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Charter schools face own budget woes

By Wendy Gragg
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Nancy Grayson, superintendent of Rapoport Academy Public School in Waco, describes her school as “lean and mean.” It has to be, she said, because charter schools, like Rapoport, get less funding than traditional schools.

To Grayson, “lean and mean” means teachers empty their own trash cans and sometimes fill in for people on the lunch serving line. The chairs in a room may not match and walls sometimes get a fresh coat of donated leftover paint.

Now, Grayson and other local charter school officials are having to figure out how to get even leaner because they’re facing the same state funding cuts that traditional schools are.

“We are realistic that charter schools are public schools and public schools are facing budget cuts,” said Josie Duckett, with the Texas Charter School Association, a group that represents 365 charter schools statewide.

Duckett said her organization is trying to educate the Texas Legislature on charter school funding.

Cards are being sent by charter school supporters to their representatives that say, “Encourage efficient education. Maintain funding for public charter schools.”

Charter schools are public schools and are free to students, but they have more flexibility in instructional techniques. Texas charter school students are still required to take state tests, and the schools receive state ratings.

But unlike traditional public schools, charter schools do not receive funding from local property taxes.

They also don’t have access to the funds that help traditional school districts build facilities.

And though charter schools are often small, they aren’t offered funds the state provides to small school districts.

Duckett pointed to a funding study, conducted by a private group, R.C. Wood and Associates, that said Texas charter schools, on average, get \$2,009 less per student than independent school districts receive.

Despite funding disparity, charter schools are preparing to have their state funding cut to the same extent of traditional public schools.

Grayson has been exploring how 6 percent, 9 percent or 12 percent funding cuts may affect Rapoport’s roughly \$3.6 million budget. She said she might be able to tackle a 6 or 9 percent cut.

“There’s no way in the world I’m going to be able to get to 12 percent,” she said.

One thing that local charter school officials, including Grayson, are considering is increasing class size.

Rapoport has about 400 students, grades pre-kindergarten through 12, and each level of the school carries the highest state rating of “exemplary.”

Grayson is proud of Rapoport’s state rating, but she’s equally proud of the demographic breakdown of her students’ scores on the state tests. She said it shows that all students, poor, white, black, etc., are performing equally well, a goal to which public schools across the nation aspire.

“We are probably one of the most frugal entities around and we are producing extraordinarily well under those conditions,” Grayson said.

A significant component of Rapoport’s success is small class size, Grayson said. Classes have a roughly 15-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio.

“We feel like the small class sizes have allowed us to maximize the learning of every single child,” she said.

A funding cut of 6 to 7 percent will likely mean an increase in class size from 15 to 17 students.

More pupils, more money

The increase in students isn’t a money-saver for Rapoport, but a money-maker, because Rapoport gets state funding per student. More students allowed to enroll means more money. Rapoport would draw from a waiting list of students who want to attend the charter school.

Harmony Science Academy of Waco, also an “exemplary” school, may consider increasing class size as well, Harmony Principal Erol Kose said. Like Rapoport, Harmony may also be able to bolster its funds next year by letting in additional students as it expands to include 12th grade. Kose said the school could go from 560 to 700 students.

Waco Charter School, operated by the Economic Opportunities Advancement Corporation, may turn to increasing its class size as well, EOAC executive director Johnette Hicks said.

Waco Charter School has 260 pre-kindergartners through fifth-graders and a state rating of “recognized.” Hicks said she’s worried that enlarging classes could affect the students’ success.

Premier High School of Waco could stand to increase class size, and the school may even benefit from increases at other schools, regional superintendent Joseph Riggs said.

Premier’s Waco campus has about 155 students in grades six through 12 and offers an alternative to the traditional classroom model. In most classes, students work at their own pace, while a teacher is present to help if needed.

Riggs said that because many of the classes consist of students working individually, the school may be able to increase class size without affecting performance.

“We expect that as the student-teacher ratios increase in (traditional) schools we may have some more students coming to our campus,” Riggs said.

Grayson said she wants to maintain the quality of a Rapoport education and she also wants to do what she can to maintain her staff.

“I’ll do anything I can at this point to save the jobs of the folks here,” she said. She’s getting the entire staff in on brainstorming for budget cuts. “I want them to say, ‘What are we willing to do as a team to support this effort?’ ”

She’s also enlisting Rapoport students in the money-saving. The third-graders have been charged with creating a campaign within the school to use only one paper towel to dry hands in the bathroom. Staff is looking at reducing the school’s energy consumption and holding a rummage sale.

“If it saves us a dollar and saves us jobs, I’m all for it,” Grayson said.

Riggs said there’s no plan to lay off teachers at Premier High School, but the school may not fill positions if teachers resign or retire. And they’ll be combing through the budget to look for other cuts.

Kose said Harmony officials may look at the school’s utilities expenses and the rent for its building on Valley Mills Boulevard.

Though their funding and approaches to education may differ, charter schools and traditional schools face the same task now, making best guesses at how they are going to teach students with fewer resources next year.

“We just don’t know right now how it’s going to shake out,” Hicks said.

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