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by

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**The University of Texas Elementary School:
Designing an Alumni Tracking System**

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Report

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Abstract

The University of Texas Elementary School: Designing an Alumni Tracking System

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The University of Texas Elementary School (UTES) is a charter school operated by The University of Texas at Austin that practices innovative research-based teaching methods. The school is in need of a system to track the educational achievements of its alumni and compare them to peers to determine the effects of attending UTES. This report provides an overview of existing studies on school effects and research design methods, offers advice and insight from other charter school administrators who have alumni-tracking experience, recommends data to collect, and outlines a plan of action including the necessary steps to gather such information.

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Chapter 1: Background

The University of Texas Elementary School, the first university-sponsored charter school in Texas, is sponsored and operated by The University of Texas at Austin. The University of Texas Elementary School (UTES) uses research-based instructional methods and engages in innovative teaching methods that add to the research knowledge base. The school enrolls children in grade levels Pre-K through fifth grade, and after students finish fifth grade at UTES, they matriculate to middle schools within Austin Independent School District. Members of the school's first graduating class entered the school in first grade in 2003 and should complete their first year of high school this semester (Spring 2012).

UTES measures its success by comparing its current students' TAKS results to statewide scores. However, UTES presently has no system of tracking the future success of its alumni once they leave the school. Despite its innovative teaching methods and research-based approach, UTES has no long-term results to prove its effectiveness. Administrators at the school would like to find the first four years of graduates and collect data to determine whether attending UTES has benefitted these students. In addition, administrators seek to implement a tracking system to follow the progress of all future graduates.

This report provides context to better understand the process of tracking alumni, as well as the challenges and limitations of analyzing such data. A literature review of previous studies on school effects, and interviews with local practitioners currently in the field, offer perspective and suggestions to the UTES for implementing a tracking program. In addition, the third chapter outlines the data needs and the anticipated work required to carry out an alumni study.

EXISTING RESEARCH ON SCHOOL EFFECTS

Elementary education is usually thought of as the first section of compulsory education that children undergo, and our culture has been sending children to elementary school for decades. Despite the widespread belief in the importance of elementary education, academic studies investigating and proving the long-run effects of elementary school are few and far between.

One study examined the long-term outcome of a popular early intervention program, Success for All, a comprehensive school reform program that focuses on promoting early school success among educationally at-risk students. The authors provide a conceptual framework for understanding the lasting effects of early interventions and offer numerous caveats affecting long-term outcomes. The authors suggest that the initial positive effects of early intervention will “diminish over time to the extent that there are not adequate follow-ups to maintain children’s social, behavioral, and academic gains.”¹ Another consideration recommended by the authors is the principle of individual differences, which differentially affected the benefits accruing to students from the intervention programs. Students showed differing levels of benefits from participation, which appeared to be related to “aspects of children’s initial risk conditions.”²

A longitudinal study examining sustained effects of attending Head Start preschool programs found that effects favoring Head Start relative to comparison groups “have been attenuated but not dissipated” by the end of first grade – two years after

¹ Geoffrey D. Borman and Gina M. Hewes. “The Long-Term Effects and Cost-Effectiveness of Success for All.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 4 (2002): 243-266.

² *Ibid.*

leaving the preschool program.³ One explanation of the diminishing effects over time focuses on the subsequent school experiences of these disadvantaged children. With residential location predominately determining where a student attends school, particularly poor students are likely to be concentrated in low-SES schools. The study suggests that the elementary schools students attended after completing Head Start “could very likely ‘undo’ the advantages accrued as a result of a year in Head Start.”⁴

The impact of schools on student achievement, known as school effects, are gauged either by identifying the effectiveness of certain school characteristics in predicting academic achievement or by measuring the variation of academic achievement between schools. A study from Michigan State University and the University of New Brunswick called “The Estimation of School Effects” examines and debates research design models used to measure different types of school effects.⁵ The authors caution future researchers not to assume “that a school has a uniform effect on all who attend it.”⁶ Similar to the Success for All article referenced above, research methods described in this article incorporate varying effects of schools, depending on student background.

These cautions and caveats are not meant to dissuade UTES from gathering data on its alumni or to suggest that students do not benefit from attending such an innovative and supportive school. In fact, research on high school dropouts show that the two most consistent indicators of high school dropout and graduation were early academic

³ Valerie E. Lee, J. Brooks-Gunn, Elizabeth Schnur, Fong-Ruey Liawy. “Are Head Start Effects Sustained? A Longitudinal Follow-Up Comparison of Disadvantaged Children Attending Head Start, No Preschool, and Other Preschool Programs.” *Child Development* 61, no.2 (1990):495-507.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Stephen W. Raudenbush, Douglas Willms. “The Estimation of School Effects.” *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics* 20, no. 4 (1995): 307-335.

⁶ *Ibid.*

performance and academic and social behaviors.⁷ Academic achievement in both middle and elementary school were identified as strong predictors, in addition to student engagement, which includes academic involvement such as attendance, as well as extracurricular involvement. Studies show that “dropping out is more of a process than an event,” and for many students, the process begins in elementary school.⁸ In order to evaluate its success, UTES administrators should evaluate the progress of its alumni in but keep in mind the diminishment of the positive effects of early interventions and the range of effects that one school may have on each of its students.

The New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project published a study in 2009 called “How New York City’s Charter Schools Affect Achievement,” which uses a lottery-based method to evaluate charter schools’ effects on achievement.⁹ Applicants from each charter school “are randomly divided into the ‘lotteried-in’ (who attend charter schools) and the ‘lotteried-out’ (who remain in the regular public schools).”¹⁰ The lottery method of evaluation is known as an industry gold standard because it is both scientific and reliable, and “there are no other methods of studying the achievement of charter school students that have reliability that is ‘in the same ballpark.’”¹¹ The two groups of students are basically identical at the time of the lottery; they are identical on readily observable dimensions “such as race, ethnicity, gender, poverty, limited English, and disability,” and other unobservable dimensions like motivation and their family’s interest

⁷ Russell Rumberger and Sun Ah Lim. “Why Students Drop Out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research.” California Dropout Research Project, University of California Santa Barbara. Policy Brief 15, October 2008.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hoxby, Caroline M., Sonali Murarka, and Jenny Kang. “How New York City’s Charter Schools Affect Achievement, August 2009 Report.” Second report in series. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project, September 2009.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

in education.”¹² The study follows the progress of both groups and “compute[s] the effect that charter schools have on their students’ academic achievement by comparing the lotteried-in students to their lotteried-out counterparts,” in a “true ‘apples-to-apples’ comparison.”¹³ Because the two comparison groups are so similar in every aspect other than school, the evaluator can get closer to causal assessments by controlling for potential confounding variables.

¹² Hoxby, Caroline M., Sonali Murarka, and Jenny Kang. “How New York City’s Charter Schools Affect Achievement, August 2009 Report.” Second report in series. Cambridge, MA: New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project, September 2009.

¹³ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Perspectives and Advice from the Field

In this section, administrators responsible for alumni tracking at other state and local charter organizations offer their insight and recommendations for UTES' study. The school will be in good company from others who face challenges collecting meaningful data. These interviews include suggestions about specific data points to collect, ways to reach students after they leave the school, and resourceful ways to gather and manage student data.

The University of Texas Elementary School is not unique in its lack of alumni tracking processes. Responsive Education Solutions – a nonprofit organization and the largest charter school district in the state of Texas – runs 52 campuses statewide, including a number of Vista Academy college preparatory elementary schools. Stephanie Matthews, the Director of External Affairs for Responsive Education Solutions, revealed that her organization currently has no system in place to track its alumni after they leave a school and matriculate to their home districts. Matthews lamented that “the lack of tracking is an industry-wide challenge, and funders and researchers are eager to find out for sure that their investments are paying off.”¹⁴

The Vice President of Quality Initiatives at the Texas Charter Schools Association, Chris Busse, offered a few recommendations for UTES in setting up its alumni tracking program.¹⁵ He suggested that UTES explore the possibility of subscribing to the National Student Clearing House's StudentTracker for Outreach Programs, which helps outreach programs track and assess the educational achievements and college success of their participants nationwide. Busse also suggested that UTES

¹⁴ Matthews, Stephanie. Interview by Kathryn Dochen. Austin, Texas, April 17, 2012.

¹⁵ Busse, Chris. Telephone interview by Kathryn Dochen. Austin, Texas, April 23, 2012.

explore the feasibility of investing in Naviance, a powerful, comprehensive online program that keeps track of student data. AISD and other charter schools in Texas utilize this software solution to manage individual students as they move through the entire college planning, application, and decision process. With respect to collecting specific data points, Busse urged UTES not to “forget or downplay the milestones” that help build a college-going culture.¹⁶ He suggested tracking awareness and culture-building milestones, such as attending college visits, practicing writing college essays, and filling out a FAFSA, in addition to parental involvement and participation in the process.

Matt Randazzo, Chief Growth Officer of IDEA Public Schools, places heavy emphasis on tracking student outcomes as soon as they start ninth grade at IDEA schools. “Even if [students] are enrolled for one day in ninth grade at IDEA but then transfer to a home school district,” IDEA tracks their progress through the end of high school.¹⁷ If students do switch schools, the staff at IDEA employs a “very resource intensive manual tracking process”¹⁸ of calling parents to find out students’ progress. If parents do not respond, IDEA leverages regional education service centers, with which the organization has good relationships especially in the Rio Grande Valley. When students graduate from IDEA high schools, they sign a release form and consent to IDEA accessing their college transcripts, and Randazzo proudly revealed that 100% of IDEA’s graduates have granted this permission. The organization uses college courses and data to inform its secondary education curriculum. Most elementary school students at IDEA will also attend middle and high school at an IDEA school, but when students do leave the IDEA system (usually

¹⁶ Busse, Chris. Telephone interview by Kathryn Dochen. Austin, Texas, April 23, 2012.

¹⁷ Randazzo, Matt. Telephone interview by Kathryn Dochen. Austin, Texas, March 23, 2012.

¹⁸ Ibid.

due to a family's move), Randazzo indicated that his organization does not keep track of those students.

During all three interviews described above, the interviewees referenced KIPP as an industry leader in alumni tracking and data collection, and each suggested that I speak to someone at KIPP Austin to find out about their methods. KIPP Austin's Director of Alumni Services, Anthony Solerno, explained how his organization keeps track of its graduates after they leave the KIPP program. Through the KIPP Through College program, the organization provides individual services all the way through the end of high school, no matter which school the student attends. Now that KIPP Austin includes a high school where most of its students matriculate, tracking student data is not a problem. However, before the high school opened, students left KIPP after eighth grade. Prior to finishing middle school, the students and parents signed a KIPP Through College commitment form, which gave permission for KIPP to visit the students on their high school campuses and to ask the high schools for the data they need. Solerno reported that "all but one" of the high schools were cooperative and forthcoming with data, and in that instance, he worked directly with the student to gather data about grades, promotion, discipline, and attendance.¹⁹

In the relatively rare instance that a student refuses to sign the commitment form and opts out of the KIPP Through College program and associated services, the staff at KIPP Austin still finds ways to gather information via email, and from the students' friends and social media activity. "Facebook is huge," Mr. Solerno said, and Twitter can be helpful as well. "We can't get grades that way, but we can find out if a student is still in school and if [he or she] is planning to go to college."²⁰ KIPP does use the Naviance

¹⁹ Solerno, Anthony. Telephone interview by Kathryn Dochen. Austin, Texas, April 25, 2012.

²⁰ Ibid.

software system, but Mr. Solerno has found that students tend not to want to get onto unfamiliar software, so Facebook has provided the best option. Relying on Facebook to connect with former students could be problematic for UTES, since its young alumni are only in middle or early high school, and Facebook may not be suitable for students of this age. Even if these students are Facebook users, connecting with young children through the site may be inappropriate. UTES can best utilize this platform with its high school aged and older alumni in the future.

Similar to IDEA Public Schools, KIPP's alumni tracking processes are labor intensive and are performed manually at the individual student level. When Mr. Solerno reacted to UTES' situation and the need to track down four years' worth of students who have already left the school, he candidly affirmed, "That's gonna be tough."²¹ To collect this data every year or with some regularity, Mr. Solerno suggested the idea of rewarding student participation with some type of stipend.

Mr. Solerno admitted that subscribing to the National Student Clearing House data would be too expensive for the small number of students KIPP Austin needs to track, but that it might be feasible to join together with other KIPP schools and pay for the service as a group. KIPP Austin belongs to a group called Austin College Access Network (ACAN), a group of charter schools and nonprofit organizations that focus on college readiness activities. Members of this group are able to get student data from participating colleges and universities. As members of the Austin District/Charter Collaboration Compact, perhaps UTES and other local charter schools can leverage this new partnership and pool resources to gain access to similar information.

²¹ Solerno, Anthony. Telephone interview by Kathryn Dochen. Austin, Texas, April 25, 2012.

Chapter 3: Designing the Study

As part of the University of Texas, UTES will have to go through the IRB procedure for research on human subjects, and the consent form sent to parents will need to be approved. Although this process will undoubtedly create an extra layer of bureaucratic red tape, the UT Office of Research Support offers downloadable and customizable previously-approved consent forms that can be easily tailored to the needs of UTES.

The University of Texas Elementary School can access data about its alumni who matriculated to schools within AISD through the AISD Department of Research and Evaluation. The figure in Appendix A of this report illustrates the process of entering into a study with this department. Two separate studies will be needed – a retrospective study for alumni, and a prospective study for current students. UTES can use the AISD Student Aggregate Reports for Student Service Providers (SAR-SSP), which provides summary data for multiple individuals and allows longitudinal tracking by running reports as needed. SAR-SSP also allows production of data on a comparison group, which can either be the same student program participants at a different point in time, or a randomly selected set of students who are matched on user-specific demographic criteria. The available data includes demographics, disciplinary records, attendance, academic achievement, and state assessment. To utilize this tool, UTES must fill out the AISD External Research application (available at the following link: <http://archive.austinisd.org/inside/accountability/research/>) and should specify data elements needed and include methodology and how data will be used.

In order to collect this type of data in a longitudinal study about its students and alumni, UTES must collect parent consent, and parents must indicate students' AISD

identification number. AISD has a minimum requirement of 20 students in a group to pull data, which means that parent consent must be obtained for at least 20 students per graduating class. Additional requirements to initiate this type of study include entering into a written agreement with AISD, signing an acceptable use agreement, attending a training session covering research ethics, basic evaluation concepts, and how to access and use the online SAR-SSP interface. AISD also requires that Student Service Providers' services be registered in the Youth Services Map (YSM).

Beginning in Fall 2012, AISD will make de-identified student level data available without parent consent. In order to pull this data, the following minimum information is needed: student's first and last name, birth date, and in the case of duplicate names, Social Security number and/or AISD student identification number. The cost of data pulls via AISD external research is currently \$50 per hour. Aggregate reports are available at no cost.

Even though the de-identified student level data will soon be available without parent consent, AISD will need Social Security numbers or AISD student identification numbers for many students who have common names. Therefore, UTES will still have to obtain consent from many parents to access students' records. For current students whose parents are easily accessible to UTES administrators, consent forms should be sent out prior to graduation to get the Social Security number of students, in addition to demographic information needed about parents and family members. Getting in touch with the parents of alumni will be significantly trickier, since families could have moved or changed phone numbers. The practitioners interviewed in Chapter 2 suggested that UTES send a letter to students' last known addresses explaining the situation and asking parents for their child's AISD student identification number.

Another way UTES can be evaluated is by comparing its performance to that of similar schools. The Financial Allocation Study of Texas (FAST) is conducted by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts and “measures how spending in every Texas public school district and campus translates to student academic progress.”²² The FAST rating is a “simple average of an academic component ... and a financial component” and “allows for fair and meaningful comparisons among Texas school districts and campuses.”²³ When comparing district and campus spending, the FAST report puts districts and campuses into groups of “fiscal peers” – up to 40 districts or campuses “that operate in similar cost environments”.²⁴ These groupings are used to compare school districts and campuses on a level playing field, and therefore UTES’ group of fiscal peers (listed in Appendix B) provides a suitable comparison group against which to study. Each year, UTES can report its overall achievement as compared to its peer schools, and students can be compared at an aggregate level by using data obtained through public information requests.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GATHERING DATA

Based on the amount of work necessary to complete a study of this scale and scope, UTES can expect to need a dedicated part-time staff member for a full year to complete all the necessary steps. After all the data is collected, UTES may approach a professor or student at the LBJ School for assistance with data analysis. The following table lists each action item and estimates the amount of staff time needed to accomplish the task.

²² “Measuring Academic Progress and Financial Efficiency in Texas Schools.” Financial Allocation Study for Texas, accessed April 29, 2012. <http://fastexas.org/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Action Item	Estimated Time
(Fall 2012) Complete UT's IRB process to gain permission to conduct this study	2-4 months
(Summer/Fall 2012) Create materials for follow-up mailing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent form (Make sure it satisfies requirements of both UT IRB and AISD) • Survey to gather family data 	5 hours
(Fall 2012 – Evenings) Phone call to each graduate's parents at the last known phone number <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the project and ask for consent • Ask for AISD student ID # or SS# • Verify mailing address, phone numbers, email address 	30 min. per student x 160 students = 80 evening hours
(Fall 2012 – Evenings) Phone call to each 'lotteried-out' student's parents at last known phone number (for comparison group data) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the project and ask for consent • Ask for AISD student ID # or SS# 	30 min. per student x # non-lotteried students = ?? evening hours
(Fall 2012) Mail consent forms and surveys to alumni's and 'lotteried-out' students' parents, and wait for their return <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need to follow up with evening phone calls 	1 month (some evenings)
(Spring 2013) Create and distribute mailing to parents of graduating 5 th graders to gain consent for future tracking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verify mailing address, phone numbers, email address • Ask for SS# 	2 weeks
(Between Jan. 1 – May 15, 2013) Complete AISD External Research Application	6 months
Wait for AISD External Research decision (<i>Applicants notified June 30</i>)	
Wait for AISD research team to perform the study and provide data	2-3 months
Analyze data	??

Table 1: Action Items for Gathering Data

SPECIFIC DATA NEEDS

Collect the following information from AISD about student outcomes:

Where does student currently attend school?
What is student's current grade level? (Has student continued to be promoted each year?)
STAAR Scores
Student grades
Attendance records
Disciplinary records

Table 2: Data needed from AISD

Collect the following information from parents, adult alumni, and/or the National Student Clearing House's StudentTracker for Outreach Programs.

What are the student's parents' highest levels of education?
What are parents' expectations for student achievement and future education?
What is parents' level of satisfaction with their child's education and achievement?
Have student/parent(s) attended college fairs, college visits, recruiting events, etc.?
Does parent feel that attending UTES has benefited their child?
Is student attending a four-year college or university?
Which college or university is student attending?
Is student attending a two-year program or working toward an Associate's Degree?
Did student graduate from college, university, or two-year program?
Is student the first in his/her family to graduate from college?
Is student planning to attend graduate school?
Student/parent email address
Student social media account(s)

Table 3: Data needed from Parents/National Student Clearing House

Appendix A: AISD External Research Flow Chart²⁵

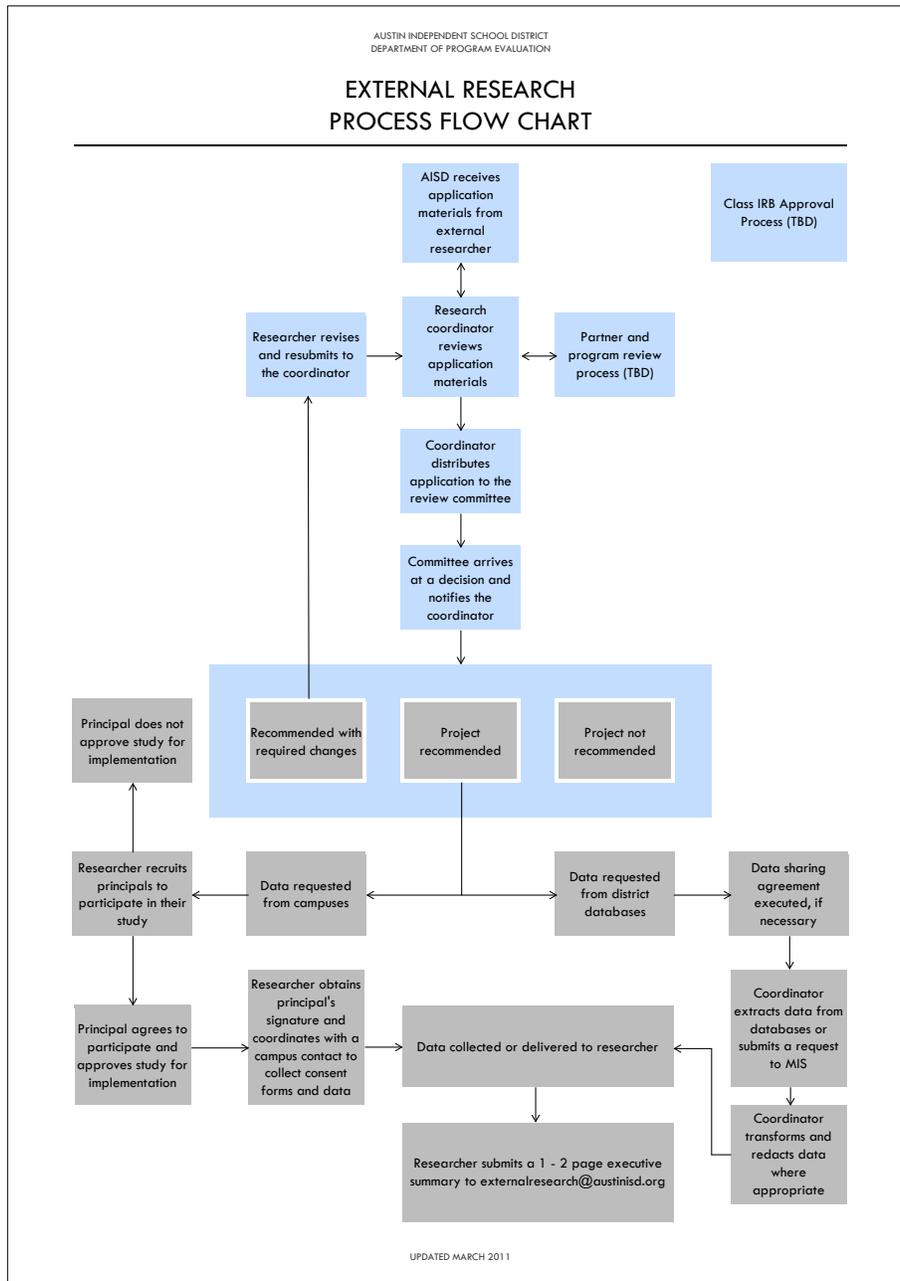


Illustration 1: AISD External Research Flow Chart

²⁵ "External Research Process Flow Chart." Austin Independent School District Department of Program Evaluation, accessed April 25, 2012.

http://archive.austinsisd.org/inside/docs/ResearchEvaluation_Process_FlowChart_11_12.pdf

Appendix B: FAST Fiscal Peers

University of Texas Elementary Charter School
Bay Area Charter Elementary School
Blanche Dodd Intermediate School
Brazos School for Inquiry and Creativity Northwest
Campbell Elementary School
Coupland Elementary School
Devers Elementary School
Field Elementary School
Garner Elementary School
Guadalupe Elementary School
Hamlet Elementary School
Houston Elementary School
J.W. Ray Learning Center
Jill Stone Elementary School at Vickery Meadow
John J. Pershing Elementary School
Lamar Elementary School
Lighthouse Charter School
Lotspeich Elementary School
Martin Luther King Jr. Learning Center
Medical Center Charter School/Southwest
Medina Elementary School
Meyerpark Elementary School
North Texas Elementary School of the Arts
Nova Academy
O'Bryant Intermediate School
Paradise Intermediate School
Phillis Wheatley Elementary School
Pinnacle School
Preston Hollow Elementary School
Roger Q. Mills Elementary School
Sherwood Elementary School
Spring Creek Elementary School
Travis Elementary School
Travis Elementary School
Two Dimensions Preparatory Academy
University of Houston Charter School
Waco Charter School
West End Elementary School

Wheatley Elementary School
Wheelock Elementary School

Table 4: UTES' Fiscal Peers

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Vita

Kathryn Janene Dochen was born in Austin, Texas. After completing her work at Anderson High School in Austin, Texas, in 2001, she entered Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with a double major in Psychology and Sociology in 2005. During the following years, she served her country through AmeriCorps with Communities in Schools – Central Texas, Inc., worked as a fundraising professional for Communities In Schools – Central Texas, Inc., and then as a conference planner at the Religious Action Center in Washington, DC. In July 2007, she entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin. During graduate school, Kathryn worked as a Graduate Research Assistant at the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, and as an intern at Texas Education Agency and Dell Inc.

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