

IDEA Public Schools Has Run Amuck and “No Excuses” Exist for the State’s Unyielding Support

By: William J. Gumbert

Introduction: Federal and state elected officials, privately funded public policy organizations, and private foundations are financially supporting education reforms to undermine locally governed, community-based school districts. With promises of a “college preparatory” or “classical” education, the expansion of taxpayer-funded charter schools in local communities is the primary reform vehicle. IDEA Public Schools (“IDEA”) is the fastest growing and most prominent charter school network in Texas. National and regional promotions claim IDEA’s “Tuition-Free,” “No Excuses,” college-preparatory education model is revolutionizing education for low-income students and eliminating the opportunity gap. IDEA’s co-founder agrees by saying: *“But no matter your zip code, you have access to a tuition-free public school, and I believe that will be the solution to every problem in America.”*

With promotions of expert teachers and more of them, IDEA promises to prepare low-income students for success to and through college. As evidence, IDEA promotes that “100% of Graduates Have Been Accepted to their College of Choice for 15 Consecutive Years.” For education reformers, IDEA is validation that *“when the adults in the system get it right, students can do remarkable things.”*

Unfortunately, recent findings reveal a story that is not representative of serving low-income families. IDEA’s story consists of private jets, chauffeured cars, a luxury Bed & Breakfast resort, misuse of public funds, high-priced advertising, misrepresentations, low instructional expenditures, low teacher experience, high “Student to Teacher Ratios,” and without offering career or technical training, IDEA graduates underperform in college. IDEA’s story is validation that locally governed school districts continue to provide higher quality educational attributes and better prepare students for success. IDEA’s story is also validation that TEA lacks the institutional controls to oversee charters and serves as another example of what happens when the state and private interests dictate the public education system in local communities.

Ernest Hemingway said, *“The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them.”* Elected officials, education reformers, and families trusted IDEA Public Schools. Regrettably, IDEA has run amuck and “No Excuses” exist for the unyielding support of the state and private interests. It’s your schools, children, families, tax dollars, and communities!

The Promotion and Growth of IDEA – Private Foundations: After three years of classroom experience with Teach for America and at the age of 24, Tom Torkelson and JoAnn Gama founded the IDEA Public Schools charter network to revolutionize the education for low-income families. Since its founding, IDEA’s education model was propelled by private interests, including the Walton Family Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Ewing Halsell Foundation, KLE Foundation, and the George Brackenridge Foundation. Collectively, these organizations give contingent donations to open campuses in targeted communities, implement specific curriculum, and expand enrollment. Although IDEA no longer specifies the details of its donors, prior communications reveal that IDEA was the beneficiary of over \$150 million of private donations to expand in various regions of Texas.

Private Financial Support to Expand IDEA Public Schools in Texas

Private Donor	Commitment to IDEA Public Schools	Expansion Region
Permian Strategic Partners	\$ 55,000,000	Midland/Odessa
Charter School Growth Fund/ Walton & Gates	\$ 23,800,000	Rio Grande Valley
KLE Foundation	\$ 23,558,800	Austin
CREED	\$ 17,000,000	El Paso
Laura and John Arnold Foundation	\$ 9,500,000	Houston
Sid W. Richardson Foundation	\$ 5,774,000	Tarrant County
Kleinheinz Family Foundation	\$ 5,774,000	Tarrant County
Walton Family Foundation	\$ 5,417,800	Tarrant County
Ewing Halsell Foundation	\$ 5,500,000	San Antonio
Choose to Succeed/Brackenridge Foundation	\$ 4,528,351	San Antonio



The private donations are contingent upon IDEA opening new campuses in certain communities, implementing specific curriculum, and meeting enrollment targets.

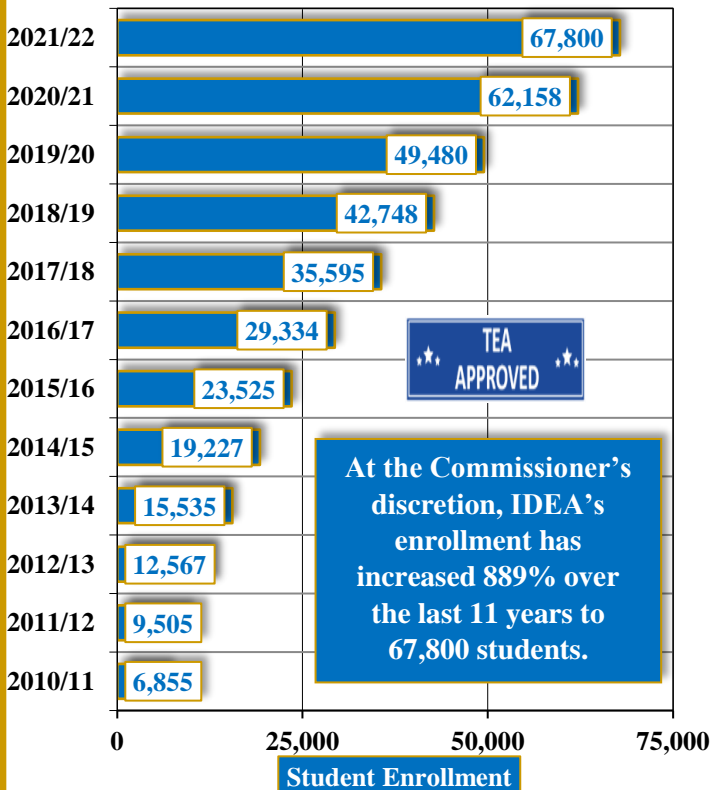
In 2008, IDEA had produced 56 high school graduates and no graduate had earned a college degree. But that did not prevent private foundations from strategically publicizing IDEA's education model to further the charter movement. In 2009, Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America ("TFA"), named Torkelson as "100 of the most influential global citizens" in TIME magazine. Coincidentally, TFA receives funding from the Walton Family Foundation, which has donated over \$160 million, and other private foundations supporting charter expansion. Torkelson also received the Peter Jennings Award for Civic Leadership in 2009, another award annually provided by TFA. In 2016, IDEA was named the top charter school system in the country by the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, also funded by the Walton Family Foundation and other private foundations. In 2018, IDEA's Torkelson and Gama were inducted into the National Charter School Hall of Fame.



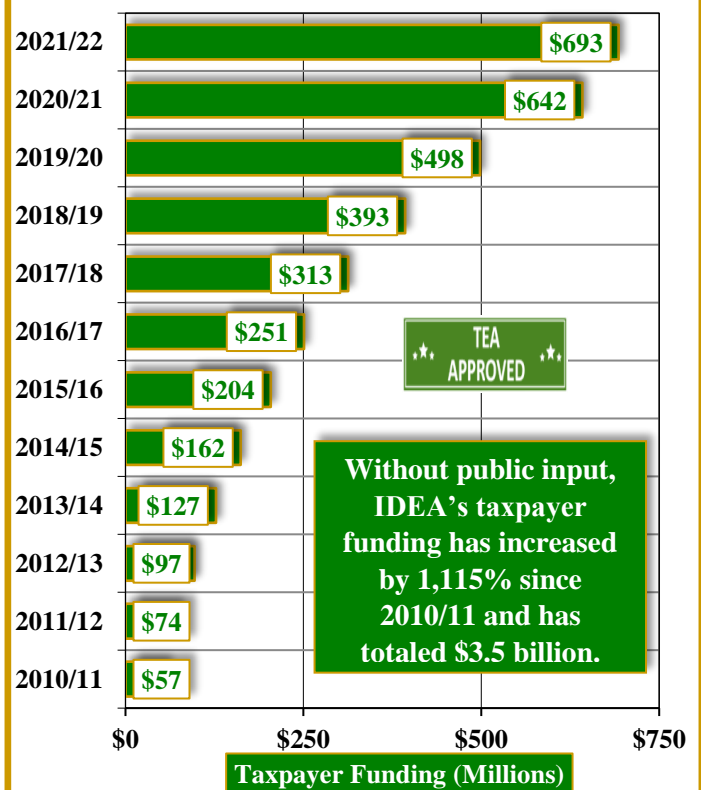
State: At the state level, the appointed Commissioner of Education supports IDEA's education reform model by unilaterally approving the opening of over 90 new campuses in the last decade to increase IDEA's enrollment by 889%. To support the construction of new campuses, the state is guaranteeing the repayment of IDEA's \$988 million long-term, non-voter approved bonds through the Texas Permanent School Fund Bond Guarantee Program. The Texas legislature contributions include providing IDEA with \$693 million of taxpayer funding in the current year and total taxpayer funding of \$3.5 billion since 2010/11. With funding for public education limited, IDEA's taxpayer funding is at the expense of locally governed school districts.

IDEA Public Schools: It should not be a surprise that IDEA is also its biggest advocate, thanks to an annual \$7.3 million Advertising Budget. To build a perception as an education pioneer, IDEA's full-time promotional staff is directed to: *"work with public relation partners to produce positive news stories, promote school leaders as subject matter experts, and build relationships with elected officials."* IDEA also runs prime-time commercials during the Super Bowl and World Series to promote its image and maximize its exposure.

IDEA Public Schools – Historical Enrollment




IDEA Public Schools – Taxpayer Funding





Recent Events – Business Practices and Expenditures: Although the state, privately funded public policy organizations, and private foundations have painted IDEA Public Schools as the educational savior for low-income families, recent events reveal a different picture. Despite a fiduciary responsibility to represent the best interests of students, the actions of IDEA provide a picture that is not representative of serving low-income families, as highlighted below.


 IDEA's policies reveal senior executives may book first-class airfare and spouses, family members, and companions of chief-level staff may accompany traveling leaders at IDEA's expense.


 IDEA's 2019 bond documents report IDEA has conducted business transactions with members of the Board, advisory board, and IDEA officials. Such transactions include:


- Purchasing uniforms/printing services from companies in which an IDEA leader has financial interests.
- Use of real estate services in San Antonio from the son of a Board Director.
- Purchasing land for a new campus from a company owned by a Board Director.

 The Houston Chronicle and El Paso Times reported in December 2019 that IDEA canceled a new private jet lease for school officials. School leaders cited the new private jet would provide more seating than IDEA's existing jet lease. At the time of cancellation, CEO Torkelson stated: *"Opponents of education reform have falsely attacked a prudent business decision, creating a distraction from our core work."*


 In January 2020, the Houston Chronicle reported that IDEA would be terminating its \$400,000 annual lease of a luxury suite at AT&T Center in San Antonio for San Antonio Spurs games.


 In May 2020, The Texas Monitor reported IDEA school executives and family members traveled via a private jet to visit school sites and attend other events since 2014. During such trips, privately chauffeured SUVs provided ground transportation for executives and family members.


 IDEA's 2020 IRS Form 990 reports the compensation of IDEA's top three executives averaged \$646,193 during the 2019/20 school year. The pay of CEO Torkelson was \$989,491. **Based upon TEA's listing of Superintendent salaries, the income of all three IDEA executives was more than every one of the 1,024 Superintendents employed by locally governed school districts.**

 In October 2021, The Progress Times reports IDEA owns a luxury Bed & Breakfast retreat in Los Fresnos. The 36-acre retreat is only 36 miles from IDEA's corporate headquarters.

Recent Events - Resignations/Terminations of Co-Founders and Top Executives: Between April 2020 and May 2021, the four highest ranking IDEA executives have resigned or been terminated. This includes IDEA's co-founders that at the time of resignation/termination were the Chief Executive Officer previously selected by the Board. While IDEA has offered little information, the following summaries are from IDEA's statements.

 In April 2020, IDEA's CEO Torkelson surprisingly resigned to "embark on the next chapter of his career." Currently, Torkelson is the CEO of "Choose to Succeed," an organization funded by private foundations to expand the number of charter schools in San Antonio.

 In July 2020, IDEA announced the retirement of its Chief Financial Officer, Wyatt Truscheit. However, two months later, Mr. Truscheit agreed to a consulting agreement with ResponsiveEd, a Texas-based charter management organization. In February 2021, Mr. Truscheit was named by ResponsiveEd as CFO-Texas.

 In May 2021, IDEA terminated co-founder and current CEO JoAnn Gama and COO Irma Munoz. According to IDEA's Board Chair, the terminations followed a forensic audit finding "substantial evidence" that top leaders misused money and staff for personal gain.

Recent Events - Expansion Approvals: In July 2020, TEA has been fully aware of the IDEA's expenditures, related party business transactions, and resignations of the CEO and CFO as noted above. But these findings did not prevent the Commissioner from approving IDEA to open 12 additional campuses and increase its enrollment from 63,200 to 78,200 in September 2020. The Commissioner did not publicly provide the reasons for approving IDEA's expansion requests.

By 2022, IDEA will operate 173 schools in 10 regions educating a hundred thousand students on their road to and through college.

IDEA's Education Model – Lower Student Expenditures: It is widely accepted that deploying additional resources to support the needs of low-income students improves student achievement. The legislature's approval of HB 3 is evidence of the state's agreement. IDEA primarily enrolls low-income students but devotes significantly fewer resources than Texas public schools to provide instruction, student programs & support services. In comparison to all Texas public schools, IDEA devotes **\$1,179 LESS Per Student** to provide instruction, student Programs & student Support Services. Why? Because IDEA allocates **\$1,079 MORE Per Student** for general administrative and leadership costs than Texas public schools.

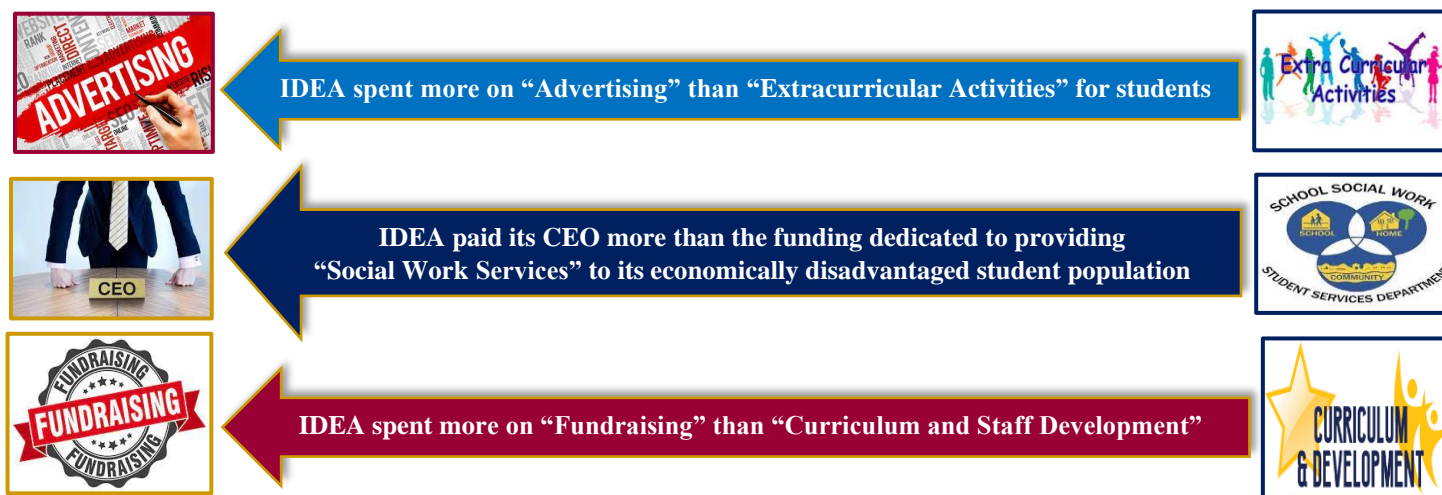
Comparison of Expenditures Per Student: IDEA and Texas Public Schools



Expenditures Identify Priorities – 2019/20: How we personally spend money indicates our personal priorities. The same is true for IDEA's expenditures and the priorities are alarming. While enrolling 49,280 students during the 2019/20 school year, IDEA allocated more resources for "Advertising" than "Extracurricular Activities" for students. IDEA paid its CEO more than the funding deployed to provide "Social Work Services" for its low-income student population. IDEA also directed more resources to "Fundraising" than providing "Curriculum and Staff Development" to improve outcomes.

IDEA Public Schools: Expenditure Comparisons – Year 2019/20

RED FLAG WARNING



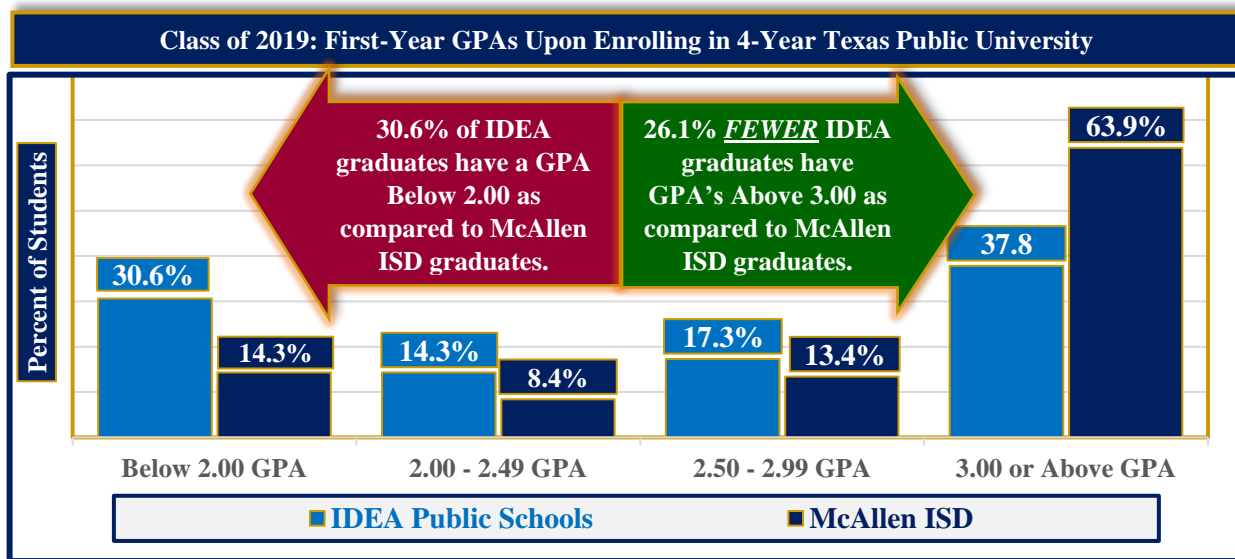
IDEA's Education Model – Classroom Attributes: IDEA's "college preparatory" model to prepare students for success in college also contains many classroom attributes that conflict with the academic research proven to improve student achievement. For example, TEA data documents that the percentage of students passing the standardized STAAR Test increases with teaching experience. Various independent studies, which are often cited by prospective charters, also document that lower "Student to Teacher Ratios" increase student achievement. Despite these findings and IDEA's promotions of employing "expert teachers and more of them," Texas public schools employ **MORE** professionally certified teachers, **MORE** experienced teachers, and **MORE** teachers with advanced degrees than IDEA. Texas public schools also deploy a LOWER "Student to Teacher Ratio" than IDEA, as summarized on the following page.

Comparison of Educational Attributes: IDEA and All Texas Public Schools

Educational Attribute	Texas Public Schools	IDEA Public Schools	Difference: Texas Public Schools to IDEA
Professionally Certified Teachers	98%	43%	55%
Average Teacher Experience	11.1 Years	4.0 Years	7.1 Years
Teachers – Advanced Degrees	25.2%	17.7%	7.5%
Students Per Teacher	15.1 Students	21.1 Students	6.0 Fewer Students



IDEA Graduates Underperform Upon Enrolling in College: Although IDEA's educational model defies logic and academic research, maybe the "College for All" curriculum is preparing students for college success. Unfortunately, that is not the case, which is concerning since IDEA offers minimal career and technical training for students that do not excel in college. IDEA Public Schools and McAllen ISD both serve students in the Rio Grande Valley. In fact, IDEA has recruited 2,510 McAllen ISD students. However, according to information published by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, IDEA graduates underperform McAllen ISD graduates upon enrolling in a 4-year Texas Public University. Compared to McAllen ISD graduates, 16.3% more IDEA graduates have GPAs Below 2.00 during their first year, and 26.1% fewer IDEA graduates earn a GPA Above 3.00. As shown below, 30.6% of IDEA graduates have GPAs below 2.00 during their initial year at a 4-year Texas Public University.



Although IDEA has operated since 2000, a lower percentage of IDEA's total enrollment is enrolling at a 4-year Texas Public University as compared to McAllen ISD. In 2019, IDEA enrolled 42,748 students and 687 graduates enrolled in a 4-year Texas Public University. In comparison, McAllen ISD only enrolled 22,082 students in 2019 and 568 students enrolled in a 4-year Texas Public University.

Description	IDEA Public Schools	McAllen ISD	Difference:
Enrollment - 2019	42,748	22,082	20,666
Graduates Enrolling in a 4-Year Texas Public University	687 (1.6% of Enrollment)	568 (2.6% of Enrollment)	119

DISCLOSURES: The author is a volunteer advocate for public education, and the author is not receiving compensation in any manner for the preparation of this material. No school district employee or elected official was involved in the preparation of this material. The material reflects the information provided by the Texas Education Agency, Tpeir – Texas Education Reports, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and other publicly available material, including but not limited to, information published by the Houston Chronicle, El Paso Times, Progress Times, Healthy Magazine, Mama Bears, and IDEA Public Schools. While the author believes these sources to be reliable, the author has not independently verified the information. The material solely reflects the author's opinions, which may or may not reflect the views of others. In this regard, all readers are encouraged to complete their review and make their independent conclusions.