

Superintendents' Perceptions of Charter School Effects on Traditional Public Schools in South Texas

Joel Nava, EdD
Journalism Teacher
Weslaco High School
Weslaco, Texas

Don Jones, EdD
Associate Professor
Doctor of Educational Leadership Program
Texas A&M University – Kingsville

Lori Kupczynski, EdD
Professor
Doctor of Education Program
University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences

Gerri Maxwell, PhD
Professor and Chair
Doctor of Educational Leadership Department
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

Abstract

Charter schools in South Texas are increasing in popularity, thereby increasing their enrollment and adversely affecting the enrollment of their neighboring traditional public schools. This study presents the perspectives of the lived experiences that traditional public school district superintendents' have of the effects caused by charter school presence in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. The study drew perceptions from eight superintendents from across two counties in South Texas. The process of change as described by Fullan (2007) was used as a lens through which the data was analyzed.

Keywords: public schools, charter schools, superintendent

Traditional public schools struggle to be successful despite multiple efforts by the federal government to turnaround struggling schools in need (Berends, 2015; Eyles, Hupkau, & Machin, 2015; Gleason, 2017; Godsey, 2015; Wolf, Maloney, May, & DeAngelis, 2017). Financial inefficiencies within traditional public schools may largely be attributed to the lack of competition within the educational field. This factor helped to spark the growth of charter schools, which affords students options especially with regard to students who have not been successful in

traditional school settings (Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2008; Kreighbaum, 2013). The research on whether charter schools offer a better academic outcome than do traditional public schools is polarized, as some students perform better on standardized tests in charter schools, while others do not (Barden & Lassmann, 2016). Berends (2015) suggested that the growth of charter schools could be attributed to national leaders promoting charter schools to families. Policies favoring privatization have emerged primarily because public schools were failing to maintain support and approval of the public due to limited options, poor management, little accountability, and heavy bureaucracy (Krethmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2014). Charter schools in South Texas are increasing in popularity, experiencing enrollment gains, and, consequently, adversely affecting the enrollment of their neighboring traditional public schools.

The study focused on two neighboring counties in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. One public school district within the geographic area of the study experienced a decrease in student enrollment of 1,787 and another experienced a decrease of 3,001 between the 2010-2011 and 2016-2017 school years, while a neighboring charter school district had an increase in student enrollment of 22,479, drawing enrollment from public school districts from both of these aforementioned districts as well as other surrounding counties. State generated data showed that charter schools in South Texas increased their enrollment steadily over the last 10 years at the expense of traditional public school enrollment (Texas Education Agency, 2017). According to Krethmar et al. (2014), reasons for this trend include perceived failure of public schools to maintain the support and approval of the public. Another trend could be that parents are exercising their right to choose the schooling for their children and are increasingly choosing charter schools over public schools for various reasons (Berends, 2015).

The various perspectives that traditional public school superintendents have of charter schools' impact on their school districts were studied. School superintendents were purposely selected to engage on this topic as the chief operating officers of these school districts overseeing all aspects potentially impacted by the growth in charter school popularity (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The two neighboring counties were chosen for the study because their combined population of 1.2 million is within range of the six most populated counties across Texas (www.census.gov). While charter schools are public schools, for the sake of brevity, traditional public schools will be referred to as public schools and charter schools as charter schools throughout this article.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to articulate perceptions by school district superintendents in South Texas about the effects that charter school presence might have on their school districts. Through qualitative study, superintendents' lived experiences and perceptions were gathered and presented, informing an oftentimes tenuous understanding of the relationship between charter schools and public schools. Gaining clarity on superintendents' perceptions informed a tenuous understanding of the relationships between charter and public schools and contributes to the extant literature providing insight with regard to the effect that charter schools have on traditional public schools.

Review of Literature

Background

Ray Budde is credited for introducing the term “charter” to education during the 1970’s (Dent, 2014). His idea afforded teachers the opportunity to reach contract arrangements with their local school districts to explore innovative pedagogical methods and strategies for improved educational outcomes, providing teachers with an increased responsibility over the curriculum and instruction in exchange for increased accountability for student achievement. His idea was realized some 20 years later and has become something he never intended it to become, a system of schools separate and apart from traditional public school districts (Saulny, 2005).

Change is Conceptualized

One change to the education system of the United States over the last twenty-five years was the introduction and evolution of charter schools. They were introduced to the United States in the state of Minnesota in 1991 as an effort to improve the public school system by creating competition (Dent, 2014; Kelley & Demorest, 2016; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farell, 2015). Competition was something that public schools had generally not been familiar with up until that point. Charter schools are publicly funded, tuition free, and some are privately managed (Gallo, 2014; Kelley & Demorest, 2016; Mayo, 2015). Being privately managed allows private entities to profit from the management of these schools. Laws that govern charter schools differ among states, although charter schools are generally exempt from some rules and laws that govern traditional public schools, allowing them to create and enact their own policies (Jha & Buckingham, 2015; Wolf, 2015). An example of a law that differs between the two is that charter schools may limit their enrollment, while public schools cannot (Booker et al., 2008).

Similarities, Differences, & Funding

Public schools and charter schools are similar in that they are both subsidized by a combination of federal and state taxes (Green, Baker, & Oluwole 2013). The federal government grants monies to each state. In 2016, Texas received \$39.5 billion in federal grants of which more than 95% were used in health and human services, transportation, and in public and higher education (McPherson & Wright, 2017). Public schools have the authority to impose a local tax by taxing local property, where the designated portion of the tax is then allotted to the public schools. Charter schools do not have this same authority. Combining the federal grants and the state and local tax revenues designated for education, the state distributes funding for its school districts basing the funding for each school district on many factors, but primarily on the attendance of each student enrolled. Daily attendance for students is reported to the Texas Education Agency where funding is based on the Average Daily Attendance or ADA (Texas Education Code [TEC], Chapter 12).

Charter schools are considered schools of choice, meaning parents chose to send their children there, whereas traditional public schools used geography to zone students (Readler & Grose, 2014). Charter schools are then categorized somewhere between private schools and public schools although they are funded and regulated by the state, which qualifies them as public schools (Wolf, 2015). Texas charter schools provide students with the opportunity to acquire the mandated

education without bureaucracy, hierarchy, and the authoritative rule of public schools (Cowen, Fleming, & Gofen, 2008). Six counties across Texas contain over 50% of its population - Bexar, Dallas, El Paso, Harris, Tarrant, and Travis. It was within these same counties that large cities such as Houston, Dallas, El Paso, San Antonio, and Austin house the largest concentration of charter schools (Barden & Lassmann, 2016). Each of these populated areas has a concentration of just over one million in them.

Method

Research Question

The following overarching research question was used to guide this study:

RQ: What are the perceptions of public school superintendents in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas about charter school's impact on public school districts?

Setting, Population/Participants

The study consisted of open-ended questioning, in semi-structured, one-hour-long interviews for eight of 25 potential participants, school district superintendents. The school district superintendents were purposively selected within two counties in South Texas (Erlandson et al., 1993; Saldana, 2013, 2015). Of those 25 potential participants, the target was to interview eight participants. The participants ranged in years of experience as school district superintendents from first year superintendents to over 20 years of experience as superintendents (see Appendix). A consent form was used to maintain proper documentation that each participant was participating voluntarily, and that each participant was over the age of 18.

Research Design and Approach

Researchers uncovered the perceptions of public school superintendents with regard to the impact that charter schools have on public school districts by using qualitative research and naturalistic inquiry techniques. The phenomenological nature of the study included interpretations of the lived experiences by the participants toward the effects of the emergence of charter schools (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Slattery, 2013).

Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis

Using an interview protocol consisting of 12 questions, the semi structured interviews were conducted with each willing participant in their office over a two-and a-half month period. The open-ended questioning addressed the effects that charter school presence had on their student enrollment, the campuses, the budget, and the adjustments that they have made in their school districts as well as the adjustments that they foresaw. The questions in the protocol were directed at generating responses from the participants about the effects that charter schools are having on their school districts. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and then transcribed, coded, and themed using transcribing and coding software. Each transcription was sent to the corresponding superintendent for verification of accuracy of their responses. After the first round

of analysis and coding, the second round of coding took place, where some of the codes generated in the first round were grouped, consolidated, or renamed. The transcriptions that included the codes were printed and analyzed for similarities, patterns were examined, and codes that appeared more than once were merged or in some instances renamed. After the second round of coding, prints of the transcriptions including the first and second round of codes were made, analyzed, and noted to categorize the codes. Once coding and categorization were complete, themes were generated, and assertions were made. The identity of the participants as well as their district's name was protected by assigning pseudonyms for both the school district as well as the participant. A journal, the transcriptions and the coding files were kept in a secure location (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldana, 2013).

Results

The response of each participant for each of the questions varied but commonalities were clear. Differences in facial expressions, physical gestures, personal presence, and even office décor accented each of the participant's personalities, but their consensus was that charter school presence was affecting their own and neighboring school districts, to varying levels but with noticeable effects. The data presented the following themes:

1. the competition posed by charter schools led to traditional public schools' focus on improvement,
2. charter schools used marketing effectively,
3. an appetite for choice existed, and
4. decreased enrollment was the most financially damaging effect on public schools.

Themes

Competition led to school improvements. Virtually all participants in the study conceded an optimistic perspective of a charter school effect, that charter school presence led them to strive to become better at everything. Each superintendent felt their school district was making improvements and working harder to make changes that may have otherwise not been made.

Superintendents welcomed competition. The participants expressed a welcoming spirit for the competition that was being posed by charter schools. All participants expected a positive effect. They viewed competition as good and healthy. In the past, school districts did not sense it necessary to compete for students. Charter school presence and the competition they posed led to improvement.

Effective marketing. The competition between these two types of schools revealed lessons that public schools could learn from charter schools. One of those lessons was the use of effective marketing techniques to promote themselves and their accomplishments by the charter schools.

Convincing parents. Charter schools convinced parents and students through marketing that they were the better choice and offered a better opportunity for students. They drew students from public school districts and into their schools.

Community relations. Superintendents used social media to communicate the proper messages relatively quickly and inexpensively. By communicating with the community, a superintendent was afforded the opportunity to develop and to strengthen relationships.

Student selection and recruitment. The participants expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that charter schools had the option and often exercised their ability to return students who were not performing up to their standards back to their home public schools. This practice kept charter school's scores from dropping. The participants believed that charter school's ability to do this made it difficult for students to properly adapt. One superintendent referred to the removal of a student from a charter school as an *eviction* and feared that exposing students to this sort of rejection early in their lives was not conducive to their educational experience.

Appetite for choice: Public schools needed to provide options. Another challenge that charter school presence presented public school districts with was that of giving parents and students more choices in their child's schooling. This challenge became a way of improving the service that public schools provided to parents and students. In the past, this type of stance from public schools was not necessary, since students, who were zoned to them by law, had to attend their schools.

Parents exercised their liberty to choose. The experiences that parents had at public schools at times led them to pursue other options. If they were not treated well, they looked for schools with staff that did treat them well.

Parents' perception. The perception that parents had of the different types of schools influenced their decisions of choosing the school for their children. Public school districts needed to work on developing a strong relationship that fostered a positive perception of their schools to the parents they served and to potential parents that they could be serving. More than ever, paying attention to parents was critical. Superintendents agreed that public schools were performing well academically against charter schools and parents needed to be made aware of their performance. Keeping parents informed would improve and or strengthen the perception that parents had of their schools.

Safety. Thoughts about whether public schools were losing enrollment to charter schools due to safety reasons varied. For the most part, superintendents agreed safety was a top priority for all schools and that safety was not a major reason for their district's loss of enrollment.

Decrease in enrollment was financially damaging. Based on the perceptions gathered from the participants, the most damaging effect that charter schools posed on public schools was that of a decrease in funding for their schools. Texas funded its schools based on the number of students enrolled. Each school reported their student's attendance daily and an average daily attendance, also referred to as ADA, was calculated. This calculation was used to determine the amount of funding that schools received from the state. When a parent or student chose a charter school, the money followed that student.

Attrition and salaries. Smaller budgets in a school district translated into reductions in spending. Expenses ranged from school supplies, to facilities, to personnel. Less enrollment

basically meant less funding. Less funding meant less resources for schools, staff, and students.

Students return to public schools. Superintendents also believed that while they were seeing a decrease in student enrollment, the decrease was mostly seen at the elementary grade levels. Students who chose charter schools in elementary grade levels, later tended to return to public schools at the middle school and high school levels. It was very likely due to the extra-curricular activities offered by schools in those grade levels.

Conclusions

This study aimed to gather superintendents' perspectives about charter schools' impact on public school districts in South Texas. The following assertions emerged directly from the responses provided by the eight superintendents from this qualitative study. The study found that superintendents believed competition posed by charter schools led to traditional public schools' focus on improvement. Charter schools used marketing tactics effectively, helping them to recruit students, and influencing the perceptions that parents and student had of their schools and that of public schools. Superintendents believed that there was an appetite for choice and that parents were increasingly exercising their freedom to choose where their children were educated. Finally, superintendents adhered to the belief that the most damaging effect posed by charter schools on public schools was a decrease in enrollment, which led to a decrease in their funding.

The report to the American people entitled *A Nation at Risk* produced more than 35 years ago was still generating effects on the educational system (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report called the nation to change the way it carried out the education of its youth, triggering all sorts of accountability measures on schools, and gave birth to an entirely new and alternative educational system called charter schools. The changes that charter schools had on public schools was slow but steady, and over time, superintendents had to adjust their approach to how they led their school districts to better-address the demands of its communities. Through the analyzation of data, it became clear that charter schools had a positive impact on public schools, leading them to improve. An observation became obvious; the superintendents interviewed remain committed to the success of their school districts.

Fullan (2007) said that change was not always easy and could be a lengthy process. The interviews with the superintendents in this study alluded heavily to changes in the educational system that have been made over the years since the emergence of charter schools and the outlook toward the continuation of improving their school districts.

Perhaps the natural tendency for superintendents to be optimistic reflected heavily in the findings of this study. Rather than focusing on the damages that charter schools inflicted on public schools, they welcomed the competition and spoke instead of the positive changes that came about. All eight participants shared the perception that charter schools incited competition but looked at the competition as having produced something positive for the public school system rather than being detrimental.

The success that charter schools had was at the expense of the public schools. For charter schools to populate their classrooms with students, they needed to draw from the enrollment of other schools, most notably the public schools. By examining the perspectives of the participants, the attraction of parents and students to charter schools derived directly from their effective marketing efforts. Charter schools were successful at convincing parents and students that they

offered a better method of schooling. Through marketing and advertising, charter schools piqued the interest of many. It was up to the public school superintendents to respond in a similar manner to convince parents and students that they were the better option for schooling, perhaps a difficult task as educators were trained to educate, not necessarily trained or fluent in marketing tactics.

The appetite for choice was real and parents and students exercised their right to choose the type of school they attended. Consequently, public schools were increasingly facing the need to sway parent and student perceptions of their schools. There was a need for a paradigm shift of looking at the parents and students as potential clients deserving of utmost customer service, and indispensable, rather than assuming an entitlement or allegiance of their behalf. Public school districts and their schools were not the only choice for schooling. Often times, charter schools portrayed a sense of exclusivity to their parents and students. Superintendents needed to find ways of portraying a similar sense of belonging to something great to their parents and their students. All superintendents agreed that safety was paramount and believed that safety was not necessarily a strong decisive point for parents deciding to choose charter schools over public schools.

Finally, the decrease in enrollment to public schools led to a decrease in public school funding and revealed what it truly means to have less money. It has revealed a potential reduction of schools that school districts operate, and a potential reduction in personnel. In some cases, attrition in personnel was being exercised. While the effect of enrollment reduction was being mostly felt at the elementary schools, it is only a matter of time before charter schools strengthen at the upper grade levels by also providing some of the programs that currently lead middle school and high school students back to public schools.

In conclusion, superintendents interviewed agreed that effects were being felt by school districts in South Texas and that aside from the need to adapt, they had been actively seeking ways by which to improve and strengthen their school districts. Viewing the data through the lens of change revealed a clear indication that the educational landscape was in a state of evolution, and perhaps more intensely since the introduction of charter schools. Competition can be perceived negatively or positively, depending on the perspective of the person living the experience. For the participants of this study, the change that the competition brought led to improvements. And if education isn't about improvement and strengthening one's abilities, then what is it about? If ever there was a time for superintendents to think creatively and to develop, share, and nurture long-term visions for their school districts, it is now. Schools in South Texas were losing student enrollment, and consequently funding. If schools are to survive, superintendents must dedicate stronger efforts toward maintaining and increasing their enrollment.

Recommendations

The results of this study presented superintendents' perceptions about the effects that charter schools had on public schools in South Texas. The challenges that superintendents faced from charter schools were real and delivered damaging effects. Recommendations for future research include the inquiry for reasons that parents and students have for choosing charter schools over public schools. Knowing those reasons would afford public schools with insight and the ability to better address an effort to prevent those losses. A quest for the implementation of more effective and efficient marketing strategies in efforts to attract and maintain students enrolled would be beneficial. Another recommendation for a future study would be to compile strategies that produced desirable results from elementary school leaders addressing student recruitment and

retention. A final recommendation would be to conduct the same study using faculty as participants, presenting perceptions of those in the classrooms.

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Appendix

Participant Demographics

Table 1

Participant Demographics (Years of Experience as Superintendent)

Participant	Gender	1-5 Years	6-10 Years	11-20 Years	Over 20 Years
Superintendent - A	Male				X
Superintendent - B	Female				X
Superintendent - C	Female			X	
Superintendent - D	Male	X			
Superintendent - E	Male	X			
Superintendent - F	Female	X			
Superintendent - G	Female		X		
Superintendent - H	Male		X		