Methodology and General Observations

Introduction

This study was designed to explore the basis for success in five charter schools located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The study was motivated by the report from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (2009) that noted the variability in results for charter schools across the nation and asked the questions of why some charters are successful and others are not? In general we know why some charter schools fail, poor fiscal management, poor implementation of the proposed model, leadership issues and enrollment that fails to meet a designed budget.

The focus of the study was to look at five charters that had achieved the following: 1) been in operation for at least five years, 2) reading and math scores approached or exceeded the state-wide required achievement testing from 2007-2012, 3) served urban minority populations for whom educational challenges commonly referred to as the “achievement gap” is evident in the achievement test data of the larger community. All five charters were authorized by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and had their charter contracts renewed at least once for five years the maximum allowed under state law.

Wisconsin Charters

Legislation in Wisconsin creates two major categories of charter schools, those chartered by school districts (90+% of all charter and independent charters called 2r charters after the section of legislation that defines independent charters schools. Most district charters are in reality program extensions of the district and not free standing schools independent of the district board or leadership. Independent charters, called 2r charters for the section of law that defines them, are the subjects for this research project. They are chartered by independent bodies, UW-Milwaukee and City of Milwaukee, having their own boards and budgets and free from many state regulations. For those interested in more detail on Wisconsin charter schools they can review legislation at Wis. Statutes 118.40 or go to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and review their web page on charter schools in Wisconsin. Currently of 243 charter schools in Wisconsin, 22 schools are independent charters.

Initial context of the charter research

The research team (five members) collected and analyzed aggregated data that had been collected by the Office of Charter Schools at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. These data included achievement data, Wisconsin Concepts and Knowledge Exam (WKCE) and Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) developed by North West Evaluation Association, for three academic years 2010-2012. Also included in these data sets were attendance, discipline and other behavioral data; fiscal and per pupil expenditure data was also included for perspective. Full demographic information is also included. These data can be found in Sections H, I, J, K and L of this report.
**Team observations**

Four of the team members had previous knowledge of these schools and upon review of these data they offered the following general observations prior to commencing the study:

1. These schools while all successful by achievement standards do not necessarily look alike in their overall approach to education.
2. Curriculum was different, i.e. texts, but did follow general state standards.
3. Leadership styles were different, but staff response(s) were positive.
4. School viewed social behavior development as essential to the operation of the school.
5. The Seven Correlates of effective schools were present, but seemed to vary from school to school with each school placing an emphasis certain elements and going beyond the general aspects of the correlates.

**Research Questions**

1. For each school in the study what are the daily operational characteristics that define its character and culture?
2. What is the role of leadership at this school?
3. How does staff explain the success of the school?
4. What, if any, unique aspects of qualities are evident in a school?
5. What stands out as common elements of these schools?
6. What are the differences in these schools?

**Methodology**

A research team of five professionals was assembled with each person becoming an embedded observer and interviewer for a period of time beginning with the 2012-13 school year. Three of the five researchers had contact with these schools in the previous years. Four of the members were associated with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and one was a recently retired public school principal.

Each team member was expected to 1) observe beginning with the new school year (2012-13) staff development process prior to the opening of school 2) establish an observation schedule that accounted for observing across all grade levels, on different days of the week and times of the day from September of 2012 through March of 2013. In many instances teachers were observed on more than one occasion to verify information or refine interpretations. 3) Team members were expected to interview school leadership, teachers and related personnel using protocols developed by the researchers (see Section M). Interviews were expected to run for 45-60 minutes and may have required more than one session. Researchers were free to conduct additional interviews of schools staff as appropriate i.e. office personnel, business manager, aides and other individuals who had regular contact with the school. 4) Team members met during the year to discuss both process and observation data.

Upon completion of the interviews and observations team member met to review information, share observations, raise questions and worked to find a framework for which to describe and guide the development of a final report. Those results are discussed in later sections of this paper.