

Charter Schools in the United States

Review of Related Literature

Patricia Murthy

Dowling College

EDU 9817 – Dr. Robert Manley

### Introduction

“Rules are not necessarily sacred, principles are.” These words of Franklin D. Roosevelt may be referenced when considering the foundation of charter Schools. However, the controversy that exists in response to charter schools is as polarized as the red and blue state map on Election Day. Though views and opinions may vary, the fact is that the number of charters across the United States has increased dramatically in the past 10 years.

According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, in 2002/2003, there were roughly 685,000 students who attended charter schools nationwide. That number increased by 2011/12 to an estimated 2 million students within the 5600 charters now existing. In the 2011/12 school year alone, the number of students enrolled in charters increased by 200,000, a 13% growth in one year and another 400,000 students remained on waitlists. Whether or not charters are the panacea for public school ills, these numbers have a substantial impact on education and opinions of both educators and families will be formulated on current research and trends..

A resounding generalization that often clouds the assessment of charter Schools is the precept that charters do not have to follow the same rules imposed upon the public school sector, thereby creating an *apples and oranges* comparison. The fact that charters are not subject to many of the government imposed mandates somewhat blurs the line of similarity with public schools. One question prevails regardless of the school sector in focus: how does it impact student achievement? So then, it is not a question of which rules are followed or which are allowed remission but the guiding principle must be: are kids learning and if so, by what measure of success.

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The literature reviewed for the purpose of this paper indicates that as the presence of the charter becomes more prevalent in our society so too is the need for research and development with respect to it. The charter is becoming a force to be reckoned with and the necessity of solid data as it pertains to student achievement and school success is crucial. The following research related to charter schools addressed principal leadership and emotional intelligence, student perception of school climate, teacher turnover rates and influences on parental choices.

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Leadership has a profound effect on the success of any organization and in education studies have been conducted to examine the role of principals in schools. Further, a closer look at the impact of Emotional Intelligence (EI) on leadership has resulted in some profound findings. The research conducted by Robert Pittman (2012) examined the relationship of the EI of principals at charter school with student performance using Goleman's (2004) theory of emotional intelligence. Pittman's dissertation studied data collected from principals of 94 charter schools in Texas, who completed the Mayer-Solavey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test [MSCEIT] to measure EI. Student achievement data was collected from 2009-10 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). He used a correlation approach since the variables, student achievement (dependent variable), principal EI (independent variable) and open enrollment charter schools status (moderating variable) were measurable.

The data were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA with Pearson product to determine correlation coefficients ( $r$ ). Though the study did not indicate a correlation between principal EI and student performance in open enrollment charter schools (all  $p$  values were greater than .05)

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supplemental analyses revealed some significance. The analysis indicated that older principals tended to have lower scores than younger principals in the areas of Understanding Emotions, Strategic Reasoning and composite EI scores.

The researcher grappled with the possibility that the context of climate and culture may affect the development of emotionally intelligent leaders and suggested further studies on a larger scale (beyond Texas). Pittman asserts that EI is especially important for the charter principal because the challenges faced are uniquely different than in public school, due to extreme budget challenges, high percentages of at-risk students. The research findings revealed a need for a broader sampling.

Another area of research examination was that of Patricia Lundeen (2012) who determined that it was as important to look at the primary group affected by the school environment and that is the student. Specifically she studied Middle School students' perceptions of satisfaction with their charter school experience. Specifically, how the convenient sample population's (ultimately 90 middle school students) perceptions relate to school success, safety and physical environment, school climate and the student-teacher relationship. By examining the responses of two survey instruments (Barrett, 2003, Austin ISD, 2008) that measured student perceptions as it related to the charter school and school climate respectively.

The literature review focused mainly on the student-teacher relationship as a predictor of student satisfaction and that attachment and bonding are key aspects. Other studies included findings with respect specifically to middle school students having the lowest levels of engagement and overall satisfaction, with the role of teacher caring as a strong predictor to these. Successful teaching practices were also linked to school satisfaction and the review of the

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literature in this area was also extensive. School size and perceptions of school safety had an inverse relationship, and school attendance correlates with parent opinion of teacher quality, which are areas of importance when considering predictors of student perceptions about school climate.

The researcher also conducted a multivariate analysis of variance to analyze whether a relationship existed between socioeconomic factors such as race, gender and ethnicity with student perceptions of charter school experience. The findings were not significant when looked at as single independent variables, however when ethnicity and gender were analyzed in conjunction, there was significance. For the most part, student perception of the charter school climate was mainly positive indicating that the experience for middle school students was beneficial.

Teacher retention appears to be of a greater challenge in the charter school setting than that of the public sector, though teacher retention in general is an important concern for impact on student achievement and performance. Stuit and Smith (2012) addressed this issue in their study of teacher turnover rates differ in charter and public schools and sought to identify factors that explained the differences. The data from the National Center for Education Statistic' (NCES) 2003-2004, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS and Teacher follow-up Survey (TFS) were analyzed.

The statistical findings in terms of percentages are daunting. Using a multi-nomial logistic regression, it was found that the odds that a charter teacher was 132% greater than a traditional public school teacher to leave the profession and the odds of moving schools are 76% greater. The analysis confirmed that this "turnover gap" was mainly due to the differences in the

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types of teachers charters hire verses public schools and that it was mainly voluntary and dysfunctional in charter verses public schools.

The literature review focused on teacher turnover rates with respect to experience level, strong academic backgrounds, and organizational conditions such as cohesion and trust among staff members. Also differences between the teacher turnover rates were analyzed between charters. The researchers postulated that teachers hired at charters tended to be younger and less experienced than public school teachers. This was a contributing factor to the results. Another factor that was considered post the enactment of No Child Left Behind, was that charters attempted to comply with the “certified teacher” requirement which may have led to involuntary leaving of the profession. Other factors such as high work-load and “burnout” were also cited as a concern for charter teachers as well as higher class sizes. In this study, the descriptive statistics spoke volumes on the number of teachers leaving charter schools in general.

The implications of this study coincide with studies on the negative effects of teacher turnover rates on student performance and achievement.

Another study of interest was one that identified and examined the factors that influence parental choice of a charter school (Ekanem 2013). This was specific to parents of students who attended a particular charter in Delaware. A survey was distributed to 300 parents and 270 were completed and returned. Questions included reasons for the choice and features of the school that appealed to them when making the choice. Frequency distributions of the survey items were computed and analyzed. The results were such that small class size, before and after school programs and opportunities for parental involvement all played a role in the parental choice. It was also interesting to note that along with class size, sports and school leadership were

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considered important features of the school while quality of teaching, school facilities and technology were the least important.

This study was specific to one particular charter school in one state, so the results may not be broadly applied to parental choice in other places for other schools. It was suggested by the researcher that this school could use the data from the study to develop “new and improved marketing strategies” (pg.4) to increase future student enrollment. This dissertation devoted much of the discussion to the history, formation and rules regarding charters as well as charters within Delaware (the location of the charter of the study).

It was acknowledged that a threat to validity was that the sample population had selection bias and that the findings could not be generalized. The initial intent of the study was to include 6 charter schools however, for varied reasons it resulted in just one. The researcher suggested broadening future examination to include public schools or other private institutions.

### Final Comments

The four dissertations reviewed for this assignment revealed interesting, *unchartered waters* of current charter research. The studies here provided a springboard of ideas for further investigation into the growing trend of charter schools in the United States. Though the sentiment surrounding the concept of an alternative to public education that may actually be viable is somewhat clouded, this is an area that needs firm research. The discussion of leadership, teacher turnover, and student and parent perceptions with respect to charters is timely and relevant. As the charter school movement has increased so has public interest, and ultimately it is the “red or blue” dichotomy of public opinion that causes much tension. It appears current

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research will be both necessary and relevant in order to truly analyze whether the charter school success is that of the *movement* or that of individual schools.

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