CASE STUDIES
OF
FIVE HIGH PERFORMING CHARTER SCHOOLS

Executive Summary

This study investigates five high achieving, urban charter schools authorized by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to determine the factors that contribute to the results they have obtained. Each of the schools is unique utilizing different curriculum and teaching methodology. Thus, there is no single curriculum or teaching methodology that must be adopted to achieve success with urban students. There are, however, factors that, although expressed in different ways, lead to the positive outcomes obtained by each school. It must be understood that these factors do not operate in isolation to each other. They are tightly interwoven, each impacting on the other. For example, leadership creates and maintains the other five factors. Shared beliefs and high expectations create community. A school does not achieve high academic results by simply declaring its intent. Rather leadership, the culture within the school, and the specific actions by school personnel, together, result in high achievement. It is the values, beliefs, and social norms that define the school culture. The school culture in turn is a strong determinant of student achievement. Academic success occurs in schools where learning is valued by both teachers and students and the school climate is such that teachers can teach and students can learn.

Each of these major factors is discussed as a single factor in later sections and also applied to the case studies reports for each school:

1. Leadership
   a. The clear articulation of mission, beliefs, and values.
   b. Modeling and acting on mission beliefs and values
   c. Establishing the parameters for and practices of activities that create a feeling of community among students and staff.
   d. Creating high academic expectations through beliefs, school structure, rigorous curriculum, high instructional expectations.
   e. Creating high behavioral expectations through beliefs, school structure, modeling, and positive reinforcement.
   f. Establishing processes and practices that lead to academic achievement and positive behavior, and providing the support to deploy these processes and practices uniformly throughout the school.

2. Shared mission, beliefs, and values
   a. The universal acceptance by Board members, administrators, teachers, staff, and parents of the school’s mission.
b. Mission based hiring that brings strong, compassionate teachers to the school.
c. The concept of “sweating the small stuff,” believing that the difference is in the details.

3. Community
   a. Activities that bring teachers and students together around the mission, beliefs, and values.
   b. The administrators’ role as team leaders, facilitators and enablers.
   c. The visibility of administrators in classrooms that ensures continuity of instruction, behavior, and culture.
   d. The ability (agility) to react in a positive manner to changing situations.
   e. The Board’s role as provider of adequate resources both human and material.

4. High academic expectations
   a. The emphasis on being prepared to go to college.
   b. Challenging and rigorous curriculum.
   c. Specific instructional goals that provide “the end in mind” for each lesson.
   d. The emphasis on hard work.

5. Positive behavior expectations
   a. The interwoven character education program that teaches students what to do rather than what not to do and how to relate to others in a positive manner.
   b. The constant use of positive language that reinforces expectations.
   c. Relationship building that creates positive interactions between students and teachers.

6. Agreed upon processes and practices
   a. Instructional leadership that provides not only what to teach but how to teach.
   b. The teachers’ acceptance and deployment of instructional practices to create high expectations, engage students in learning, and proactively managed classrooms.
   c. The collection and use of data.
   d. Productive use of time.

As noted in the opening paragraph each school had its unique characteristics and different histories that impact its mission and value system. In each case study the concept of operating as charter school is an element that creates the opportunity to be independent of district organization, structure and traditions, they are independent schools that stand on their own rather than reliance on a system to define their mission, leadership and curriculums. The factor of independence is not identified as a strong correlate of research on effective schools, but in the instance of these five schools that independence to achieve their own goals and create a culture of success plays a positive role in the outcomes.