Assessing Charter School Success: A Pilot Study Examining The Utility of Parent and Community Involvement and Talent Development in Four Lucas County Ohio Charter Schools

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Introduction

Charter schools have proliferated across the nation's educational landscape in recent

years. These schools were designed to ensure that parents and students have a choice of publicly

funded schooling opportunities varied enough to meet their specific needs, talents, and interests.

However, these new schools emerged at the same time as a national standards reform movement

manifested in standardized, high-risk proficiency testing, swept through public education. A

quest to achieve a common set of standards, intended to become the "centerpiece" (Resnick, in

Clinchy, 1997, p. 6) of all students' schooling, certainly seems to be at odds with a movement

that is based on creating diverse schools for diverse needs (cf. Meier, 1995). The discrepancy is

even more pronounced given the focus of the assessment of charter school success on student

achievement, typically measured by scores on standardized tests (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek,

2000; Lasley, Ridenour, Talbert-Johnson, & Raisch 1999), whereas many parents claim to be

concerned primarily with their children's satisfaction with their charter school (Bowman, 2000).

Charter schools are said to have only "one common denominator: charter schools know

that they are responsible for improving student achievement" (Nathan, 1996, 23). However,

Hassel (1999) noted:

> Charter-granting agencies are struggling with how charter schools should
> fit into existing state and district standards and testing regimes; how to
> handle accountability for charter schools with unconventional goals,
> learning processes, or student populations; how precisely to implement the
> 'meet your goals or lose your charter' requirement ... Consequently, both
> the public at large and individual charter schools have a direct interest in
> the development of systems for holding charter schools accountable for
> results. (pp. 159-160)

Charter schools originated with the promise of increased accountability, particularly in

terms of student achievement. However, holding charter schools accountable is difficult, just as it

is inherently difficult to accurately demonstrate achievement, given the limited usefulness of test

data. It has been recognized as imperative that alternative measures of school success be developed, so that policy makers do not rely too heavily on standardized test scores that may be inappropriate indicators of success in the early years of a charter school's existence (Finn et al., 2000; Jackson, 2000). An over-reliance on standardized test scores may not be an appropriate way to measure charter school success, since these schools have been established to escape prescriptive systems and often serve predominantly at-risk students (cf. Wells, 1998; Vornberg, 1999).

What is lacking is a viable, yet flexible method and framework for assessing the success of charter schools in meeting this goal. Evans, Stallions, Damianos, and Orfely (1999) suggested that "a holistic/comprehensive charter school assessment" (p. 23) be conducted. They argued the need for an "informal, yet focused approach" (p. 23) to assessment that would be more authentic. The involvement and talent development theory developed by Astin as a way of assessing the quality of postsecondary education may serve as useful conceptual framework for assessing the success of charter schools and their students.

This study began by eliciting definitions of charter school "success" held by important stakeholder groups -- parents and teachers. Astin's (1993) theory of involvement and talent development in higher education was used as the conceptual framework for assessing the success of charter schools and their students. Comparing charter schools with post-secondary institutions is not a new approach. Finn et al. (2000) noted that charter schools, with their diversity of organizational structures and purposes, are comparable in many ways to the diversity found in higher education institutions. Furthermore, attention to the connections between student academic success and student involvement in school has recently surfaced for schools in general, not just charter schools (Lannert, 2000). This connection is based on research into what

individuals and groups view as significant in defining success. For instance, Klesse (1994) cited

a survey of corporate recruiters who placed interpersonal and communication skills, problem-

solving and technical ability, energy and judgment far above grades in ranking the skills they

considered in hiring decisions (Lannert, 2000). Renzulli (1994) proposed schools for talent

development as a plan for total school improvement.

As part of a study to investigate how success is defined in the charter school setting, we

conducted focus group interviews with parent/guardians and teachers in four charter schools with

varied missions and student populations in the county serving as the pilot site for charter schools

in the state of Ohio. We asked parent/guardians and teachers to describe what it meant to be a

successful student and a successful school. As reported below, these emic (insiders') definitions

point to "success" as involving growth in both cognitive and affective student talents, and

identify the involvement of different stakeholder groups as hallmarks of success.

Assessment and Accountability Challenges in Charter Schools

Studies have found that in general, charter schools need to develop better ways to set

standards and track performance (Evans et al., 1999; Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek, 1998).

They need clearer guidelines of responsibility and accountability (Wells et al., 1998).

Researchers have suggested many ways of assessing charter schools' success, including the

receipt of public grants and private donations, the number of student applications, student

"educational growth" (as measured by standardized testing), and student attendance (Evans et al.,

1999). Astin (1993) used similar methods for assessing institutions of higher education and

found that they told relatively little about the quality of the actual education students receive. It

seems logical, therefore, to question the extent to which such measures indicate the quality of

education that students receive in P-12 charter schools.

Applying the Theory of Involvement and Talent Development to P-12 Education

A wide body of research has documented that student involvement has a positive influence in developing a host of important cognitive and affective outcomes or "talents" among college students (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Involvement in this context refers to "the quality and quantity of the physical and psychological energy that the student invests in the [school] experience" (Astin, 1984, 134), while talent development refers to "changes in the student from the beginning to the end of an educational program" (Astin, 1984, 61). In later research, Astin suggested that colleges should be involved in developing multiple talents of their students in both the cognitive and affective domains (Astin, 1993). He argues that student involvement is the behavioral manifestation of motivation, encompassing such aspects of motivation as student time on task and the quality of student effort. Working with data that now include more than 10 million college students collected over a 35-year span, Astin (1993) has studied the impact of the college experience on student development, and has shown positive correlations between involvement and talent development. He has been able to demonstrate that "the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement" (Astin, 1984, p. 136). Based on these positive relationships, Astin argued that college policies and practices should be designed to maximize student involvement, which he defined as a fundamental measure of institutional "excellence." Astin (1993) also suggested that the involvement and talent development theory could be useful in studying the talent development process for college faculty. He argues that the more involved faculty members are with their institution, the more likely they are to develop their teaching, research, and service talents, thus enhancing the excellence of the institution.

This study tests empirically the utility of Astin's involvement and talent development theory to P-12 charter schools. Through focus group interviews with teachers, the study examined the nature of teacher involvement, and the importance teachers placed on involvement in measuring the success of charter schools and their students. The study also extended the involvement and talent development theory to parents, whose involvement is viewed as an important purpose of charter schools in many states' legislation. The concern for parental involvement in P-12 public education is not surprising, given that parents/guardians often take a greater role in their children's P-12 education than they do in their post-secondary education. Examining the quantity and quality of parental involvement, and the importance parents place on involvement in measuring the success of charter schools and their students seems highly appropriate.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to explore the utility of involvement and talent development theory in the assessment of charter schools and their students' success in an effort to devise an assessment that more authentically matches the views and values of primary stakeholders: teachers, and parent/guardians. The research sought to find answers to two different research questions:

1. How do parent/guardians and teachers define the success of charter schools and their students?

2. What is the nature of the involvement of students, teachers, and parents/guardians in charter schools?

Setting, Participants, and Methodology

In 1997, the State Board of Education in Ohio was given the legal authority to grant charters to community schools (Ohio's term for charter schools) in the state. Ohio's charter school laws are relatively "strong" (Hassel, 1999, 18-19) in terms of creating favorable conditions for diverse types of schools to open under the auspices of a variety of public bodies. Lucas County was designated as the pilot site for community schools within the state, with chartering authority in the county granted to several local governmental authorities. Lucas County, therefore, seemed an appropriate location in which to conduct a pilot study aimed at identifying methods for assessing the success of these community schools and their students. For this pilot study, four community schools were selected to represent the diversity of types of schools chartered in the county. School A was a school for youth aged 11-14 with multiple handicaps, behavioral disorders and academic disabilities, based on therapeutic riding and providing a holistic approach to life-skill development. School B was an elementary school built on the philosophy "it takes a village to raise a child," and focusing on collaboration with community-based organizations and parents. School C was a K-12 school whose mission was to provide developmentally appropriate education to at-risk youth and services to their families. School D was a college-prep middle and high school providing in-depth training and opportunities in the performing arts. Letters were used to solicit the participation of teachers and parents/guardians in focus groups interviews and observations. Research was conducted in Spring 2000, at the end of the second year of operation for schools A, B and C, and the first year for school D.

Focus group interviews were conducted with parent/guardians and teachers in each school using open-ended questions about definitions of "successful students" and "successful schools," as well as about the nature of student, parent, and teacher involvement in the schools. These topics were intended to invite a wide range of discussions about different emic (insiders') definitions of success to be used in developing criteria for the assessment of the success of charter schools and their students. Focus group interview data were complemented by classroom observations, concentrating on the nature of student and teacher involvement.

Transcriptions of audio taped focus group interviews were repeatedly reviewed to identify emergent themes. The themes were then categorized according to emergent descriptions of successful students and schools, and according to *a priori* indicators of success conceptualized by Astin (1993) in his involvement and talent development theory. By looking at insiders' definitions of success of charter schools and their students, the researchers were able to avoid *forcing* the data to fit Astin's theoretical framework. The further thematic analysis of the data, however, allowed for the examination of the utility of Astin's (1993) involvement and talent development theory for defining successful charter schools and their students.

Results

The results of the pilot study are reported in the sections that follow, beginning with parent and teacher definitions of successful charter schools, followed by their definitions of successful students. In separate focus groups, parent/guardians and teachers in each of the four schools participating in the study were asked to describe (1) what they viewed as a successful school in general, and in particular their school's successes and shortcomings, (2) their reasons for choosing a charter school, and (3) their definitions of a successful student. Responses were

reviewed to identify participants' definitions of what constitutes a successful school (see Table

1), and what attributes identify a successful student (see Table 2).

Table 1

Successful Schools

	Definitions of Successful Schools
Parent/Guardians	• Environment of Acceptance • Positive Student-Student Interaction • Positive Student-Staff Interaction • Mutually-Supportive Staff-Parent Interaction • Increased Student-Parent/Family Interaction • Environment Facilitating Ongoing Talent Development: academic and co-curricular
Teachers	• Environment of Professional Respect, Freedom, and Responsibility • Facilitation of Students' Individualized Talent Development: academic and co-curricular • Personal Interaction between Staff and Students • Collegial Interaction Among Staff Members • Parental Involvement & Education

Table 2

Successful Students

	Definitions of Successful Students
Parent/Guardians	• Desire and Enthusiasm to Participate and Learn • Growth in Self-Esteem • Growth in Self-Efficacy & Respect for Own Abilities • Ability to Interact Respectfully with Others from Different Backgrounds • Academic Achievement • Creative Process & Transferability of Learned Skills • Varies: Must be Defined for the Individual
Teachers	• Desire and Enthusiasm to Participate and Learn • Growth of Affective and Social Ability, including Altruism • Growth in Taking Responsibility, Self-Motivation, and

Ownership of Work
- Growth in Academic Ability
- Transferability of Learned Skills
- Varies: Must be Defined for the Individual & by the Individual

Parent/Guardians' Definitions of School Success

Parents reported that a successful school was one that created an *environment in which students felt accepted.* A parent at School D defined a successful charter school as a school that gave students a "place to feel good about themselves," where "nobody is a failure." Another parent at School D said,

> My daughter just didn't seem to fit in so well at the public school ... It was for social reasons [that she enrolled in the community school]. My daughter is not very outgoing and she had problems sometimes assimilating into new environments. I thought a smaller student body would help. And I like it here for her--[I] see positive change.

A parent from School A, who had a daughter with a "syndrome that puts her about a standard deviation below the norm," observed:

> More and more kids, because she was so different, below average, just started ignoring her, so she was not socially interacting. We find that here she is socially interacting and she is not being ignored. I guess what I'm saying is that the concept of mainstreaming didn't work for her.

This environment of acceptance is closely related to the quality of interactions discussed in the following sections.

The importance of creating a school culture that expected and facilitated *positive student-student interaction*, ranging from simple interaction to mutual emotional and academic support was voiced by parents from all four schools. Parents often perceived this student-student interaction as no accident, but as intentionally structured by the school. At School A, for instance, parents reported that students who were not special needs or handicapped assist other students, therefore "becom[ing] role models for the kids that have serious problems." A parent from School D noted,

One of the students was in a performance at the Ohio Theater. Our children *had* to go to that performance [as a school requirement].

In addition to the existence and sometimes requirement of student-student interaction, parents also commented on the quality of the student-student interaction. A parent at School B defined their charter school success by the encouragement her child received from peers. She observed,

[In my daughter's former public school] they constantly have their guard up for someone to criticize them. Here, they are at all different levels but they all work together and they socialize, and that is a real big part.

Parents from all four schools noted that the students encouraged each other, not only by refraining from criticism, but also by positively reinforcing each other. In three separate focus groups, different parents from School D commented:

There's a camaraderie among the students that you don't normally see in a public school…. They are much more like a family…. I think it is because they share an interest—because they see themselves a little bit in each other.

They help each other

They have this camaraderie at this school.

They look out for each other.

Parents commented on the cognitive/academic aspect of student-student interaction as well as the social/affective aspect of it. A parent from School D described:

[One of my daughters] has helped a lot of the students in math, and [my other daughter] in tap. So they are concerned about the success of the other students because they don't want to see the other students leave [due to failure].

Another parent from School D articulated that peer support helped students to find not only their strengths, but also their limitations, and encouraged them to challenge the limitations.

Overall, student-student interaction and support were portrayed as part of the school culture, supported by positive interactions between students and staff. As a parent from School D noted:

> I think there's a lot of support and encouragement that you probably wouldn't see in a different environment—from the peers, and from the teachers. It's really nice.

Parents similarly described *positive staff-student interaction*--the close relationships between staff and students, and encouragement of their children by staff, as indicators of school success. Smaller school and class sizes, and lower teacher-student ratios facilitated this. One School D parent said, "The teachers know your child by name without a problem because there are only 98 kids total in the school," while a School B parent commented on the "trust relationship" between her student and teacher, growing from the teacher's consistent "caring for" the students. One parent from School A said,

> The communication that is here has been a really good factor in my child's success. I like the fact that the teachers have a phone in their rooms, so they don't have to leave.

A School B parent stated that when children have problems, teachers are there to help the children and make a "safe environment" for them.

Similarly, in the largest category of responses, parents from all four schools indicated appreciation of *mutually supportive staff-parent interaction*. Parents noted that successful schools involved the whole family in the educational process. A parent at School B said,

> When I first came here, I found out that this was like a village, and I like that because it does take a village to raise a child. It takes people. It is more like family [here].

Other parents at School B concurred in "[liking] the principle about how it takes a whole community to raise a child."

Parents particularly liked having direct access to communicating with teachers in a variety of ways. For example, teachers were accessible to "sit down and talk [with parents] about the problems" students had, and teachers were expected by the school to call parents at home if their students had any problems at school. School A parents received a school letter informing them of events and schedule changes, and both School B and School A parents and teachers wrote back and forth daily in notebooks. One said:

> That was a real hard thing for my son to accept because he thought he could come home and tell me his teacher said this or ... was mean, and I would get all upset. And [he thought] he could come to school and say, "Well, I don't know what happened to my homework. I think my mom got mad and ripped it up.... He has to be accountable for what he says, so communication has helped tremendously.

A School A parent said her child's teacher was very supportive when she asked the teacher to do some extra work for her child; a School C parent reported,

> We can come in or call and say, 'This is not working right; I've got to come in and see you.... That an important thing where you can just negotiate with them, how we're going to teach the kids.

Similarly, a School D parent reported,

> I walked in yesterday and asked [my daughter] where her social studies teacher was, and she pointed to him. And I went and said, "Hi. I need to talk to you." And he said, "Okay." We went ahead and talked. Figured out what was going on. And it is just that simple. And that is the good part because it is simplistic: you don't have to set an appointment or get all worked up about things.

Overall, parents reported appreciating the simple fact that school staff initiated and proactively welcomed communication. A School A parent said,

> The invitation for that communication meant a lot to me. You didn't feel like you were bothering the teacher or burdening them with questions.

A School D parent similarly noted the importance of knowing the teachers much more on a personal basis, while a School B parent reported "[feeling] good about the school [in that] parents are really welcomed to get involved." Another School B parent expanded,

> I am more involved in what [my son] is doing and his schoolwork. I get to interact with his teachers a lot more ... Being a single parent, [I like] the fact that there are so many nurturing people here for him. Instead of having one teacher, he has several teachers who can be part of his life, [and who are] concerned about his development.

Perhaps a more unexpected characteristic of successful schools defined by parents emerged as *increased student-parent/family interaction*. For instance, a parent from School A reported:

> One day last week ... I had left the house for about 45 minutes and when I came home I had three messages on my recorder: two from my son ... because he was so excited because just in the morning he had done 15 papers and that was the most he had ever done in his life.... He tried and tried and couldn't get a hold of me, so he finally called my husband on his cell phone at work just so he could tell him--that's how excited he was.

Though this was not a large category of responses, it may warrant further investigation.

Finally, parents said that a successful school provides an *environment that facilitates ongoing talent development*, in both academic and co-curricular realms. This was a particularly common response from parents in Schools C and A that focus on helping students "at-risk" or with special needs as part of their mission. When asked why they chose the school, many parents at these two schools referred to the inability of the regular public schools to facilitate their children's growth and development. For example, parents at School C spoke of their children not "getting the help [they] needed" for improving weak academic skills at the traditional public school, while parents at School A talked about traditional public schools "trying to push [them] along." A parent at School A noted that she believed that in traditional public schools, her son was mainstreamed into classes where he was set up for failure:

> If he is constantly failing, of course he is going to act out ... I was disappointed in the system that wanted to fail a child or give a child permission to fail before he even made any attempt [to succeed] ... It was getting to the point where we really felt we weren't going to be able to reach him. And I told the teachers over and over, "If you can't reach my child, you certainly can't teach him."

Similarly, parents at School C commented about their charter school's teachers being "much more willing to work with [their SBH son] than the other school system was." Parents at Schools B and C commented on the value of looping (teachers' staying with the same students for more than one year) and going to school over the summer as facilitating, in a School B parent's words, education as "an ongoing process.... With the year round, it stays fresh--I mean, the learning process never stops. It is just an ongoing cycle." Thus parents seemed to be viewing academic progress as more a matter of continual improvement and growth, than as a matter of performing well on discrete tests (which were not mentioned by any parents as indicators of success).

Parents also described successful schools as facilitating their students' pursuance of what were usually extracurricular activities as part of the regular curriculum, (i.e., as co-curricular) (Klesse, 1994), thus extending the possibility for talent development. A parent at School D said:

> I remember saying [to my daughter], "You have dance lessons, you have theater lessons, and you are taking voice lessons. This school has it all during a normal day. It is perfect." ... It was a matter of finding a place where [my daughter] could get everything at once.

Another parent at this school said:

> My daughter has been involved in modeling and always wanted to be a model or actress. If she wants to be an actress, she needs singing and dancing and she needs theater. And looking realistically at the cost of doing all those after school, there just weren't enough hours in the day to get all these extra things done. So we thought if she came here she would get the instruction in the music and dance and theater.

Thus, in parents' perceptions, a successful school bridged affective and cognitive development of their children by providing "a nurturing environment ... where kids were able to grow to their fullest [potential]."

Teachers' Definitions of School Success

Thematic analysis of teachers' perceptions of school success showed that teachers described "successful schools" as including four major characteristics: the freedom to develop and take responsibility for their own initiatives, interactions with children, help from other staff, and parental involvement.

With regard to *professional freedom* as a hallmark of a successful school, teachers valued both the freedom to develop techniques and the freedom to take responsibility for both their successes and their setbacks. A teacher from School A said,

> We are not told, "You have to use this book and get through the whole
> thing. If you don't the kids fail, you fail, end of story."

Similarly, a teacher at School C observed, "It's the freedom I like here, to teach how I want to." Teachers similarly saw value in a school's letting individual teachers take responsibility for the outcomes of their own initiatives. A School B teacher said,

> There are so many things that I want to do and there are so many things
> that I want to accomplish. I have all these aspirations, and then you say,
> "Okay, there is no where to pass the buck." So now you have to get down
> in the trenches and work to accomplish this, but I know that the outcome
> will be, if not the result that I want, ... much closer than I would have been
> able to achieve anywhere.

Professional freedom relates to the second and third themes of successful schools: teachers' ability to address individual students' academic needs, and their ability to demonstrate their care and affection toward their students.

Teachers related their professional freedom to a second hallmark of a successful school, their *facilitation of students' individualized talent development*. The above-quoted teacher from School A continued,

> Success is measured by being able to find whatever methods we need to use to meet this group of kids at this particular point in time.... Our [larger] school systems can't afford that creativity, but for us it is very beneficial.

A teacher at School C said:

> I think the biggest success is that we teach kids at their own pace ... That way the kids that need the help get the help, and the kids that want to be independent and want to work faster, can work faster. And that to me is success because they have the freedom to do that.

A teacher at School B described their school success as the following:

> [Our director] has this philosophy: We love all children. And if you choose that philosophy, then it becomes your responsibility to accept the fact that each child is different and try to figure out how to reach that child.

And a teacher at School A discussed this theme as well:

> I came here with the hopes that the charter school provides the opportunity to explore new techniques and new methods of reaching these children that have often been rejected from the mainstream environment. Parents are fed up because they realize that their kids haven't been reached because the schools aren't providing the services. It provides us an opportunity, [for example,] to use the animal therapy this facility offers.

Parallel to students' involvement in individualized, academically challenging tasks, *affective interaction between staff and students* was cited as key to a successful school. A teacher at School C said,

> I can tell my students, "I love you" or give them a hug and not worry that I am going to be in trouble.

Another School C teacher described the importance of expressing care for the children in the following words:

> To be able to show [my students] that I care about them and to have them come out and to know how to care about someone or love someone ... It's always the greatest pleasure for me to have my students [say], "I love you."

Some teachers at all four schools said they had developed trust and emotional connection with their students. A School D teacher said,

> [The students] say things to us that I would certainly have never shared with the teacher--I mean, personal information. They talk to us like they talk to their friends.

Teachers also described *collegial interaction among staff members* as part of a successful school. Teachers viewed having other staff to work with as another important factor of school success. A teacher at School C said:

> I am not making as much money here, but everything else is just so much better. I have administrators walk in my classroom throughout the day. You would never see that at [the traditional public school I worked]. You were in there all by yourself, all day long ... I have an assistant in my classroom ... The support is wonderful, and the camaraderie of the staff.

Another noted that "the staff is pretty much friendly here, and that helps out a whole lot when we are dealing with such big problems" among the students.

Other teachers implied that consistency across classrooms emerged, or at least had the potential to emerge, from teachers' meeting to share ideas. A School B teacher described the key to the school's success as communication:

> We all teach like 145 kids. The point is we all talk to each other at our once-a-week meetings where we get together to discuss any problems that we are having with any system, or just problems, or just what we are feeling, and then we can work that out. In another school you probably wouldn't do that.

Finally, teachers identified a *high level of parental involvement* as another important factor in assessing the school's success. According to teachers, successful schools were the ones with high parental involvement. A teacher at School C said:

> Success [is] when you have parent involvement. For those kids whose
> parents are involved, and come to see how their kids are doing, you see the
> most out of them.

Parent/Guardians' Definitions of Student Success

From parent/guardians' perspectives, student success involves students' social and personal (affective) as well as cognitive growth. Parents mentioned desire to participate, self-esteem and self-efficacy, altruism toward and respect for others, academic achievement, and ability to transfer learned skills to different contexts as indicators of a student's success. They also, however, emphasized that an individual's success is a highly individualistic matter, and must be considered as a matter of unique growth.

Parents defined their students' success as beginning with *a desire and enthusiasm to participate and learn*. A parent from School A reported:

> A lot of parents have told me that for the first time, their kids want to
> come to school. These were kids who were really turned off, didn't like
> school too much, were thrown out of school for behavior, and for the first
> time the kids really want to be here.

Another common indicator of student success was high and increasing level of self-efficacy and respect for own abilities. A parent from School D said that a successful student is

> someone that can kind of figure out their strengths and limitations, and
> then can work on those limitations.... I can just say I've seen my daughter
> grow here.... She was extremely shy....

From parents' perspectives, student success also involves students' growth in developing a *high and increasing level of self-esteem*. A parent at School D said:

> Self-esteem in general is very good for success. You can be a D student
> and still be successful.

Another parent at School D agreed:

> Being able to stand in front of a group--and sometimes a very large group-
> -... has been beneficial for [my daughter]. I think if you can get students
> over that point, ... they have more self-confidence, self-esteem. They're
> never going to have people push them around, you know. They're going to
> stand up for themselves, they're going to speak out, voice an opinion, etc.

Closely related was the attribute of *high and increasing level of self-efficacy*, sometimes described as the student's coming to have respect for her or his own abilities. A parent from School D said that a successful student is

> someone that can kind of figure out their strengths and limitations, and
> then can work on those limitations....

A few parents also identified a fairly sophisticated social growth specifically the *ability to interact respectfully with others from different backgrounds*, as characteristic of a successful student. A parent from School B added to the list:

> Probably also etiquette and manners. I really believe that children...get to
> understand the power in having manners and etiquette that are door-
> openers to your success.... You have to know how to approach different
> people with different cultures and you must start at...home,...but if you
> can't get it at home, the school should.... How you talk to each other and
> how you approach your elders.... Society is not going to have tolerance for
> stupidity.

Though this theme was not widely discussed, it shows parents' valuation of a social skill not conventionally cited as key to student success.

Parents linked affective outcomes such as growth in social skills and self-esteem with *academic achievement*, which for some was the key indicator of success. A parent at School D said:

> Probably first and foremost are their grades. They have to be able to cope
> with the curriculum...and assimilate socially. That's a big thing with the
> kids, because if they don't assimilate socially, then they're not going to be
> successful academically. That puts a big strain on children academically, if
> they feel like an outsider.

A parent from School C similarly saw success as academic achievement, but emphasized that

achievement occurs at an individual rate:

> It may take them a longer time, but they are going to make it through
> school..... So I think success is that you do graduate and you do go to
> college. Even with my kids having the problems they do, I still want them
> to get As and Bs.

Extending the measure of academic achievement, parents also pointed to *"creative*

process" and the transferability of learned skills as indicators of a successful student. That is,

students were not just achieving grades in school, but were re-creating and practicing what they

had learned outside of school. At School C, this manifested itself in students' playing school. At

School A, a parent described her student dancing what she had learned at school with non-school

peers--both teaching them the moves and techniques, and expanding with them into different

moves. Though this was not a large category, it raises an interesting dimension of what

constitutes success.

Finally, when asked to define "successful students," parents emphasized that the

definition varies: it must be defined for the individual student and in part by the individual

student and parent. A School C parent, whose son was at the school in the hopes that they would

work well with his bipolar disorder, said:

> *Originally*, if you had asked me that two years ago, I would have said, "A
> successful student does well in school, has a lot of friends, gets good
> grades, takes the ... college prep classes, and graduates and then goes off
> to college to get a good job." *Now* ... the definition of success for my son
> is just to get through school.... Actually, I hope he gets through each
> day...and if he gets through the year, I am happy. So to him...to me, that's
> success for him now.

Teachers' Definitions of Student Success

In defining successful students, teachers similarly linked affective and cognitive growth,

citing students' enjoyment of and enthusiasm for school, their success in specific ways (such as

being taken off the "at_risk" list), and specific learning outcomes. The first and most commonly named component of being a successful student was widely cited as possessing a *desire and enthusiasm to participate and learn*. A teacher at School C, describing senior level students, put it simply:

> My biggest success is seeing students that actually want to come to school, because I know quite a few that just never really wanted to. And then also students that ... show up every day, actually taking the homework home or taking other work home and saying, "Give me another packet so that I can get this done."

Another teacher at School C described:

> Success is when the parents were telling me how much their children enjoyed school. The parents are saying [that the students] are enthusiastic about it, they are talking about things from school outside of school ... Kids that can't wait to come back from their break, kids that are playing school at home, writing at home, and doing that type of thing.

A School B teacher described this development, describing

> ...students who start off the quarter [saying,] "Oh, we can't do it that way," and now it's, "Can I have another book report form?" "Can I take one home?" ... "Are we going to do that today?" The enthusiasm that is there for learning and for being in the classroom. It is starting to be less of a chore for them. It is more of a pleasant experience.... That is going to be with them for a really long time.

Teachers identified *growth of affective and social ability, including altruism*, as characteristic of successful students. A teacher from School A pointed out that

> here a lot of the students have been improving a lot with their social and emotional and behavioral situations to the point where they will be able to handle high schools or whatever in a more responsible manner.

Another teacher from School A was more specific:

> The child who could sit for about 20 seconds at the start of the year, he sits through most of the day now. His success was in steps. So it was successful when he could sit at his desk for ten minutes, then an hour, or a couple of hours. And now it is most of the day, most of the week. So that is success.

A teacher at School B said:

> The biggest [indicator of success] for me is the way we take what I call "at risk" children and take them off the at_risk list. What has connected me to the school would be children who just came here off the wall, bouncing, crying, really trying to tear things down.

Teachers' descriptions of social ability ranged from growth in very basic skills, as these teachers have described, to a much more sophisticated notion of success as having learned to act for the good of the group. A School C teacher said:

> Success for me is ... when I say, "Hey, you guys, over there, what are you doing?!" ... and I am thinking they are goofing around, you know, and they'll [say], "Oh, he's helping me with my spelling." Or, you know, ... when they pull together and help each other out.... Tom Morrison said that the function of freedom is to free somebody else. So when you get to a level, you reach down and you pull up the person who is struggling, and they do that and I think, "Okay. I can see where we've come."

By far the largest category describing successful students had to do with *taking responsibility for self through self-motivation and ownership of work*. Some described this development of responsibility as "effort." A School D teacher said,

> For me, it [success for a student] is any sort of effort.... And asking me questions.... If I have an ADHD kid who gets 70 on the test, that's success.... If they flunk it, but they got a higher flunking grade than they were getting, that's successful. To me, it's not really a matter of...their grades; it's just the effort that they put in.

Her colleague said:

> Attempting to turn in their work. Showing an attempt, showing that they are trying in some manner... they are coming to you with questions, coming to you with problems, asking for help.... That's the successful student.

A teacher at School A similarly described this as an attitude of "I can do this; I can handle it."

For other teachers, responsibility went beyond self-motivation to students' entering fully into their work. A teacher from School D described this as "the level of work--how they actually approach their work," and continued to explain:

> To me, they are going through the motion, when they are doing the [ballet] step correctly. That's not work for me.... If you're going to be in a [dance] company, you can't even get an audition if you are not willing to do your best.... [Success is] working to that high level, high expectations, always.

This total involvement and high expectation of self was described by others as "ownership." A School D teacher explained,

> Like with these variety show performances [produced regularly in the school], the kids feel like they own the information enough that they can go out and put together a song with four-part harmony, and audition it for the performance. They don't feel like they have to go running and ask, "Could you please help us?" The fact that they feel like they know enough now to do it themselves is great, because I don't think we would have seen that in September.

Another described this as maybe "not all be[ing] brilliant, but it's them taking their own responsibilities and motivation."

A School D teacher linked this success in taking responsibility for one's own learning process to academic achievement, saying:

> Another thing that is success for me is that they know our expectations...because they didn't before. So they are succeeding in learning the process, and also the discipline. Then, on the other end of it, since they are doing that, everything else is becoming more successful because they are becoming more prepared and more knowledgeable students.

This teacher continued to explain that she looks for "success in grades," but that that academic success starts with success in taking responsibility for one's own work process.

Teachers also consistently cited *growth in academic ability*, as measured by where the individual student began, as a key indicator of student success. According to teachers, academic

growth is assessed based on where the student started, not on externally-defined competencies. A

teacher at School A said,

> We have got some kids that when they started here last year, a couple of
> kids couldn't write at their [grade] level, or read at their level, and we have
> got some now that really are above their level. So I think that is success.

A teacher at School C similarly described:

> When I came here, I had students in my [grade 1_2] classroom who not
> only couldn't read at all, but they didn't even know the alphabet or the
> sounds of the alphabet. And the biggest success for me is that now every
> single one of my students in my class can read and spell at least ten words.

Another teacher from School C described:

> Today a mother told me on the phone that her child went to her CCD
> [Catholic education] class and read a whole paragraph out of the Bible and
> never missed a word.... She said, "Do you realize that [you teachers] are
> doing wonders? My daughter is more confident, more happy, and more
> content in herself because you've taught her to read.

Thus this teacher linked issues of self-esteem with academic achievement. Similarly, a teacher

from School A said:

> I think we consider students successful if they can move on to the next
> level. A student that we had, he was transitioned into the high school
> through basically a year here. So I think making that transition to the next
> level from our school we would consider a success.

Such a transition involved development of both social and academic skills, as another teacher

from School A emphasized:

> [Successful students are] those kids who stop telling us to go to lower
> elevations on the planet and to procreate with ourselves, and [who] sit
> down and rationally think things through instead--[who] after a while stop
> hitting and start thinking.

Similar to the parents, teachers identified *transferability of learned skills* to other arenas,

but different from parents, the teacher who discussed this emphasized their use in society. A

School B parent said:

> Whether or not students decide they want to purse a career in the sciences or technology, there are certain skills that are important in--and are going to continue to be important in--their society. As we become more technical as a society, something as simple as sitting on a jury and having to analyze the strength of evidence, [or] being able to determine whether or not vaccines are appropriate for your child--all those fields are becoming more technical and students must be able to make competent decisions.... Getting that information to the students ... [means] they are going to be better prepared as adults in whatever their future may hold.

Finally, like the parents, teachers recognized that the definition of success *varies: it must be defined for the individual and by the individual*. As a teacher in School A said simply, "Success is going to depend on the child." Or as a teacher from School D answered the question of defining success for students, "Once they did their best."

Implications for the Theory of Involvement and Talent Development

This study found that the theory of involvement and talent development is useful in assessing the success of charter schools and their students. Several types of involvement (student, parent, and teacher involvement), and several types of talents (both cognitive and affective), were mentioned as indicators of this success. These involvements and talents are discussed in the sections that follow.

Involvement

Both parents and teachers perceived student involvement as an important component of success for both charter schools and their students. A theme that emerged from teacher and parent/guardian groups is their belief that charter schools provide more opportunities for student involvement than do the traditional public schools. Parents and teachers at charter schools mentioned a number of different types of student involvement, including interactions with peers and teachers, and involvements with the school and with school activities. The importance of student involvement to these stakeholder groups validates the findings of other researchers that

student involvement is the single most important ingredient for promoting both P-12 school and student success.

Teacher involvement emerged as another important component of success for charter schools and their students. A theme that emerged from both parent and teacher focus groups is their belief that charter schools provide more opportunities for teacher involvement than do the traditional public schools. The focus groups gave a variety of examples of teacher involvement in charter schools, ranging from interactions with students, to the development and protection of the school mission, and participation in the governance structure. The importance these stakeholder groups place on teacher involvement validates the findings of other researchers who have documented the importance of teacher involvement for both P-12 school and student success.

Parental involvement was yet another component of the success of charter schools and their students. Both parent and teacher focus groups felt that charter schools provide more opportunities for parental involvement than what exists in traditional public schools. Types of parental involvement at charter schools ranged from helping children with their homework, to working with the PTA, defining the mission, and governing the school. The importance these groups place on parental involvement lends empirical support to those researchers who have found that parental involvement promotes the success of P-12 schools and their students.

Talent Development

A number of student talents, from both the cognitive and affective domains, emerged as important indicators of the success of charter schools and their students. In the cognitive domain, academic achievement measured by grades and growth in children's ability to read, write, and compute, is an important indicator of success. In the affective domain, growth in children's

motivation, self-concept, and satisfaction, measured by increases in enthusiasm for school, in self-esteem, and in satisfaction with the school experience, are important indicators of success. Neither stakeholder group place much significance on standardized tests as a measure of the success of charter schools and their students, but rather are more likely to view success in terms of growth in involvement and cognitive and affective talents. This finding suggests that the involvement and talent development framework has utility in charter school research in capturing insiders' perceptions about the success of charter schools and their students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study gathered the insights of important stakeholder groups about their views of the success of charter schools and their students. Charter school legislation, written during a period of growing interest in national standards, frequently defines charter school success in uni-dimensional terms. Legislation in a number of states focuses heavily on standardized tests as the primary indicator of charter school success. In Ohio, for example, newspaper articles regularly compare charter with traditional public schools on student performance on the Ohio Proficiency Test. Ohio charter schools (referred to as community schools) are typically criticized in these articles as not performing well in comparisons with the traditional public schools.

The findings of this study suggest that student performance on standardized tests is not the primary way that charter school parents and teachers define success, either for charter schools or for their students. These stakeholder groups are much more likely to discuss other indicators of success, including levels of student, teacher, and parent involvement, and to use multiple talent development outcomes, including student growth in their ability to read and write, and growth in their satisfaction, motivation, and self-esteem.

The use of involvement and talent development indicators of success suggests that uni-dimensional measures of charter school success, such as student performance on a standardized test, are incomplete. Other cognitive outcomes, including increased interest in reading and writing and grades in these subjects, are important outcomes to parents and teachers. Affective outcomes, like self-esteem, satisfaction, and motivation are equally important but are not captured by standardized tests of student performance. Parents and teachers also define "success" in terms of the educational process of teaching and learning, as well as by the product, or outcomes. Student, teacher, and parent involvement in the school and the teaching-learning process is a crucial component of their views of the success of charter schools and their students. In general, the study's participants believe that charter schools allow for greater involvement of key stakeholder groups than do the traditional public schools.

These insider definitions of "success" of charter schools and their students call into question the present heavy reliance on standardized tests as the primary measure of success. Standardized achievement or proficiency tests, when used to track students longitudinally, can document the talent development of students' abilities and skills. More often than not, however, these tests are used by states to compare charter with traditional public schools, rather than to track the cognitive growth of individual students. As a consequence, the use of standardized tests invites media comparisons, with charter schools often receiving undeserved criticism, and with public schools receiving undeserved plaudits.

This study suggests that a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to defining and measuring the "success" of charter schools and their students is needed. Although standardized tests will inevitably be part of the definition, they might be used longitudinally to track growth in students, rather than to compare performance between charter and traditional schools. Multiple

indicators of "success" are needed to capture the complexity of the outcomes that parents and teachers hold for charter schools and their students. Portfolios can be used to measure growth in writing or other creative skills, such as in the fine or performing arts. Periodic surveys and instruments can be conducted to document growth in students' affective outcomes, such as satisfaction, self-esteem, and motivation.

Conclusions

Policy makers, researchers, and others evaluating charter schools are searching for ways to measure the success of the schools and their students. Although accountability demands from legislators have pressed standardized tests to the forefront as the primary measure of "success", this study suggests that parents and teachers have other measures of success in mind. This pilot study found that parents and teachers define community school success using a multi-dimensional framework of involvement and talent development. This finding validates the arguments of other charter school researchers that charter school "success" is multi-dimensional rather than uni-dimensional in nature.

The majority of charter schools claim that their mission is to develop multiple student talents, rather than just simply cognitive talent as measured by student performance on a standardized test. The multi-dimensional nature of the missions of most charter schools is reflected in the parent and teacher definitions of success reported in this study. Given the multi-dimensional nature of charter school missions, we recommend more nuanced, comprehensive approaches to the assessment of the success of charter schools and their students. These new approaches to the assessment of charter schools and their students need to reflect insider's perceptions of the importance of measuring involvement and talent development as indicators of success.

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