

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES OF CHARTER SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

SÖZLEŞMELİ OKUL MÜDÜRLERİNİN LİDERLİK SORUNLARI

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Abstract

There are different kinds of schools for pupils to attend and get educated. Charter schools are one those options, which are “publicly funded elementary and secondary schools that have been freed some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools, in exchange for some type of accountability for producing certain results, which are set forth in each charter school’s charter” (www.nea.org). In this article, firstly, a brief explanation of the importance of education is presented as the introduction which states, many studies indicate that there is an increase in the enrollment of the schools, however, there are studies demonstrating that not all public school pupils are successful enough. Second, the background of charter schools in the U.S. and charter school financing are identified. This study are presents that there is a significance increase of the enrollment of charter schools. Following this, the overall principal issues (both charter and public school principals) are discussed. This study is also highlighted that, the leadership of charter school principals is an essential aspect of the success of charter school. Finally, although the overall success of charter schools is much better than public school, transformational leadership is suggested as the position of the authors which is argued to improve the overall success of charter schools.

Key Words: Charter Schools, Public Schools, Principals, Transformational Leadership

Öz

Öğrencilerin eğitim görebilmeleri için farklı türde okullar vardır. Sözleşmeli okullar bu opsiyonlardan biridir ve “kamu tarafından finanse edilen, diğer devlet okullarına göre kurallar, yönetmelikler ve tüzükler bazında birtakım serbestlikleri bulunan, buna karşı sorumluluk sahibi olmaları adına her sözleşmeli okulun sözleşmesinde ayrı ayrı belirlenmiş uyması gereken kuralların bulunduğu okullardır” (www.nea.org). Bu çalışmada ilk olarak eğitim önemine kısaca değinilecek ve görülecektir ki her ne kadar okullara kayıt oranlarında yükseliş görülse de devlet okulları yeterince başarılı olamamaktadır. İkinci olarak, Amerika Birleşik Devletlerinde sözleşmeli okulların tarihçesi ve finansman yöntemleri ele alınacaktır. Yine bu çalışma göstermektedir ki, sözleşmeli okullara kayıt oranlarında ciddi derecede artış söz konusudur. Bunların ışığında hem devlet hem de sözleşmeli okulların müdürlerinin sorunları tartışılmıştır. Bu çalışma aynı zamanda, sözleşmeli okulların başarılı oluşlarında okul müdürlerinin liderlik karakteri sergilemelerinin önemine vurgu yapmaktadır. Sonuç olarak, her ne kadar sözleşmeli okullar diğer devlet okullarına göre oldukça başarılı olsalar da, sözleşmeli okulların genel başarılarının yükselmesi için dönüşümcü liderlik model olarak önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sözleşmeli Okullar, Devlet Okulları, Okul Müdürleri, Dönüştürücü Liderlik

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Introduction

21st century knocked on the doors of humanity with a variety of opportunities for education by providing very sophisticated technological supplies, comfortable study environments and politicians who care about education more than the ones in the past. The importance of the education is now more than an argument but a vital reality. Many studies indicate that there is an increase in the enrollment of the schools, however, there are studies demonstrating that not all public school pupils are successful enough. According to Murray (2010), “Cognitive ability, personality and motivation come mostly from home. What happens in the classroom can have some effect, but smart and motivated children will tend to learn to read and do math even with poor instruction, while not-so-smart or unmotivated children will often have trouble with those subjects despite excellent instruction” (p.31).

Schools are the places where the pupils’ characters are shaped and prepared for future challenges. The Future of Children presents an important insight, “To attain adult success today young Americans must be able to use reading to gain access to the world of knowledge, to synthesize information from multiple sources, to evaluate arguments, and to explore in depth fields as disparate as history, science, and mathematics. To complicate the challenge, schools must not only better prepare students for these demands but also reduce sharp disparities in literacy outcomes between disadvantages and privileged children”(P. 1). As a matter of fact, the best ‘possible’ education for the young Americans is necessary through well-educated teachers and qualified school leaders.

Charter School and Its Background in the U.S.

1. The Definition and Funding of a Charter School

Charter schools are comparatively newer than the traditional public schools and private schools, but, they are popular. Mora and Christianakis (2011) cited that, “ Presently, there are over 4700 charter schools in 40 states, in the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, with most in low-income urban communities, serving over 1.2 million students, with tens of thousands more students on waiting lists” (p. 93). Wolf (2010) cited the definition from The U.S. Department of Education Web site (answers.ed.gov) as:

Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The “charter” establishing each school is a performance contract detailing the school’s mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success.(p. 383)

In addition to this, U.S. Department of Education’s Charter School Guidance (2004) explains the purpose of the Charter School Program (CSP): “The primary

purpose of the CSP is to expand the number of high-quality charter schools available to students across the Nation by providing Federal finance assistance for CSP design, initial implementation, and planning; and to evaluate the effects of charter schools, including their effects on students, staff and parents” (p. 6). Wolf (2010) further mentions that, “In 1991, Minnesota was the first state to authorize charter schools. Since then, a total of 40 States and the District of Columbia have authorized charter schools” (p. 383). Therefore, charter schools are public schools as well, since they are required to get permission from the State governments; and they are also engaged with governments on a specific agreement (charter), however, charter schools have their own focuses and regulations which are separated them from the traditional public schools.

The major differences between the traditional public schools and the charter schools have been discussed by the researchers and the main frame emerges when a student’s enrollment process into charter school is identified. Shen and Berger (2011) present the idea which confirmed the increase of the enrollment of charter schools , “Charter schools now educate more than 3 percent of all public school students , and the proportion of students enrolled continuous to increase at more than 10 percent a year” (p. 1). Then, they continued the discussion by presenting the funding types of charter schools, “As publicly funded schools, charter schools receive money for the students they enroll. When a student enrolls in a charter school, the money follows him or her from resident school district” (p. 2). U.S. Department of Education’s Charter School Guidance (2004) identified three different types of funding formulas for charter schools:

One strategy funds charter schools based on the per-pupil revenue of districts in which their students reside. It is used in eight states. The second type of formula is based on the per-pupil revenue of the authorizer. It is the most common formula as it is used in 29 states. The third formula uses a statewide per-pupil allocation. Used in five states and the District of Columbia, it provides charter schools the same funding wherever they are located within the state and wherever their students reside. (p. 15)

II. Operation of a Charter School

Charter schools are permitted to select their focus, environment, operations, and wide diversity across different sectors (CREDO, 2009). Charter schools may be run by individuals or organizations. More and Christianakis (2011) stated, “A wide array of institutions, some public and some not, manage charter schools; social service agencies, universities, philanthropic organizations, religious schools, previously tuition-charging privates, for-profit firms, parents, community members, and educators” (p. 93). These diverse stakeholders underscore the structural and economic changes that have resulted from the expansion of charter schools.

Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) are non-profits that operate multiple charter schools as well as launch new ones. Along with their for-profit counterparts, Education Management Organizations (EMOs), individual CMOs have quickly become some of the biggest names in public education: KIPP, Rocketship Charter Schools, and Green Dot Schools, just to name a few (charterschoolcenter.org). According to DeArmond, Gross, Bowen, Demeritt, and Lake (2012), “CMOs are nonprofit organizations that directly manage groups of charter schools. In many cases, CMOs are building systemwide structures designed to support coherent, mission-driven schools at scale” (p. 3). Robelen (2008) participated in the discussion by highlighting the vision of CMOs, “CMOs wrestle with striking the right balance between central control and local autonomy, and the dynamic tends to evolve. But while there is variation across CMOs, the core vision is usually pretty firm (p. 13).

Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Foundation is an instance for Charter Management Organizations. The KIPP Foundation to grow the KIPP network by recruiting and training outstanding school leaders to open and operate KIPP schools. Since 1994, KIPP has grown from two teachers in a single classroom to more than 2,700 teachers serving more than 39,000 students in 125 schools across the country (kipp.org). According to Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak & Walters (2010), “The nation’s largest network of charter schools is the Knowledge is Power Program, with 80 schools operating or slated open soon. KIPP schools target low income and minority students and subscribe to an approach some have called *No Excuses*. No excuses schools feature a long school day and year, selective teacher hiring, strict behavior norms, and encourage a strong student work ethic” (p. 239).

The Success of the Charter School across the Traditional Public School

Charter schools have the autonomy to manage itself and it is expected to reach an outstanding student achievement degree, however the studies demonstrate opposite findings. Hubbard and Kulkarni (2009) mentions that, “States have rapidly expanded charter schools in recent decades with the hope that small, autonomous schools will lead to effective educational innovations and improve learning outcomes for students” (p. 3). However, according to Banks, Bodkin and Heissel (2011), “Charter schools, unlike traditional public schools, have more flexibility in their operation, though this flexibility does not always result in better educational outcomes for students” (p. 1).

Even though, “Charter schools in Chicago handed public money to more private corporate sponsors than even before. Of the first 57 charter schools in Chicago, 42 are corporate, 3 are teacher initiated, 9 are community centered, and 3 are university based” (Mora & Christianakis, 2011, p. 96), not all charter school students in Chicago demonstrate better results than the traditional public schools. “The group portrait shows wide variation in performance. The study reveals that a

decent fraction of charter schools, 17 percent, provide superior education opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their student would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools” (CREDO, 2009, p.1). Therefore, the findings of Wolf (2010) are significant, “One of the most comprehensive discussion about charter school achievement is in *The Charter School Dust-Up*. The authors concluded, based on 19 studies, conducted in 11 states and District of Columbia, that there is no evidence that, on average, charter schools out-perform regular public schools. In fact there is evidence that the average impact of charter schools is negative” (p. 383).

One last empirical data is revealed by National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) in 2004. The study is called National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) also known as *The Nation's Report Card*. The report found that charter school students, on average, score lower than students in traditional public schools. While there was no measurable difference between charter school students and students in traditional public schools in the same racial/ethnic subgroup, charter school students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch scored lower than their peers in traditional public schools, and charter school students in central cities scored lower than their peers in math in 4th grade. NAGB (2004) looked at the impact of school characteristics and found that:

- Charter schools that were part of the local school district had significantly higher scores than charter schools that served as their own district.
- Students taught by certified teachers had roughly comparable scores whether they attended charter schools or traditional public schools, but the scores of students taught by uncertified teachers in charter schools were significantly lower than those of charter school students with certified teachers.
- Students taught by teachers with at least five years' experience outperformed students with less experienced teachers, regardless of the type of school attended, but charter school students with inexperienced teachers did significantly worse than students in traditional public schools with less experienced teachers. (The impact of this finding is compounded by the fact that charter schools are twice as likely as traditional public schools to employ inexperienced teachers (nea.org).

Not all charter schools fail on the other hand. Robelen (2008) gives an example of New Jersey's educational situation, “Newark is New Jersey's largest city, with some 280,000 residents. More than one-third of adults over age 25 in the city lack of high school diploma, and only 12 percent have a college degree” (p. 6). The poor performance of the Newark school system has been a critical driver of

charter school movement in the city. According to Robelen's 2006-2007 state test research charter school students achieve over regular public school students but the principals are still complaining on their obstacles which they have to face with. Robelen (2008) cited from Mayor Brooker's interview, "I am not loyal to charter schools or traditional public schools; I am loyal to results" (p. 7).

The Obstacles of Charter Schools Principles

Recent studies leave no doubt about how important teachers are to student learning. Some researchers even argue that "having string of highly effective teachers in elementary schools can actually make up for the adverse effect poverty has on student achievement" (DeArmond et al., 2012, p. 2). On the other side, Portin, Schneider, DeArmond & Gundlach (2003) added an insight of leadership on school management, "If schools are to succeed, principals should take on an increasing array of leadership" (p. 1). It is not expected of all principals that they have excellent leadership skills, but it should be considered that school principals are also the leaders of the school. As a fact, the grading results of the charter schools are not satisfied; not only principals are responsible for lower results but it is their job to diagnose and figure out a solution for the issues. There are some obstacles identified by the researchers preventing the effective leadership of school principals.

There are some certain tasks of the school leaders regardless of their classification as charter or public school. Portin, Schneider, DeArmond & Gundlach (2003) have studied the particular duties of school leaders in 21 schools in four cities across four states. They have implemented interviews in those schools and draw five major conclusions:

1. The core of the principal's job is diagnosing his or her particular school's needs and, given the resources and talents available, deciding how to meet them.
2. Regardless of school type—elementary or secondary or public or private—schools need leadership in seven critical areas: instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, and micropolitical.
3. Principals are responsible for ensuring that leadership happens in all seven critical areas, but they don't have to provide it.
4. Governance matters, and a school's governance structure affects the ways key leadership functions are performed.
5. Principals learn by doing. However trained, most principals think they learned the skills they need on the job. (p. 1)

It is reasonable to expect principals to know more about instruction than teachers; not necessarily every school need same kind of leadership; understanding

what the school needs and then delivering what is required is the core job of the principals and lastly, when schools are not totally dysfunctional, the principal's job involves diagnosing problems and searching for remedies.

Leading a charter school is different than leading a private or traditional public school. Campbell, Gross, and Lake (2008) focus on the charter school leadership and identify the charter school leaders and their challenges. According to Cambell et al. (2008), "For the charter school leader, there is no central office to recruit students and teachers, secure and manage facilities, or raise money and manage school finance" (p. 14). A key difference separating charter school leaders from traditional public school principals is their experience with school leadership. In 2007, the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) at the University of Washington surveyed charter school leaders in six states: Arizona, California, Hawaii, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Texas. Cambell et al.(2008) Combined their survey findings with NCSRP finding and they came up with these findings:

- Facilities issues top the list of challenges, with about 40 percent of charter school leaders reporting that securing and managing facilities is a problem.
- Personnel and finances come next on the list of struggles. The need to attract good teachers, the constant necessity of raising money, and the challenge of matching expenses with enrollment-driven income are anxiety-provoking and time-consuming concerns for charter school leaders.
- The lack of sufficient time for strategic planning—looking ahead to plot the school's growth and build its capacity—is another daunting challenge, according to our survey. Almost half the respondents reported not spending enough time on strategic planning.
- Nearly one in five charter school leader's reports being only slightly confident or not at all confident in implementing a strategic, schoolwide instructional initiative or schoolwide improvement plan. All of those concerns are more common among leaders with the least experience in the principal's office.
- It follows, then, that experience on the job is the No. 1 factor explaining confidence in charter school leaders, according to the survey, even more so than specialized training and experience. (p. 14)

In order to improve the overall school success, all efforts to develop organizational coherence through talent management need to be thought of and that coherence and culture are ultimately useful to the extent that they focus on improvements in teaching and learning.

Transformational Leadership as a Recommendation to Improve Overall School Success

School leaders are the people who should diagnose issues and implement the change whenever necessary. As charter school leaders, it has been identified that charter school principals are responsible for hiring of the teachers (CMOs school hiring process may change; board of trustees may be involved in the hiring process) who are basically the followers of the principals. The relation between the principal and the teachers should be settled on a followership and leadership position. It is important to understand for both sides that, “A leader cannot achieve tasks alone, and a followerless leader is a lonely individual” (Hertig, 2010, p. 1412).

On the other side, transformational leadership is suggested for principals and the teachers which may help to improve overall school success. Nahavandi (2010) defines transformational leadership as, “Transformational leadership includes three factors - charisma and inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration – that, when combined, allow a leader to achieve large scale change” (p. 193). From Nahavandi’s perspective, a transformation skilled school leader is the person who has the charisma when it comes to dealing with stakeholders, partners, and parents and is the person who does not hesitate to advocate for change when it is required. Seidman and McCauley (2011) present their insights into discussion by identifying some expectations from transformational leaders:

Transformational leaders must: Create and communicate a compelling vision for the future that inspires large numbers of people to function at higher levels than previously imagined; Hire a team that has just the right combination of skills and knowledge; Manage this team with a delicate balance between drive and support; Continue to achieve transactional excellence while the transformation is in process. (p. 47)

Seidman and McCauley’s draw a school leader picture which highlights the ability of effective communication and the importance of creating a vision for the organization and hiring processes. Eisenbach, Watson, and Pillai (1999) support the idea of transformation process, “Transactional leadership develops from the exchange process between leaders and subordinates wherein the leader provides rewards in exchange for subordinates' performance. Transformational leadership behaviors go beyond transactional leadership and motivate followers to identify with the leader's vision and sacrifice their self-interest for that of the group or the organization” (p. 83). Mokber, Khairuzaman, and Vakilbashi (2011) conclude the discussion by identifying how transformational leaders make an impact on an organization, “Transformational leaders can transform organizational culture through intentional teaching, coaching, role modeling, promotion, and other mechanisms and improve commitment and loyalty to innovation individually and in groups” (p.506)

Conclusion

This manuscript first defined the charter school for the purpose of this study. The founding and operational regulations are outlined and the funding processes are explained. Next, charter schools are compared with traditional public schools in regards to student achievement. After describing the challenges and obstacles for school principals, transformational leadership model is proposed as a feasible solution to the leadership challenges in charter school, which then can increase student achievement. The solution lies in a stronger understanding of transformational leadership practices and training the principals and the teachers through this framework. Transformational leaders at charter schools can lead changes when deemed necessary and influence the overall school performance through modeling effective communication, creating and communicating the vision, being a role model for teachers, students, and staff, hiring the right person at the right time, being a charismatic leader when dealing with complex challenges, maintaining the funds and facilities, and more importantly transforming the organizational culture through success. Robelen (2008) cited that, “Charter leaders typically require skills not just in leading instruction and managing people, but also in finding and maintaining school facilities, handling finances, hiring faculty members, and negotiating relations with boards, parents, and charter school authorizers” (p. 10).

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