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Elementary charter schools post better test scores than neighborhood peers, Tribune analysis finds

Charters don't meet state averages

By Carlos Sadovi and Darnell Little

Tribune reporters

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Kehena Sraieb remembers walking into her daughter Halina McCarthy's neighborhood public school in West Rogers Park last year and being dissatisfied.

She didn't like that nearly 30 students were packed into a classroom and was underwhelmed by the attention teachers and administrators paid to students.

Now Halina, 8, is a 3rd grader at Passages Charter School in Edgewater, which ranked as the city's best charter school on Illinois State Achievement Tests taken in the spring.

"What I like here is that you could read on their faces that they are doing the job with passion and love," she said.

A Tribune analysis of state test data found that on average the 18 Chicago elementary charter schools scored 7 to 9 percentage points higher on state tests than nearby neighborhood schools. Charter scores also were 4 to 7 percentage points better than district averages, the analysis found. But charter results lagged anywhere from 6 to 14 percentage points behind state averages.

While charter schools take kids from across the city, most students live near the charters they attend. These schools are independently run but receive district money to teach students. While they must meet state and district requirements, they can create their own curricula. Charter teachers don't have to belong to a union and don't have to be certified.

Rosemaria Genova, spokeswoman for the Chicago Teachers Union, said charters have smaller class sizes, get more resources and tend to get the most motivated parents and students. She said the district should work to make all of the schools equal.

But Elizabeth Evans, executive director of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, said better scores are due more to "school culture" and longer school days that on average add two weeks to the school year.

In May, a study of Chicago elementary charters by the non-profit Rand Corp. found that these schools were doing as well as the city's neighborhood schools. There was little difference between students who transferred into charter schools and peers staying in neighborhood schools, the study found.

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