

Charter School Administrators' Attitudes and Beliefs Concerning
Developmental and Mental Health Services

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Abstract

Charter schools are public schools exempted from certain federal and state regulations in exchange for contracted promises to achieve particular educational goals. The growing popularity of charter schools and the unique place they hold in the school reform movement is bringing them to the attention of educational service providers and the American public. This article introduces information about the charter school movement and presents the results of a survey that investigated charter school administrators' attitudes and beliefs regarding developmental and mental health services. Implications for professional school counselors are examined.

Charter School Administrators' Attitudes and Beliefs Concerning Developmental and Mental Health Services

Charter schools are public schools exempt from certain federal and state rules and regulations, such as hiring requirements, that apply to traditional public schools. These exemptions are granted in exchange for promises to achieve educational goals specified in their charters. A unique aspect of charter schools is that they share support among political conservatives and liberals alike (Viadero, 2004) and the attention paid to charter schools as an influential element of the school reform movement has increased greatly in recent years. Evidence of the growing popularity of this alternative approach to public education is their inclusion as a school choice option in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act. The purpose of this article is to introduce information about the charter school movement within the overall school reform movement and to present the results of a survey that investigated charter school administrators' attitudes and beliefs regarding developmental and mental health services. The implications of charter schools for professional school counselors are examined.

School Reform

The 1983 publication of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's *A Nation at Risk*, a critical examination of the American public educational system, sparked the current school reform movement (Estes, 2004). More recently, the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006) issued a similarly scathing indictment of the state of the American educational system asserting that the problems facing US education are so significant that a major systemic overhaul is required. The level of discontent among many critics

of public education is high, as evidenced by the usage of phrases such as “public utility with captive customers” and “monopoly producing bad products at high prices” (Riley, 2000, p.1). There is evidence to suggest that the US general public, as well, has significant concerns with the state of public education (Wadsworth, 1998). An education reform issue that seems to be popular with many reformers, politicians, and the American public alike is school choice. It is within this arena that the topic of charter schools has entered the school reform debate.

School Choice

An increasingly influential strand of the school reform movement is the school choice movement. Fuller, Burr, Huerta, Puryear, and Wexler (1999), in a Policy Analysis for California Education report, characterized the basic underlying concepts of the school choice movement as follows:

Choice is founded upon a human-scale theory of accountability. Give parents the option to exit their neighborhood school and shop from a wider variety of alternatives. Or, bypass the school system entirely and give public dollars directly to parents via vouchers, boosting their purchasing power. Thus, school principals and teachers – if the theory’s underlying assumptions are met – become directly accountable to parents, not to school boards or state education agencies. This market competition for parents, enacted by a more diverse set of schools, will raise the quality of public education (p. 5).

There are several school choice options included in the reform debate: charter schools, private voucher programs, site-based management, tax credits and/or deductions (Rees, 2000), home schooling, and public school choice (Greene, 2002).

Some school choice options involve public schools while others involve private schools. Charter schools, as indicated previously, are public schools exempt from certain federal and state rules and regulations, such as hiring requirements, which apply to traditional public schools. Under site-based management, another proposed public school choice reform option, much of the decision-making authority devolves from a school board or central administration to the principal and a committee of teachers at a school. Other options include magnet schools, which are public schools with a specific curricular focus, and open enrollment, where parents may enroll a child in a public school outside their immediate neighborhood. Private school choice options include voucher programs that provide publicly financed vouchers to low-income students enabling them to attend private schools. In the tax credits and/or deductions option, parents receive credits or deductions for money spent on private school tuition (Fuller et al., 1999). Of these many forms of school choice, charter schools seem to be the form that has gained some ascendancy in recent years; particularly, among urban and minority parents and educational leaders.

Charter Schools

The 'charter' of a charter school is essentially a renewable "performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success." Charters are usually issued for 3-5 years (US Charter Schools Overview, n.d., ¶1). While charter schools are granted more freedom than regular public schools, they also bear additional accountability burdens in that they can lose public funding and be closed if they do not demonstrate students are learning (Hill, et al., 2001).

Charter school choice has attracted a great deal of attention and support recently from reformers, politicians, and the American public. It is likely that charter schools will stay in the spotlight in part because under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), charter schools are one transfer option for students in low-performing schools (Pascopella, 2004). While the concept of charter schools appears to have wide appeal, it is not without its detractors.

Pros and Cons of Charter Schools

Toch (1998) and Finn and Bierlein (1996) discussed some of the positives and negatives that have been associated with charter schools. Positives included the involvement of individuals in public education who have not traditionally been involved; strong staff and parent commitment to a school's vision; small class sizes; increased parental involvement (one piece of anecdotal support involved a school that required 20 hours a semester of parent volunteer work); strong school partnerships with business and community groups; and, high quality instructional materials.

Despite these positives, there are many downsides associated with charter schools, including: poor curricula and teaching; financial abuses; low academic standards; neophyte teachers; low-pay; high staff turnover; lack of basic supplies; discrepancies in enrollment reporting; financial abuses and profiteering; teachers needing to be jacks-of-all-trades; cramped budgets; crowded and sometimes temporary buildings; lack of non-instructional support staff and facilities such as gyms and media centers; and, the absence of capital funding and start-up money. It must be emphasized that there is wide variation in charter schools just as there is in traditional public schools. Some charter schools may enjoy many more pros than cons, and vice versa.

Broad criticisms of charter schools have centered on three key issues: whether charter schools are taking only the 'better' students; whether they are serving minority and special needs children adequately; and whether they are indeed accountable for their educational outcomes. In regards to the serving of minority students, Bulkley (2005) has asserted that the evidence suggests charter schools tend to be urban and serve higher percentages of minority students than do regular public schools. Heubert (1997), meanwhile, stated that statistics indicate a lower proportion of students with disabilities in charter schools than in traditional public schools. It is not clear, he indicated, whether students with disabilities were not being admitted to and served in charter schools, or whether charter schools were not resorting to special education to serve these students.

Charter school accountability is a complicated issue as it involves more than just the achievement of particular educational outcomes. A main concept of charter school accountability is that poor performing schools will be closed through having their charters revoked. It is not clear, however, that this actually occurs. As of 2002, "194 (6.95%) of the 2,790 schools that had ever received charters and opened their doors had been closed, but just 0.005% had been closed for reasons related to academic performance" (Hess, 2004, p. 509). In addition, charter school accountability also often encompasses efforts among proponents and opponents to compare the performance of charter schools with traditional public schools.

Charter Schools versus Traditional Public Schools

The existing data comparing student achievement in charter schools versus traditional public schools are inconclusive and must be viewed with discerning eyes. As

much attention must be paid to who published the study as to the results. Many authors and research groups appear to have political agendas of their own in regard to this issue. It seems that for every article showing charter schools performing as well as or better than public schools, there is another article showing them performing poorly in comparison. For an excellent summary and evaluation of current (2000 or later) research comparing traditional public schools and charter schools, see Hassel's (2005) Charter School Leadership Council report *Charter school achievement: What we know*.

A major question about the research as a whole concerns what the results indicate beyond just whether one type of school is performing better than the other on certain measures. Former US Education Secretary Rod Paige raised the question of whether some charter school students really were underperforming in comparison with traditional public school students, or whether these students were finally showing some educational gains compared to where they were in the traditional public school system (Phillips, 2004).

Another issue complicating comparison efforts involves the length of time charter schools have been given to achieve results. Even though the first charter school law was enacted in 1991 (Riley, 2000), a report for the US Department of Education (Hill et al., 2001) indicated that in 2000, half of the US charter schools were in their first two years of operation. Some research evidence suggests charter schools improve as they matured (Hassel, 2005). However, whether or not charter schools are performing well or underperforming in comparison with traditional public schools is only part of the picture. The very presence of charter schools is influencing the educational landscape in the United States.

Influence of Charter Schools

Some public school systems are responding to the presence of charter schools with legal challenges or threats while others are responding in a marketplace type manner. One school district, in response to students moving to charter schools, opened new traditional and Montessori elementary schools and a performing-arts magnet school, as well as added daylong kindergarten for many existing elementary schools (Toch 1998). In a survey, Arizona public school teachers reported the following responses by districts to charter school pressures: greater attempts to inform parents about programs and options; greater emphasis on professional development for teachers; and, increased consultation by school principals with teaching staff (Rees, 2000). It may be difficult, however, for traditional public schools to compete with what some charter schools are able to offer.

There are many different types of charter schools. There are charter schools targeting students at risk of failure, from different cultures, with specific disabilities, and that are college-bound (Estes, 2004). There are schools for girls and minorities (Pascopella, 2004). There are “virtual” schools as well as schools that are partnered with juvenile corrections, a boys-and-girls club, a parks department, and a fast-food company (Finn & Bierlein, 1996). There are charter schools specializing in serving the deaf, pregnant teens, and low-income children, as well as schools that are bilingual (Riley, 2000). While many of these schools may perhaps be lacking in facilities and resources, and may not be achieving as much as chartered for academically, their diversity and specialization may be just what some parents want. A recent Public

Agenda Online (2005) survey found that although most Americans did not know very much about charter schools, when they learned more they tended to like the idea.

Survey of Charter School Administrators

Charter schools have generated a great deal of interest in the media and among academicians and politicians. The majority of the popular press and academic scholarship on charter schools has focused on criticisms of the traditional public school system, comparisons between charter schools and traditional public schools, and education issues such as accountability. However, there is virtually no charter school scholarship addressing developmental and mental health services such as those provided by professional school counselors and other student service providers.

In addition, there is no information available on the extent of a presence student service providers have in charter schools. The purpose of this survey research was to assess the attitudes and beliefs of charter school administrators toward the provision of normal developmental and mental health services, and to ascertain employment-related information on student services personnel in charter schools.

Method

A master charter school list (1867 charter schools) was compiled through a website (<http://www.uscharterschools.org>). Developing or inactive schools were eliminated from the population. Schools were then classified by state to insure geographic variation within the population surveyed. Eighteen states reported zero or one charter school and were eliminated from the study.

The researchers decided to survey 50% of the charter schools in each remaining state (38 states). Working from the list of charter schools by state, the researchers

started at a random spot, and then systematically selected every 4th school until the number of schools selected totaled half of the total number of charter schools in the state. This same procedure was used for each state. The researchers mailed surveys to the administrators of 755 charter schools. Fifty-seven surveys were returned due to incorrect mailing addresses or inactive schools leaving a total of 698 charter schools in the sample. The researchers sent a follow-up electronic version of the survey to non-respondents. Eleven additional schools were found to be inactive (total of 687 charter schools in the sample). A total of 202 surveys were returned (29% return rate). One hundred and seventy four of these surveys were deemed fully complete and included in the analysis (25% return rate).

The 174 schools reporting demographic data represented 28 states (88% of the states surveyed). The indicated grade levels of the schools varied with 26% having K-8 grades taught; 19% 9-12; 10% K-12; 8% K-6; 5% 7-12; 3% 6-12; 2% 3-8 and 27% with other grade combinations that represented less than one percent of the sample.

The mean number of students enrolled in the schools was 310 students with a range from 16 students to 3000 and a median of 200 students.

When asked if the school addressed a need of a special population or specialty area, 85% of the schools reported that the school was identified as providing education in a specialized area. These areas were 38% “at-risk” populations, 19% emotionally challenged; 18% alternative education; 16% technology; 14% fine arts, 12% gifted and talented students; 9% ethnic or cultural issues, 9% school to work specialties; and 3% health and sciences. The percentage of specializations totals over 100% as schools

could check all areas that were applicable or write-in specialty areas not on the list provided.

Instrument & Analysis

The researchers created the survey used for this project. It consisted of 20 questions divided into three areas. The first section (4 questions) asked for information regarding the demographics of the school. The second section (13 questions) asked for opinions on the provision of developmental and mental health-related services within the school (e.g. Do you think that providing services targeting the normal developmental concerns of students in schools influences the students' academic achievement?). Table 1 provides a listing of the Section II questions, response options, and response results. The third section (3 questions) sought employment information through three questions.

The researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze the data from the study. Interpretation of the analysis relied on the frequencies and valid percentages reported.

Results

Opinions Regarding Provision of Services

In the survey, normal developmental needs were described as requiring “the provision of experiences, information, instruction, support, and encouragement to assist students in the development of personal, social, academic, and career/ vocational/ employability skills.” Mental health needs were described as requiring “the provision of services such as the following: responsive individual and/or group counseling to remediate student problems in personal, social, academic, and/or career/vocational functioning; crisis intervention and counseling; special education assessment; family

casework.” The results from Table 1 show that 98% of the administrators of charter school believe that services targeting students’ normal developmental needs influence academic achievement positively or somewhat positively; 100% believe these services influence the social environment of the school positively or somewhat positively.

Similarly, 98% believe that services targeting students’ mental health needs influence academic achievement positively or somewhat positively; 98% believe these services influence the social environment of the school positively or somewhat positively.

Fifty-nine percent of charter school administrators believe teachers always or usually were the professionals best suited for providing services addressing the normal developmental concerns of students in schools; 39% believe teachers were the professionals best suited sometimes. Twelve percent of administrators believe teachers always or usually were the professionals best suited for addressing the mental health needs of students in schools; 66% believe teachers were the professionals best suited sometimes. Nineteen percent believe this almost never to be the case.

Fifty-seven percent of charter school administrators agreed with the statement, “Parents should be the primary ones to deal with the normal developmental concerns of school-age children, not the schools;” 43% disagreed with the statement. Fifty-four percent agreed with the statement, “Parents should be the primary ones to deal with the mental health concerns of school-age children, not the schools;” 40% disagreed with the statement. Forty percent of charter school administrators indicated that referrals were made to outside service providers when students had a mental health need; 51% said this was true only for serious cases.

Sixty-seven percent of charter school administrators strongly favored hiring mental health professionals (e.g., school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists) to attend to the mental health needs of students; 18% mildly favored hiring these professionals while 13% indicated neither opposing nor favoring. Eighty five percent of the administrators believe that these professionals, if hired, should be required to hold the same licenses or endorsements held by similar professionals employed in the traditional public schools; 12% indicated this should not be a requirement.

Employment

Seventy-six schools (44%) employed school counselors. The remaining schools provided 31 different job titles for the position of school counselor including teacher, education director, art therapist, academic advisor, and administrator. Fifty-four schools (31%) employed school social workers. The remaining schools referred to those who were employed as school social workers as counselors, case managers, prevention coordinators, and “the one who was assigned to us by the District.” Ninety-six schools (55%) employed a school psychologist. Ninety-seven percent of these school psychologists were employed part-time and used on a contracted as needed basis.

Discussion and Implications

The charter school administrators responding to the survey indicated strong beliefs that services targeting the developmental needs and mental health of students positively influence the academic achievement and social environments of their schools.

Most of the administrators saw the teachers in their schools as the professionals best suited for addressing the developmental concerns of students, but the

administrators were more neutral in their assessment of teachers' abilities to address the mental health needs of the students in their schools. These notions fit with the ideas of guidance being a whole school function and challenging student issues requiring the collaborative efforts of student service professionals, teachers, parents and community-based service providers.

It is a positive to note that close to half of the charter schools surveyed employed school counselors. This is an important finding given that many charter schools operate on very limited budgets and some, depending on how the charters operate in their states, are released from the hiring requirements imposed on traditional public schools. It is also a positive that so many of the charter school administrators endorsed appropriate credentialing of professionals in charter schools similar to the credentialing required of professionals in traditional public school settings. A related concern, however, is that when asked to write in a job title for their school counselors, if different from 'school counselor,' some administrators wrote in many different titles including 'teacher' and 'administrator.' The provision of these types of titles indicates that some charter school administrators do not understand who school counselors are or what they do. This is an important realization given that some charter school administrators do not come from traditional education backgrounds or settings. These individuals may not have any knowledge or prior experience with professional school counselors.

If by the nature of the charter their school receives these administrators are given wide latitude on who to hire to work in their schools, they may not hire a professional school counselor. They may choose to hire a teacher or other individual who costs less to serve as a quasi-counselor, if they even deem such a position necessary.

Despite the growing body of literature about charter schools and the charter school movement, there is almost no mention of school counselors. Much of the literature tends to focus on what charter schools are and how they compare to traditional public schools. The question confronting the school counseling profession at this point is does the charter school movement represent a significant threat or opportunity for school counselors?

In contrast to the traditional public education system, the charter school movement seeks to establish public schools freed from some of the rules and regulations seen as constraining regular public schools. Proponents assert that freed from these constraints, charter schools can be designed to meet more adequately the specific needs of certain types of students or students with certain interests while still remaining accountable for student outcomes. This goal, combined with the small size of many charter schools, makes for a potentially ideal scenario for the school counseling profession. School counselors in charter schools could significantly impact the design and development of public schools. Such input could result in a new model of student counseling and guidance in which school counselors enjoy a significant and supported role in helping students to succeed academically, vocationally, and personally, rather than constantly battling the perception of their serving in an ancillary capacity.

Another unique feature of charter schools that could benefit school counselors is their diversity in terms of educational focus and students served. Students in charter schools are not immune from the same societal pressures and challenges affecting and impacting students in traditional public schools. The focused educational mission of some charter schools combined with their unique organizational structures is extremely

conducive to the effective delivery of school counseling services. Charter schools could prove to be ripe environments for comprehensive school counseling programs and for allowing school counselors to effectively serve as educational leaders and advocates.

The school counseling profession seems to be well poised to take advantage of the changing educational climate afforded by charter schools. Through the efforts of the American School Counselor Association, state school counselor associations, and school counseling professionals across the country, a clear and consistent new vision for a school counselor professional identity is emerging. This vision establishes school counselors as educational leaders and partners with other educators in promoting systemic change and prevention programs, and in seeking to address the normal developmental and remedial needs of students to enhance student learning.

While the school counseling profession has realized significant gains, many challenges continue for school counselors in traditional public schools including large student-counselor ratios, the imposition of many non-counseling and non-guidance duties, an increased emphasis on testing leading to more limited student access, and an accountability movement that does not adequately take into account the societal context in which schools exist. Despite the potential charter schools appear to afford school counseling professionals in relation to these challenges, it must be understood that there still is a public lack of knowledge about the role and education of school counselors. Given that not all those who are starting charter schools are education professionals who might possess an understanding and awareness of school counseling and its benefits, it is incumbent on the school counseling profession to promote a concerted effort to inform charter school movement leaders about the school

counseling profession and the potential benefits for students and parents. Educational reform gives the profession of school counseling an opportunity to be recognized for its contribution to the enhancement of student learning and development, but only if school counselors make their roles and achievements known.

The active presence of school counselors in charter schools may serve as a marker for the future of school counselors in education. It would be an important step forward for the school counseling profession to partner with colleges, universities, and other entities establishing charter schools, to participate in designing charter schools that allow for school counseling best practices and in which school counselors and a comprehensive school counseling program play a central role. Such partnerships would essentially result in lab schools allowing for the demonstration and documentation of school counseling effectiveness. Furthermore, given the limited resources and high capital costs that many charter schools experience at their start-up, such partnerships may be the best avenue for establishing a strong school counseling presence in charter schools relatively early in the charter school movement.

The school counseling profession cannot afford to ignore the presence of charter schools, nor the potential challenges or opportunities they present to it. Potential exemptions from certain traditional public school regulations, such as mandates for school counselors, pose a direct threat to the school counseling profession. Charter schools appear to be an important and durable part of the new educational landscape. School counselors need to be part of the current education reformation and a part of tomorrow's schools.

Further Research

The results of this survey indicate the presence of school counselors in some charter schools. Further research is needed at this point to examine the perceptions and experiences of these professionals. Qualitative study of the perceptions of charter school counselors with prior employment in traditional public schools would assist in understanding the opportunities and challenges encountered by school counselors in charter schools.

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Table 1 Administrators' Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Provision of Services

	Positively	Somewhat Positively	Somewhat Negatively	Negatively	No Influence
Do you think that providing services targeting the normal developmental concerns of students in schools influences:					
Academic Achievement	77%	21%	2%	0%	0%
Social Environment in Schools	76%	24%	0%	0%	0%
Do you think that providing services targeting the mental health of students in schools influences:					
Academic Achievement	73%	25%	1%	0%	1%
Social Environment in Schools	71%	27%	1%	0%	1%
	Always	Usually Yes	Sometimes Yes	Almost Never	Never
Are teachers the professionals best suited for providing services addressing:					
Normal Developmental Concerns	8%	51%	39%	1%	1%
Mental Health of Students	1%	11%	66%	19%	3%
	True		True Only For Serious Cases		False
When a student in our school has a mental health need, a referral is made to an outside service provider for services for this student.	40%		51%		9%
	Agree		Disagree		No Response
Parents should be the primary ones to deal with normal developmental concerns of school-age children, not schools.	57%		43%		0%
Parents should be the primary ones to deal with the mental health concerns of school-age children, not schools.	54%		40%		6%
	Strongly Favor	Mildly Favor	Neither Oppose Nor Favor	Mildly Oppose	Strongly Oppose
Charter schools should hire mental health professionals (e.g., school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists) to attend to the mental health needs of students.	67%	18%	13%	1%	1%
			Yes	No	No Response
Should mental health professionals (e.g., school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists) who are employed in charter schools be required to hold the same licenses or endorsements held by similar professionals employed in traditional public schools?			85%	12%	3%

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