

A Study of a Charter School

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ABSTRACT

Charter school laws explicitly addressed improving not only student achievement but also the attitudes and behavior of students enrolled. This study was designed to examine if the attitudes and behavior of students in one charter school improved over a time-period of three years. The sponsor was required to conduct an evaluation of each charter school sponsored. This required evaluation was conducted July 1, 2000, through June 30, 2003, and was primarily concerned with the academic achievement of students. The evaluation committee also conducted research to determine if any changes occurred in the attitudes and behavior of the students. The charter school is a non-profit charter school located in south St. Louis. The charter school is serving approximately 200 students in grades six, seven and eight. Thirty-one of the sixth grade students enrolled in the school year 2000-01 were enrolled as eighth graders in the school year 2002-2003. All of the students enrolled in the academy meet the criteria of at-risk students.

Introduction and Background of Study

Beginning in the 1970's, Kansas City and St. Louis City Public Schools were supervised by two federal courts to ensure the improvement of student achievement and desegregation of these two urban school districts. Neither urban school district achieved the results established by the federal courts. The Kansas City and St. Louis school districts received over three billion dollars in funding during the 1970's, 80's and 90's from the state of Missouri to improve student achievement and the desegregation of the student population. State funding to support desegregation of both urban school districts began to be phased out in fiscal year 2000. Even with over three billion dollars, the urban school districts in Kansas City and City of St. Louis have been either un-accredited or provisionally accredited throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and

1990s. This lack of improvement created dissatisfaction in the Missouri legislature with Kansas City and St. Louis city schools and led to the passage of Missouri's charter school legislation (Niedowski, 1998).

The Missouri legislature in 1998 passed legislation permitting the establishment of charter schools in a metropolitan school district or in an urban school district containing a city with a population greater than three hundred fifty thousand inhabitants. Many requirements mandated for public schools, were eliminated for charter schools. The most important requirement eliminated was the supervision of charter schools by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. This oversight responsibility was assigned to the sponsor (Missouri Revised Statutes, 160.400).

Charter schools in Missouri are independent public schools located in the school districts of St. Louis City and Kansas City. Charter schools may not charge tuition and are free and open to all residents of St. Louis and Kansas City school districts or who are eligible to attend a district school under a voluntary desegregation program. Charter schools are required by law to accept and to meet the needs of special needs children and may not have admission requirements. Enrollment is limited only by capacity. Missouri's first charter schools opened in the fall of 1999 (Missouri Revised Statutes, 160.410).

Purpose of the Study

Ten to twelve years ago, most research regarding charter schools focused on whether this new type of public education was worthwhile. Recent research reviewed more closely what happens inside the charter schools. This study will evaluate the change in attitudes and behavior, if any, of students that were enrolled in one charter school for a period of three years, grades 6-8.

Charter school laws passed in many states explicitly addressed improving not only student achievement but also the attitudes and behavior of students enrolled. This study was designed to examine if the attitudes and behavior of students in one charter school in St. Louis, Lift For Life Academy, improved over a time-period of three years. Southeast Missouri State University, as the sponsor, was required to conduct an evaluation of each charter school sponsored by the university. This required evaluation was conducted during the time period of July 1, 2000, through June 30, 2003, and was primarily concerned with the academic achievement of students. The evaluation committee also conducted research to determine if any changes occurred in the attitudes and behavior of the students. Unlike the research by Finn and Kanstoroom in 2002, which was primarily about how charter schools assemble and deploy the professional staff, this research compared the perceptions of parents, teachers and administration about aspects of their school environment.

Demographics

Lift For Life Academy is a non-profit charter school located in south St. Louis. Currently, the academy is serving approximately 200 students in grades six, seven and eight. Thirty-one of the sixth grade students enrolled in the school year 2000-01 are currently enrolled as eighth graders in the school year 2002-2003. The average daily attendance percentage of sixth graders, enrolled in 2000-01 school year, was 91 percent. The average daily attendance percentage of eighth graders, enrolled in 2002-03 school year, was 91 percent. Students at the academy were tested with the Terra Nova (norm-referenced test). Data provided indicated

individual student growth. The academy also provided a quintile analysis of Terra Nova score, which indicated that students are moving from lower test scores (quintiles) to high scores. A longitudinal study comparing achievement data of the sixth graders enrolled in 2000-01 to the achievement data of the eighth graders enrolled in 2002-03 show gains across all subject areas. Currently, ninety-two percent of the students enrolled at the academy are eligible for free or reduced lunches. All of the students enrolled in the academy meet the criteria of at-risk students.

Research Questions

The study posed three research questions concerning the Lift For Life charter school being studied.

1. Why did the parents choose to send their children to Lift For Life Academy?
2. Did Lift For Life Academy influence the attitudes and behaviors of students attending the program as perceived by parents, teachers and administrative personnel?
3. Did parents perceive their sons/daughters received a better education when attending Lift For Life Academy than in the school(s) previously attended?

Review of Literature

Casey reported in a study of Charter Schools in New Mexico that most charter schools are much smaller than their public school counterparts and this certainly has an effect on the educational experience of students enrolled. Charter school students are known by nearly the entire school community. Being known to others helps develop a sense of belonging and contributes to the development of a learning community. Smaller size allows for better monitoring of student behaviors, attitudes and academic achievement. Parents have a perception of being welcome in smaller schools, and their relationships with the administrators, faculty, and staff are perceived as "closer." Small schools appear to be more responsive to the needs of both students and parents so that levels of satisfaction with the charter schools are high (Casey, 2002).

Minnesota's experience with small charter schools was similar to that of New Mexico. In Minnesota, various educational organizations noted that the charter law prompted school districts to change. One change was the creation of small alternative charter schools and regional learning centers for students who were not succeeding. In this same research, principals, teachers and parents agreed or strongly agreed that students gained and behavior and attitudes improved because of a smaller and caring school environment (Nathan, 2003).

Research and Training Associates, Incorporated was contracted by Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to conduct a six-month study of Kansas City, Missouri, charter schools, as required by the Missouri charter school legislation. Obtaining information from parents of charter school students proved difficult because of the limited number of charter schools and the short period of time that charter schools have been operating in Missouri. Some schools had already conducted parent surveys; others were attempting to develop a survey that combined the items required for evaluation purposes with items that provided data needed by the school to improve services. Among the five schools that surveyed parents within the study period, parents reported to be satisfied with many aspects of the charter school.

However, teachers and administrators stated that more than half of all charter schools encounter unexpectedly difficult challenges from the students who attend them, primarily from the large numbers of disadvantaged and at-risk pupils (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2001).

Casey found that students' attitudes about school were generally more favorable than when they attend public schools. The majority of the students believed that teachers' expectations for them were high. When asked to compare their charter school with their previous public school, students (grades 4-9) gave significantly higher ratings to their charter school than to the public school previously attended. The students perceived the work in charter schools to be more challenging, interesting and more worthwhile than their studies in public schools previously attended (Casey, 2002).

Methodology

The study was conducted using a phenomenological design resulting in a description of themes or patterns. A qualitative design was chosen for this study based on the assumptions described by Creswell (1994). These assumptions are as follows: Reality is subjective and multiple as seen by participants in the study; the researcher interacts with that being researched; research is value laden and biased; research is informal with evolving decisions about sample size, questioning strategies, and research questions and this method is inductive, emerging design, context bound, and accurate and reliable through verification.

The primary objective of the study was to understand the parents', teachers' and administrators' perspectives of the attitude and behavior changes of the students from when they entered the charter school at the beginning of sixth grade to near the end of their eighth grade year. The objective was also to examine the perceptions of parents as to whether or not their sons/daughters were receiving a better education than in the schools previously attended.

Participants were chosen using snowball and purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 1990). Initially, parents and teachers were chosen based on recommendations from the principal. Others were chosen to interview as parents and teachers recommended others to be interviewed. Six parents, two teachers, and the director of the school were interviewed. All of those interviewed had been participating in the school since it opened in 2000. This was done because the children had been in the school for all three years of its existence and the teachers and director had been at the school since it opened.

Standardized open-ended interviews were used as the dominant strategy to gather data in the participant's own words. This interview technique was chosen to "minimize interviewer effects by asking the same question of each respondent" (Patton, 1990, p. 285). This was considered important because of the researchers' direct involvement with the school in that they both serve on the University Charter School Evaluation Committee that reviews and approves the Charter. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was informed of the purpose for the interview and assurances were made that the content of the interview would be treated confidentially (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes, and responses were recorded. Shortly after the interviews, the tapes were transcribed. The interviews were conducted in the charter school building.

Data were analyzed using Tesch's eight steps to consider when coding (Creswell, 1994). In addition the research questions helped to define the coding categories. All of the transcriptions were read thoroughly to get a sense of the complete picture. Some ideas were recorded during this initial reading. One transcript was then selected to read in detail for themes and trends. Notes about key words and phrases that indicated a possible theme were made on a separate sheet. Several transcripts were then read and notes were made about possible themes. When this was

completed these key works and phrases from the initial reading and the detailed reading were examined to determine if there were clusters of themes and trends.

Four clusters were identified and each cluster was assigned a number code. At that point each transcript was read in detail and number codes were assigned to statements in the interview transcripts. The data belonging to each category were listed on a single list for each category and the lists were examined. Additional clusters were identified within each category and the findings were written in the following section of this paper.

Findings

A close examination of the data revealed several findings. Some of the findings relate directly to the research questions. However, there were other findings that do not directly relate to the research questions but were significant enough to warrant some attention.

The data were very consistent that attitudes and behavior of the students had improved considerably since entering the charter school in the sixth grade. Both parents and school personnel indicated there were improved attitudes toward school both at school and at home and the behavior was better than when the students entered the school in 2000.

Many of the parents talked about how their children had matured during the three years at the school. They recognized there was some natural maturing with age, but they were of the opinion that the school was responsible for much of the maturity. The director of the school emphasized that students had grown in personal character and personal growth. The comments about improved attitudes and behavior can be summed up by the following comments about the students: Improved attitude, more responsible at home and school, confidences improved, learned self control, positive about school and sense of pride.

The parents gave a great deal of the credit to the school staff for the change in the students' attitude about school and their improved behavior. This is consistent with the findings of Finn and Kanstoroom (2002) who found that the teachers in charter schools tended to fit the mission of the school and were willing to put in long hours to help students. Parents in Lift For Life Academy indicated that teachers had high expectations for the students and there was better follow-up if there was a problem whether it is absences, not doing their work, or misbehaving.

Parents indicated that students had come to the charter school in 2000 from a variety of school settings, some from traditional public schools, some from other charter schools, and some from magnet schools. When asked why they chose to apply for admission to the charter school they gave a variety of reasons. Some of the reasons mentioned most were: Transportation, lack of confidences in the public schools, new and different, could not afford parochial school, smaller classes and problems in previous schools.

Overall the parents expressed significant satisfaction with the charter school. They were very satisfied with the staff and they follow through on problems related to student learning and discipline. Both parents and staff indicated that classes were smaller than in the public schools and students received more individual attention. This was consistent with the Finn and Kanstoroom (2002) study.

The parent interviews indicated that parent participation was better than observed in previous schools attended. Two particular events were mentioned as evidence of this, the awards night and the high school night for eighth graders. According to parents both events were well attended by parents.

Conclusion

There were various reasons for the parents choosing to send their children to Lift For Life Academy. They ranged from transportation to not believing in the public schools. Overall, one conclusion can be drawn from this study. The parents were looking for an alternative to the inner city public schools and they could not afford a private or parochial school.

Both the parents and staff interviewed in this study made strong statements that the attitudes and behavior of the eighth grade students at Lift For Life Academy have improved significantly in the three years since they entered the school. This improved attitude and behavior is displayed both at school and at home. Such statements as: More responsible at home; confidence has improved, better self control, and sense of pride seemed to characterize the attitude of the interviewees about the improved attitudes and behavior of the students.

The third research question deals with the perceptions of parents about the education of their children at Lift For Life Academy. The evidence was overwhelming that parents interviewed for this study were very satisfied with the education at Lift For Life Academy and that it was better than what they were receiving at their previous school. Their positive perceptions revolve around the belief that the teachers at Lift For Life Academy care more, the teachers go out of their way to help kids, classes are smaller, teachers are absent less, principal and teachers follow up better with parents, and they teach students about real life. This is very consistent with the findings of Finn, Manno, and Bierlein (1996) in their Hudson Institute study, the Bomotti, Ginsberg, and Cobb (1999) study, Casey (2002) study, Adler and Seok-woo Kwan (2002) study, Bryk and Schneider (2002) study and Alex and Merrell's (2004) study where students, who had been unsuccessful and unhappy in other schools seem generally satisfied with the education they are receiving in the charter schools.

Charter schools in Missouri are still in the earliest stages when compared to Minnesota and California. Missouri's charter schools appear to offer a viable educational alternative for urban students. Most parents interviewed perceived the charter schools in Missouri to provide "schools of choice" and within the means of parents who could not afford private or parochial schools. For many students and families, charter schools provide a high-quality education while remaining within the public school system. For those students enrolled in Missouri's charter schools, the state's initiatives in the area of urban public school choice have had positive effects on both students and parents.

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