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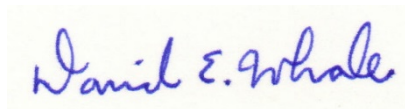
Editor's Note

It is with a heavy heart I must announce the passing of one of our editorial board members, Larry Corbett, a professor in the College of Education and Human Services at Central Michigan University. Larry was an avid supporter of international experiences for students. He also had served as the director at CMU's Center for Clinical Experiences for student teachers. He was a great friend of all and will be missed.

A few comments about this edition: We are working hard to make *The Charter Schools Resource Journal* one of the premiere sources of information for all who are interested in scholarly examinations of charter schools. We invite you to share this issue with friend and colleagues. If you are interested in contributing, please see the "call for papers" at the end of the issue.

Thank you, and we will see you again in Fall 2018. (Note: We are off for the summer. Any submissions we receive between May 15 and August 15, 2018, will be considered at the start of the new academic year at the end of August).

Professionally,



David E. Whale, Ed.D.
Editor, *The Charter Schools Resource Journal*
Central Michigan University

EDITORIAL BOARD

THE CHARTER SCHOOLS RESOURCE JOURNAL



2017-2018



Editor
David Whale, Ed.D.
Professor
Central Michigan University
whale1de@cmich.edu



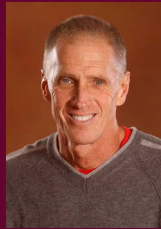
Associate Editor
Robin Ward, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Rice University
raward@rice.edu



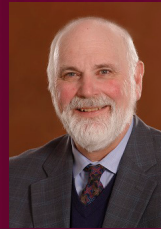
Carolyn Brown, M.Ed.
Curriculum Director
Grand Canyon University
crwhale@gmail.com



Matthew Ohlson
Assistant Professor,
University of North Florida
matthew.ohlson@unf.edu



William Leibfritz, Ph.D.
Professor
Central Michigan University
leibf1we@cmich.edu



Larry Corbett, Ed.D.
Professor
Central Michigan University
corbe1lj@cmich.edu



aretha marbley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Texas Tech University
aretha.marbley@ttu.edu



Jabari Paul Cain, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Mercer University
cain_jp@mercer.edu



Xiaoping Li, Ed.D.
Professor
Central Michigan University
li2x@cmich.edu



Riley Justis
National Charter
Schools Institute
Vice President for
Technology & Performance
justi1rj@cmich.edu



Stephanie Mathson,
M.L.I.S., M.A.
Associate Professor
Central Michigan University
maths1sm@cmich.edu



Mary Frances Agnello,
Ph.D.
Professor
Texas Tech University
maryfrances.agnello@ttu.edu



Antonio Corrales
Assistant Professor,
University of Houston
Clear Lake
corrales@uhcl.edu



J. J. Lewis, M.Ed.
President and CEO,
Compass Charter Schools
jlewis@compasscharters.org

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Best Leadership Practices from an Exemplary Charter School District in South Texas

Alejandro Garcia

alejandro.garcia@utrgv.edu

Assistant Professor

Organization and School Leadership Department

The University Texas-Rio Grande Valley

Mario H. Salinas

m.salinas@ecisd.us

Assistant Superintendent for Support Services

Edinburg CISD

Abstract

Charter schools have emerged as a powerful force in the American school reform movement. When first introduced, charter schools came with two distinct promises: to serve as an escape hatch for students in failing schools, and to create and incubate new educational practices. This qualitative study identified best practices from an exemplary charter school system that differentiated charter schools from traditional public schools. The three main themes and sub-themes discovered are: 1) Academic focus: a) The principal as an instructional leader, b) High expectations of students, c) Data driven decision making 2) Staffing tendencies: a) Recruiting strategies, b) Autonomy to hire staff, c) Non-renewal of staff; 3) Organizational level characteristics: a) Senior administrator visibility and feedback, b) Staff Accountability and expectations, c) Lack of School board politics. If emulated these best practices could result in an increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of traditional public school administrators, and thus strengthen the traditional public school system.

Keywords: educational leadership, school improvement, charter schools

Shortly after the beginning of the 1990s, the American public witnessed one of the most significant and controversial developments in public education: the emergence of the charter school movement. Up until 1991, there was no such thing as a charter school in the United States. Ravitch (2010) asserted that in the first decade of the twenty first century, the leading reform ideas in American education were accountability and choice. Ravitch (2010) suggested that charter schools have become the “jewels” of the school choice movement. Furthermore Ravitch (2010) cited how proponents of charter schools claim that,

Charter schools appeal to a broad spectrum of people from the left, the right, and the center, all of whom say charters are the antidote to bureaucracy and stasis as the decisive change that would revolutionize American education and dramatically improve educational achievement. (p. 133).

Many educational constituencies ranging from parents to teachers, experts to principals, educational entrepreneurs to nonprofits have argued that charter schools hold the promise of breaking up large, factory style schools along with the burdensome and often non-friendly educational bureaucracies and administrations that govern them (Weil, 2009).

According to Betts (2009) advocates argued that one rationale for charter schools is that heterogeneous students have different needs, implying that a one-size-fits-all approach of traditional public education will fall short of the ideal of individualizing the education given to each child. Charter schools are often seen as a way of providing parents’ choice over both the curriculum and the pedagogical methods to which their children will be exposed. Hess, Maranto, and Milliman (2001), asserted that a major underpinning of school choice as a reform movement is that competition will force traditional public schools to become more efficient and effective.

Theoretical Framework

Smith and Peterson (2006) believed that there are many individuals in the field of education considered to be education entrepreneurs who share many “entrepreneur-like” characteristics, but who do so in the hope of catalyzing massive improvement in K-12 public education. Education entrepreneurs are defined as visionary thinkers who create new for profit or nonprofit organizations from scratch that redefine our sense of what is possible. Smith and Peterson (2006) claimed that these organizations stand independent from existing institutions like public school districts and teacher colleges; as such, they and the entrepreneurs who start

them have potential to spark more rapid, dramatic change than might otherwise be created by status quo organizations. Smith and Peterson (2006) further suggested that education entrepreneurs are a rare breed of innovator whose characteristics and activities may lead to the transformation—not merely the slight improvement—of the public education system.

Researchers such as Teske and Williamson (2006) asserted that the notion of “entrepreneurial-like” activities have expanded into the public and nonprofit sectors in recent years using the terms “public entrepreneurship” or “social entrepreneurship.” Hentschke (2009) stresses that up until recently, educational leaders had no compelling reason to demonstrate entrepreneurial attributes. He contended that traditional public school systems have favored other traits in their leaders such as, faithful stewardship of public resources, procedural compliance, balancing political demands, upholding professional norms, etc. Hentschke (2009) further suggested that in our increasingly market sensitive economy, more and more public schooling enterprises are now requiring entrepreneurial-like talents and skills. Hentschke described the “educational entrepreneur” as follows:

- They have a unique idea that borders on a fixation. It may be a solution to a widespread problem, a way to meet an unmet need or a significant improvement to a widely used product or process.
- In order to transform their idea into reality, they often have to “go their own way” to raise the necessary social and financial capital to create a separate enterprise.
- They operate and seek to grow the business as the concrete manifestation of their unique idea (2009, pp. 151-152).

In the educational realm, entrepreneurs seek to teach children who have been ill served, improve the quality of teachers and school leaders, give educators effective tools, and deliver services in more useful and accessible ways. In a word, they seek to tackle the same problems as other educators. The difference is in how they go about it (Hess, 2006). In applying the concept of entrepreneurship to education, the key element is its transformative nature. Educational entrepreneurs are individuals seeking to instigate change in the public education system that will disrupt, transform, or radically alter the way education is provided (Teske & Williamson, 2006). Teske and Williamson (2006) further argued that educational entrepreneurs can be business

people who see a new way to provide education services. They can also be public school leaders who seek to change or disrupt the existing system in fundamental ways from the inside, or they can be nonprofit leaders who create organizations on the fringes of the larger system that will try to alter the system over time.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to gain insight and understanding into those charter school leadership concepts, attributes, and actions that have contributed to the popularity and success (as defined by the TEA , 2012) of a particular open-enrollment charter school organization and apply these same leadership concepts in a traditional public school setting.

There is significant research on charter school effectiveness and factors that influence parents' choice of a charter schools and their satisfaction with charter schools. However, few studies have addressed charter leadership attributes and actions that have transformed charter schools into the burgeoning movement that it is today. To date, most studies about charter schools have focused on performance evaluation or whether charter schools achieve higher levels of innovation, accountability, learning, access, and satisfaction (Weil D. 2009). Far less attention has been paid to the question of those charter school leadership attributes and actions, under the “decentralized and autonomous” context that charter school leaders operate in, which have led the perception that charter schools are superior to traditional public schools with regards to student academic achievement.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, the participants' charter school experience and practices provided an understanding of those leadership characteristics, attributes, and practices that have Agency has consistently rated the charter school an exemplary school district.

Researchers engaged in basic research want to understand how the world operates. They are interested in investigating a phenomenon in order to get at the nature of reality with regard to that phenomenon. The basic researcher's purpose is to understand and explain (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined “naturalistic inquiry” as a “discovery-oriented” approach that minimizes investigator manipulation of the study setting and places no prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be. Therefore, the researcher conducted this study using a naturalistic, discovery-oriented approach to holistically understand human experience in a charter school setting.

In this study, the participant's charter school experience and practices provided an understanding of those leadership characteristics, attributes, and practices that have transformed this particular charter school into one of the most effective, as TEA has consistently rated the charter school an Exemplary school district, and popular public school options for parents in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2012a; Morten, 2011a; Morten, 2011b).

Therefore, the methodology selected for this study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative studies allow the researcher to study selected issues in depth and detail (Patton, 1990). Creswell (2003) suggested that the actual methods of data collection in qualitative studies are traditionally based on in-depth open-ended interviews, observations, informal interviews, and documents which may include e-mails, scrapbooks, and other emerging forms.

Creswell (2003) suggested that in qualitative studies the researcher can conduct face-to-face interviews with participants, interview participants by telephone, or engage in focus group interviews with six to eight participants in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from participants. Johnson (2002) stressed that a researcher who uses in-depth interviewing commonly seeks "deep" information and knowledge. The information and knowledge is usually deeper information and knowledge than what is typically gleaned from surveys, informal interviews, or focus groups. The information generally addresses very personal matters, such as lived experiences, values and decisions, occupational ideology, or perspectives. Thus, the researcher of the study interviewed the informants using a face-to-face, semi-structured format utilizing in-depth open-ended questions. Using this data collecting strategy the researcher was able to solicit direct quotations from the participants about their experiences, opinions, feelings, perceptions, and knowledge relative to their association with a particular charter school organization. Direct quotations are a basic source of raw data in qualitative inquiry, revealing respondents' depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions (Patton, 1990). Utilizing this strategy, the goal of the researcher was to provide a framework within which to gather high quality information from people and data that would reveal experiences with program activities and perspectives that represented accurately and thoroughly the respondent's point of view about the leadership traits and characteristics of the charter school organization under study.

Research Questions

The researcher developed the research questions as result of a review of the literature on the emergence and growth of charter schools and related literature. As described in the literature review chapter, charter schools are increasingly becoming a popular option for parents opting out of the traditional public school system.

1. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?
2. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to staffing?
3. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting?

Site Selection

Merriam (1988) maintained that the most appropriate sampling strategy for a qualitative study is a non-probability sampling, of which there are several forms, one of which is purposeful sampling. Patton (1990) maintained that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information rich cases, he contends, are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. The rationale of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study (Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most (Patton, 1990). Therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy was utilized to select the participants for this study. Specifically, a random purposive sampling technique was used for this study.

The sampling for this study was conducted from those individuals who are campus principals with the School of Excellence in Public Schools in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) of Texas. Additionally, the superintendent was also interviewed.

The site for this study, The School of Excellence Public Schools had a total of twenty two campuses in the LRGV of Texas. These twenty two campuses were located in ten sites. Each site consisted of one campus housing grades K-5 called an academy and another campus housing

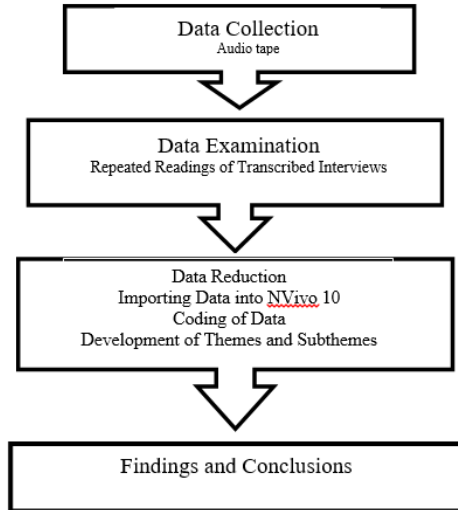
grades 6-12 called college preparatory. The entire charter school district has a total student enrollment of over 6,000 students (School of Excellence website)

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher used the face-to-face, open-ended, in-depth interview as the primary source of data collection. Other data collection strategies such as observations and document analysis were also utilized. Notes were taken at each interview and the interviews were audio recorded. The study was confined to those campuses located in the LRGV of Texas, and the study population constituted of subjects that had the role of principal within the School of Excellence and traditional public schools. The study also included the Superintendent of the charter school organization. A recruitment letter explaining the purpose of the study and requesting their participation in the study was emailed to all twenty two principals located in the LRGV of Texas. Twelve principals responded via e-mail and agreed to participate in the study. A random selection strategy was then utilized to select the four study participants in the category of campus principal (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The Superintendent was also asked to participate in the study via a semi-formal, open ended, in-depth interview. The researcher then e-mailed the four selected participants to set up a pre-interview.

Five individual, semi-formal, open ended interviews were conducted. Patton (1990) contended that the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to understand how participants view the program, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences. Therefore, to avoid work related distractions and time constraints, all the principal interviews were conducted after work hours and off campus (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The public library in the city where the principals worked was the location selected for the interviews. The superintendent was interviewed at one of the charter organization's campuses.

Figure 1: Data Analysis Framework



(based upon Miles & Huberman's (1994)
Qualitative Data Analysis)

Data Analysis/Results

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of one's data (Merriam, 1988). It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data (Creswell, 2003). Merriam (1988) suggested that the final product of a qualitative study is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. The researcher constructed a data analysis framework based upon Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis (Figure 1). Using this framework the researcher was able to make sense of the massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and draw conclusions from the data.

After coding and analyzing the transcriptions of the five audio-recorded individual interviews, the researcher found three major themes and sub-themes as they related to the research questions. The three main themes and sub-themes are as follows: 1) Academic focus: a) The principal as an instructional leader, b) High expectations of students, c) Data driven decision making 2) Staffing tendencies: a) Recruiting strategies, b) Autonomy to hire staff, c) Nonrenewal of staff; 3) Organizational level characteristics: a) Senior administrator visibility and feedback, b) Staff Accountability and expectations, c) Lack of School board politics.

Research Question 1

How do charter school administrators from the selected charter school district describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?

Theme 1: Academic focus

Under the theme of academic focus, the sub-themes that emerged from the participant interviews were: the principal as an instructional leader, high student expectations, and data driven decision making.

The principal as an instructional leader

After reviewing and analyzing the participant's responses as they relate to Research Question One, it was clear to the researcher that academics is this charter organizations main priority. In a meta-analysis of sixty-nine studies conducted from 1978 to 2001, Marzano et al., (2005) found that the average correlation in studies conducted in the United States indicated that principal leadership has a significant and positive relationship with student achievement (as cited in Dufour & Marzano, 2011).

Hoy and Hoy (2009) suggested that although principals play the critical role of instructional leaders, principals clearly are not solely responsible for leadership in instruction. They argued that leadership in instructional matters should emerge freely from both principals and teachers. To engage in such cooperation, principals should spend time in the classrooms as colleagues and engage teachers in conversations about learning and teaching (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). In this study, Principal #1, who was previously a high school principal at a traditional public school clarified that, "I spend most of my time in the classroom working alongside with teachers. I do quite a bit of coaching, mentoring, and training teachers mostly with a focus on curricular issues". When asked to describe the differences in the traditional public school versus the School of Excellence experiences, relative to his instructional responsibilities, Principal # 1 stated that the first year was a culture shock. He said that the instructional program was his primary responsibility at the School of Excellence, whereas in the traditional public school, in addition to the instructional program, he was expected to be involved in all kinds of issues unrelated to the academic mission of the school. Principal # 3, who was an administrator at a local traditional public school for eighteen years prior to joining the School of Excellence, said that biggest difference between the School of Excellence and traditional public school is that in School of Excellence principals are expected to be in the classroom. She said that she did not see

this type of classroom focus in traditional public schools. Principal #2 and the Superintendent shared similar experiences.

High expectations of students

Rix (2012) mentioned that charter schools have two advantages over most traditional public schools: autonomy and a mission. Having a focused mission or a school philosophy and the autonomy to make decisions to put that philosophy into practice is what sets charter schools apart from traditional public schools.

The School of Excellence superintendent stated that he founded his first School of Excellence public school because he felt there was not enough being done to provide a high quality college prep curriculum in the area. He noted that after the doors opened, the student waiting list to get in to School of Excellence has grown exponentially ever since. Principal #1 explained that since the School of Excellence does not have such things as athletics and fine arts, the focus has to be academics. He clarified, “They do not come here for athletics, so the quality of instruction has to be better. Our mentality or our mindset is that our teachers are going to do the extra hours required to provide a better product.” He cited their homework policy as an example of student high expectations. He stated that all children are expected to do one and one-half hours of homework daily. Students are expected to complete their homework assignments on time with no excuses. Principal #1 agreed and stated that students who did not complete their homework were required to participate in an afterschool program designed to assist students in completion of their homework. He said that at the three traditional public schools, where he worked prior to coming to the School of Excellence, there were no strict homework policies. He said, “I know that at traditional public schools such policies do not exist”.

Data driven decision making

Park and Datnow (2009) explained that in the era of standards based reform and accountability systems, educational leaders are now required to analyze, interpret, and use data to make informed decisions in all areas of education from professional development to student learning. All participants of the study stated that data-driven conversations with their teachers are the primary instructional tool used for feedback and improvement. Kowalski, Lasley, &

Mahoney, (2008) mentioned that all educators play a critical role in using data to accelerate student achievement; however, the principal is the most critical player. Furthermore they stated, “More than any other single policy or law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has visibly incorporated directed autonomy, data driven decision making, and school leadership” (p. 8). Principal # 1 reflected on his experience as a traditional public schools principal versus his experience with the School of Excellence and stated that,

I am much more deliberate now than I was when I was a principal at a traditional public school. I am continually reflecting on my efficiency and effectiveness as a leader. I spend a significant amount of time having one-to-one data conversations with the teachers. So, if I am going to make decisions regarding change, I better know what is going on in the classroom in terms of data. Based on these data conversations, I make decisions regarding existing structures, trainings, and other issues.

Principal # 2 mentioned that most of what they do as principals is quantitatively based. He stated that for every twenty minutes he spends in class observing a teacher, he will spend at least another thirty minutes outside of the classroom having data conversations. He explained that the expectation of the principal to be in the classroom has other responsibilities attached to it. It is one thing to be in the classroom with the teachers observing, mentoring, and coaching, but is quite another to provide feedback to the teachers. Reflecting on his four years of traditional public schools teaching experience, Principal #2 said that not once did he have a data conversation with his principal. The participants of the study cited that tracking data was one of the most important practices of the principals that at the School of Excellence. The participant principals in this study reported that they track student data, as well as teacher data, including progress and interim reports, on a weekly basis. One principal participant stated, “I am always having data conversations with teachers about student progress or lack of progress.”

Research Question 2

How do charter school administrators from the selected charter school district describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to staffing?

Theme 2: Staffing tendencies

Under the theme of staffing tendencies, the sub-themes that emerged from the participant interviews were: recruitment strategies, autonomy to hire staff, and non-renewal of staff.

Effective teachers and quality principals are the foundation of effective schools (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Many of the children in the United States, no matter where they live, will be academically endangered if they have poor teachers for three years in a row (Nye, Konstantopoulus, & Hedges 2004).

Hoy and Hoy (2009) argued that teacher quality is the single biggest school level factor related to the academic success or failure of students in high poverty schools; however, they suggested, principals are responsible for developing the school climate that supports the very best instructional practices. Quality teaching also depends on the schools where teachers work, the materials available, and the communities of professionals that surround them (Wilson, 2011). Wilson (2011) reported that the quality of teaching in a school is also directly related to a strong principal who exercises inclusive leadership. In addition, Wilson (2011) stated that schools need to be able to recruit promising teachers, reward and retain effective ones, and to have a mechanism in place to dismiss those teachers who do not improve.

Recruiting strategies

All five participants indicated that staffing and recruitment methods are fundamental components of the School of Excellence. Before their employment with the School of Excellence, three of the principals had prior experiences as administrators and as teachers in a traditional public schools. When the superintendent was asked about School of Excellence strategies or methods for recruiting faculty and staff he said,

Our Human Resource (HR) department is not a place where everybody is sitting in offices. We have a team of recruiters, and their job is to be out in the field .We invite potential recruits to Starbucks to talk and to share over coffee. Our recruiters visit high performing teachers in their classrooms on task. They recruit them all semester, and we try to get them excited about the prospect of coming on board with the School of Excellence.

The superintendent also indicated that the recruiters host recruits on tours to the School of Excellence campuses. The recruits visit classrooms and speak with the teachers about the School of Excellence experience. He stated, “It is the same thing that investment banks, consulting firms

do. They get these really aggressive recruiters throughout their head hunting. Um, that is what we try to do.” The superintendent indicated that once they get the recruits excited about applying, they put them through a rigorous selection process. He went on to say that it is about building excitement in the teacher pool. All teachers that are hired go through the same process, however, he noted that the process does change every year. He stated that, “A teacher that we hire today is more likely to be successful than a teacher that we hired five years ago because our selection process is continually improving.” He explained that at the end of the year, the recruiting team analyzes the recruits hired versus performance to see where improvements can be made. He clarified, “Our team goes back and we look and see if there is any correlation in how well they did in the selection process versus how they performed. It is not a scientific method, but we are getting there.” When the principal participants were asked how they became involved with the School of Excellence, they all indicated that the recruitment strategy was significant. All the participants agreed that the School of Excellence utilized a recruitment strategy that was deliberate and rigorous. The principal participants all shared similar experiences in the process of joining the School of Excellence. For example, before becoming a principal at the School of Excellence, Principal #1 had been an assistant principal for several years in several different high schools here in the LRGV of Texas. He was a principal at a local high school when he first met the superintendent at a social gathering. Principal # 1 explained that the Superintendent inquired about his history and background. Principal # 1 described his education and training, and the superintendent asked if he was interested in joining the School of Excellence. Principal # 1 told him that he was happy with his present assignment, but that he would keep the offer in mind. The communication between the two continued and after approximately two years and Principal # 1 decided to join the School of Excellence.

Autonomy to hire staff

All four principal participants indicated that the autonomy given to them to lead a campus was one of the most significant differences between the School of Excellence and traditional public schools. When asked to describe some of the differences between traditional public schools versus School of Excellence Principal # 1 stated that,

So the biggest thing I would say is the fact that they give me total autonomy of the decision making. I hire, dismiss, and move people around

without interference from headquarters. They do not interfere, but then they hold me accountable [sic].

When the asked to compare the level of autonomy, on a scale of one to ten, between traditional public schools and School of Excellence Principal # 1 stated, “I would give traditional public schools a five versus a ten for the School of Excellence.”

Similar to Principal #1’s response, Principal # 3 cited autonomy to lead as an important factor in her ability to succeed as a campus leader with School of Excellence. She stated, “To me as a campus leader, I think it is important to be able to promote from within.” She explained that campus motivation is high because her staff knows that if they work hard, the opportunity to get promoted to a leadership position is always a possibility. She said, “This last year I promoted my first grade ELA teacher to assistant principal of operations, and I promoted another teacher into assistant principal of instruction.” When asked if she was the final authority in these kinds of personnel moves, she said, “I am the final authority, as long as they have a record of results, headquarters lets me do my job. They have never asked me to interview or to hire an individual.”

When asked if he had authority to hire his own teachers, Principal # 4 said,

We have a recruiting department at headquarters. Prospective teachers have to go through a pre-interview process with the recruiting department before I can even talk to them. If they go through the pre-interview, I have full authority to hire. I have hired all my teachers.

Principal # 2 mentioned that, “The talent recruiters find us people that are worthy to teach at the School of Excellence. Applicants have to exhibit our core values.” When asked if he believed this recruiting process existed in traditional public school, he stated,

I do not think so. In traditional public schools, applicants come to you. At the School of Excellence, we go after them. The recruiters go after talent. So by the time I interview an applicant, he or she has already been pre-screened. These people fit our core values and therefore make excellent teachers.

Nonrenewal of staff

All principal participants agreed that non-renewal of staff at the School of Excellence is a much simpler process than in the traditional public schools. All the principals indicated that, as principals at the School of Excellence, they had non-renewed staff for various reasons. For

example, Principal # 1 stated that, “This is the part of autonomy given to me that I like the best.” He explained that he had a first year teacher that was struggling to connect with the students and recalled that he had recruited the teacher from a local institution of higher learning to teach United States History. He stated, “I told the teacher my concerns from the very beginning and I explained to him that his inability to connect and motivate students was a problem for all. The teacher had content knowledge, but the problem was communicating and connecting the knowledge to the students”. Principal # 1 then stated that he met with the teacher and informed him that he was not seeing any progress. He explained that the teacher understood and subsequently submitted his resignation. When Principal # 2 was asked how they would deal with a teacher that was performing below standards she stated that,

I generally will put the teacher on a performance improvement plan. We outline specific goals that they have to meet. My assistant and I coach, provide support, and give feedback to the teacher on a daily basis. If the teacher still does not improve, then I will let him or her know that they need to start looking for another job. When asked if she was the final authority on non-renewal of staff, she responded, “Absolutely.”

Principal # 4 also described having to non-renew staff. He lamented that, in School of Excellence, administrators do not want to lose teachers but it was for the good of the students to non-renew low performing teachers.

He explained that administrators go through the process of training teachers in order to retain highly qualified teachers and that a sizable amount of taxpayer dollars are spent on getting teachers ready to teach. Therefore administrators really do not want to lose teachers, if it can be avoided. When asked if he had ever non-renewed a teacher, Principal # 4 responded,

I hired a teacher this year, and I coached her every single day. We would watch videos of her teaching, and I would give her feedback on what she needed to improve on. I would tell her this is what I see, and this is what I need you to work on. In the end I had a conversation with her that she needed to transition out.

When asked about the School of Excellence, contracts, Principal # 4 responded that the way the contract is written makes it easy to release an under-performing teacher. He stated, “I

do not know if this is the general rule for all charter schools, but that is the way it is at the School of Excellence, It makes a huge difference in my ability to lead.”

Principal # 2 simply stated, “I am the hiring and firing manager on my campus. At the end of the day, I am accountable to my kids. That is the bottom line.” He explained that employees at the School of Excellence have a contract, but because of the charter school guidelines, employees are all at will. Principal # 2 further stated that their charter guidelines allow them autonomy and flexibility and the non-renewal process includes growth plans and paperwork. He explained that, “We do not just fire people, but I know that the process is much easier than what you do at traditional public schools”.

Research Question 3

How do school administrators the selected charter school district describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting?

Under the theme of organizational level characteristics, the sub-themes that emerged from the participant interviews were: senior administrator visibility and feedback, staff accountability and expectations, and school board politics.

Theme 3: Organizational level characteristics

Senior administrator visibility and feedback

All the principal participants agreed that senior level administrators were constantly on campus to observe teacher and student interaction. All participants agreed that the superintendent and senior administrators visited the campus regularly and provided constructive feedback on their observations. All the participants cited that communication between campus level staff and headquarters was a fundamental component of the School of Excellence philosophy.

Another difference between the School of Excellence and the traditional public schools was accountability. He stated, “You can walk into any of our schools and you will see and feel our mission and our goals.” Principal #1 said,

You do not want to be that principal in a school that does not hit the goals. I mean because you are going to be in trouble. That is the culture of our organization. All of our principals know it and want to be that highest performing school.

Principal #2 also explained that senior administrators regularly visit his campus. When asked to describe who the senior administrators were, he said that the vice president in charge of his campus visited him at least once weekly. The Superintendent does visit his campus but not as frequently. He described the visits as,

They are visible in the classrooms, look around, sit in my meetings, discuss different issues that I may have at the time, and we have data conversations. A central office administrator will come in and visit all my classrooms, and he usually gives me direct feedback on his observations. He is very good at giving feedback. Feedback is usually direct, but he also uses a lot of voice recordings and e-mail. Uh, that is pretty typical of anyone who visits the campus from central office.

In addition, Principal # 4 said that one of the biggest differences between her experiences at traditional public school versus the School of Excellence was the visibility of the superintendent. He described him being as highly visible, providing feedback, and asking for feedback. When asked to give a specific example she said,

As a matter of fact he visited the campus today. He gave me direct feedback on what he saw. He said that the School of Excellence culture was evident. He said the students were fully engaged, and the teachers were teaching. He gave me positive feedback, but he also told me things to work on. Additionally, he asked me for feedback on how he, himself, could be more of assistance to the principals.

Principal # 3 added that the superintendent did very good job of coaching and developing the skills of the principals. It is hard for a principal with School of Excellence to fail simply because headquarters provided so much assistance and mentoring. She said, "I think that is one of the biggest differences between my experience at traditional public schools and the School of Excellence."

Staff Accountability and expectations

All participants described the School of Excellence culture as a "no excuses" culture of accountability and expectations. They all stated that this culture of expectations applied to students as well as staff. The principal participants all agreed that accountability and expectations

revolved around results. Principal #4 stated that the mission of the School of Excellence was academics, plain.

He explained that one of the expectations at the School of Excellence that was unique was that all the teachers and administrators were issued a company cell phone. When asked if parents were free to call staff at any time, he responded,

Every teacher is given a cell phone, and they are expected to answer any inquiries a parent may have. We ask our teachers to answer parent calls until about nine p.m. I have had many parent conversations on the phone. Parents usually call our teachers to inquire about a particular assignment or another, sometimes discipline, but it is usually about homework.

Principal # 3 shared a similar response to the question of expectations and accountability. She said that the School of Excellence has a no excuses do whatever it takes culture of expectations for both the students and the staff. When asked to compare working in a traditional public school district versus the School of Excellence relative to expectations and accountability. She said,

We are held accountable to the results. If the results are not there, you do not have a job. That's the bottom line. The superintendent has goals, the vice presidents have goals, we have goals, and the teachers have goals. If everyone meet their goals, then we're good.

Principal # 3 furthermore explained that one of the big differences between her experiences as an administrator at a traditional public schools and the School of Excellence was that at the School of Excellence you had to constantly reflect on continuous improvement. She said,

I self-reflect on things like, [sic] What do I need to do to be a better leader? Why are the scores not where they need to be? Is it me or is it my teachers? What are my weaknesses? Where are my teachers the weakest? I am held accountable so I am going to turn around and hold my staff accountable too. If a teacher is not producing, we are going to sit down and have data conversions and figure it out because we have our goals and we have to meet them.

Lack of School board politics.

Moody (2011) contended that the complexities surrounding superintendent and board relations has intensified over time. The increasingly complex quality of that relationship, which includes political and social influences, has produced additional challenges and stressors that has historically been disjointed and, by its nature unstable (Moody, 2011). Studies concerning superintendent and school board relations indicate that problems between board members and superintendents tend to surface when some board members attempt to assume a more active role in the operational aspects of schooling than the superintendent is willing to accept (Haugland, 1986; Moody, 2007). Hensley and Burmeister (2009) argued that it is incumbent upon school leaders such as the superintendent and the school board to promote positive relationships and to develop healthy organizational cultures that serve to advance powerful, effective teaching and learning.

Three of the four principal participants in this study agreed that board politics in traditional public schools is the primary reason why they work at School of Excellence. By the same token, all the principal participants reported that they could not recall a single incident of school board member interference while working at School of Excellence. The Superintendent and founder, was asked to describe his relationship with his school board. He said,

I recruit most of the board members myself. So I make sure that people have the right mind set before I appoint them to the board...they look at how we perform versus our goals. They do not get involved in the day-to-day management of the enterprise. One big difference between traditional public schools and us is that the board does not do the hiring.

When asked if the board tried to micro-manage him or anyone else, the superintendent said, "No, but occasionally they will try; but I just remind them that it is not the way it works and um that usually works."

Principal # 1 said that he joined School of Excellence because of board politics in the traditional public school that he worked in. He said,

The superintendent had been recruiting for a couple of years, but I was reluctant to leave the traditional public school where I worked as principal. Finally, I had enough of the petty board politics at the traditional public schools and it really turned me off. They were asking me to do things that I was not comfortable with. I was being asked to do things that were

against my core values. So I took the job offer from the School of Excellence superintendent.

The other principals in the study also shared similar stories of petty board politics influencing their decision to join the School of Excellence.

Discussion/Recommendations

The aim of the study was to emulate, in a traditional public school setting, the charter school practices that have contributed to the popularity and success (as defined by the TEA, 2012) of a particular open-enrollment charter school district. The ultimate result would be to increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of traditional public school administrators, and thus strengthen the traditional public school system. The study was conceptually framed around the premise that state charter school laws allow individuals and groups to create new public schools that are supported with public dollars but managed independently of the local education agency.

Academic focus: The principal as the instructional leader

Good principals engage their schools in the core processes of establishing, maintaining, evaluating, and improving their structures and cultures. Schools need a principal to keep the organization going effectively and improving continuously. The instructional leadership of the principal is a critical factor in the success of a school's improvement initiatives and the overall effectiveness of the school (Lunenburg, 2010). Whereas all the participants reported that instructional focus was one of many priorities in traditional public schools, all the principal participants concurred that instructional leadership was priority one in Schools of Excellence. All of the participants reported that a majority of their time and focus is spent in the classroom with the teachers. Hoy and Hoy (2009) argued that principals cannot be effective instructional leaders if they do not know what is happening in the classroom. Additionally, principals reported that they spent at least equal amounts of time outside the classroom providing constructive feedback and having data conversation with the teachers; all other responsibilities of leading a campus are delegated. They all agreed that schools are about teaching and learning. All other activities are secondary to these goals (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). In addition, all the participants agreed that the position of principal in the School of Excellence was about coaching and mentoring teachers and providing the needed support for student learning

Academic focus: Data driven decision making

In their book, *Data Driven Decisions and School Leadership*, Kowalski, Lasley, and Mahoney (2008) stated, “What gets measured and gets monitored gets improved” (p.104). William Harris noted that the term data does not mean just test scores; it encompasses all the talk and work of teachers and students (Nidus & Sadler, 2011). All educators play a critical role in using data to accelerate student achievement. Arguably though, the principal is the most critical player (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). Principal #1 and the superintendent both cited that one of the biggest differences between School of Excellence and traditional public schools was that at the School of Excellence they were constantly tracking and charting data. The participants all reported daily data conversations with teachers and supervisors as well. They described one to one data conversions with teachers and supervisors on topics that include student daily attendance, student persistence and discipline, student homework, student writing samples, student attrition, teacher progress and assessments, and assessment data on special populations, or any information that provided the opportunity to discuss student work in the context of the lesson and instruction (Nidus & Sadler, 2011). All participants agreed that at the School of Excellence data driven decision making is a pedagogical way of life. Data driven decision making was the primary tool they used to make better decisions about how best to educate the students. As cited in the study, data driven decision making is an important strategy to have in the tool box, and all principals should consider teaching and learning as their primary focus. Therefore it is recommended that principals use formative data as a tool to assist them in making important decisions, and especially those that directly affect student achievement.

Academic focus: High expectations of the students

Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, and Javed (2009) described instructional leadership as consisting of principal behaviors that set high expectations and clear goals for students and staff. The participants all agreed that the primary feature that set School of Excellence apart from the traditional public schools was the high student expectations. From the beginning students are told and reminded on a daily basis that they will matriculate and graduate from college. The participants described the School of Excellence as a “No Excuses” school. All of the participants emphasized that high expectations of the students and the staff is the culture of the School of Excellence. Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, and Javed (2009) further reported that a teacher’s commitment to change within the instructional program was affected the most by leadership that gave direction and purpose, e.g. the purpose of the school is to educate all students at high levels. As

one example of high student academic expectations, the principals reported that they do not segregate student by ability, as they expect all students to perform at high levels of academic performance. The superintendent emphasized the high academic expectations for all students by citing that at the School of Excellence there is no tracking of students by ability level. He said that all students take Algebra in the eighth grade; all the students are enrolled in advanced classes; and all the students will graduate with at least one International Baccalaureate (IB) credit. Another example of the high academic expectations of the School of Excellence was that all students are expected to do at least one and a half hours of homework every night. The students are expected to complete the home work on time. No excuses. The superintendent reasoned that the School of Excellence had high expectations of their students because most students come to the School of Excellence with serious academic deficiencies. He explained that they need more time to accomplish the School of Excellence mission than just regular school day hours. The students needed to invest more time in order to catch up. He explained, "That is why we insist on home work every night." He said, "If you add up the hours of after school academic time over the course of a year, I would say it would add up to thousands of hours. We think that it is very significant." In the event that a student does not complete his or her homework, the School of Excellence has an after-school program specifically designed to assist students with their homework assignment. Any student who does not complete the homework assigned was required to participate in the after school program. The superintendent explained the rationale for the strict homework policy. He reasoned that to begin with, all the School of Excellence students are expected to excel academically. The second reason he cited was the fact that most of the students that the School of Excellence serves have serious academic deficiencies when they enroll in the School of Excellence, and need more time than the regular school day to strengthen their academic foundation. Third he said, "We believe that these high expectations will ultimately result in college success." DiPaola and Hoy (2008) described effective instructional leadership as, "Individuals who set high expectations for all students, used assessment data to support student success, kept the focus on the students, and addressed barriers to learning" (p. 8).

Staffing Tendencies: Recruitment of staff

The superintendent of the School of Excellence reported that recruiting quality staff was a critical component of their business model. He reported that the School of Excellence has a recruiting department whose function it is to find individuals who meet their recruiting criteria in

order to fill their ranks. He described that once a candidate is identified as a potential recruit, the recruiting becomes deliberate and rigorous. Hoy and Hoy (2009) argued that teacher quality is the single biggest school level factor related to the academic success or failure of students in high poverty schools. However, they imagined, principals are responsible for developing the school climate that supports the very best instructional practices. All the participants in this study described a deliberate recruiting process that centered mostly on an individual's track record of success. In one case the recruiting process included on-going communication and dialogue that lasted more than two years. In another case the recruitment of one of the principals lasted almost one year and included constant communication that included several face to face in-formal interviews over coffee or lunch. Additionally, this process included the School of Excellence staff observing the potential candidate in her place of employment. Amrein-Beardsley (2007) cited that the factor most likely to encourage teachers to work in a school would be the quality of the principal. The extent to which the principal would be caring, supportive, open-minded, committed to student learning, knowledgeable, and "highly qualified" mattered most. The second most persuasive recruitment strategy was an offer of a higher salary, promotion, or increased benefit. In every case in this study, the candidates were offered a better salary and benefits program than was provided at their previous place of employment. All reported that included in their benefits program was a potential for performance related bonuses. Additionally, the superintendent cited the salary structure flexibility and bonuses as a significant recruiting tool. Wilson (2011) contended that the quality of teaching in a school is directly related to the quality of the teachers and the principal. Thus, in recruiting potential principals and administrators, it is recommended that district Human Resources (HR) departments exercise a deliberate recruitment process that includes rigorous review of an individual's track record in addition to the traditional public schools practice of reference checks. A second recommendation, in addition to this rigorous review of potential candidates, is that HR should venture out into the field and invite/attract and persuade skilled individuals to apply. A third recommendation to recruit high quality candidates is to offer salary and benefits incentives. All the study participants reported that traditional public schools had rigid salary schedules that were based on the number of years of experience in Education. All other factors were disregarded. Thus, in addition to years of experience, salary schedule flexibility and benefits incentives should be considered and equitably

distributed based on the candidate's awards, degrees, and other qualifications related to administrative expertise and should reflect the level of need found in the district.

Staffing Tendencies: Autonomy to hire staff

More than a quarter century ago, Ernest Boyer, an influential figure in the advancement of public education and teacher training, observed,

When you talk about school improvement, you are talking about people improvement. That is the only way to improve schools, unless you mean painting buildings and fixing floors....The school is people, so when we talk about excellence or improvement or progress, we are really talking about the people who make up the building (Dufour & Marzano, 2011, p. 15).

Two meta-analyses of research on the factors that impact student achievement found that the quality of instruction students receive in their classrooms was the most important variable in student achievement. Those same studies also noted the wide disparity in the quality of instruction within the same school (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). The principals reported that after the talent recruiters screened the applicants, they were free to interview and hire the staff they felt was the best fit for their campus. All of the principals in the study cited that the autonomy granted to them to hire teachers and staff was the single biggest difference between the School of Excellence and traditional public schools. Furthermore, all of the participants indicated that they could not recall a single incident of headquarter interference during the hiring process of staff for their campuses. On the other hand, three of the participants in the study indicated that the lack of autonomy in traditional public schools was the primary reason for leaving traditional public schools. Therefore, a first recommendation is for central administration human resources (HR) departments to actively search for talent. Rather than just serve as an application depot of interested applicants, human resources should actively recruit and screen for talented candidates. To ensure system-wide efficiency and consistency, a second recommendation is that all potential candidates for employment must go through the central office screening process. As cited in this study, the teacher is one important variable in student achievement (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Thus, a final recommendation is for superintendents of traditional public

schools agree as a non-negotiable item with board members, that the campus principal has the final say the hiring of their classroom teachers.

Staffing Tendencies: Non-renewal of staff

All principal participants agreed that terminating staff at the School of Excellence was a much simpler process than in traditional public schools. The primary reason that non-renewal of staff was an easier process was that charter schools do not offer contracts. Even so, the participants reported that, before non-renewal of an under-performing employee, they would generally put the employee in a performance improvement plan along with specific objectives and goals that they had to meet. All of the participants agreed that the School of Excellence spent significant resources on training and preparing teachers for the instructional rigor of the classroom. Thus, all of the participants reported that they provided support in the form of coaching, mentoring, and constructive feedback before they made a decision of non-renewal of a teacher. All of the principal participants that non-renewed staff, reported that headquarters supported their decision in every case. The participants stated that the autonomy to non-renew staff was a significant component in their ability to lead. As cited in this study, the teacher was the single most important variable in student achievement (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Therefore, the first recommendation is for the district to have policies that make the process of non-renewal underperforming staff easier. A second recommendation is for central administration to provide all necessary support in such recommendations. A third recommendation is for the principal to focus on all new teachers, and to start documenting, beginning on the first day of school, teacher performance. If the principal observes potential problems, then the principal needs to provide needed support as soon as possible. A fourth recommendation is for the principal to evaluate all new teachers to the campus and all teachers that he or she perceives to be in need of improvement. If the principal fails to see progress, then the principal needs to place the teacher on a growth plan with specific and measurable goals and objectives. This action needs to happen as soon as possible. If the teacher fails to meet the goals and objectives, then the principal needs to recommend non-renewal.

Organizational level characteristics: Senior administrator visibility and feedback

Richard Dufour and Robert Marzano (2011) contended that creating conditions that foster academic achievement can be done with existing resources if schools and districts are willing to

change some of their traditional practices. As described under the theme of organizational level characteristics, the principal participants each described a significant difference between traditional public schools and the School of Excellence.

All of the participants reported that senior administrators, including the superintendent, were regular visitors to their campuses. At the same time, they reported that while employed at traditional public schools, central office staff visits to their campuses as a strategy for academic improvement were rare. All reported never to have seen the superintendent visit the campus for the purpose of a walkthrough and subsequent feedback as a strategy for academic improvement. Lezotte (2008) argued that the principal and his staff could help a school improve student achievement, but they could not sustain the improvement or survive the departure of key leaders without the support of the district and a commitment at that level to promote effective schooling practices (as cited in Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Buckingham (2005) concluded that one thing all leaders must remember to be effective is the importance of clarity in their communication. He cited that effective district leaders recognize the importance of ongoing communication, and they engage in conversations with stakeholders about all things related to school improvement. Effective school leaders are eager to initiate dialogue, and develop formal and informal strategies for soliciting the perspective of others. Thus, regular campus visits by central office staff is a significant strategy for academic improvement (Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Also, as cited above, it is of critical importance for the superintendent to visit campuses on a regular basis and provide constructive feedback on his or her observations. The visits should focus on what is happening in the classroom and conversations and feedback should be on data as well as on the district's mission and goals and not on individuals or personalities. Thus, based on the evidence cited in this study, it is recommended that the superintendent and central office administrative staff prioritize campus visits for the purpose of providing clarity in communications and provide needed support of the campus' goals and objectives. These regularly scheduled campus visitations by senior administrators as a strategy for academic improvement should be categorized as a top priority.

Organizational level characteristics: Staff Accountability and expectations

All participants described the School of Excellence culture as a "no excuses" culture of accountability and expectations. Even though the principal participants described a high degree of autonomy to lead their campuses, they all agreed that they were held accountable for student

achievement results. As cited in this study, all of the principals explained that they were held to high expectations, and that senior leadership expected them to reach the bar that was set for them without excuses. Furthermore, all the principals had previous experience working in traditional public schools and agreed that the sense of urgency and high expectations, characteristic of the School of Excellence, was absent in traditional public schools. Although the senior leadership in the School of Excellence was willing to compromise on some aspects of the job, there was little or no compromise on student academic achievement. Thus, it is important that the superintendent and central office administrative staff clarify, to the campus principal, what is non-negotiable. Therefore, a recommendation is that the superintendent would expect the building principals to accept responsibility for the success or failure of their schools and, in return, would provide principals with some flexibility. However, the principals are also expected to lead within the parameters established by the district's goals, such as academic achievement as a non-negotiable (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). To improve the clarity and specificity of expectations, a second recommendation is that central office leadership would work with the principals to identify specific instructional practices. These practices, such as data-driven decision-making and data conversations, would be visible at each school. A third recommendation is that central office leaders, including the superintendent, must clarify expectations and monitor, through regular campus visitations, the degree to which the priorities are understood and acted upon (Fullan, 2010).

Organizational level characteristics: Lack of School board politics

Fusarelli and Peterson (2002) wrote, "Research literature focused on district leadership indicates that the relationship between the superintendent and the board of education has a significant impact on the quality of a district's educational program" (p. 282) (as cited in Moody, 2011). Furthermore, The Center for Public Education (2011) concluded that school districts with a strong board/superintendent relationship had greater student achievement as measured by dropout rates, the percentage of students going to college, and aptitude test scores. As cited in this study, three of the four principal participants opted out of traditional public schools because of the political nature of their working environment. Board politics, as cited by the principal participants, often influenced the campus level decision making process. The principal participants, on the other hand, reported that board politics or the influence of the board members relative to their decision making was non-existent at the School of Excellence. Therefore, it

recommended that the superintendent strive to develop a relationship of trust with the board of trustees. It is vital that boards and superintendents see themselves as a team and not separate entities. Thus, one of the superintendent's initial team development initiatives should be to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of their respective positions (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The superintendent could enlist the services of an educational service center to assist with this activity. The focus of this team building activity should be to: a) Create a trusting and collaborative relationship between the board and the superintendent; b) Creation by the board of conditions and organizational structures that allow the superintendent to function as superintendent and instructional leader of the district; c) Effective communication between the board president and the superintendent and among the board members (The Center for Public Education, 2011). Finally, the superintendent and the board of trustees should recognize that team building and effective communication is a continuous and on-going process

Conclusion

The Superintendent and four principals in one exemplary public charter school system had previous work experience in traditional public schools agreed that their charter school practices that had contributed to the popularity and success. All of the principals interviewed for the study were in agreement that there were practices in their charter setting that were either non-existent or were not a priority in a traditional public schools setting

The goal of the study was not to replace traditional public school practices with charter school practices, but rather to emulate, in a traditional public school setting, the charter school practices that have contributed to the popularity and success as defined by the Texas Education Agency. These factors have also been identified in studies found in literature as essential components to sound instructional programming.

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How Project-Based Learning is Helping Change the
Status Quo

Scott Wurdinger

Professor, Experiential Learning and Leadership Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Department of Educational Leadership

scott.wurdinger@mnsu.edu

Author Note

Scott Wurdinger is a professor of experiential education and leadership studies at Minnesota State University in Mankato, and currently serves as the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program Coordinator. His research interests focus on how experiential learning develops life skills such as problem-solving and creativity. His most recent book is *The Power of Project-Based Learning: Helping Students Develop Important Life Skills* published by Rowman and Littlefield.

Abstract

Project-based learning is a teaching approach that continues to gain traction in high schools and universities. This approach allows students to create and complete projects that are relevant and meaningful to them. Projects should be complex enough so that students undergo a series of trial and error episodes which allows them to learn important life skills such as problem-solving and creativity. This approach is helping change the status quo in education because rigor is not based on the ability to memorize information for tests, but instead focuses on a more meaningful learning theory that includes testing ideas against reality to determine their worth. This article addresses research studies that support the project-based learning process, but it also provides examples of how graduates from a university in Minnesota have implemented this approach to improve professional practice.

Keywords: project-based learning, experiential learning, learning theories, life skills, status quo, competency-based education, charter schools

“Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth”

---Albert Einstein

Academic success in public schools is primarily based on how well students perform on standardized tests. It is similar in higher education in that the most heavily used assessment by instructors is the multiple-choice test (Tarun & Krueger, 2016).

Kohn was cited in an article published in the *Washington Post* stating, “Multiple-choice tests are uniquely flawed as assessments for exactly the same reason that multiple-choice standardized tests are: They are meant to trick students who understand the concepts into picking the wrong answer, and they don’t allow kids to generate, or even explain, their responses” (Strauss, 2014, p. 2).

In addition, Engle (2015) reviewed more than 300 studies of K-12 academic tests and discovered that, “most tests used to evaluate students, teachers, and school districts predict almost nothing except the likelihood of achieving similar scores on subsequent tests” (p.1).

Students go from one class to the next listening to teachers give them instructions on assignments and telling them what they need to memorize for these tests. By the time students graduate they are quite adept at memorizing information and taking instructions from their instructors.

In these environments students are passive learners and are not allowed to actively engage in their learning. They are not given the freedom to explore their own interests or learn about things that are relevant and meaningful to their lives. This type of learning environment is not only boring, but it does not allow students to take control of their learning.

Education moves students from the same grade level, through the same curriculum, at the same pace, taking the same tests, at the same time. The status quo in education has existed for years. Layers of bureaucracy have been created with the goal of increasing test scores, but this is not how students, or for that matter anyone, likes to learn.

Many students in traditional public high schools are bored every day in school because the material is uninteresting and not relevant and because there is a lack of interaction between teachers and students (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). At the university level, one of the primary reasons why students drop out is because of poor or indifferent teaching (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999, p.40).

This suggests that the status quo is being maintained and students continue to be the recipients of a passive learning environment when they should be given the freedom to take control of their own learning. To move away from the status quo, which relies on lecture as the main teaching method and memorization as the dominant learning process, educators need to use new teaching methods that engage students in their learning.

Project-based learning (PBL) is a teaching method that allows students to apply what they are learning and are assessed by demonstrating their knowledge. Students in PBL programs, schools, and courses demonstrate what they know through designing and creating projects, which they often present to their peers, and are evaluated with performance-based assessments. It has been defined as

a teaching method where teachers guide students through a problem-solving process which includes identifying a problem, developing a plan, testing the plan against reality, and reflecting on the plan while in the process of designing and completing a project (Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg, & Bezon, 2007, p. 151).

This process allows students to learn content related to their projects, but it also allows them to learn life skills like creativity and perseverance. Since 1992 reports and research studies have identified specific skills such as, problem solving, critical thinking, adaptability, creativity, time management, and collaboration that employers desire but are lacking in their young new hires (SCANS, 1992; Wagner, 2008; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). PBL allows students to learn life skills that they can carry with them long after they graduate from school (Meyer & Wurdinger, 2016).

This article will discuss several research studies that support the project-based learning process, as well theoretical constructs that undergird this approach to teaching and learning. The article will close with several examples of how individuals are implementing this process to improve professional practice in both high school and higher education settings.

Multiple research studies suggest that when students are engaged in creating and completing projects they learn important life skills such as problem solving, time management, responsibility, and collaboration. (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991; Levine, 2002; Newell, 2003; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Grant & Branch, 2005; Larmer,

Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015; Wurdinger, 2016). In addition, Krauss and Boss (2013, p. 18) identified a number of skills that students learn while engaged in PBL that include flexibility, organization, self-control, task initiation, time management, and metacognition. Increasingly, K-12 teachers around the world are beginning to use this method because they know it challenges students on an individual level, motivating and inspiring them by tapping into their own learning styles (Bender, 2012).

Other researchers have analyzed teacher acceptance, student motivation, and student achievement, and all have come to the conclusion that it is an effective teaching methodology. An earlier study conducted by Barron, Schwartz, Vye, Moore, Petrosino, Zech, and Bransford (1998) discovered that academic performance and motivation are improved when using project based learning. In their comprehensive study, they had students create blueprints of chairs and playhouses, and then present these drawings to their classmates. They measured low, average, and high achieving students and found that all three groups had significant improvements in their ability to understand difficult math concepts after using the project method. This approach to learning not only had a significant impact on their comprehension, but it also had a positive impact on their motivation. Fifty percent of the students interviewed about their experience specifically mentioned that the projects were a very important part of their school year (p. 305).

A year after the Barron et. al. study, Cornell and Clarke (1999) conducted an extensive study on standards based teaching and learning for the primary purpose of moving teachers away from a teacher directed lecture format towards a student-centered format where students initiated and completed projects. They found that students were more engaged when involved in project based learning because it gave them an opportunity to work with other students while doing hands-on activities, which provided them with a more self-directed learning environment. Even lower performing students enjoyed the process because it not only gave them an opportunity to discover unique skills necessary to complete projects, but allowed them to progress at their own pace.

However, two of the paradoxes they discovered, "less teacher talk requires more teacher time" and "free-ranging self-directed inquiry depends on a tight design structure," indicate that even though motivation and student learning were enhanced through the project based learning process, it requires more work for teachers when designing projects and preparing lessons (Cornell & Clarke, 1999, p. 94). Teachers commented that the initial phase of the project based

learning process required a fair amount of planning time; however once established, they were able to focus more on guiding students through the process.

Liu and Hsiao (2002, p. 311) conducted a research study on project based learning with middle school students and found that it increased their "learning of design knowledge, their cognitive strategy use, and their motivation toward learning." In this study students assumed the roles of researcher, graphic artist, programmer, project manager, and audio/visual specialist and worked together to complete multimedia presentations. Because students were directly involved in the process they were able to understand and retain the information they were using while creating and designing their multimedia presentation. Their research clearly indicates that project based learning has the potential to enhance both student motivation and performance in the classroom. These two authors sum up their research by claiming that students showed "substantial gains in their abilities to understand, use, and present geometric concepts" (p. 303).

These research studies suggest that project based learning is effective with students because it taps into their interests and allows them to create projects that result in meaningful learning experiences. It is one approach to teaching that inspires students to learn and provides them with relevant problems to solve.

Imagine if students could work on projects in all their classes, and ask as many questions as they like while practicing skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, time management, and responsibility. According to Pearlman (2009), students need a different set of skills that include: learning and thinking skills, technology literacy skills, and life skills in order to compete in the future, and that these skills can best be obtained through project based learning. Educators should give students opportunities to participate in project based learning so they can practice these skills

Although project based learning is a more intensive learning process that requires more time to complete projects, it allows for deeper learning, which inspires and motivates students. The learning is rich. Students learn useful skills that they carry with them after they graduate, which have a lasting effect on their lives. Project based learning allows students to be actively involved in the learning process so they can learn different life skills.

Project based learning allows students to think creatively, solve problems, learn important life skills, and work with their hands creating meaningful projects. This process of

learning promotes creative thinkers, and motivates students to learn. It works and is being used by charter schools all across the country (Martinez & McGrath, 2014; Wurdinger, 2016).

Organizations such as the Buck Institute for Education (BIE) and Edutopia provide numerous resources that help educators integrate PBL into their curriculums. Much of their focus is on how to integrate PBL into mainstream public schools that are bound to the traditional structures such as, compartmentalized subject matter, shorter class periods, and student achievement that is based on test scores. While PBL is definitely a step in the right direction, these structures often promote a teacher directed approach where the teacher determines what projects students will complete, which does not necessarily promote student motivation or interest.

The Learning Theory Behind PBL

The PBL learning process results in problem solving, mastery and competency. Rigor is not defined by one's ability to memorize information, but by one's ability to apply it, ideally in real world situations.

Problem-solving is the learning process that results from using PBL and this process is much more complex and time consuming than learning how to memorize information. It requires students to undergo multiple trial and error episodes in which failure is an inherent part of the process.

Complex projects require solving multiple problems that crop up during the process of completing them. The learning theory that occurs with project-based learning stems from Dewey's (1938) "pattern of inquiry." Dewey's pattern of inquiry consists of six steps. His explanation of this theory, however, is similar to the scientific method (pp. 101-119). He explained that a relevant problem causes perplexity and desire to find an answer (step one), which is then followed by creating a plan (step two), testing the plan against reality (step three), and reflecting on its worth (step four). The testing phase of this process is what makes learning experiential. This type of learning is especially effective when students create plans to solve problems and then test them in real world settings to determine their worth.

For example, conducting a restoration project for a local hiking trail entails identifying where trail erosion is occurring, creating a plan to determine how eroding sections will be restored, determining what types of material will be needed to restore the trail, and how to transport the material to the trail locations.

In addition, students will need to identify what tools and equipment will be needed to transport and move the construction materials, and determine the number of people needed to do the work. Questions and problems will crop up during the process of completing the project, which will require several trial and error attempts during each phase of the process before the project is completed.

When students are in the process of completing such a project they go through the process of identifying problems, developing plans, testing them against reality, and reflecting on the outcomes to determine their worth. This process places students in charge of their learning and challenges them cognitively as they complete the project and solve various problems they encounter along the way.

This process is time consuming, and requires a change in classroom culture, which is probably why educators shy away from using it. It is much easier to lecture and give students multiple-choice tests than to have them engage in lengthy projects that involve a complex problem-solving process.

Figure 1 shows how the learning theory behind PBL begins in the present and leads out into the future as students undergo multiple problem-solving episodes. They become discoverers of knowledge in this process and each cycle requires them to practice and learn skills such as problem solving, creativity, time management, responsibility, work ethic, and ultimately self-direction.

INSERT FIGURE 1

The skills learned from going through this process are critical, and are what the world demands of students after they graduate. They are the skills that help students learn self-confidence, which allows them to become self-directed learners controlling their own learning.

After having taught in higher education for 25 years it is my firm belief that when students are engaged in projects they become inspired and motivated to learn. Projects allow them to become engaged in their learning while practicing important life skills that they carry with them long after they graduate.

Two reasons why changing the status quo is necessary include: 1) students want to be engaged learners and take ownership of their learning, and 2) research shows that tests such as

the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and college entrance exams like ACT are not good predictors of success after graduation (Heath, 1994). Multiple research studies show how students like to learn best, which is through active participation (Baeten, Dochy, Struyven, Parmentier, & Vanderbruggen, 2016; Baeten, Kyndt., Struyven, & Dochy, 2010; Beusaert, Segers, & Wiltink, 2013).

Letting Students Take Charge of Their Education

Educators have two choices when implementing PBL. They can choose what projects they will assign to their students or they can allow students to choose their own projects.

However, if educators truly want to liberate their students and allow them to take ownership of their learning, they should allow them to choose their own projects.

Implementing PBL with elementary school students may require teachers to identify two or three projects for their students, and then allow them to choose the one they like best. In addition, these educators will need to create more structure for their students so they stay focused on the task at hand.

PBL works well with students that have a grasp of their interests and passions. Allowing students to choose their own projects is beneficial when using this teaching approach because when students spend time cultivating ideas, plans, and implementing strategies they become extremely invested in their projects.

When students feel a sense of ownership they tend to follow through and complete their projects. Students tend to be not only intellectually invested, but emotionally invested in them because they stem from their own interests and are relevant to their lives.

Coopersmith's (1967) seminal research on self-esteem found that students are more apt to develop healthy attitudes of self-worth if they acquire four basic attributes: Significance, competence, power, and virtue. Significance is about understanding that they are important to the world; competence is about being good at something; power is about understanding that they have influence on decisions; and virtue is about evaluating and judging themselves and the quality of things like their projects.

PBL allows students to learn these important attributes because it places them in the center of their learning. When students are involved with complex projects they practice these skills and learn through their mistakes. Here are several examples how students took their learning into their own hands and became change agents in education after they graduated.

From Students to Leaders

One graduate program for future educators at a university in Minnesota implements PBL in most of its courses. Courses in this program provide students with a series of readings that provide students with the theories and practices of PBL. Students then venture out into the community to discuss possible projects with local organizations.

For example, one group of students did a service project by reaching out to the director of a nature center located near the university and met with her to discuss potential projects. The center provides programming for the local school district. After the meeting, the college students broke into three small groups to discuss what projects they wanted to conduct and how they were going to do them.

One of the groups decided to paint a series of nature scenes on the walls of the center. Another group decided to construct a squirrel obstacle course that would require squirrels to climb up and cross a series of cables, ropes, and obstacles to reach the food, and the third group decided to create and distribute a flyer with information on how to deter whitetail deer from eating plants out of gardens. The nature center director explained that there was a healthy whitetail deer population living in the woods surrounding the center, and that people living nearby were complaining about the deer destroying their gardens.

The first group researched local plants and animals that school students might see while hiking on the nature trails surrounding the center. Then they determined what plants and animals they would include in their murals and where they would be placed on the walls. They drew sketches of how the paintings would look and picked out the corresponding paint colors. They spent numerous hours, many more than the course required, painting these murals.

The second group drew sketches of the obstacle course and determined what types and amounts of materials they would need to purchase to build the course. They went to a hardware store, bought all the materials, and began constructing the obstacle course.

The third group had to conduct some research about what relatively inexpensive options existed that would deter deer from eating common flowers and plants found in gardens in Southern Minnesota. They also spoke to some of the people living near these woods to discuss possible options. They created a list of ideas and designed a flyer to hand out to residents. Finally, they canvased neighborhoods near the center and handed out these flyers.

This took initiative and courage to reach out to a community organization and inquire about how they could help make the nature center a better facility for its student visitors. It also took courage to meet with some of the local people to ask them questions about what the deer were eating and how they might be able to help stop the problem.

These students took control of their learning and created meaningful projects that fulfilled a need in the community. They learned about the plants and animals in this area, but they also practiced skills like collaboration, communication, creativity, problem solving, and ultimately self-direction. When students are allowed the freedom to pursue their interests through projects they not only learn about the project, but they learn about themselves as well.

Their learning was assessed via their performance on both their projects and their project presentations, which they conducted at the end of the semester. In both cases it was obvious that they performed admirably. Students learn self-direction by being given the freedom to determine their own projects, and they learn valuable knowledge and skills while in the process of completing them.

Students need to learn these types of skills if they are going to help change the status quo in education. It is difficult for them to learn self-direction and courage when they are in an environment where the teachers control what they learn and how they learn it.

Many of the students that graduated from this program are now in leadership positions and are teaching others the importance of being courageous in their pursuit to change the status quo in education. One former student is now a lead teacher at a project-based learning charter school.

A lead teacher at this school does much more than just teach. This individual plays an important leadership role and provides the school with a variety of administrative duties. His leadership responsibilities include overseeing the budget, dealing with disciplinary issues, and training new teachers. His primary passion is teaching and helping students learn valuable life skills, but he also believes strongly in providing this school with these duties because he believes teachers should be in control of their own schools.

Teacher powered schools like his do not have one administrator such as a principal to oversee all the administrative services. These schools allow teachers to oversee these services, which empowers them to become leaders.

According to Berry and Farris-Berg (2016), “In teacher-powered schools, teams of teachers have secured autonomy to collaboratively design and lead many aspects of teaching and learning. Keeping students at the center of their decisions, they make choices about a wide array of factors, including the design of the instructional program and professional development, colleague selection, budgeting, and whether to give (and how much to count) district assessments” (p. 15).

Since beginning his teaching career at this school, he has helped shape a restorative justice program that focuses on the needs of the victims and offenders, as opposed to strictly punishing the offender. Students are in favor of this model because decision-making occurs within the entire learning community and helps students understand how their acts effect their peers.

He has also helped train a number of student teachers that had little understanding of how the project-based learning model operates or how the school functions as a teacher powered school. As time went by he has taken on more leadership responsibilities and has gained knowledge and understanding of how the entire school functions.

He has had an enormous impact on the school where numerous high school students graduated living successful lives. He has also had a huge impact on the other teachers he has trained and is spreading the theory and practices behind project-based learning. He is an innovative change agent that continues to make an impact on the charter school movement.

Another student that graduated from the Minnesota program is now a director of a teacher education program at a private college. She did her dissertation research on two project based learning schools and discovered that these students were excited and motivated about their learning. One reason was because these schools allowed their students to pursue projects that were of their own interest. Another reason was because their teachers cared about them and spent time with them discussing their growth. This former graduate student also found that students were not only learning academic content, but they were learning important life skills like collaboration, communication, and work ethic. Students at one of the schools said communication, time management, and self-direction were the skills they improved on the most; and at the other school, students said communication, collaboration, and self-direction were there most improved skills (Meyer & Wurdinger, 2016, p. 102).

This former student has now taken on a monumental task of implementing project-based learning throughout her entire teacher education department. She is encouraging all the teachers in the department to learn the theory and practices behind this approach so they can expose their students to this methodology.

This is a big step that will help bring about change in the status quo. When university faculty instruct their teacher candidates the theory and practices of project-based learning, and use it in their own classrooms, students tend to implement it because they often teach the way in which they were taught.

Another former graduate from the Minnesota program is currently the co-director of a National charter school organization called EdVisions that helps replicate project-based learning in schools across the country. This individual has helped implement four key design essentials at numerous schools. These design essentials include:

- Small Learning Communities
- Personalized Learning through Self-Directed Project learning
- Authentic Assessments
- Teacher Ownership/Democratic Governance (EdVisions Website).

He helps schools implement these strategies with the intention of helping students become self-directed learners. He also coaches schools on how to use Project Foundry, an assessment tool that helps students and teachers track a student's progress in the project-based learning process.

He encourages and trains schools to become teacher powered schools that use a democratic process. Teachers in these schools are in control of what happens and do not have administrators telling them what to do. Teachers in these schools control their budgets and negotiate their own salaries.

This former student has now become one of the leaders in the project-based learning charter school movement. He is changing the status quo by encouraging teachers to become courageous educators.

Courage is required to make changes throughout the entire education system from Kindergarten all the way through doctoral education. The former students mentioned previously are change agents in the process of helping transform the way educators teach their classes. It is

a slow process, but as more courageous educators inspire others to use PBL in their classes, the status quo will change.

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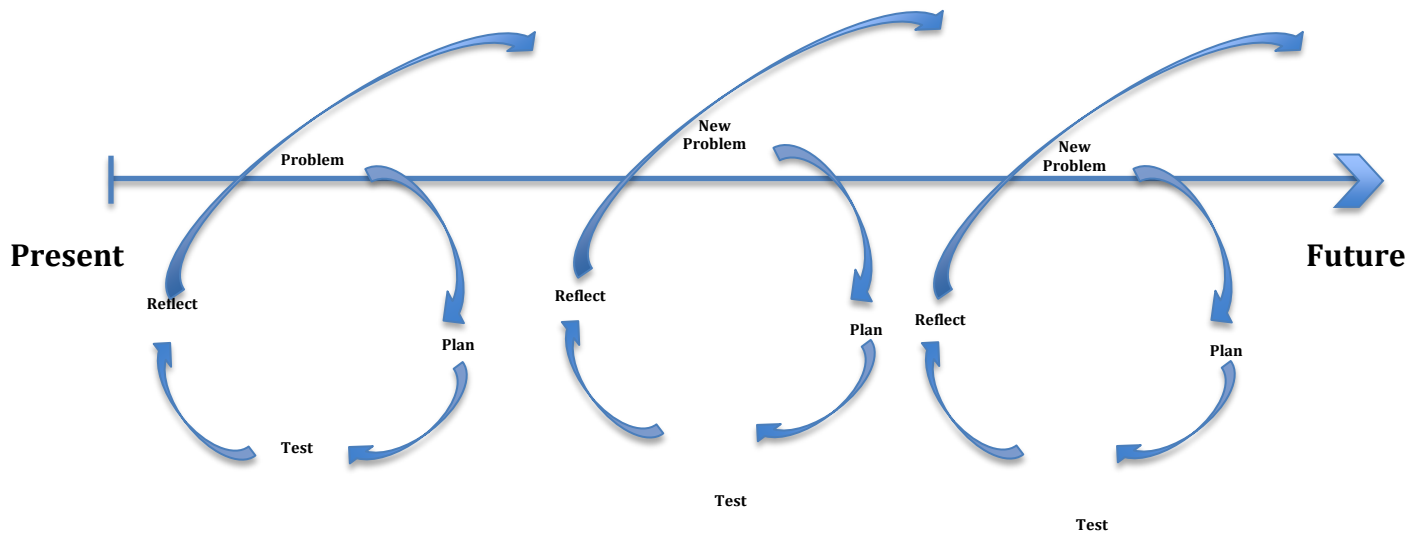
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Figure 1: The learning theory behind PBL



Learning Outcomes:
Problem Solving
Communication
Creativity
Responsibility
Self-Direction
Time Management
Collaboration
Work Ethic

A Case Study of Bullying in an Urban Charter School

Amy Orange

University of Houston Clear Lake

Antonio Corrales

University of Houston Clear Lake

Author Notes:

Amy Orange is an Assistant Professor in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Houston-Clear Lake where she teaches courses in qualitative research methods and research design. Prior to her appointment at UHCL, Dr. Orange taught in California public schools. . She has published articles on early childhood education, workplace bullying in schools, high-stakes testing and accountability in K-12 education, and qualitative methodology. She is a senior editor for *The Qualitative Report*, a peer-reviewed journal, and has also served as a peer reviewer for conference proposals and journal manuscripts.

Antonio Corrales is a full-time professor in Educational Leadership at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. He has several years of experience in providing managerial leadership and administrative support to various departments in a variety of school districts and organizations serving in executive and administrative positions at the district and campus level, as well as management of multimillion-dollar projects for multinational companies. His research focuses on school turnaround and multicultural issues in education. Email: corrales@uhcl.edu

Abstract

Publically funded charter schools are becoming a feasible option for parents and students in the U.S. during the past years. Research shows that charter schools tend to operate under similar characteristics and systems than small schools, and that small schools tend to be more effective on implementing educational programs than larger ones, especially when it comes to bullying. Recent years have shown a considerable surge in the nationwide debate in regards to bullying on public schools and the lack of effectiveness within educational programs to address the issue. The purpose of the study was to determine the prevalence of bullying and the effectiveness of school staff in decreasing bullying among middle and high school minority students attending an urban charter school. Student, parent, and staff climate surveys, interviews, and focus groups were implemented in an urban kinder through 11th grade charter school at a large school district in the south of Texas. Results indicated that even when some cases of bullying were present within the student body, the internal dynamic and processes of the charter school allows it to effectively implement educational programs to address and prevent bullying. The results are congruent with research corroborating that small districts tend to be more effective than larger ones when implementing educational programs.

Introduction

Recent years have shown a considerable surge in the nationwide debate in regards to bullying in public schools (Ertesvag & Roland, 2014). Even when educators have elevated their level of awareness about this topic by proactively trying to implement anti-bullying initiatives in the schools, the effectiveness of these programs seems insufficient based on the recent increase of reported bullying cases across the U.S. (Pister, 2014; McCormac, 2014). The National Crime Victimization Survey determined that 20.8% of students between ages of 12 and 18 reported being bullied at school, while 11.5% reported being cyberbullied (NCES, 2016). Studies show that both individuals who are bullied and individuals who bully may suffer long-term consequences (Mundbjerg, Nielsen, & Simonsen, 2012; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015). This reality has transformed this issue into one of the biggest health risks to children, youth, and young adults in the U.S. (American Educational Research Association, 2013).

When analyzing the specific factors causing bullying, lack of diversity acceptance and awareness seems to be the primary reason for bullying among students (Gage, Prykanowski, & Larson, 2014; Pritchard, 2013). Protective factors also include: a safe environment (Cornell & Bradshaw, 2015), character education (Harlow & Roberts, 2010) and attending a school where students possess strong social-emotional skills (Gower, McMorris, & Eisneberg, 2015). In that direction, investing in educational programs providing specific tools for students to increase their level of acceptance among each other and elevate knowledge on diversity seems to positively impact academic achievement (Bickley-Green, 2007; Haner, Pepler, Cummings & Rubin-Vaughan, 2009; Marshall, 2014). These educational programs may be developed and implemented within a multidisciplinary team by applying research-based practices to enhance human capacity at all levels (Gower, McMorris, & Eisneberg, 2015). This process may occur by promoting the delivery of curriculum and instruction to increase child growth and development as well as student academic performance quickly and effectively (Marshall, 2014).

Bullying has become a prevalent and common social phenomenon (Ertesvag & Roland, 2014). Recent studies show that both individuals who are being bullied and individuals who bully suffer in terms of long-term results such as unemployment, incarcerations, and psychological struggles (Mundbjerg, Nielsen, & Simonsen, 2012). According to the National

Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2013, almost 1 in 3 students (27.8%) report being bullied during the school year.

At the same time, the utilization of technology to bully, known as cyberbullying, has provided additional components to the problem by making it more complex, and even more difficult to delineate (Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015). There is a relationship between online bullying and traditional bullying; students who are bullied at school also tend to be bullied online and students who bully at school tend to bully online as well (Kowalski & Limber, 2013).

Publically funded charter schools have become a valuable and feasible educational venue for students during past years (Chabrier, Cohodes, & Oreopoulos, 2016). Charter schools are increasingly prevalent within the U.S educational system with more than 7,000 charter schools and three million students enrolled across the nation; these statistics represent more than five percent of all public elementary and secondary students in the country (NCES, 2015). Most of the current research about charter schools has been focused on comparing charter schools to traditional public schools in terms of provided services (Kelly & Loveless, 2012). Research on bullying in charter schools is very limited, with a single study focused on the bullying among deaf students and their hearing peers at two charter schools (Bauman & Pero, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to determine student and staff perceptions of: 1) the prevalence of bullying at YSA; 2) the effectiveness of school staff in addressing bullying; and 3) the student-teacher relationships among middle and high school minority students attending an urban charter school.

Review of the Literature

In 2016, the National Crime Victimization Survey determined that 20.8% of students between ages of 12 and 18 reported being bullied at school, while 11.5% reported being cyberbullied anywhere (NCES, 2016). This reality has transformed this issue into one of the biggest health risks to children, youth, and young adults in the U.S. (American Educational Research Association, 2013). In fact, research shows that being bullied has equal or worst effects on young adults' mental health than being physically abused (Lereya, Copeland, Costello, & Wolke, 2015). Students who experience bullying are at considerable higher risk for depression, anxiety, sleep difficulties, and lack of academic performance (Center for Disease Control, 2012).

Impact of Bullying on Academic Performance

Bullying is considered an attack to a person's character by implementing constant and premeditated usage and influence of power. Bullying can be provided within a variety of forms: physical hostility such as hitting and pushing, as well as vocal belligerence, such as name calling (Espelage, 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Bullying can transpire through social or interpersonal dynamics by excluding victims by peers or exposing them to embarrassment (McCormac, 2014). Bullying can materialize within different levels: mild, moderate, and severe, and the process can be direct or digital, currently known as cyberbullying, such as text messages, social media, and websites (Mundbjerg, Nielsen, & Simonsen, 2012).

The occurrence of bullying is common across grades and all schools in the U.S, and it is also present within a variety of genders, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic status (Gage, Prykanowski, and Larson, 2014). Depending on the way bullying is defined by school district policies and processed by school administrators, the number of students involved in reported bullying events varies (Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2012). Research portrays that a similar dynamic occurs with those students confessing bullying their peers (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). It seems that bullying impacts the majority of students in one way or another within the school system, specifically when bearing in mind the different roles that the dynamic may imply: students being passive witnesses, targets, and provokers (Gage, Prykanowski, and Larson, 2014).

Students who experienced bullying tend to develop higher rates of anxiety, despair, physical health problems, and social skills issues and these difficulties can be permanent within time (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007; Espelage, Low, & De La Rue, 2012; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011). Bullying victims are less likely to be actively involved in school activities, and their general academic performance tend to deteriorate (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Robers et al., 2012). At the secondary levels, where bullying and sarcasm are constant, students are less active in school initiatives, low perform academically, and are at risk to dropout (Espelage, 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2008; Pister, 2014; McCormac, 2014).

Students actively involved in bullying have a tendency to be expelled and be exposed to delinquent activities, as well as developing illegal behaviors and social instability in adulthood (Bender & Losel, 2011; Ttofi et al., 2011). Students who are bullied but also engage in bullying as aggressors have more negative outcomes than students in bully- only or victim-only groups

(Ttofi et al., 2011). Cyberbullied students tend to develop similar negative consequences to those experienced by traditional bullying, including hopelessness, poor student achievement, and behavioral issues (McCormac, 2014). Cyberbullying may increase suicidal tendencies, and students with constant suicidal thoughts are more likely to commit suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010).

Charter Schools, Small Schools, and Best Practices

In a study examining 113 charter schools and the potential impact of lottery systems to select students, attendance rate, and student achievement, Chabrier, Cohodes, and Oreopoulos (2016) found that on average students enrolled at one of these schools each year increased math scores by 0.08 standard deviations and English/language arts scores by 0.04 standard deviations. The research determined that the increments on student performance were a consequence of specific instructional tools directed towards decreasing bullying and creating a more positive general instructional environment. These initiatives are mostly applicable within charter school and small school settings such as “No Excuses” attitude towards students, even within economically disadvantaged ones. The study creates parallelisms between charter school common practices and establishing a positive school climate.

Publically funded charter schools and their capability to increase student achievement has been scrutinized significantly during the past years (Chabrier, Cohodes, & Oreopoulos, 2016). Publically funded charter schools are subjected to standardized testing and state legislation similarly to any other regular public school, even when charter schools tend to have a higher level of freedom in terms of curriculum, finance, human resources, and general operations (Cohodes, 2016). A clear example is that charter schools have to comply with all the routine state rules and protocols to include improvement plans (Fryer, 2014). Considering that charter schools are growing at a fast pace within the United States (U.S.) during the past years by representing approximately five percent of all public elementary and secondary students in the country (Mills, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015), and bearing in mind that during 2014 approximately three percent of all charter schools were closed (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015), it is critical for school leaders and policy makers to find instructional initiatives to establish a positive school climate and culture and to assist charter schools in increasing their effectiveness in terms of academic performance and general

operations. More specifically, promoting initiatives to combat bullying in schools may contribute with this general premise.

Ready, Lee, and Welner (2004) conducted research looking to summarize current studies in regards to educational equity and school organization, mainly focalizing the analysis on school size and school overcrowding. The study found that high schools tend to be larger than their ideal size, which may restrict teachers' ability of getting to know their students in depth. Larger high schools may have difficulties creating positive school climate by promoting educational programs. Additionally, it was also found that larger high schools may affect economically disadvantaged students the most by establishing educational barriers to acquiring knowledge and promoting a positive school climate.

Trying to analyze the impact of school size on student achievement, Egalite and Kisida (2013) studied the academic behavior of one million students in four states representing a variety of geographic regions across the U.S. This study analyzed how student achievement varied according to schools' different sizes from grades 2-10 between years 2007 to 2011 and found that large schools have a negative effect on school climate and as a consequence on student achievement, specifically in reading and math predominantly for grades 6-10. Considering the necessary resources to establish academic programs and curriculum to promote student achievement in reading and mathematics within different schools' sizes, the conclusions of this research created a clear relationship between positive school climate through educational initiatives in small districts and schools.

Theoretical Framework

Baldry and Farrington (2005) studied risk factors influencing harassment and bullying by considering interpersonal and environmental contexts. The study reveals that factors linked to abuse and bullying may simultaneously happen at multiple levels of the social-ecological domains. Swearer and Espelage (2011) explain that the social-ecological dynamic may be critical to understand the occurrence of bullying and victimization. This complex process occurs between the individual, the consequential conduct, social-environment circumstances such as relatives, friends, educational and community settings. In general, these factors must be studied jointly when researching the dynamic between victimization and bullying.

Moffitt and Caspi (2001) explained that some adolescents face a variety of issues in terms of behaviors that could potentially prompt them to victimization and bullying, while others may

be better equipped to confront social dynamics, including bullying, by developing certain social skills during early ages. According to Bender (2010) adolescences may experience multifaceted developmental trails such as unhappiness, nervousness, school dropouts, and student performance. Sroufe and Rutter (1984) established that developmental psychopathology structures, to include behavioral anomalies, victimization, and bullying, reinforce one another. Bonnano and Hymel (2010) explain that an approach to understand the dynamic between psychopathology structures is to study mediators and moderators such as problem solving skills, traumatic stress, student achievement, and school dropouts. These mediators and moderators could act as conductors to relate victimization and bullying.

Finally, Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2012) analyzed the way that educators deal with stress by studying factors such as enthusiasm, engagement, and commitment to educate. Research shows that the dynamic between educators' low levels of stress and elevated self-efficacy tend to increase academic achievement and student self-efficacy. In that direction, elements such as teamwork, access to educational programs and resources, decision making empowerment, and level of commitment tend to positively influence the general learning environment and the educators' perception in terms of workload and level of influence within educational programs.

Methods

Site and Participant Selection

A sample of students, teachers, and administrators was drawn from a small charter school district in a large city in Texas. The school had 478 students kindergarten through 11th grade. The student demographics were 78% African American, 10% American Indian or Alaska Native, 7% Hispanic, 4% White, and 1% Other. According to the 2016-2017 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPER) (Texas Education Agency, 2016), the district received an accountability rating of "met alternative standard." 83.9% of students were considered at risk of dropping out of school; the dropout rate was 1%. 0.6% of students were enrolled in bilingual and English language learning programs. The average teacher's salary was \$43,084, which is \$9,441 less than the state average, and teachers averaged 0.8 years of experience.

All middle and high school students and teachers and staff from Young Start Academy (YSA) were invited to participate in a survey regarding school climate and bullying. Staff and students also participated in focus groups or interviews. Only students who had parental consent

were selected for participation in focus groups. All participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence.

Instrumentation

To measure student, teacher, and staff perceptions of school climate, bullying, and academic expectations, we used the Secondary School Climate Survey (Cornell, Shuklan, & Konold, 2016) and the Authoritative School Climate Survey (Konold et al., 2014). The student version included scales on student support, disciplinary structure, academic expectations, student engagement, and peer victimization. Students were also asked about their grades, suspensions, educational goals, parental educational attainment, and demographic questions. The teacher/staff version had scales on student engagement, school disciplinary structure, teacher respect for students, student willingness to seek help from teachers, prevalence of teasing and bullying, safety and discipline, student aggression towards teachers, teacher reactions to aggression, and collegiality as well as demographic items. Participants rated most items using Likert scales ranging from 1-4 (*strongly disagree to strongly agree* or *never to more than once per week*).

Data Collection and Analysis

After IRB permission was granted, students completed the survey at school during a time selected by their teacher. Teachers and staff completed the surveys on their own time. All survey responses were anonymous. Students and staff took an electronic version of the survey; each version of the survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

School staff provided us with time for student focus groups and they selected the students for us, based on those who had parental permission to participate; a total of 42 middle and high school students participated in focus groups regarding school climate and bullying, which lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Most of the participants were African American and the groups were evenly divided by gender. However, the data we collected often lacked detail and we suspected that students were not comfortable sharing in a group setting. Sometimes when students spoke, their demeanors suggested that they did not take the questions seriously and that being in a group of their peers affected their honesty.

Seven one-on-one interviews with school staff, teachers, and administrators from YSA were also conducted, with each lasting from 20-45 minutes. The interviews focused on school climate, student bullying, and how YSA dealt with bullying on campus. With participant permission, all interviews were audio recorded.

Survey data were downloaded from Qualtrics and imported into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to analyze the data. The open-ended survey questions, focus group data, and interview data were imported into NVivo for analysis; we used an inductive analysis approach to obtain a more in-depth understanding of student and staff perceptions of bullying at YSA. Our coding process included both a priori and emergent codes. After coding was completed, we created a matrix to organize our codes into themes and to insure we had sufficient data to support each theme.

Results

Participant Demographics

One hundred and forty students and 46 staff/teachers responded to the survey. Of the student respondents, 58.5% were female and 41.5% were male. Regarding race/ethnicity, most (76.7%) of the student participants identified themselves as African American. The remainder identified as American Indian (10.53%), Hispanic (9.09%), Two or more races (6.77%), White (4.5%), and Asian (.75%). The majority of the students were economically disadvantaged (62.4%). About one-third (n=45) were considered English Language Learners yet, as stated above, less than 1% of students at YSA received ELL services; this is due to the flexibility of curriculum in a charter school.

Thirty-one females and 16 males took the staff survey. The majority (77.27%) were African American, 2.22% were Hispanic, 4.55% were White, 2.27% were Asian, and 6.82% identified as two or more races. Overall, few staff members had been involved in education for a long period of time; about 85% reported they had worked in the field for five years or less.

Prevalence of Bullying

Approximately 43% (n= 60) of students and 47% (n=22) of school staff felt bullying was a problem at YSA. However, only about 12% (n=17) of students reported that they had been bullied at school this year and 8.21% (n=11) reported being cyberbullied. About 10% of students reported that they had bullied others at school this year (n=15). However, these numbers do not align with the responses to the specific types of bullying. For instance, the most prominent bullying behavior involved being teased about clothing or physical appearance with 66.5% (n=93) of students and 57.8% of staff (n=27). Yet only 17 students responded that they had been bullied at school this year.

School staff often had different perceptions than students regarding the prevalence of bullying at YSA. For example, 26.16% (n= 37) of students agreed or strongly disagreed that students at YSA were teased or put down about their sexual orientation compared to 13.33% (n= 6) of staff. Students were also more likely to report being bullied because of their race or ethnicity (20.5%, n=29) compared to staff perceptions (17.7%, n=8). However, staff reported more teasing about sexual topics (28.89%, n= 13) compared to students (20.46%, n= 29). This difference could be due to participants' perceptions of what "counts" as teasing or bullying. Table 1 shows student and staff perceptions of the prevalence of certain bullying behaviors at YSA.

Insert Table 1

The qualitative data yielded similar results, with the majority of students reporting verbal bullying such as name calling and being teased about appearance. One male student stated, "I have been bullied at school before. I was bullied because people found it unusual that I had a huge forehead and decided to bash me about that feature." A female student shared, "I have been called Itchy and teased about my skin condition." A few male students mentioned physical bullying such as hitting and pushing. One male student commented, "I have been bullied by other kids putting there (sic) hands on me and they want to get mad when I put my hands back on them."

Some staff felt that bullying needed to be better addressed at YSA. One participant commented, "It is vital that students understand that bullying leads to violence, depression and even suicide." However, another commented, "There is no bullying at this school." Since both of these comments came from the surveys, these differences in opinion may be due to the position of the participant; the surveys were anonymous, so we do not know if the comments came from teachers, administrators, or other staff and therefore, we do not know the level of student contact these individuals may have had.

Others discussed the steps they took in their classrooms to prevent bullying. For example, in an interview, one teacher shared, "I was bullied as a child and I do not allow that in my

classroom. I try to show students better ways to interact when I see them being mean to each other.” She felt that by holding her students to high standards, they would rise to those and treat each other well.

Some teachers, staff, and students spoke about bullying at YSA and the steps taken to address it. One administrator commented that there had been problems with bullying in 7th grade, but “once we knew about it, we took care of it”. He said he and other administrators met with individual students in an attempt to address problems. During the focus group with the 7th graders, students acknowledged that bullying had been a problem at the start of the year. One female student said, “The principal fixed it. Now, we are getting along. Mostly.” Other students in the focus groups mentioned problems with other students, but did not feel that these were bullying; one high school student described the problems as “just the usual stuff where we fight a bit but then get along later. Nothing serious”. Overall, student and school staff perceptions mostly seemed to be that bullying was addressed relatively well at YSA and that problems were dealt with when they arose.

School Safety and Student-Teacher Relationships

The majority of participants expressed that they felt safe at YSA, with 62% (n= 87) of students and about 85% (n=39) of school staff responding that they felt safe at the school. Some teachers and staff (44.44%, n=20) felt there was a need for increased safety and security at YSA; students were not asked about increased safety and security.

Insert Table 3

Overall, students seemed to feel comfortable going to their teachers for help with academic or social needs (see Table 4). Nearly 80% (n= 112) of students felt that their teachers would do something to help if they went to them because they felt bullied. The majority of students reported that they would tell a teacher or other staff member at the school if another student spoke of killing someone (82.51%, n=116) or brought a gun to school (83.22%, n=117). However, some students disagreed that they would report these incidences to adults on campus, raising potential safety concerns.

Most school staff felt as if students were comfortable approaching them if they experienced issues with other students and felt that teachers took action to deal with bullying on campus. Overall, the teachers and staff felt that they encouraged students to report bullying on campus. However, staff reported that they know when students are being bullied or picked on about 76% of the time; this suggests that students are not always telling school staff when they have problems with peers (see Table 5).

Insert Tables 4 & 5

Some staff spoke of the need for students to treat them more respectfully. One teacher commented, “Students are allowed to call teachers names and curse at them with no repercussions from the administration.” Another staff member commented, “Students are highly disrespectful to adults at times or most of the times. They tend to not listen when you try to talk to them. This happens mostly during lunch or transition times.”

Students shared a mix of positive and negative comments about the staff and teachers at YSA. Some shared that they would like the teachers to be more engaged. One high school student said, “They just stick us on the computers. They don’t really do anything else.” However, another student felt that her teacher cared about her and the other students. “She always tries to teach us and she asks about our day,” she said. Most felt that their teachers treated them appropriately, but in response to an open-ended survey question, one male student wrote, “All teachers are disrespectful”.

Significance

The academic and social impact of bullying in schools has been well researched and documented (Ertesvag & Roland, 2014). Students who are bullied are more likely to drop out of school, consume drugs, rely on welfare, and be incarcerated (Beauvais, Chavez, Oetting, Deffenbacher, & Cornell, 1996; Mundbjerg, Nielsen, & Simonsen, 2012). Our results showed that students at YSA reported more instances of bullying than average, with approximately 43% of students stating that bullying is a problem at their school; this shows that there is a need for education about bullying prevention. However, only about 13% of students reported that they

had been bullied at school this year, which suggests that perhaps the smaller environment of YSA is contributing to a greater awareness of bullying amongst staff, making it possible for them to address problems when they arise. In addition, the majority of YSA students reported feeling comfortable going to a teacher for help if they are being bullied; this aligns with Cornell and Bradshaw's (2015) research that showed a positive school climate can contribute to reduced bullying.

YSA should better utilize the level of freedom that charter schools have in terms of curriculum when implementing educational initiatives to combat bullying with a focus on students becoming more proficient dealing with a variety of races, developing multi-cultural awareness, and creating effective conversation skills when having disagreements and differences (Ramarajan & Thomas, 2010; Shaw, 2005). Gower, McMorris, and Eisneberg (2015) explain that these type of innovative educational initiatives may be more effective when established within a group of professionals with a variety of expertise in different academic areas, as well as when utilizing research-based strategies to increase the capacity of the majority of the involved stakeholders.

Considering that almost one in three students reported being bullied during the school year (NCES, 2013), that charter schools are growing at a fast pace within the U.S. educational system (Mills, 2013), and that bullying may be one of the primary reasons for students to drop out of school (Gage et al., 2014), this study could potentially provide a significant contribution to the overall discussion about the impact bullying has on student performance.

Future research should include a qualitative component to provide more in-depth responses on student and staff experiences. While the survey data provided an overview of bullying at YSA, there were also contradictions in the data, such as the lack of alignment between student reporting on the types of bullying behaviors and the frequency of overall bullying. In addition, focus groups were not an ideal method for collecting data on students' experiences with bullying; however, YSA arranged these groups and we lacked the ability to change this. One-on-one interviews would allow us to gather more honest data from students.

Due to the small sample size, the results from this study may not generalize to other populations. In addition, limitations may arise from the self-report nature of the data. Participants' level of honesty in responding to survey items or interview questions may also affect this study's results. In particular, student responses in the focus groups may not have been

entirely truthful, due to the setting and discussion with peers; students may have held back for fear of being judged by their peers.

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Table 1.

Staff and Student Perceptions of Bullying at YSA (%)

Survey Item		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Bullying is a problem in this school.	Student	28.6	28.6	20.3	22.6
	Staff	11.1	42.2	37.8	8.9
2. Students in this school are teased about their clothing or physical appearance.	Student	9.7	23.9	36.6	29.9
	Staff	6.7	35.6	40.0	17.8
3. Students in this school are teased or put down because of their race or ethnicity	Student	37.9	41.7	12.9	7.6
	Staff	31.1	51.1	13.3	4.4
4. Students in this school are teased or put down about their sexual orientation	Student	37.69	36.15	13.08	13.08
	Staff	31.11	55.55	13.33	0.00
5. There is a lot of teasing about sexual topics at this school	Student	30.00	41.67	12.88	7.58
	Staff	22.22	48.89	28.89	0.00

Table 2

Student School Climate Survey Items Related to Bullying (%)

Survey Item		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I have been bullied at school this year.	Student	61.94	25.37	5.97	6.72
2. I have bullied others at school this year.	Student	70.90	18.66	6.72	3.73
3. I have been physically bullied or threatened with physical bullying at school this year.	Student	67.67	25.56	6.02	3.76
4. I have been verbally bullied at school this year.	Student	60.61	19.70	10.61	9.09
5. I have been cyberbullied at school this year.	Student	66.42	25.37	3.73	4.48
6. I have been socially bullied at school this year.	Student	63.91	26.32	7.52	2.26
7. I have been bullied by teachers or other adults at school this year.	Student	74.62	20.00	2.31	3.08

Table 3

Student and Staff Survey Item (%)

Survey Item		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I feel safe in this school	Student	16.43	21.43	45.00	17.14
I feel physically safe in this school	Staff	2.22	13.34	84.45	0.00

Table 4

Student School Climate Survey Items Related to School Climate (%)

Survey Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. If I tell a teacher that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help.	6.85	13.70	38.36	41.10
2. I am comfortable asking my teachers for help with my schoolwork.	6.29	6.99	23.45	68.97

3. There is at least one teacher or other adult at this school who really wants me to do well.	3.45	4.14	23.45	68.97
4. If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.	12.33	6.16	30.14	51.37
5. If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.	12.59	4.20	22.38	60.84

Table 5

Staff School Climate Survey Items Related to School Climate (%)

Survey Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Students know who to go to for help if they have been treated badly by another student.	4.44	8.89	57.78	28.89
2. Students feel comfortable asking for help from teachers if there is a problem with a student	2.17	19.56	56.52	27.74
3. Students report it when one student hits another	15.22	26.09	54.35	4.35
4. Students are encouraged to report bullying and aggression	6.82	9.09	54.54	29.55

5. Teachers take action to solve the problem when students report bullying	4.35	13.04	56.53	26.09
6. Teachers know when students are being picked on or bullied	4.35	19.56	63.05	13.04

The Charter School Principal:
Foundations for Leadership Preparation and Practice

Barbara A. Klocko
Central Michigan University
barbara.klocko@cmich.edu

Benjamin P. Jankens
Central Michigan University
ben.jankens@cmich.edu

Lisa M. Evans
Central Michigan University
Lisa.M.Evans@cmich.edu

Charter schools, or public school academies, have become a permanent fixture in the field of public education in the United States. Although charter schools are public schools, they are unique in their approach to both operations and instruction, and as such, come in all types and sizes. Leading these unique programs requires a similarly unique training, which is not typically part of the traditional school administrator preparation programs currently being offered (Klocko, Kirby, Jankens, & Hullender, 2013). In this article, we tell the stories of practicing charter school leaders to uncover the issues and challenges that charter school leaders face in preparation for the myriad expectations inherent in the role of the charter school leader. Because of the gap between charter school leaders' preparation and the expectations of their roles, we seek to uncover the best ways to close this gap and provide real-life lessons for improving professional practice.

Charter schools grew out of the school reform movement to offer school choice to parents and to provide competition for the fragmented public school system (Klocko, Kirby, Jankens, & Hullender, 2013; NYCCSC, 2012). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) served as a catalyst to school reform by emphasizing the system-wide failure of public schools, and ushered in the charter school initiative to provide freedom from state and local regulations. In short, charter schools were created to change the way schooling was done (NYCCSC, 2012). Mr. York is the president of an early-college preparatory charter school, and endorses the important mission of charter schools:

I think the charter school movement is one in which there is a high level of focus on 'how do we develop solutions towards issues that we are seeing in education that are not being resolved, are not being reconciled.' If we see something that is not working, let's not stand idly by and allow it continue not working, let's figure out a way to do something different, provide a new opportunity, and provide a different way to get at the outcome that we are trying to get at.

Since 1991, charter public schools have steadily been increasing in popularity and number. With over 2.5 million students attending 6,500 charter schools in 42 states and the District of Columbia (NCES, 2016), the need to recruit and train qualified and effective charter school leaders is as great as ever. Because of the unique demands of charter school leaders, principal preparation programs have a persistent challenge in ensuring that charter school candidates not only have the traditional perspectives on educational administration and

leadership, but also possess the ability to transfer their skills to the charter setting. In this study, we offer foundations for preparation of aspiring leaders through the voices of six charter school leaders along with recommendations for practice.

Charter Schools and Management

In the United States, charter schools are a unique combination of publicly funded, privately run organizations; Operating a charter school brings with it unique challenges not found in a traditional school setting. Although they vary by management type (self-managed and managed), most charter school leaders are responsible for additional activities that their colleagues in district-run schools may never experience; including the lack of support from a district office (Campbell et al., 2008). Although charter schools with a full-service management company may provide similar support as a traditional central office may provide (financial, operational and academic support), self-managed charter schools require leaders to assume responsibilities that require cross-training and multitasking expertise.

Self-Managed Charter Schools

The majority of charter schools, roughly 80%, are self-managed, meaning they are not affiliated with a management company (NAPCS, 2008). A self-managed structure is similar to a district public school, with the board of directors hiring a superintendent and overseeing all operations of the academy. Although the academy may contract for food or transportation services, in reality, they operate just like a traditional district program. These leaders are actually superintendents. They report directly to the board of education, are responsible for all financial and business services – outside of having support from a business manager – in addition to being the instructional leader, and all school and community relations activities. President York's charter school is a self-managed charter school:

I think that because we are our own district, I can work more closely with the board. I can make a lot of changes very quickly. If we are getting perception survey data from parents, or students, or working directly with teachers, and they feel like something we are doing with instruction or with what parents' or students' needs are, is not aligning with what the data is showing us, it is very easy for us to make quick change, communicate the change, get everyone on the team and involved in that discussion and move without potentially having to move three or other things first to get there.

Mr. Williams, the co-director/principal of a charter school where he shares responsibility with another co-director/principal, sees some advantages to being autonomous from a management company. The original founders of the school created a partnership model for management and leadership that is still in use and part of Mr. Williams' job description. He credits his strength to his longevity within the school:

I think the 14 years of teaching here prepared me for running the school. I'm a co-director so I'm providing the stability and the leadership. This was the original vision. This is the history. This is where we're at. In my role here as co-director, I am really district superintendent, principal, custodian, curriculum director.

Managed Charter Schools

Utilizing a management company is a design model which turns some or all of the responsibility for implementing the educational program, business, or personnel services, over to a contracted service provider. Mrs. Newsome is a principal at a charter school fully managed by a nationally recognized management company. Due to the large size of the company, the amount of support afforded to school leaders provides a foundation upon which they can build. While charter schools are held accountable to many of the same expectations, charter school leaders' roles differ from the roles of public school leaders. Mrs. Newsome spoke of the value the service center at her management organization brings. As a first year principal, Newsome turned to the support of the service center for assistance on staffing, student programming, and federal mandates, and relied most heavily on the support of the Business Analyst for assistance with the use of funds:

It's the support that you get from a charter school organization. Our service center has many different departments, from human resources, to business analysts, to leadership development, curriculum and instruction, safety team, information and analytics team, marketing and more. The support that you get as a leader or as a principal within a charter school organization provides development opportunities for myself, but then also provides support in areas.

Charter School Leadership and Accountability

Unlike their counterparts in traditional district schools, charter school leaders have a myriad of responsibilities beyond the typical school leader duties (Campbell, Gross, & Lake, 2008). In many states, charter school principals act as superintendents and have a greater control

over decision making. Charter school leaders must ensure decisions meet state and national standards, find and maintain facilities, recruit and retain families, lead fundraising efforts, collaborate with the board and local community, and keep their schools fiscally viable by developing and monitoring budgets. Many of these roles surpass the responsibilities of public school principals (Klocko et al., 2013; Carpenter & Peak, 2013).

Another important role for charter school leaders doing double duty as principals and superintendents is staying true to the charter reform movement. Principal Newsome noted:

We've got to make ourselves more clever and creative and innovative in order to get enrollment. I think instilling the behavioral component, the moral focus component...I think it comes down to the parent engagement too, really trying to promote that. Then, it's just a sense of a true environment that really enhances the atmosphere with love and compassion and a sense of family. It's a place that you walk into and you feel it's like a school, but you also feel the family sense of it. It's not just a place where your kids get on the bus and get off the bus and they go and they learn their numbers and learn how to read.

Notwithstanding preliminary independence regarding staffing, curriculum, and the budget, many charter schools are now held accountable to the same state and federal expectations as district schools (Klocko et al., 2013). Considering the current environment of high-stakes accountability, increased performance requirements, mandates, and a lack of funding, charter school leaders require a unique set of skills (Campbell & Gross, 2008). Mr. Lakeland is the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) of a burgeoning charter school that arose to meet the needs of a community whose elementary school had been shuttered and for many years, students were bussed 20 miles to neighboring communities. Lakeland also suggested that charter schools provide a great deal of autonomy and opportunities that may not be available in a traditional setting:

I gained an appreciation for the autonomy that charter schools receive, as well as opportunities to be innovative. The opportunity here at the Academy is more of a grassroots one, whereby it was the only opportunity to have a school here because the school had been closed and consolidated. The reason I chose a charter school was more about the school as a whole -- the fact that I'd be granted some autonomy to construct

and build things. Essentially building it from the ground up was attractive to me and rarely would I ever have that opportunity in a traditional setting.

A reality of charter school leadership is that the work at each school is unique and individualized; it is unlikely that preparation is ever sufficient. The variance between different schools also translates to the work and activities required by the leaders. Charter school leaders often lead schools without the guidance and support of the school district; therefore, they must bring to the role a combination of business aptitude and instructional knowledge (Carpenter & Peak, 2013). Charter school leaders themselves suggest that their roles require a more entrepreneurial approach than traditional district schools, as Principal Markham noted:

Obviously [charter schools] are different than the public schools in a variety of ways. I think we have the autonomy here to really go above and beyond for our students without jumping through all the hoops... This allows us to really service our students and meet their needs on an individual basis. The relationships that we have here in our community... They're very tight, and I think to be honest, that's why we get a lot of kids that transfer in here... they hear how we treat people, how we treat our students. What we provide for them is what makes a big difference.

Ms. Taylor, the principal of a charter school in a small charter network of five schools confirmed, “The best thing about working at our charter schools... is that I have as much support as I need. If I have a crazy idea, I don't have to go through red tape. I present my idea and normally it's implemented.”

While these leaders' sentiments align with the widespread assumption that charter schools have greater autonomy and leaders are therefore able to exercise more instructional leadership, Cravens, Goldring, and Penalzoza (2008) found that charter school leaders admitted to only being able to spend limited time focused on instructional leadership within their buildings due to the multitude of other administrative tasks that comprise their roles. Principal Newsome listed some of her duties that extend beyond instructional leadership as a charter school principal: curriculum, student behavior, stakeholder engagement, finance, the budget, compensation, the school calendar, a marketing plan to enroll students, professional development for the staff, and curriculum programs.

Another key aspect to leadership is a focus on teamwork and collaboration. Mr. Markham suggested that learning from other leaders is a key element to his training, noting, “We were able

to learn a lot from each other, people that are in similar communities or school backgrounds that share the same problems, you can bounce ideas off of how they deal with certain things”.

Principal Taylor echoed this sentiment, indicating:

I have an amazing support system. Mentors that are encouraging me to grow and that want me to grow and really reach my potential not only as a leader but would want my school to reach their potential as an educational community.

Mr. Williams recently received national recognition for collaboration initiatives at his self-managed rural charter school:

How can you apply our model to a traditional middle school? What are the things that we're doing that would benefit these larger schools? Our collaboration allows for the curriculum to be more meaningful and connected... Our structure of collaboration is one thing that is so ingrained in what we're doing that it allows us to offer unique programs...it makes it a really nice place to work as long as you're up for collaboration and teamwork. ... We are producing students who want to be advocates for their learning.

Although preparation programs can provide content-specific knowledge, there is no better preparation for group work than on-the-job experience. As Mr. Lakeland shared, a major aspect of his work is being an inspirational leader:

Overall, there's an important part of being an inspirational leader in the role that I have. I feel successful in inspiring, motivating our team to do great work for kids. I share personal stories with them about my own challenges growing up, and being from this area dramatically helps in being an inspirational leader, which I believe is, at times, the most important work that I do.

Who will Lead the Charter Schools?

One of the biggest challenges facing charter schools is recruiting and keeping qualified leaders. As the number of students attending charter schools continues to increase (Carpenter & Peak, 2013), and the charter school movement continues to steadily grow, an increasing number of qualified leaders is in demand. Due to many factors, including an increase in new charter schools, a stigma that leaders would never be able to work in a traditional public school if they were to be associated with a charter school, growing demands and responsibilities, and a shortage of funding, administrative positions in charter schools are difficult to fill. This is

especially true in underserved communities and schools that have some of the most challenging working conditions. (Darling-Hammond, et al, 2007; NAPCS, 2008).

Because charter schools tend to have higher teacher turnover than public schools (NYCCSC, 2012), leaders must dedicate time and resources to hiring and training staff (Carpenter & Peak, 2013). Principal Newsome contributed her successes to “focusing on the staff, listening to the staff, and trying to build high morale and streamlined systems.” Indeed, one distinguishing role of all leaders is providing instructional leadership to their staff. Principal Taylor spoke of motivating her staff. “I believe, truly, and that every person that is a member of my educational community has a voice. I respect that voice through our teacher surveys, through our parent surveys, through our student surveys.”

Another challenge is not just finding qualified candidates, but finding someone with experience and the ability to improve instructional outcomes. In addition to the myriad of responsibilities facing a charter school leader, they are also tasked with the insurmountable goals of solving decades-long educational challenges and eliminating the achievement gap; essentially single-handedly (NAPCS, 2008). Principal Taylor indicated that there are many steps her school takes to hold true to the promise of better educating students than the public schools in her area:

We expect all of our students to pass and take Advanced Placement courses. We expect them to be college-ready by the time they graduate from us. A grade of C- or higher is passing here. We have an expectation for community service...The support we provide is the dynamic that most schools don't have...our one-on-one interaction, making sure that we are meeting the needs of all of our students.

It is also well-documented that charter schools disproportionately enroll minorities and students of color as compared to their traditional counterparts, with 60% of charter school students representing a minority. By contrast, Mr. Williams described the lottery system that they use at this rural K-8 charter school that has 172 children on a waiting list, “We don’t know anything about the students when they sign up for the lottery. It’s all run by state law and everything is monitored by the state and our authorizer.”

Although charter schools also have almost twice the number of minorities in leadership positions as the traditional district schools (32.4% vs. 17.2%), they are still not proportionate to the number of students they enroll (NAPCS, 2008). Principal Taylor grew up in a neighboring community to the one her school serves. “Statistically I shouldn't be a principal. I'm a first

generation college student, came from a family of four other siblings from a single parent home, with a father who (had drug problems).”

Administrative turnover within charter school leadership is also greater than in public schools, at 18.7% for charter schools compared to 3.6% across public school districts (NYCCSC, 2012). In effect, charter school leaders also tend to be less experienced and younger than public school leaders (NYCCSC, 2012) and are more likely to be former teachers with less experience in administration (Klocko et al., 2012). Contributing to the gap between charter and public school leadership turnover are principal characteristics, school contexts, principal leadership practices, and working conditions (Sun & Ni, 2016). President York, a former teacher without traditional leadership preparation, is the current president of a charter school.

One of the things I struggle with is helping people who are just getting to know me understand my background and experience and how they relate to what I'm currently doing and how it has prepared me. There is the perception that without a specified degree or based upon my appearance, because I look very young, that I'm not qualified or capable.

Due to the lack of leaders in the pipeline, charter schools are looking inward to solve the leadership shortage. One of the biggest challenges to succession planning is a lack of opportunities within most charter schools. Many charter schools don't have the internal structures and processes that allow teachers to move into leadership or assistant leadership positions, until the current administrator leaves (NAPCS, 2008). Management companies who have the resources and infrastructure, on the other hand, have established their own preparation programs. Using top-notch leaders as teachers and mentors, these programs leverage the current wealth inside the organization to advance leadership within the company (Olson, 2008). Ms. Burns, an accomplished charter school leader, boldly affirmed her commitment to the professional development opportunities she provides to leaders, faculty, and staff:

It's about the schools that I serve. I work with some really high performing folks, and I want to make sure they continue to grow, because I just love what I do. It's coaching people to continue to get better, and I love that part of it.

One of the ways charter schools are meeting the shortage of leaders is by preparing their own leaders through immersion programs. Rather than hiring school leaders with master's degrees and relying on their formal training to ensure they are successful, some larger

management companies are “growing their own” by providing leadership immersion experiences right in their own schools. Mr. Jackson reflected on his experience with other charter schools and how they meet this challenge:

Many of the highest performing charter management organizations out East, such as Uncommon Schools, Achievement First, and Democracy Prep...all of those programs have a lot of resources due to significant philanthropic funds. They are rapidly opening schools and they will often have an entire year where the prospective school leader is paid a full salary and has a very structured training experience where he or she takes on responsibilities in a school under the guidance of a school leader in preparation for launching the new school. This immersion touches all of what it means to be a great school leader in general, but also some of the things that are specific to charter schools.

Charter School Leadership Preparation

Charter school administrator credentials vary from state to state. Some states require charter school administrators to have the same credentials as traditional public school administrators (e.g. Michigan, New Mexico, Tennessee), while many states provide additional flexibility when hiring charter school leaders (e.g. California, Florida, Idaho, Utah). In Utah, a charter school may sponsor a school leader for certification if that administrator meets specific competency requirements. Although many states do not require charter school leaders to be licensed, many charter school boards set minimum credentials that a charter school leader needs to have in order to be considered; including state administrator certification, or licensure. Mr. Williams acknowledged his extra responsibilities as principal and superintendent; nonetheless he endorsed academic credentialing and certification, “I think that it is best for charter schools, and the charter school movement, that the expectations of charter school administrators be the same as the expectations of traditional school leaders.” Campbell et al. (2008) cited a study published in *Education Week* reporting that 74% of charter school principals hold degrees from traditional education programs. Additionally, they indicated that approximately 60% of charter school principals are former public school principals, while 13% have no background in education.

After teaching for several years in public, private, and charter schools, President York was hired as an administrator in a state that did not have certification requirements for charter school leaders. Now working in a state that does require certification, he is currently working on obtaining his Doctorate in Education and certification in administration:

The purpose of pursuing this degree currently is really to help me with the superintendency. I want to be able to gain more understanding and knowledge of change leadership, district-level leadership, policy, and that higher-level understanding of the difference between school-level leadership. Learning how a superintendent works with a team to coordinate political elements and bring together the community around the school is foundational to this degree. I am defining how a superintendent brings multiple schools together around a common vision and common mission and filter that into the school-level leadership work.

Despite the fact that the role of a charter school leader extends beyond the expectations of the traditional public school leader, many charter school leaders receive their administrative certifications from the same institutions as their public school counterparts. While many leadership preparation programs at the Master's and Doctoral Level offer relevant training necessary to obtain state licensure/administrative endorsement, few universities offer programs or emphases tailored specifically to charter school leaders despite the promise of reform that charter schools offer students and parents. Many current charter school leaders are a product of programs that do not specifically meet the expectations for principals in today's charter schools (Klocko et al., 2013).

The most common route to becoming a charter school leader is through a university master's degree program in education leadership and administration. Many charter school leaders bring administrative experience from the traditional setting to the charter school environment. Outside of a handful of states requiring charter school administrators to comply with traditional certification and licensure, there is a wide-open range of experience, preparation, and credentials required for aspiring charter school leaders. These expectations are usually determined by the local charter school, and often equate experience with university training. Mr. Lakeland summed up his preparation in this way:

I think in one respect, it's not about preparation for charter schools. It's about preparation for great schools. Some elements are not specific to a charter school, and those are really deep knowledge around how to be an effective instructional leader and how to effectively push without overburdening and overwhelming teachers.

The Motivation of Charter School Leaders

In seeking to better understand the motivations for charter school leaders to pursue advancement either through management-provided intensive training, or through a university-based advanced graduate degree program, we refer back to the voices of charter school leaders in the field. We wondered why a charter school principal would want to pursue credentials beyond the expectations of the principalship. It is the intrinsic challenge to improve their skills and self-efficacy that drove them to continue their training, as fittingly described by Ms. Burns:

For me, personally, especially in a work environment, if it's too easy, I get bored. That was part of my evolution from teaching into leadership. I was a highly effective teacher. I was a teacher leader. I was helping train people over the summer, and I enjoyed all of that. Then that being said, although I would learn new things each year, the challenges weren't there for me anymore, which really made me think about being a leader. That idea of being challenged to try something new, or again, it hasn't been figured out yet, so we have to put a plan together. We've got to look at what the research says. We've got to rally the team, and get the right people at the table. Those things get me excited!

It is that excitement or arousal through challenge that has marked the career choices, competencies, and successes of all the charter school leaders we interviewed for this study and likely those we encounter regularly through our work with educational leaders. Ms. Burns works as a regional director for a management company overseeing curriculum and instruction for students and faculty in two states. Her story is one of accountability ... In her own words, “Performance matters!”

The biggest thing for me...and I hate to make it seem so simple, but I do think it has to do with how people manage change. In my experience with the charter schools, change is inevitable. Every year, we're going to be changing, based on what we learned from last year, and you have to be okay with that. I think that it is essential in preparation programs to get people to feel comfortable with change, and how to manage change.

Implications for Preparation Programs

Principal preparation can come in many forms. The majority of charter school leaders have gone through a university preparation program embedded into their graduate degrees. A few, but growing number of non-university preparation programs are filling the void between a traditional preparation program and the needs of charter schools. Although most programs are run by the management company themselves, there are a few supported by philanthropic efforts

to train leaders for urban settings. Most university programs cater to the traditional public school clientele; however, many have revised their programs to include a course on charter schools or charter school administration. Still others include content within various courses that differentiate between the traditional administrative approach and that of the charter school setting. A few universities have established charter school specific preparation programs.

Although these are typically modeled after their traditional programs, universities have recognized the increasing demand for charter school leadership preparation and in a more competitive environment, have taken up this challenge. A unique phenomenon, however, is that many charter school leaders are still opting for enrolling in traditional programs. Similar to the stigma associated with working at a charter school, charter school leaders are worried that a degree in charter school leadership would not be as valued, or even a liability if they ever chose to pursue a position in a traditional district. Mr. Lakeland offered particular insight about his status as a student in a university degree preparation program:

The sum experiences of my life and my professional career was my preparation for this work. I'm in the process of completing a formal degree program, but frankly, I'm doing that because I have to, not because I see tremendous immediate direct value in that program or whether some of the courses will help me on a day-to-day basis.

Administrative preparation and advanced degree programs exist to prepare leaders to obtain positions as school leaders and improve student achievement; yet despite the increased focus on school quality and accountability, district leaders are largely dissatisfied with the quality of principal preparation programs because the training does not always reflect principals' real jobs (Wallace Foundation, 2016). Currently, many programs do not fully prepare school leaders for the demands of the principalship (Klocko et al., 2013) and this may be particularly true for charter school leaders. Many charter school leaders indicate that the areas in which they felt the least prepared, such as legislation, research, marketing, and public policy, are the areas which are most distinct to charter schools (Klocko et al., 2013; Carpenter & Peak, 2013). In fact, some university policies and practices can hinder change (Wallace Foundation, 2016) as they often fail to address the specific needs of charter school leaders, thereby leaving them underprepared for the job (Sun & Ni, 2016). Mrs. Newsome depends on her university degree program to help her to advance her leadership skills:

I think the advanced degree is helping me as well. It's talking about change management

more. I think that's what you deal with on a daily basis in a leadership position, how to deal with conflict, how to deal with change, how to motivate, how to get leverage in change. That's been I think awesome. That's helped me reflect as a leader thoroughly and often.

Principal Taylor received her Master's in Educational Leadership degree from a public university in Michigan, and became an assistant principal after teaching for three years. She reflected on the lack of training in the managerial components associated with accountability for charter school leaders:

You have to fire somebody and no one teaches you how to do that. Or put someone's performance improvement plan in writing. You're never taught how to do that--small aspects to the budget, hiring, and firing, to some of the larger things like what to do in case of a fight...law type things...IEP type things. Those things are not (deeply) covered in an education leadership program right now.

Indeed, leaders tend to spend less time in areas in which they are not as knowledgeable (Carpenter & Peak, 2013); thus the areas of high importance specific to charter school leaders are often the areas that receive the least attention. Charter school principals in the field are the most qualified to offer insight into how university preparation and advanced degree programs can create programs that best address the needs of charter school leaders. Mr. Lakeland would appreciate stronger foundational training in key technical areas that he faces as a principal:

Two areas where I actually feel underprepared are special education and federal programs...Not the programmatic side, but the rules, regulations, budgeting; The difference between a targeted assistance and school-wide program in terms of Title I; What you can do, what you can't do; How to develop those programs and implement them in a quality way to be in compliance with the rules and regulations. I think that leadership preparation programs could do a better job of preparing leaders for some of those technical pieces.

Mrs. Newsome stated that she benefitted from shadowing leaders while in her Master's in Educational Leadership program, but that the experience could be so much more valuable if the experience was made to be more authentic by more of a full-immersion shadowing or internship program.

I think I learned most from my master's program shadowing people like when you have to do interviews and shadow and almost do a little internship. I think that would be insightful if you could be in a role for that for a year if they offered that in schools, like a transitional principal role.

Ms. Burns is currently in a university program pursuing her Doctor of Education degree. She clearly articulates her two reasons for advancing her degree in an altruistic tone, blending her passion with accountability:

I take seriously the work that I do with the students and staff. As a leader, as I've come to learn, learners are only going to be as good as what they get stretched to be. Leaders are responsible for creating a culture, and giving people the freedom to do that. If I haven't worked on myself as a leader, then my limitation can become a limiting factor for the students and staff that I serve. That's number one...The second reason for me really is that education has changed so much over time, and continues to change. I really want to know what is the latest and greatest out there. I want to know how it fits with what we've already known for years. Are there new connections that can be made, or are there things still that we haven't figured out that may be really important?

Ms. Taylor reflected on her Master's preparation program, and suggested that instead of randomized assignments, connecting the learning to a real school would have been beneficial. "Let's just have some actual data, make it relevant to a school." She continued, "The most relevant class was my laws and politics class. I learned a lot about what you can and can't do in the school building relevant to the charter and how your board policy protects you, like your student handbook."

President York is completing his Doctor of Education degree at a major public university with a traditional, public school focus. He noted areas where his learning could have been enhanced for charter school leaders like himself:

In terms of change leadership, in the leadership courses, building-level leadership makes tremendous sense, how you affect change in the school and gather a team around a unifying idea and really think about that. It also made me curious and I would have liked to think about how you, as a superintendent, affect change in multiple schools or in a community. How do you take the same concepts of affecting change in a single-building and apply that in a larger sense then to multiple buildings?

Recommendations for New Charter School Leaders

Due to the uniqueness of many charter school programs, the preparation and training needed to successfully lead these programs must be equally unique. Although most school leader preparation programs don't provide a charter school perspective, most of the foundation for effective school management is the same. What is not the same; however, is the context and application. Six key recommendations are provided to offer avenues for new charter school leaders seeking to acquire comprehensive charter school leadership preparation and development.

Foundations in Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Although there are as many educational approaches as there are charter schools, there are foundational theories and best-practices that form the basis of all successful educational programs. Whether the school elects to purchase a curriculum or create its own, the school leader must be familiar with the foundations of a comprehensive curriculum and effective implementation. Similarly, with instructional practices, there are limitless instructional approaches and styles that a program could utilize. Although most charter school leaders have a teaching background, being a leader requires advanced knowledge and skills to be the overall instructional leader and effectively recruit, hire, evaluate, and develop a quality faculty.

Program assessment and evaluation is another foundational element to the requisite knowledge a charter school leader needs to guide and develop a program. Although charter schools may opt for a unique approach that matches the overall educational program, the foundations of effective assessment and evaluation are universal. Having a strong grasp of the theories and concepts of a traditional academic program will provide the charter school leader with the foundation necessary to build upon, whether it is a traditional approach or a departure from the norm.

Foundations in Business and Administration

As with the foundations in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, fundamentals in administration and management are comparable across all public schools. The foundations for human resources and personnel, as well as facilities management, finance, and operations are not unique to one type of school. Although there are differences in policies and approaches, the theoretical and practical application are essentially the same. Additionally, charter school leaders need to contextualize the content in their unique charter school setting. Some charter school

leaders may find themselves in a turn-key charter school network where most of the business and administration are handled by a management company, while day-to-day operations are handled by the principal. Other charter school programs are fully autonomous, or self-managed. As discussed previously, leaders working in these environments must have a broader knowledge of overall organizational management. Either way, the foundations for school business and administration can be acquired through a traditional school leadership preparation program, or even a more generalized administrative degree. Applying these concepts and ideas to their unique program will be the goal of the charter school leader.

Foundations in Charter Schools

The most unique aspects in running a charter school are not the academics or operations, but the philosophies held by the leader. The participants in this study boldly affirmed that most of what charter school leaders learn, they learn on the job. Although there are always elements to a leader's preparation that is tested in the field, best practice is clear that successful school leadership starts with a foundation of knowledge and skills. Although most of these elements can be gained from traditional approaches, taking into consideration the unique context, effective charter school leadership requires endorsement of the essential beliefs and ideals of education reform.

Charter schools are as much an idea and strategy as they are an organization type. Because charter schools were born from the concepts of free-market education leading to choice and competition, charter school leaders must understand the tenets of why charter schools exist and how they can make a meaningful contribution to education reform. Most of this cannot be learned on your own or assumed. Consequently, charter school leaders need to gain a historical and legislative perspective on the charter schools philosophy and how it came into existence.

Although there are a couple of charter school leadership courses at the graduate level, most of the knowledge in this area will be gleaned from fellow charter school leaders, founders, and state associations. New charter school leadership should be active in their charter school communities and network across the various platforms. They should join state charter school associations and actively participate in networking opportunities at national charter school conferences and workshops.

Charter School Specific Clinical Internship

Knowledge of school leadership and administrative theories and concepts is the first step to becoming an effective school leader. The next and most profound step involves practice under the supervision of a seasoned and successful leader. Like traditional school leadership preparation, charter school leadership preparation must include a rigorous and authentic field-based internship experience. Meaningful charter school specific internships will help to strengthen entrepreneurial skills as well as instructional leadership skills for emerging leaders. The internship can also serve to create a mentor relationship providing opportunities for more experienced leaders to support the next generation of charter school leaders through immersive on-the-job experiences.

Charter School Leader Mentorship

To have a continued support system as new charter school leaders transition to their own program, formal mentors should be part of the approach. Most charter school leaders don't have formalized structures and fully developed policies or administrative guidelines for ongoing support for new and aspiring leaders. Accordingly, having a support system of mentoring in place may provide the new charter school leader with the necessary strategies necessary to address challenges of their new position. New charter school leaders need to form a strong professional network; not just of friends and colleagues, but of individuals who can serve as confidants and mentors. Having someone you can call in an emergency or tense situation can be the thing that makes or breaks a charter school leader's career.

Charter School Leader Professional Development

Finally, once a charter school leader has both the foundation of knowledge of effective school leadership and the charter school leadership experience, they need to ensure they have a continuous development plan to address their areas of development and growth as a leader. Effective charter school leaders are engaged in their professional network and seek out development opportunities. Most of these can be found through state and national associations, but there are many development opportunities through local, state, and national venues outside of the charter school sector, as well as advanced graduate degrees such as a doctorate in educational leadership.

Conclusion

Charter school leaders face many unique challenges for which traditional preparation programs do not always prepare them adequately (Klocko et al., 2013). One outcome of this

review is that charter school leaders have many options for gaining experience and training for their positions. From on-the-job training, a management company sponsored program, to traditional university programs, the format and focus is not as important as the content and relativity to the challenges of running an effective school. It became clear that charter school leaders are entrepreneurial, innovative, and creative, which helps them achieve their goals and find solutions to immediate problems. Key recommendations provide a solid foundation for theory and practice for charter school leaders, and with continued mentoring and development will ensure charter school leader success. Although there are not many charter school specific preparation programs available, effective charter school leaders are seizing these opportunities to develop themselves in order to improve their practice and advance their work. Once the charter school leader has acquired the basic knowledge, advancement to skill-based training will intensify their ability to fully realize the organization's mission and vision, and achieve high quality results.

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Higher Education Authorization of Charter Schools: Opportunities for Teaching, Scholarship,
and Service

Doug Thomas
University of Central Missouri

Julie Hentges
University of Central Missouri

Author Notes

Doug D. Thomas is a Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Central Missouri and a consultant with the UCM Charter School Office. thomas@ucmo.edu

Julie Hentges is an Associate Professor of Elementary Education at the University of Central Missouri and a consultant with the UCM Charter School Office. hentges@ucmo.edu

Abstract

Over the past two decades, charter schools have become a vibrant component of the current educational landscape. Charter schools serve over 3.1 million students in approximately 6900 schools across the United States. A unique aspect of this undertaking has been the establishment of alternative authorizers, and specifically universities, to approve, provide oversight, and renew public charter schools. Campus leaders, policy makers, and scholars must contemplate numerous variables regarding a university's involvement with the charter school movement. Universities must first and foremost provide the required "oversight" mandated by charter school laws. Nevertheless, there are also unique opportunities for the traditional higher education roles of teaching, service, and research. With 18 years of experience, the University of Central Missouri provides an overview of issues and opportunities encountered as an authorizer of public charter schools, highlighting opportunities that embrace teaching, scholarship, and service.

Introduction

Charter schools have become a significant part of American education and the kingpin of the school choice movement. Currently, over 6900 charter schools are serving approximately 3.1 million students across our nation (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). As an alternative to traditional public schools and a key component of the school choice movement, charter schools begin as an alternative to neighborhood school attendance. “The emergence of charter schools, which, when first introduced in 1991, came with two distinct promises: to serve as an escape hatch for students in failing schools, and to create and incubate new educational practices” (Fryer, 2012, p. 2). With the charter school initiative parents are provided with school choice.

A key component of the charter movement is the authorization and oversight of public charter schools. Gustafson (2013) stated charter schools “have been a focus of school reform advocates and the subject of substantial research. Yet the regulators of the charter industry (called “authorizers” or “sponsors”) remain a mystery to many” (p.33). Within the public forum, “few issues provoke as much debate as charter schools, which are publicly funded schools... and are under the authority of a quasi-contract, or “charter,” granted by a public body” (Buddin & Zimmer, 2005, p.351). The authorizing agency can directly affect the quality and effectiveness of the charter schools operating under its jurisdiction. Gustafson (2013) stated, “While authorizers are not the operators, they set the standards and measure operators against those standards. The work of authorizers is central to the charter compact: granting autonomy in exchange for accountability” (p.33).

According to the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA, 2015) state law charges authorizers to: 1) approve new schools; 2) oversee ongoing performance; and 3) evaluate the performance of public charter schools to make renewal decisions. Authorizers must ensure that the schools are operating as per the charter agreement and fulfilling its educational obligations as outlined in the charter and state statutes. Authorizers must identify and analyze appropriate measures, such as state assessment results and fiscal audits, as gauges of the schools’ effectiveness. With specific attention given to supporting students in high-risk environments to excel, university authorizers can guide charter schools on this path through a collaborative partnership to advocate for student success. Clearly, these are significant oversight responsibilities on the part of the authorizer, which may appear daunting at times.

UCM as Charter Authorizer

Soon after the Missouri charter legislation passed in 1998, the University of Central Missouri undertook an extensive review of its potential role as an authorizer of public charter schools. The review determined that sponsorship (authorization) of public charter schools was aligned with the University's mission, including key functions such as providing service, improving teacher preparation, improving urban education, and teacher recruitment (Thomas & Machell, 2001). Stemming from these philosophical bedrocks, the University of Central Missouri set about to determine effective levels of oversight and support for the charter schools operating under its sponsorship.

The authorizer of public charter schools in Missouri is defined as the "sponsor" per Missouri legislation. The University of Central Missouri became the State's first "sponsor" with the approval of 10 charter schools in 1999 (Thomas & Machell, 2001). Currently, the College of Education houses the UCM Charter School Office, which is staffed by a director, field representative, consultants, and an office professional. A portion (1.5%) of the per-student funding sent to the charter school covers sponsorship costs. Sponsors are required to expend a minimum of 90% of its charter school sponsorship funds in direct support and oversight of its charter school sponsorship program, or as a direct investment in the sponsored schools (DESE, 2017).

With 18 years of experiences as a public university on the forefront of enabling charter legislation and the "sponsorship" of inner-city public charter schools, the University of Central Missouri's oversight processes have developed over time. The University of Central Missouri's primary function as an authorizer is providing ongoing oversight of the schools. Throughout the year, on-site evaluations and program assessments are conducted. A calendar of oversight topics outline and inform the timing and scope of the oversight activities. This process often encompasses the collection of compliance reporting documents, such as teacher certification reports and state financial documents.

Other items involve scheduled site visits to the schools for specific program and operational assessments. Site reviews consistently contain 1) academic programs and accountability, 2) safety and facility issues, 3) governance, 4) fiscal reporting and accountability, 5) personnel and payroll, 6) certification, 7) student records, 8) curriculum review, and 9)

professional development. In support of these oversight roles, University personnel participate in state level and area meetings of charter school sponsors, attend national, state, and local meetings focusing on charter schools, and participate in leadership meetings stemming from the Dean's office and departments within the College of Education, throughout the school year. These oversight activities conducted at the school site inform an embedded operational review for charter schools.

Most charter agreements run for five years, and at the end of the term of the agreement, the University must determine to continue or discontinue sponsorship of a school by either renewing or non-renewing the agreement. Although it may be difficult to simplify charter school issues, the fact is, to remain viable charter schools need to "persuade an (charter) authorizer to re-charter them every few years" (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005, p. 52). During its 18 years as a charter school sponsor, the University of Central Missouri has opened 14 schools. For a variety of reasons, five of these schools were not renewed. Some of the reasons are poor academic performance, poor operations, and fiscal management issues. Effective operational reviews help to inform this high-stakes process.

Roles for Teaching, Service, and Scholarship

The expertise found among university faculty and professional staff members can effectively fulfill many of these statutory obligations of the University as a charter authorizer. Within the activities and responsibilities associated with being an authorizer of public charter schools, there are unique opportunities for teaching, scholarship, and service, at both the school site level and within the greater educational arena.

Teaching Opportunities

The University of Central Missouri, in partnership with its public charter schools in Kansas City, has provided specifically designed degrees and/or coursework to charter school educators, as well as pre-service students within the teacher preparation degree programs. *Graduate Programs.* UCM has provided courses for two cohorts of graduate students participating in an urban leadership preparation program. The urban leadership program was developed to better prepare future school leaders for the unique demands of urban education. All coursework and activities are relevant and meaningful to the leadership and management of urban schools. "Job-embedded" activities are incorporated throughout the coursework to give students the opportunity to work with "real world" situations and issues. Additionally, only

instructors with urban experience and expertise, including practitioners from urban districts, were selected to teach the courses. The cohort model provided flexibility and support for the students. Scheduling and advisement were built into the model, bringing these services to the students.

Charter school leaders were vital in the recruitment and selection of students for the program. Additionally, selected school leaders have participated as “guest lecturers” to share their expertise and experiences. Students also received financial support. The Charter Schools Office provided “tuition” for four of the required classes, basically “reinvesting” a portion of the funds generated by charter school enrollment back to the schools. These courses were designed to support the school improvement mandates embedded in the charter school concept. Fourteen students, all urban educators working at a UCM sponsored charter school, completed the program in 2012. The second cohort of 13 charter school educators completed the program in 2015.

An additional initiative was an Elementary Education Master’s Degree cohort designed to meet the specific needs of the urban educator. Classes for the participating teachers were completed at the charter school site. Faculty served dual roles, providing mentoring and consultation during the school day, and serving as an instructor for several of the courses during the degree program. University faculty had the opportunity to interact with urban educators and students, while providing graduate level course work to teachers working at the school. University and charter school staffs were able to collaborate and reflect on best practice to promote student learning and achievement. Charter school teachers were offered an opportunity to meet face-to-face with their graduate level instructors throughout the instructional day. The job-embedded approach to graduate level coursework offered graduate students the experience and support needed to address the unique challenges often found in an urban core educational setting.

Practicum Experiences for Pre-service Teachers. Early in its sponsoring tenure, UCM received a grant from the Hall Family Foundations (Hallmark Cards) to support field experiences to the urban charter schools, providing funding for transportation and a program coordinator. Following the grant, UCM has continued to provide field experiences for its education majors, requiring urban, suburban, and rural experiences for all its degree completers. The charter schools provide the primary source of urban field experiences for UCM education majors.

Faculty members accompany the undergraduate students in the field experiences, spending the day at an urban site, shadowing students and interacting with urban educators. Personnel from the Charter School Office assist with organizing the trips, provide orientations to the students and faculty, and conduct follow-up evaluations of the urban field experiences.

Scholarship Initiatives

Urban education, and especially the school choice arena, is ripe with research opportunities. The first major research project involving the UCM faculty and the charter schools was a collaborative venture with faculty members pairing up with charter school operators to document the initial year of charter school operations (Sluder, Thomas, & Snyder, 2001). This collaborative effort resulted in a comprehensive book documenting key events of each school's inception and the first year of operations as a public charter school. Subsequent research projects have led to publications as well as numerous national and international presentations on charter school issues, including oversight, academic programs, growth measures, leadership studies, global patterns of school choice, re-segregation trends, and charter schools designed to serve refugee and immigrant students.

Service Opportunities

There are numerous opportunities for service oriented ventures associated with the authorization and ongoing support of public charter schools. As schools are created and grow, there is a constant demand for professional development at all levels. There are two primary avenues for service for university faculty and professional staff-- one avenue supporting the university in completing its regulatory and oversight roles; and another providing support for the public charter schools. The following section provides an overview of key service opportunities made available to the UCM faculty and professional staff.

Oversight Teams. Oversight team members often include faculty and professional staff selected from various academic disciplines that align with their respective responsibilities. For example, faculty members from the School Administration program provide fiscal, governance, and board policy reviews. Other College of Education faculty members have provided assessments of curriculum, professional development, and academic accountability. Oversight members are charged with serious and significant responsibilities. Any discrepancies or weaknesses identified during an operational review are provided to the UCM Charter School Office, the lead administrator of the school, and the governing board of the school. A noted operational

deficiency will trigger consequences, including action steps for program improvement. Serious issues place the school on probationary status.

Charter school oversight represents an important quality assurance role for sponsoring agencies. Members of the UCM oversight teams have extensive background for the role they serve. The on-site activities of the members involve detailed and meticulous work that requires patience, skill and a willingness to prepare a report with integrity. Members of the team understand the nature of the work involved and the magnitude of the responsibility associated with the oversight of public charter schools.

In addition to institutional benefits, there are also clear benefits to university staff participating within the charter oversight processes. Members of the oversight team have an opportunity to expand their knowledge of urban education, observe various approaches to delivering instruction to students, as well as stay up to date on certification, personnel, special education, school law, and other school related issues. Most importantly, university personnel have firsthand professional experiences within the school choice arena. Specific opportunities provided by UCM associated connections with charter school communities and stakeholders revealed areas to support charter schools through teaching, scholarship, and service.

Professional Development. Service initiatives provided by professional development and consultation opportunities abound within the charter school arena. Charter schools flourish in areas where the traditional public schools have struggled with academic performance and public support. Charter schools, especially those directly connected to the University, are often eager to engage with college departments, professional development centers, or specific faculty members on school improvement initiatives. There were many opportunities provided by UCM associated connections with charter school communities to address service initiatives, such as providing in-service for literacy training, curriculum, data driven school improvement, and school board training.

Beginning Teacher Mentoring. Beginning teacher induction and mentoring opportunities offered through the UCM Charter School Office were organized and presented through the Regional and Professional Development Office. Beginning teachers joined in the mentoring sessions on a voluntary basis, but with school support and encouragement. These new teacher participants met with their mentor teachers on a monthly basis. University faculty members were encouraged to participate when appropriate, as well. At each session, a facilitator offered support during

sessions for collaboration. Both the mentor and mentee interacted during learning community experiences. Throughout the first two-year process, documentation was collected which yielded positive feedback for teacher efficacy. As a result, this project expanded over a several year period.

Leadership Collaboration. Leadership support offered through the direction of the College of Education Charter School Office, university faculty and staff offered levels of support for charter school leadership. These consultants, instructors, and facilitators met collectively with charter school leaders, creating an ongoing forum to discuss and address a wide array of issues and challenges encountered within the urban education and school choice arenas. The charter school leaders received the feedback from this collaborative initiative in a positive light.

Governance Support. Apparent from the beginning, charter school governance and procedural support was as an area of need. UCM collaborated with other sponsoring institutions to provide guidance for members of the different governing boards to address this need. Over several years, the Support for effective governance of the charter schools has transitioned over the years, moving from large group in-services to individual board sessions, to strategic planning facilitation. The well-received training sessions continue as a key coaching scaffold for UCM charter schools.

Community Partnerships. Numerous community service agencies have voiced an interest in supporting urban schools and more specifically inner-city education initiatives. Through its connections with the schools, community partnerships offer support to charter schools in a number of ways. Charter schools have received many hours of volunteer services from community and student organizations, effectively engaging community stakeholders in the learning process.

In addition, UCM has been able to form stark relations with community service organizations in Kansas City who are associated with the schools, such as the Guadalupe Center, Della Lamb Community Services, and Don Bosco Centers. These, and other community service organizations, have been providing support to needy neighborhoods for many years. The charter legislation allowed community service organizations to extend their support into public education opportunities geared toward serving historically underserved populations. Subsequently, charter sponsorship brought the University in direct contact with key stakeholders within these different services organizations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2015) offered, “successful charter schools are growing in number and expand the evidence base that schools and communities can organize and operate public schools that deliver the academic progress their students need to be successful in school, work, and life” (p. 7). University authorizers are in a unique position to hold charters accountable for student success while at the same time providing levels of support to these charters. Students at-risk of failure in the public school system include many children who are in poverty – “the correlations are consistent with the expressed mission of many urban charter school operators to provide high-quality education choices specifically for these students” (p. 43). The focus to maintain charter status must be to provide options for quality school choice to students who may without this option fail in the public school system. There is evidence successful charter schools follow a similar path. University authorizers can guide charter schools on this path through a collaborative partnership to advocate for student success.

The UCM endeavors with its public charter schools have provided clear evidence of effective levels of support and beneficial partnerships. Many collaborative initiatives were organized and implemented to support inner-city charter schools. Professional development, beginning teacher mentoring, leadership preparation program, governing board training, and partnerships with community service agencies were initiated and implemented as effective supports for charter schools. Stemming from the findings of these experiences, the authors forward the following recommendations regarding policies and practices associated with the authorization of public charter schools by institutions of higher education.

- Teaching - Colleges of education should examine the unique needs of educators within the school choice environment and adjust their teacher preparation and leader preparation programs accordingly. Charter schools can provide ideal settings for productive and collaborative practicum experiences for pre-service teacher preparation students. Charter educators encountered unique challenges, providing the impetus for unique graduate degree offerings.
- Scholarship - University faculty should consider the rich scholarship and research environment within the school choice educational arena. Key research topics could

include the effect of choice on the overall educational status of a community, effective and ineffective charter schools, preparation issues for teachers and school leaders, charter school demographics, school funding issues, and the re-segregation of schools.

University personnel should also examine grant opportunities with charter schools. As both schools of choice and as schools often designed to serve high risk student populations, charter schools provide many opportunities for grant funded initiatives.

- Service - Universities should seek out and encourage service opportunities for faculty and professional staff. As noted, there are two avenues for service. One area of service would include opportunities to support the university in completing its regulatory and oversight roles, such as serving on oversight teams or conducting operational reviews. Another avenue of service opportunities would be geared toward supporting the charter schools in addressing the needs of its students, staff, and community at-large.

As noted earlier, the UCM community determined involvement with charter schools aligned with its mission, including the need to support the schools, and specifically the educators and students they serve (Thomas & Machell, 2001). Serving as a charter school authorizer can be an effective investment of time, expertise, and resources that serve both the missions of the public charter schools and of the University. Coupled with the statutory mandate for effective oversight are ample opportunities for teaching, scholarship, and service. Indeed, university authorizers are in a unique position to collaborate with charter schools, community partners, and state agencies to provide educational support and innovation for some of our nation's most needy communities and students.

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Dr. David E. Whale, Editor
The Charter Schools Resource Journal
Central Michigan University
College of Education and Human Services
whale1de@cmich.edu
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