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Interest in charter school education growing

**BY ERIC FINLEY
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The campus atmospheres at Ramirez Charter School and Richard Milburn Academy are drastically different.

Ramirez is a colorful place where grade school students celebrate their cultural diversity, where 5-year-olds are on their way to being proficient Spanish speakers and teachers use aroma therapy to ease students into learning.

Milburn has its high school classrooms in a strip shopping center, along with a nursery so high school moms don't have to leave their kids behind when they go to class. It has a workman-like feel, a place where at-risk teenage students who need a different approach to education can take classes for four hours a day and get the diploma they might not otherwise have.

Both are charter schools in Lubbock, and part of an educational trend that more parents and students are gravitating toward.

"This is a wonderful campus," said Jo Ann Newman, a multicultural events and university coordinator at Ramirez. "It feels different. It is different."

The number of U.S. charter schools jumped 11 percent this year compared to the 2005-06 school year, according to a study released this fall by the Center for Education Reform, a Washington, D.C.-based research group that supports charter schools.

Nationwide, about 1.15 million students are now enrolled in charter schools, the study found. The study estimates 89,000 students attend 269 charter schools in Texas, up from the Texas Education Agency's count of 66,073 in 2004-05.

The number of Texas charter students includes those in charters other than open enrollment schools, which Texas lawmakers have capped at 215. A spokeswoman for state Sen. Florence Shapiro, chairwoman of the Texas Senate Education Committee, said it's unlikely lawmakers will try to raise that limit.

Charter schools are public schools, open to all students who, in some cases, have to pass enrollment requirements such as grade-point averages. They are also publicly funded. The Richard Milburn Academy in Lubbock gets 85 percent of its funding from the state; the rest comes from federal dollars. The Ramirez Charter School is funded with local tax dollars as part of Lubbock Independent School District.

Ramirez Elementary was changed to a charter school in 2004, after development in the Overton Park addition emptied the neighborhood from which it drew most of its students.

As a charter school, no students are bused there, and parents across the city bring their children there because of expanded classes and after-school programs, Newman said.

Charter schools such as Milburn, which are run by nonprofit organizations, are sometimes controversial because of the public funds they receive.

Starlette Gill, the school director at Lubbock's Milburn Academy, said some people are hung up on the idea of alternative education as a form of discipline. Instead, she said her school serves the community by helping at-risk students graduate high school. Since it opened in 1999, Milburn has graduated 143 Lubbock students.

"People have to open their minds about what charter education is," she said. "It's not for public school rejects. We really are a school of choice and more and more students come to us making that choice."



Staci Gray / Staff

Baby Jaycee sleeps in a crib as her mother, Chelsey Cowley, right, studies with Kiama Mitchell in a pre-parenting class at the Richard Milburn Academy.

2006 State Accountability ratings for Lubbock Charter schools

School Enrollment Rating

Richard Milburn Academy 170 Academically Acceptable

Rise Academy 196 Exemplary

South Plains Academy 180 Academically Acceptable

Ramirez Charter School 400 Recognized

Eagle Academy N/A Academically Acceptable

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