

RESPONSIVE EDUCATION SOLUTIONS RESPONSE TO CREDO REPORT ON CHARTER SCHOOL GROWTH AND REPLICATION

February 20, 2013

The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (“CREDO”) released its Charter School Growth and Replication report Wednesday, January 30, 2013 (the “Report”).¹ The Report analyzes, among other things, the performance of charter schools by “compar[ing] the performance of students in . . . charter schools to ‘virtual twins’ that attend the same traditional public schools that the charter school students would have otherwise attended.”² Put another way, the Report asks, “Would a charter school student have experienced more or less academic growth had he or she remained in the traditional public school?”

In the Report, CREDO created a new term—super-networks—“to identify federations of independent networks which operate under a larger national manager.”³ Responsive Education Solutions (“ResponsiveEd”) was one of four “super-networks” identified and extensively profiled in the Report.⁴ CREDO begins its analysis of ResponsiveEd by asserting that, “the overall effects on growth for students attending Responsive Ed schools are negative . . .”⁵ After an extensive review and some general disclaimers, CREDO concludes its analysis of ResponsiveEd by warning the reader that “the results of this study should be considered along with results of other evaluations of Responsive Education Solutions performance to determine if this performance is an exception or part of a larger pattern of weak performance.”⁶ Given CREDO’s suggestion that ResponsiveEd schools are academically weak, its serious and public assertion that ResponsiveEd schools negatively impact student academic growth, and the number of inquiries for explanation that ResponsiveEd has received from the media and charter school authorizers, ResponsiveEd felt it necessary to respond to such claims by providing the reader with information regarding our academic performance, as well as our analysis of the Report itself.

RESPONSIVEED SCHOOLS HAVE A TRACK RECORD OF STRONG ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The strong academic performance of ResponsiveEd schools is evidenced by state and federal accountability results, accreditation, and partnerships.

State and Federal Accountability

The test data used for the Report began in 2005-06 and ended in 2009-10.⁷ During that time, ResponsiveEd operated 12 college-prep schools and 22 dropout recovery and prevention high schools. During the final year of the Report, ResponsiveEd delivered some of the best academic results in the State of Texas—as evidenced by both state and federal accountability results.

State Accountability

Under the Texas accountability system, schools are rated according to the following scale, ranging from lowest to highest: “Academically Unacceptable,” “Academically Acceptable,” “Recognized,” and “Exemplary.”⁸ During the final year of the Report, 92% of ResponsiveEd college-prep schools were rated either “Recognized” or “Exemplary”—no school was rated “Academically Unacceptable.”⁹ That same year, 100% of ResponsiveEd’s dropout recovery and prevention schools earned the highest possible academic rating given by the Texas Education Agency.¹⁰

Federal Accountability

Under the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,” all public schools—including charter schools—are evaluated for Adequate Yearly Progress (“AYP”).¹¹ Under this federal accountability system, schools are rated according to the following scale, ranging from lowest to highest: “Missed AYP” (designating a “campus that does not meet AYP standards on one or more indicator components”) and “Meets AYP” (designating a “campus that meets AYP

standards on all indicators for which it is evaluated”).¹² During the final year of the CREDO Report, 100% of all ResponsiveEd schools were rated “Meets AYP.”¹³ This is especially impressive given that ResponsiveEd operated 22 dropout recovery and prevention high schools that year. As explained by the National Education Policy Center, “Those [organizations] managing schools that target more disadvantaged populations are more likely to not make adequate yearly progress, while [organizations] whose schools have college prep profiles or serve few disadvantaged students have a much better chance of making AYP.”¹⁴

Accreditation

ResponsiveEd is accredited by AdvancED (formerly known as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools), the largest educational accreditation agency in the United States.¹⁵ In its official 2012 “Quality Assurance Review Report,” AdvancED rated ResponsiveEd “Highly Functional” in the “Teaching & Learning” standard of the review,¹⁶ making the following specific findings:

- “The district is committed to providing each student a well-designed curriculum. The curriculum is aligned with the state standards and meets the requirements of the No Child Left Behind performance targets.”¹⁷
- “[A]cademically struggling students are identified and instructional intervention strategies are implemented to ensure content mastery.”¹⁸
- “The development of quality curriculum materials in each content area is an innovative and effective way of providing an environment conducive to student learning.”¹⁹
- “The district has also embraced the concepts of individual learning styles in each school.”²⁰
- “The district programs are focused on interventions that help students meet state and district expectations for learning.”²¹
- “[T]he primary focus of their educational programs is on student learning outcomes . . .”²²

- “[T]he curriculum is reviewed yearly and revised according to state and district standards. The district uses its master teachers yearly to review, revise, and update curriculum on all content areas.”²³

Partnerships

While ResponsiveEd’s strong academic performance is best evidenced by the objective academic results noted above, it is also evidenced by the strong partnerships we have developed over the years with organizations such as the Texas Education Agency, Walton Family Foundation, and the Austin Independent School District.

Texas Education Agency

ResponsiveEd’s primary Texas charter authorizer, the Texas Education Agency, has affirmed the academic performance of our schools by allowing us the unprecedented freedom to open and operate an unlimited number of schools within Texas.²⁴ In a letter dated August 23, 2012, the Texas Education Agency notified ResponsiveEd that we were approved to expand—at our sole discretion—for a period of three years.²⁵ This is a strong statement from the Texas Education Agency that they consider ResponsiveEd to be among the highest-quality charter operators in the state.

Walton Family Foundation

In 2012, the Walton Family Foundation awarded ResponsiveEd more than \$1.2 million dollars to support “Arkansas Education,” more than any other organization in that category except the Arkansans for Educational Reform Foundation.²⁶ In a press release dated January 29, 2013, the Walton Family Foundation noted that, “[i]n 2012, the foundation supported the introduction of the highly successful charter management organization Responsive Education Solutions to Arkansas which led to the approval of three new public charter schools that will open in the 2013-14 school year.”²⁷

Austin Independent School District

ResponsiveEd’s academic success with its dropout recovery and prevention high schools has led to a recent partnership with the Austin Independent School District (“AISD”) to open ResponsiveEd learning centers within two AISD campuses.²⁸ Pleased with the academic success of those students attending the ResponsiveEd program, the AISD board of trustees unanimously voted to renew its contract with ResponsiveEd on December 12, 2012.²⁹

Consequently, contrary to CREDO’s suggestion that its conclusions could indicate “a larger pattern of weak performance” on the part of ResponsiveEd schools,³⁰ ResponsiveEd’s state and federal accountability results, accreditation, and partnerships indicate a pattern of strong academic performance.

CREDO’S REPORT IS UNRELIABLE, MISLEADING, AND INADEQUATE

While we applaud CREDO’s desire to measure charter school performance, we have serious concerns about its methodology, analysis, and conclusions. Because others have already amply challenged the “virtual twin” methodology employed in the Report in general,³¹ we wish to focus our response on those shortcomings of the Report that apply to ResponsiveEd in particular, namely:

1. unreliable data gathering, maintenance, and organization;
2. failure to provide documentation to support the Report’s methodology;
3. failure to follow its own research criteria; and
4. the misleading and inadequate nature of the “virtual twin” methodology for measuring the academic growth of students attending a dropout recovery and prevention charter school.

The Report is based on unreliable data gathering, maintenance, and organization.

Although ResponsiveEd was profiled extensively in the Report, we were never contacted by CREDO. After the Report was published, we reached out to CREDO in an attempt to gain an

understanding of the very serious assertions made in the Report regarding ResponsiveEd's academic performance. In the days that followed the Report's publication, we communicated several times with the authors of the Report, Mr. James Woodworth, CREDO Research Associate, and Dr. Margaret (Macke) Raymond, CREDO Director. Repeated requests for information produced inadequate responses, leading us to conclude that CREDO's data gathering, data maintenance, and data organization procedures show evidence of being disorganized and unreliable.

By way of example, ResponsiveEd recognized an ambiguity in the Report regarding the number of our schools included in CREDO's study. As noted above, the test data used for the Report began in 2005-06 and ended in 2009-10.³² During that time, ResponsiveEd operated the following brands/schools: Vista Academies, Quest Middle Schools, Premier High Schools, iSchool Highs, and IQ Academy. The Report, in contrast, lists only "Vista Academies" and "Premier High School," as well as a separate designation ambiguously entitled "Responsive Education Solutions (RES)."³³ When asked to explain the ambiguity, CREDO assured us that the designation "Responsive Education Solutions (RES)" included Quest Middle Schools, iSchool Highs, and IQ Academy. In response, we requested that CREDO provide us with a complete list of the ResponsiveEd schools that it analyzed in the Report. What we received as supporting documentation for the Report was a two-page school list that conflicted with CREDO's own Report.

1. While the Report lists "Responsive Education Solutions (RES)" as having 13 campuses,³⁴ the supporting documentation provided by CREDO lists 3 campuses.
2. While the Report lists "Premier High School" as having 16 campuses,³⁵ the supporting documentation provided by CREDO lists 22 campuses.
3. While the Report lists "Vista Academies" as having 14 campuses,³⁶ the supporting documentation provided by CREDO lists 9 campuses. In actuality, the Vista Academies brand had 10 campuses in operation during the study years.

Overall, while the Report lists 43 campuses, the supporting documentation provided by CREDO lists 34 campuses.³⁷ Such inconsistencies between CREDO’s Report and its own supporting documentation lead us to conclude that the data gathering, data maintenance, and data organization procedures employed by CREDO are unreliable, thereby making any conclusions and summaries in the Report based on this data to be unreliable as well.

CREDO has failed to provide documentation to support the Report’s methodology.

ResponsiveEd has repeatedly requested CREDO to provide us with the documentation it used to conduct its analysis of ResponsiveEd.³⁸ Inexplicably, it appears that CREDO has failed to maintain any of its supporting documentation for the Report.³⁹ Unfortunately, CREDO’s response to our most recent request for supporting documentation, has led us to conclude that our request is likely to go unanswered.⁴⁰ As a result, we do not know which ResponsiveEd students make up 26,304 student records listed in the Report;⁴¹ we do not know what percent of ResponsiveEd students had traditional public school “virtual twin” matches;⁴² we do not know from which traditional public schools the “virtual twins” were drawn; and we do not know which ResponsiveEd campuses were included in the study. Instead, CREDO has advised us that it requires more time for it to conduct additional tests and engage in self-reflection—actions that we would argue should have occurred prior to the publication of a report that makes serious claims about ResponsiveEd’s academic performance.⁴³

CREDO has failed to follow its own research criteria.

As noted above, CREDO created a new term—super-networks—“to identify federations of independent networks which operate under a larger national manager.”⁴⁴ In another section, the Report defines the term “super-networks” as “[Charter Management Organizations (“CMOs”)] that have some of their member schools themselves develop into CMOs in their communities.”⁴⁵ Under either definition, ResponsiveEd does not qualify as a “super-network.” During the study years of 2006-2010, ResponsiveEd was not a national organization, but operated exclusively within Texas. In fact, ResponsiveEd will not open its first out-of-state school until fall of 2013. In addition, none of ResponsiveEd’s schools operate independently,

but are operated under a single board of directors. Finally, none of ResponsiveEd’s schools have developed into CMOs.

To date, CREDO has failed to explain why it did not adhere to its own criteria when subjectively misclassifying ResponsiveEd as a “super-network.”⁴⁶ And while such subjective misclassification as a “super-network” brings welcome scrutiny to ResponsiveEd, CREDO’s failure to adhere to its own research criteria calls into question all other aspects of its research.

CREDO’s “virtual twin” model is a misleading and inadequate method for measuring the academic growth of students attending a dropout recovery and prevention charter school.

As noted above, ResponsiveEd operates “Premier High Schools,” which are schools designed to reach those students who have dropped out of school or who are at risk of doing so (e.g., students enrolled in their third or fourth year of high school, but who are classified as freshmen due to the number of credits they have accrued). First, it is a fundamental error for CREDO to compare the academic growth of students in a dropout recovery and prevention high school with their “virtual twins” in the traditional public schools. This is because traditional public schools are not even an option that is available for such a comparison. The student would not be attending a dropout recovery and prevention high school unless the traditional public school had not already failed to meet the academic needs of the student in the first place. Put another way, for a student attending a dropout recovery and prevention high school like Premier High School, the choice is not charter schools or traditional public schools, but rather charter schools or no school.

Second, in the Report, 81% of the 26,304 student records in ResponsiveEd’s “super-network” are from Premier High Schools.⁴⁷ Consequently, the Report’s analysis of ResponsiveEd’s “super-network” is essentially an analysis of the students enrolled in ResponsiveEd’s dropout recovery and prevention schools. This is critical, because CREDO bases the validity of the Report’s results on its ability to accurately compare each charter school student to a “virtual twin”—i.e., an “exact match[]” of the charter school student based on

observed characteristics.⁴⁸ And while CREDO’s “virtual twin” includes several observable characteristics, it does not match students based on age.⁴⁹ Thus, the Report considers a 14-year-old freshman who is on target to graduate in three years to be a “virtual twin” of an 18-year-old freshman who seeks to graduate in one or two years. Whereas the 14-year-old freshman has both time and a normal course load, the 18-year-old freshman has neither. Thus, CREDO’s “virtual twin” model is a misleading and inadequate method for measuring the academic growth of students attending a dropout recovery and prevention charter school.

OUR CONCLUSION

As already noted above, the Report is based on unreliable data gathering, maintenance, and organization; CREDO has failed to provide documentation to support the Report’s methodology; CREDO has failed to follow its own research criteria; and CREDO’s “virtual twin” model is a misleading and inadequate method for measuring the academic growth of students attending a dropout recovery and prevention charter school. As such, we conclude that the Report is unreliable and provides untrustworthy conclusions about ResponsiveEd.

¹ See CREDO, Charter School Studies, <http://credo.stanford.edu/research-reports.html> (last visited Feb. 14, 2013).

² Report, Executive Summary, p. 4.

³ Report, Vol. II, p. 1.

⁴ See Report, Vol. II, p. 26 (“For this study, we identified four charter super-networks: KIPP, Responsive Education Solutions, Uncommon Schools, and White Hat.”).

⁵ Report, Vol. II, p. 78.

⁶ Report, Vol. II, p. 84.

⁷ See Report, Vol. II, p. 4 (“Our data window begins in 2005-06 and ends in 2009-10.”).

⁸ See 2010 Accountability Manual: The 2010 Accountability Rating System for Texas Public Schools and School Districts, p. 1, <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2010/manual/manual.pdf> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

⁹ See Texas Education Agency; Office of Assessment, Accountability, and Data Quality; Final 2010 AYP Results, p. 165, <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/ayp/2010/distcampfinal10.pdf> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

¹⁰ See *id.*

¹¹ See 2010 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Guide For Texas Public School Districts and Campuses, p. 11, <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/ayp/2010/guide/guide.pdf> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

¹² See *id.*, p. 18.

¹³ See Texas Education Agency; Office of Assessment, Accountability, and Data Quality; Final 2010 AYP Results, p. 165, <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/ayp/2010/distcampfinal10.pdf> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

¹⁴ National Education Policy Center, Profiles of For-Profit and Nonprofit Education Management Organizations, p. 21, http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/EMO-profiles-10-11_0.pdf (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

¹⁵ See AdvancED – Find Accredited Institutions, Type “Responsive” in “Institution Name” field, <http://www.advanc-ed.org/oasis2/u/par/search> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013); Company Overview – AdvancED, <http://www.advanc-ed.org/company-overview> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

¹⁶ AdvancED Quality Assurance Review Report for Responsive Education Solutions, p. 16 (document on file with the author).

¹⁷ *Id.* at p. 14.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at p. 15.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ See Letter from Mary Perry, Charter School Administration, Texas Education Agency, to Charles Cook, Superintendent, ResponsiveEd, Aug. 23, 2012 (“These waiver applications allow Responsive Education Solutions . . . to expand without submitting expansion amendment requests for commissioner approval for a period of three years to include 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 school years . . .”) (document on file with author).

²⁵ See *id.*

²⁶ See Walton Family Foundation – 2012 Grant Report, <http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/about/2012-grant-report#homeregion> (last visited Feb. 14, 2013).

²⁷ See Foundation Invests \$432 Million in 2012; Creates Opportunity To Help Individuals, Communities Live Better, <http://wff.cotcdn.rockfishhosting.com/documents/1792c778-e9de-4fb8-9cb2-babd203ff606.pdf> (last visited Feb. 14, 2013).

²⁸ See Frequently Asked Questions: Graduation Pathways Education Program, <http://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dept/default/docs/02.14%20AAFR%20-%20ResponsiveEd%20FAQ.pdf> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

²⁹ See In-District Charter with Responsive Education Solutions, <http://www.austinisd.org/fmp/facilities-recommendations/responsive-education-solutions> (last visited Feb. 13, 2013).

³⁰ See Report, Vol. II, p. 84 (noting that “the results of this study should be considered along with results of other evaluations of Responsive Education Solutions performance to determine if this performance is an exception or part of a larger pattern of weak performance”).

³¹ See, e.g., The Center for Educational Reform, National Charter Research Misfires on Charter Schools, <http://www.edreform.com/2013/02/national-charter-research-misfires-on-charter-schools/> (last visited Feb. 14, 2013) (“[R]elying on flawed virtual twin methodology, is highly misleading”); Wall Street Journal, Opinion: The Truth about Charters, <http://live.wsj.com/video/opinion-the-truth-about-charters/639C224C-66E5-428A-B69E-07ED7FAB1631.html#!639C224C-66E5-428A-B69E-07ED7FAB1631> (last visited Feb. 14, 2013) (criticizing the Report’s “crazy ‘virtual twin’ process”); Liv Finne, Guide to Major Charter School Studies, <http://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/guide-major-charter-school-studies> (last visited Feb. 14, 2013) (“The ‘virtual twin’ method has been criticized for being highly subjective and easily manipulated as a point of reference.”).

³² See Report, Vol. II, p. 4 (“Our data window begins in 2005-06 and ends in 2009-10.”).

³³ See Report, Vol. II, Tables A.1 and A.2, pp. 60, 61, 65, and 67.

³⁴ See Report, Vol. II, Tables A.1 and A.2, pp. 60 and 67.

³⁵ See Report, Vol. II, Tables A.1 and A.2, pp. 61 and 65.

³⁶ See Report, Vol. II, Tables A.1 and A.2, pp. 60 and 65.

³⁷ See Report, Vol. II, Tables A.1 and A.2, pp. 60, 61, 65, and 67.

³⁸ See E-mail from Dr. Alan Wimberley, Chief Learning Officer, ResponsiveEd, to James Woodworth, CREDO Research Associate, to Feb. 13, 2013 (document on file with author):

Mr. Woodworth,

You refer several times to “further” data analysis. This is not my request. Credible research practice keeps precise records of data, methods and process during the study and after the study. This is not just a given, it’s a non-negotiable. My request was just asking you to send copies of the actual data you, as the author, used to calculate your study that led to your conclusions about us. That should be accessible and available immediately. If not, there could be cause to doubt the transparency of the project. We are not asking for additional items. We are asking for the actual documents you used. I am certain you did not throw these away or dispose of them, so my request is that you provide us with the data documents from your files that I am sure you kept to substantiate your work.

The mention of you requesting, and waiting on further data analysis also leads me to ask: Did CREDO actually perform the work on the study? Why would you, as the lead researcher, be waiting on further analysis? Is this new analysis? Who is doing the actual data work for CREDO?

Further analysis is not necessary. You have already performed your analysis. You have already published your conclusions. So, in good faith, I am just asking you to “show your work”. Making statements such as those made by you about our work demands that you be ready “immediately” to back up your findings with the actual documents that you created that caused you to decide our work was worthy of those statements. A growing number of people are becoming interested in this and your ability to show your work is crucial. The fact that you now state that you have no materials to provide is telling and important.

We again ask to see your work and we continue to wait for you to provide a time when we can meet with you.

Sincerely,

Alan Wimberley, Ed.D.
Chief Learning Officer
Responsive Education Solutions

³⁹ See E-mail from James Woodworth, CREDO Research Associate, to Dr. Alan Wimberley, Chief Learning Officer, ResponsiveEd, Feb. 13, 2013 (document on file with author) (“We are currently awaiting the results of an additional data request to allow us to respond to your concerns. As I have mentioned previously, there are several administrative issues which limit our access to the TX data.”).

⁴⁰ See E-mail from Dr. Margaret Raymond, CREDO Director, to Dr. Alan Wimberley, Chief Learning Officer, ResponsiveEd, Feb. 13, 2013 (document on file with author).

⁴¹ See Report, Vol. II, Tables A.1 and A.2, pp. 60, 61, 65, and 67.

⁴² See Report, Technical Appendix, p. 12.

⁴³ See E-mail from Dr. Margaret Raymond, CREDO Director, to Dr. Alan Wimberley, Chief Learning Officer, ResponsiveEd, Feb. 13, 2013 (document on file with author) (“We are conducting additional tests to see if your assertions are correct. We owe you and ourselves that level of self-reflection. . . . [W]e are trying to see if our approach already handles your concerns or whether we have overlooked something.”).

⁴⁴ Report, Vol. II, p. 1 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ Report, Executive Summary, p. 4 (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ See E-mail from James Woodworth, CREDO Research Associate, to Dr. Alan Wimberley, Chief Learning Officer, ResponsiveEd, Feb. 4, 2013 (document on file with author) (“Responsive Education Solutions was identified as a super-network because it includes Vista Academies, Quest Middle Schools, Premier High Schools under one larger umbrella.”).

⁴⁷ See Report, Vol. II, Tables A.1 and A.2, pp. 60, 61, 65, and 67.

⁴⁸ See Report, Technical Appendix, p. 10 (“To create a reliable comparison group for our study, we attempted to build a Virtual Control Record (VCR) for each charter school student. The goal of the matching process is to create a virtual twin for each treatment student in the data set. By combining the characteristics of the TPS students selected on exact matches of observed characteristics, we generate a virtual twin with unobserved characteristics highly likely to be similar to the charter students’ characteristics.”).

⁴⁹ See Report, Technical Appendix, p. 11.