are slated to open this fall, and administrators hope to have a total of 35 schools up and running by

2012, with an enrollment of 24,000 students. The newer schools are already receiving accolades comparable to those at Ercetin's. Of the 19 that were operating in 2008 and 2009, 11 received the TEA's "exemplary" rating, 6 were "recognized," and 2 were "academically acceptable."

The success of the Harmony schools, and the other Texas charters, is hard to ignore, especially when you consider the crisis in public education. The problems are not new. In 1983 a comprehensive report called *A Nation at Risk* documented in depressing detail the shortcomings of elementary and secondary education in this country. On a series of nineteen tests, U.S. students never placed first or second when compared with children from all over the world; when compared with students in other industrialized countries, they ranked last on seven of the examinations. U.S. students did fairly well on





Opposite: Top, Ashley Agbasoga, at the Harmony Science Academy in Austin, participates in a graduation rehearsal. This fall she will attend Columbia University, in New York. Bottom: A bulletin board shows the range of universities that have accepted Harmony students. This page: Soner Tarim, the superintendent of the Harmony Public Schools.

the reading tests, but they performed miserably in chemistry, physics, and math. Follow-up reports in 1998 and 2006 found little significant improvement. On the benchmark Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, conducted in 1998, the U.S. ranked ahead of only Cyprus and South Africa in math and science literacy. Even our best students ranked at the bottom when compared with the best in other countries. What's more, tests of fourth-, eighth-, and twelfth-grade students showed that U.S. kids fared worse and worse by comparison as they progressed through the system. Later studies, in 2003 and 2007, concluded that American students had performed poorly at all three levels.

To make things even more problematic, our educational system is also dealing with a rising dropout rate. Major studies indicate that 25 percent of American students fail to graduate from high school. Among blacks and Hispanics, the figure is nearly 40 percent. Closer to home, Texas has ranked dead last in high school graduation rates in recent years, with nearly 49 percent of students failing to earn a diploma. Moreover, of those who do manage to finish high school and enroll in Texas colleges, half need remedial courses and many never graduate. This is not the picture of a nation at risk but of a nation and state in peril.

Though they are not without their detractors, charter schools have tried to establish themselves as an answer to this challenge, and they are riding a powerful wave of support. Following the lead of the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, President Barack Obama has called for their expansion, urging states to lift the cap on the number of charters they will authorize—the Texas cap is currently 215, and the TEA has received bids for each spot—to qualify for grants from the \$4.35 billion educational stimulus package known as Race to

the Top. (Governor Rick Perry chose not to participate in the program because he believed it had too many strings attached.)

As the Harmony schools have become models for other programs across the state, they are poised to take advantage of this groundswell. Yet there's an interesting wrinkle in the story of the Harmony schools. The organizers, key administrators, and about half of the math, science, and computer teachers are Turkish Muslims, not exactly what one would expect in Texas. Many of them have at least some ties to a broad-based movement in which well-educated, pious Muslims have established hundreds of the highest-performing secular schools in Turkey and the surrounding Turkic states. Though this has created some controversy, it appears to be of no concern to the parents, students, and non-Muslim teachers connected to these schools. What is of concern is whether their approach to public education provides a road map for other schools to help improve the quality of education across the state or, as critics contend, merely drains resources away from existing public schools. Is the answer to our educational crisis to be found in that run-down building in Meyerland?

THE FOUNDER OF THE HARMONY SCHOOLS IS AN INTENSE BUT UNFAILINGLY COURTEOUS 43-YEAR-OLD NAMED SONER TARIM,

who was born and raised in Istanbul. In 1991, while Tarim was teaching at a Turkish university and work- | **CONTINUED ON PAGE 167**

Head of the Class

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 107

ing on his doctorate in aquatic ecology, his older brother asked him to come to Houston to look after his wife and three children while he underwent treatment for colon cancer at M.D. Anderson. As the ultimately unsuccessful treatments dragged on, Tarim started taking courses at the University of Houston to improve his English. He also began to check out possibilities for continuing his scientific studies in the U.S. After his brother died and his family returned to Turkey, Tarim enrolled at A&M in 1994, where he joined a cohort of more than 150 Turkish graduate students, nearly all studying math, science, and engineering.

As he gained more teaching experience at A&M, he and some of his colleagues discovered that, unlike beginning students in Turkey, many of the freshmen in the undergraduate courses they were teaching did not have the basic math and science skills needed for college work. To bring their struggling charges up to speed, they began offering free tutorials in the afternoon. They soon realized that what these students lacked was not intelligence but instruction.

Tarim and many of his peers have been influenced by the writings of Fethullah Gülen, an immensely popular imam and one of the world's leading public intellectuals. Gülen's message, contained in sixty books and countless sermons, is that one can be both completely modern and completely Muslim at the same time and that the rejection of modernity, especially in the areas of science and technology, has kept many Muslim countries mired in the Middle Ages. For decades he has spoken of the need for a "Golden Generation" of people who will lead Turkey to a brighter future. He stresses the value of altruism, volunteer service, and generous sharing of one's time and money. In a pattern repeated thousands of times in Turkey and elsewhere, people influenced by his teaching have formed independent foundations that start and operate schools, hospitals, relief agencies, newspapers, radio and television stations, banks, and businesses.

Tarim and his colleagues were about to become the latest. With friends at the University of Houston, Rice University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Baylor College of Medicine, they put together a proposal and applied to the State Board of Education to open the first Harmony Science Academy, in Houston. Tarim served as the first principal, and as more schools opened, he became the superintendent of the Harmony Public Schools and Harmony's single-minded champion. "Our

schools are a plus for the neighborhood because they provide parents with an option," he says. "If you go to the grocery store, you like having a choice between brands. We explore, we experiment, and we have the freedom to try different programs."

Like all public schools in the United States, Harmony is forbidden from offering religious instruction or sponsoring religious activities; though operated by Muslims, Harmony academies are explicitly not Muslim schools. Still, Turkish Muslim immigrants hold a near monopoly on the top administrative positions and occupy many of the math, science, and computer teaching slots, though nearly all the other teachers are American and non-Muslim. "Because we focus on math, science, and technology, we have to get qualified teachers," Tarim explains. "It is tough to hire math and science teachers these days. We try to hire people who are working on their master's and Ph.D. degrees." The first such teachers were fellow graduate students he knew at A&M and other schools in Texas and Oklahoma. These in turn recruited others, offering a path for young Turks wanting to live in the U.S. and needing help getting a visa.

After a year or two of teaching, the most promising teachers are assigned to a school in an apprentice role, such as assistant principal. Then, if they show potential, they have a chance to become principal at that or another school. But citing a Turkish adage that, in effect, translates to "You can't run a mill by bringing water from another stream," Tarim points to a growing number of non-Turkish administrators as well, including several women who are principals or assistant principals of Harmony elementary schools. The same evolution seems to be occurring in the teaching ranks. At HSA-Houston, all the math teachers are from the U.S., and the science department includes two non-Muslim Americans. Tarim estimates that 60 percent of the current math and science teachers in the Harmony system are non-Turks.

As one might expect given the presence of Turkish staffers, Harmony students have the option of studying Turkish to fulfill their language requirement. Some question how useful Turkish will be to Texas students, but interest is strong. Halil Tas, the superintendent of the cluster of four Austin schools, said that almost four thousand students are taking Turkish in all the Harmony schools combined. Several students mentioned that it would enable them to participate in state, national, and international Turkish Language Olympiads, where students compete in singing, poetry, writing, folk dance, and other cul-

tural categories.

It will also come in handy if they get to visit Istanbul. That is not a hookah dream. Every school sends groups of students to Turkey during spring break, at a greatly reduced cost. Renato Ramirez, the chairman, CEO, and president of the International Bank of Commerce in Zapata, marveled at this opportunity. "It's fantastic," said Ramirez, who helped pick up the half a million dollars of cost overruns to turn his Laredo warehouse into a Harmony Science Academy. "When I was in high school, they would take us to the Coca-Cola plant."

Not everyone shares Ramirez's enthusiasm. In recent months, several articles widely circulated on the Internet have been sharply critical of Gülen and, by extension, schools such as Harmony that are operated by his admirers, calling them madrassas and describing them as incubators of Islamist radicalism. These attacks are riddled with documented factual errors, misleading assertions, and in some cases, complete fabrications. No one familiar with the Harmony schools accords the criticism any credibility. Consider SBOE member David Bradley, one of Harmony's most vocal champions. "I would be the first to raise the alarm bell if I thought they were terrorists, but they are not," says Bradley, who is part of the board's conservative faction that seeks more emphasis on America's Christian roots. "Their concern is on reading, writing, and arithmetic."

HSA-Dallas humanities teacher Amy Curtis sounds a similar note: "I'm a fundamentalist Christian and my son goes to this school. It's such a good culture of ethnic toleration that I have actually felt much freer and less restricted than in a politically correct ISD. We have respect for each other's culture and each other's views. I've had many good religious and philosophical discussions with my Muslim colleagues." When someone sent the articles to faculty members at HSA-Dallas, she says, "I didn't even read it. I've worked with these people for four years, and I knew it was garbage."

THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING CHARTER SCHOOLS—AND THEIR IMPACT ON

students across the country—is to realize how they differ from traditional public schools. Perhaps most important, charter schools are able to hire non-union, even uncertified teachers; pay them based on merit rather than seniority; and fire them when they perform poorly. Starting salaries typically run 10 to

15 percent below those for a local ISD—say, \$36,000 compared with \$43,000 for a new teacher in Houston—but can increase more rapidly. It is this flexibility that excites charter school supporters, alarms teachers unions, and gives pause to less invested observers.

Supporters cite research indicating that a majority of public school teachers come from the bottom third of their college classes and that many of the teacher-education programs they attended are themselves inferior; a recent national study slammed the quality of instruction at eight Texas colleges, including the University of Houston, Texas Tech University, and Texas Christian University. Contrast that with the encouraging results achieved by Teach for America, which recruits recent graduates and working professionals to teach in inner-city schools. Many participants and alumni of that initiative attended elite private universities and majored in something other than education. Or note that even within the same schools, students in some classes consistently outperform students right across the hall. The conclusion seems obvious: Better teachers get better results.

Teachers unions see charter schools as a palpable threat to two of their most cherished principles: salary and job placement based

on seniority and tenure, which makes it almost impossible to fire incompetent teachers. They also take umbrage at what they see as the chutzpah of naive young idealists who have not paid their dues, literally or figuratively. It's one thing, they argue, to be full of fire when you are 22 and have never had to worry about a job or when you get to teach youngsters whose parents reinforce the strict discipline system in schools like KIPP, YES, Uplift, and Harmony. It's quite another matter to be 55 and still trying to instill learning in uncontrollable kids whose parents are crackheads or dope dealers and whose only other relevant institutions are the welfare office and the prisons they visit on weekends.

Observers with less personal investment in either position concede the problems of the rosy scenario. In her latest book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, educational historian Diane Ravitch noted that it's unrealistic to think it possible to stock large numbers of schools with outstanding teachers: "This is akin to saying baseball teams should consist only of players who hit over .300 and pitchers who win at least 20 games every season."

Charters have also found allies among supporters of vouchers, who see the schools as a way of demonstrating the appeal of pro-

viding parents with alternatives to "government run" schools. Opponents of charter schools see them as a way to lessen the demand for vouchers that could be used at private schools, including those supported by religious organizations. Conservative foundations and think tanks have long backed plans to increase school choice. Liberals usually support unions and measures designed to help all public schools. But more and more people on the left are impressed at the success the best charter schools have had in educating inner-city kids. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, and the Doris and Donald Fisher Fund identify less with a particular political stance than with a conviction that research, pilot experiments, competition, accountability, and results-based rewards will help schools become better.

All of which sounds great, except for the fact that existing empirical evidence indicates that most of them achieve results that are no better or are even worse than those of regular public schools. The most recent national study, conducted in 2009 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, assessed more than 2,400 charter schools in the nation and found that only 17 percent did better than public schools at showing improvement over time on standardized tests in reading and math. Thirty-seven percent did worse. Texas was one of six states whose charter schools compared most unfavorably with regular public schools. "This study," the researchers concluded, "reveals in unmistakable terms that, in the aggregate, charter students are not faring as well as their [traditional public school] counterparts." The CREDO study did, however, acknowledge a crucial exception: "Charter schools that are organized around a mission to teach the most economically disadvantaged students in particular seem to have developed expertise in serving these communities. We applaud their efforts and recommend that schools or school models demonstrating success be further studied with an eye toward the notoriously difficult process of replication."

That helps explain the success of KIPP, YES, IDEA, Uplift, and Harmony. All of them target such at-risk students, and all can point to data showing that their students do markedly better than regular public school students from the same neighborhood who have the same demographic and economic characteristics. Critics contend that the comparison is faulty. While it is true that charter schools must admit students by a strict lottery system when demand exceeds supply, the fact

TEXAS NONPROFIT SUMMIT

SEPTEMBER 23 – 24, 2010

ON A MISSION: IGNITING A NONPROFIT REVOLUTION




**Governor's Nonprofit
Leadership Conference**

Register today for the Texas Nonprofit Summit, a learning and networking event for nonprofit professionals and stakeholders.

Keynotes from Dan Pallotta, Linda Crompton and Vinay Bhagat.

Info and registration:
greenlights.org



CONNECT



INSPIRE



INNOVATE

that parents are sufficiently concerned about their children's education to learn about the school and enter the lottery means that the winners are hardly a random sample. Moreover, the regular public schools where they would have gone will be left with less motivated and, quite likely, less able students, worsening an already bad situation.

Some teachers I interviewed conceded that this assertion is plausible but noted that the more successful charter schools have long waiting lists, indicating that large numbers of parents want a better education than most regular public schools provide. Last year, Harmony schools had to turn away almost 14,000 students. YES Prep had to say no to almost 4,000 students seeking entry to its seven schools in Houston, and the original KIPP Academy, in Houston, currently has a waiting list of some 600 students, nearly equal to its total enrollment. The solution, they assert, is not to condemn charter schools but to open more of them. As for the parents, they are more concerned with the future of their offspring than with the plight of the poor schools they now attend. As one put it, "These are my only two kids and this is the only time they have a shot at an education. I want the best for them."

Charter skeptics also note that the lure of millions of dollars in federal money, \$450,000 of it right up front, is certain to attract the crooked, corrupt the upright, and convince incompetents that it must be easy to run a school, especially if they hire some relatives. Sadly, financial chicanery, nepotism, unacceptable academic practice, and even child abuse have been all too common. In one of the most notorious Texas cases, involving the Prepared Table Charter School, in Humble, three family members of the leader of the school, the Reverend Harold Wilcox, pleaded guilty to exaggerating enrollment, using a sham catering company to overbill the federal lunch program, and laundering money through the church where Wilcox was pastor.

Observers like Houston state representative Garnet Coleman argue that even good charters drain away funds from local districts. Coleman understands why parents send their children to charter schools when the neighborhood school is inferior: "Who would argue with that? But parents have a different job. My responsibility as a legislator is to all children." He freely admits that schools such as KIPP, YES, Uplift, and Harmony follow practices proven to work: longer hours, after-school and weekend tutoring and enrichment programs, insistence on parental involvement. "We need to take those things and make them universal," he said. "If kids

need to stay until five o'clock or come on Saturday, let's do it. If necessary, run a second set of buses to make that possible. If parents need to be involved, make sure the schoolhouse is open and the lights are turned on at night to accommodate working parents who can't get there in the day. If small classes are the key, let's pay for small classes, not increase class sizes from thirty to forty students. Since we have all these models that have 'proven themselves,' why aren't we doing that for all children? That is a failure of the people in government in the state of Texas."

SO WHAT CAN ALL SCHOOLS—CHARTER AND OTHERWISE—LEARN FROM THE SUCCESS

of the Harmony model? Though the Harmony schools follow the regular public school calendar (KIPP, by contrast, has school days that last from 7:30 until 5, along with a mandatory summer session), they offer extensive tutoring and time-intensive extracurricular activities, such as robotics, after school and on Saturdays. Another important idea picked up from KIPP is home visits. Harmony teachers visit more than 90 percent of their students' homes at least once during the year. HSA-Houston student Djenaba Aswad said, "It's good to see the teachers interact with my family. My parents see the teachers as caring. It makes the school seem more like a family. My chemistry teacher is like another father or an older brother."

At most Harmony campuses, 60 to 90 percent of the students are Hispanic or black and qualify for free or discounted lunches. But because admission is by lottery, there can be no quotas, so the demography of the schools tends to reflect that of the neighborhood. However, principals at nearly every school I visited spoke of parents who drive at least half an hour to bring their children to school. As Harmony's reputation spreads, the picture may change. At a Harmony campus in northwest Houston, the distribution is about 30 percent Hispanic, 30 percent Asian, and 30 percent Anglo. Banners hanging from rafters in the gym signify students with roots in more than forty countries. In recognition of their diversity, the schools organize and invite parents to participate in Day of the Dead and Cinco de Mayo celebrations, Black History Month, Asian Heritage Week, and an international festival to cover other cultures.

But ultimately what distinguishes Harmony and the other top-performing charter schools is a well-taught, rigorous curriculum. Harmony students are expected to

perform above grade level and, as a natural by-product, to score well on the TAKS tests. As TAKS results are the primary measure by which schools are judged under No Child Left Behind, public schools have no choice but to pay attention to these annual tests, but many educators view them as an inferior indicator. The Harmony schools take them seriously but do not let them take over the curriculum. "When we started," Tarim recalls, "people told us to focus on that, but we decided it was inadequate. That is a very low standard. If you focus on that, you are setting kids up for failure."

That message has been delivered. At every school I visited, teachers conceded that doing well on the TAKS is important but that it does not consume their lives. "When I first came here, it immediately struck me that Harmony is not a TAKS-oriented school," said Jennifer Butcher, a teacher at HSA-Laredo. "They were actually teaching the curriculum. At public schools I've worked at, they were always passing out practice tests. Here I actually get to teach history, science, grammar, and everything they need to learn. It's not just TAKS."

That approach seems to work. More than 90 percent of Harmony students consistently pass the TAKS tests. When Hispanic and black students at Harmony schools are compared with their ethnic counterparts across the state at the sixth- and ninth-grade levels, they outclass them by 30 to 54 points, with the largest difference at the higher levels, indicating the cumulative effects of Harmony schooling. This success at closing the achievement gap led to HSA-Houston's receiving the National Title I Distinguished School Award in 2005. It was one of only 52 middle and high schools in the nation to do so, and the only charter school.

In addition to regular classroom instruction, every school offers extensive free tutorials after class and on Saturdays for students who need extra help, all year in every subject. More important, teachers and administrators know which students require additional attention. Within the charter school community, Harmony is becoming famous for its sophisticated database at its central office, in Houston, which houses an extraordinary level of real-time data. In addition to such administrative information as salaries and other expenses, the database includes the full curriculum, test-preparation tools, attendance records, and a fantastically detailed grade book for every course. On the day a test or other assignment is graded, a student, parent, teacher, principal, or curriculum director in the central office can see not only

the overall grade but how the student performed on parts of each test or other assignments. This makes it possible to spot trouble early on and direct students to individual or group tutorials specifically tailored to their shortcomings.

The database may prove to be the key to replicating the Harmony model on a much larger scale. The schools already give the software free of charge to any other type of campus, as long as it has a math and science focus. But Tarim has a much grander vision. He has offered the program to Rice University's Connexions project, an ingenious multilingual computer resource that publishes materials that teachers and researchers around the world can use to suit their needs. Together, Tarim and the Connexions team are writing a \$30 million grant proposal that would pay thousands of teachers to prepare lesson plans in their various fields. These lesson plans in turn would be reviewed by experts who would customize them for schools around the world.

The database also keeps a running score on students' standing on the Discipline Point System. Following advice from KIPP and YES, Harmony holds students to a high standard of order and responsibility. Various "unwanted behaviors," such as tardiness, failure to bring materials, talking back to the teacher, chewing gum, or leaning back in the chair, are assigned points befitting their perceived seriousness. Students who amass more than ten points in a week are required to attend after-school or Saturday detention. If they go a week without receiving any points, the count reverts to zero.

Though the Harmony schools have embraced many of the typical elements at other campuses, so far organized sports are limited to basketball, volleyball, soccer, and karate. State representative Richard Raymond, who has a son at the Laredo HSA, described the seventh-grade basketball team he volunteers to coach as "sort of the Bad News Bears, but I'm trying to teach them the basics—the mental part, teamwork—and they'll be better next year. We often lose by twenty points, but they're all going to play and they're all going to play the same amount of time. Over the course of the season, everybody made some baskets. In the last game, they played a girls' team that was a year older—and won. Man, you would've thought they had won the NBA championship."

Harmony also encourages students to enter all sorts of academic contests, to prove to themselves that they can face the strongest of competition. The result is display cases, even in the newer schools, that are filled with trophies and medals and plaques. The display at

HSA-Houston shows President George W. Bush presenting an award to a student who placed first in the national Math Counts competition in 2008. More recently, the school's computer programming team placed first at the state UIL competition in April. Robotics is a popular activity at most Harmony schools, and their teams have excelled repeatedly. The two-year-old Laredo school placed first among 80 teams that competed in Houston in February, and an El Paso team competed for the United States against 84 teams in a 2009 European robotics championship in Denmark. Even though most Harmony schools have been open for less than a decade, their students have won more than two thousand awards in local, state, and international science fairs and Olympiads. Given this record, it is not surprising that of the first 35 schools designated as T-STEM (Texas Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics) Academies, which receive funding from public and private organizations such as the TEA and the Gates and Dell foundations as part of the Texas High School Project, 14 were Harmony schools.

More impressive than all these plaques and trophies is Harmony's ability to achieve its primary stated goal: to thoroughly prepare students to enter and succeed at four-year colleges. "If it stops with high school," Tarim says, "we are not successful. And we don't want them to drop out of college." In almost every school, from the elementary grades upward, scores of college pennants point students to that goal. When asked what they like about Harmony, fourth graders volunteer, "It's preparing me to go to college." When I asked middle-schoolers, "How many of you think you will go to college?" I invariably got a unanimous show of hands. But humanities teacher Amy Curtis said, "That is not a question we would ever ask. We ask them, 'Which four-year college are you going to attend?' College readiness begins in elementary school, not in the ninth or tenth grades."

These efforts are not feeding an empty hope. Of the 83 students who graduated from the Harmony Science Academies in Houston, Austin, and Dallas this spring, only 3 had not yet been accepted to a four-year college. Such a record would cause most superintendents to puff up with pride, but Tarim is not satisfied. He is, however, optimistic. "We are not yet successful," he insists. "We are at the beginning. In three years we will have close to a thousand Harmony school graduates in the state. Eventually, far more. When all the Harmony schools produce students who graduate from four-year colleges and become contributing members of society, then I can confi-

dently say we are successful. We can't claim that now, but the mechanism is in place."

Harmony and other successful charter schools can serve the purposes for which they were created—testing ways, both old and new, of improving our educational system and reaching students who have failed in or been failed by other schools. They can be invaluable models for regular public schools. But they still serve less than 2 percent of the nearly five million school-age children in our state. The task ahead is to discern the best practices of both kinds, as well as those of private schools, and to have the will to implement them. It will likely mean rethinking teacher education, restructuring tenure, assigning veteran teachers to challenging posts, lengthening both the school day and year, encouraging home visits, and instilling a culture of high expectations and "no excuses." It will mean providing the resources required to attract more young people from the top third of their college classes into the noble profession of educating children. And since little of this will be free, it will also mean coming to realize that taxes are not a curse to be avoided but the dues we pay for civilization. ♣

TEXASMONTHLY.COM

Read a Q&A with William Martin.

TexasMonthly

VOLUME 38, ISSUE 8

TEXAS MONTHLY (USPS 552-650) (ISSN 0148-7736) is published monthly by Emmis Publishing, L.P. Principal office: 3300 North Interstate 35, Suite 800, Austin, Texas 78705. Copyright © 2010 by Emmis Publishing, L.P. All Rights Reserved. Printed in the USA. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas, and at additional mailing offices. This magazine or its trademarks may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or hereafter invented without written permission from the Publisher. The following is a partial list of trademarks and/or service marks of Emmis Publishing, L.P. or its affiliates including registered marks as indicated: TEXAS MONTHLY®, DOMAIN®, BEHIND THE LINES®, ROAR OF THE CROWD, STATE SECRETS®, TEXAS MONTHLY REPORTER, REPORTER, LOW TALK, AROUND THE STATE, TEXAS PRIMER®, TEXAS MONTHLY SHOPS DALLAS®, TEXAS MONTHLY SHOPS HOUSTON®, MARKETPLACE, WHERE TEXAS SHOPS, BURKABLOG, STREET SMARTS, TOPIC A, MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH, FAITH BASES, MINISTER OF HEALTH, THE TEXANIST, THE HORSE'S MOUTH, TEXAS BRIDE®, TM, TM & DESIGN. For subscription inquiries: Write to TEXAS MONTHLY, Subscription Service Center, P.O. Box 421935, Palm Coast FL 32142; Web site: texas-monthly.com. Please allow six weeks for change of address or new orders. The one year domestic subscription price is \$12. BACK ISSUES: \$7. Bulk rates on request. Subscribers: If the Postal Service alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. A perfume-free subscription is available on request. Address this and all other correspondence to TEXAS MONTHLY, P.O. Box 1569, Austin, Texas 78767-1569. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for care and return of unsolicited materials. Return postage must accompany material if it is to be returned. In no event shall such material subject this magazine to any claim for holding fees or similar charges. Occasionally we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 1569, Austin, Texas 78767. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to TEXAS MONTHLY, Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142.



Magazine Publishers of America