

TEACHER VOICE
AND
THE CHARTER SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Anthoula Vasiliou
Fordham University
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Dr. Mark Naison

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Charter schools are controversial. While some communities have happily welcomed charters as an alternative to the other public schools in their neighborhoods, others have fought against them. The main arguments in support of charter schools suggest that they produce better results in their students' academic achievement and that they provide a more flexible environment to experiment with new, innovative approaches to education. However, in a growing body of research, it has been found that, on average, charter school students perform about the same as those in regular public schools across the country.¹ Furthermore, some of the strategies that have been implemented in charters as part of their attempts to innovate, such as longer school days or "no excuses" discipline, have contributed to a work environment that many teachers have deemed unfavorable, to say the least.

While most of the discussion regarding charter schools has focused on the aspect of students' academic achievement, attention must also be given to teachers' experiences. Some charter school advocates have argued that education policies should be developed solely with the interests of children in mind. Geoffrey Canada, founder of the Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy Charter Schools, for example, stated: "will [the public school system] serve the children in our schools or the adults? I'll support any school that will educate children. Can

¹ Kahlenberg, R. D., & Potter, H. (2014). Introduction, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (pp. 2). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

the critics make that same claim?”² This suggests that the Promise Academy Charter Schools, which do not offer the same workplace protections as traditionally unionized public schools, make policy decisions with the best interest of children in mind, while public schools might compromise this for the convenience of teachers. Similarly, Michelle Rhee, Chancellor of the Washington, D.C. public school system from 2007 to 2010, often criticized teacher’s unions for putting the “interests of adults” over the “interests of children”.³ While there may be some aspects of teacher’s unions that need reform, such as easily awarding tenure to teachers within their first few years on the job, Canada and Rhee’s statements encourage a disregard for teachers’ opinions, which can do more harm than good. Of course, the purpose of schools is to educate children and prepare them for the future, so they should be of the utmost importance when making policy decisions. At the same time, teachers’ voices must also be heard. I do not think that any good teacher would prioritize his or her interests over those of students, but there is a limit to how much sacrifice they are expected to make in their workplace.

Establishing a favorable work environment in schools is not just a matter of convenience for teachers. Research has shown that teachers’ job satisfaction is important to their students’ academic success.⁴ When teachers are engaged in their schools’ decision-making processes, their school climate improves, teacher turnover rates drop and teachers are more committed, engaged and effective in the classroom. As a result, students are taught in a more positive environment,

² (2010, March 14). The Push-Back on Charter Schools. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/the-push-back-on-charter-schools/?_r=0

³ Ravitch, D. (2010). What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (pp. 172). New York, NY: Basic Books.

⁴ Kahlenberg, R. D., & Potter, H. (2014). Reduced Teacher Voice, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (pp. 35). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

which leads them to perform better as well. Hence, teachers' interests do not necessarily conflict with the best interests of their students.

Considering this, it is important to have an understanding of teachers' experiences, particularly in charter schools where they are overwhelmingly not unionized and are subject to more unfavorable work environments. Through this paper, I aim to highlight some of the issues that charter school teachers face on a daily basis. I have conducted extensive interviews with six individuals that were previously or are currently employed by charter schools. In order to encourage my interviewees to speak openly to me and to help protect against any potential retaliation for expressing negative views about their schools, their identities will be kept anonymous and their schools will not be named. A general description of the individuals that I interviewed is as follows:

- A male teacher formerly employed at a unionized charter school in New York
- A female teacher currently employed at another unionized charter school in New York
- A female teacher formerly employed at a small un-unionized charter school in Chicago
- An female operations manager currently employed at a school that is part of a small un-unionized network of charter schools in New York
- A female teacher formerly employed at an un-unionized charter school in Indiana that operated under a national for-profit charter school management company
- A male operations coordinator currently employed at an un-unionized charter school in New York that is part of a large "no excuses" charter network.

Of course, this is a small number of charter school employees, and hence their experiences cannot be considered representative of charter schools overall. Furthermore, a clear majority of the individuals that I spoke with had a generally unfavorable view of their work environments. This should not be interpreted to mean that all charter schools face all of the issues that they describe. There are undoubtedly charter school teachers that enjoy their jobs and have more positive experiences in their schools. I occasionally describe such examples from secondary sources. Nonetheless, there are many similarities and common themes in the information that these charter school teachers and staff members have shared with me. Some of their experiences are quite alarming and should not be brushed off as anomalies, but rather seriously considered when critically evaluating charter schools.

The information that I gathered from these interviews has been divided into five main sections, which constitute the first five chapters of this paper. The first chapter describes teachers' motivations for deciding to work in charter schools and highlights some of the main problems that they face in regards to the quality of their work environment. This includes overwhelming work schedules and a lack of union representation. The second chapter focuses on the discipline policies in charter schools, which range from the very strict behavioral expectations in "no excuses" schools, to the inconsistent and inadequately enforced policies of other schools. In the third chapter, I discuss charter schools' approaches to educating students with special needs. This is a significant issue, as many charters have been accused of not providing proper resources for these students or attempting to exclude them from their student bodies. Chapter four emphasizes charter school teachers' relationships with their administrators and school leaders. Although these relationships are essential to the smooth functioning of their schools, many teachers informed me that there is often a lack of communication and trust

between them. Chapter five incorporates the viewpoints of charter school parents and describes the relationships that they have with teachers. Many parents have favorable views of charter schools and consider them to be a good alternative to poor performing public schools. However, some teachers emphasize that parents are not always fully informed about the policies that are implemented in their children's schools. Finally, in the sixth and last chapter I highlight some of the general areas for improvement in charter schools, particularly with their relationship with regular public schools. I conclude by arguing that there must be a greater effort to include teachers in decision-making processes in charter schools and allow them to share their ideas, in order to establish a better environment for both teachers and students.

CHAPTER ONE

CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS:

ENTERING, EXPERIENCING AND LEAVING THE SYSTEM

There are an endless number of issues to debate in the field of education—teachers’ tenure, students’ rights, parental involvement, funding, accountability, testing, extra-curricular activities—the list goes on and on. Among all these, it is probably fair to say that charter schools are pretty high on the list. Charters have adamant supporters, fierce opponents and many onlookers. They are championed for their innovation, but also criticized for underserving children with disabilities and children that are English Language Learners. They are defended for their record of academic achievement, but also attacked for their treatment of their teachers. Considering this last point in particular—if teachers are known to have unfavorable work experiences in charter schools, why would a teacher decide to teach in a charter school?

First, although charters have been around for a few decades now, teachers do not always know much about them when they apply for a position. One woman that I interviewed that was formerly a teacher at a charter school in Indiana, for example, noted that she was unfamiliar with charter schools and did not really know what she was getting into. After leaving a position in a public school, she heard about a charter school, the first one in her neighborhood, that was opening its doors. She was curious to see how this school would function, but was also excited by the idea of being involved in a school from its very beginning and being a part of its growth and development. Ultimately, though, she became very disappointed with the school because she was unhappy with the stress and the workload that she was burdened with, and also discovered

that the school's leadership was more interested in acquiring real estate and making profits than helping children obtain a quality education; she quit after three years. The charter school was shut down because of accusations of corruption shortly thereafter.

Another teacher that I interviewed from a small New York charter school described a similar experience of obtaining a position at her charter. After teaching in a public school for four years, she was looking for a new teaching position and heard about a fairly new charter school (part of a small network of schools). She, too, knew little about charters when she applied for the job, but was interested in learning about them. After two years, she is in the process of not only quitting her job, but also leaving the teaching profession altogether after a disappointing experience of being unsupported by administration and being overworked.

These two teachers had a few years of teaching under their belts before they began teaching in charter schools. Many other teachers, though, are inexperienced and go into charter schools as their first teaching job. Other teachers are alternatively certified, which means that not only do they have no prior teaching experience, but they also were trained in a relatively short and less in-depth program. These teachers do not always know what they are getting themselves into when they accept a job offer in charter schools, and many of them crack under pressure and are unable to deal with the work conditions.

There are two main reasons why many of these teachers are hired despite their lack of experience. First, some charter schools face high teacher turnover rates and must quickly fill positions, so they are willing to accept less qualified teachers. Second, some researchers have advanced the idea that the first two or three years that a teacher is in the classroom are not indicative of a teacher's potential and that he or she can make great gains within those first few years. Hence, schools may hire new teachers, particularly if they are short-staffed, with the

expectation that they can learn on the job and effectively educate students in the long run.⁵ However, charter school teachers are often met with unique challenges that may affect their teaching abilities or their desire to remain in the position.

One of the most obvious pressures that charter school teachers face is working for long hours. Of course, teaching is a demanding profession that requires a lot of time in regular public schools as well. However, unlike regular public schools, charter schools are able to extend their school day, school week or school year. It is not unusual for charter schools to have school days that begin at 8:00 a.m. and end at 4:30 p.m., followed by after-school activities that extend later into the evening. It is also not unusual for charter schools to hold class or extra-curricular activities on weekends, or to require teachers to conduct other activities, like home-visits, outside of the regular workweek. It is furthermore not unusual for charter schools to have school years that begin in August and end in July. The obvious reasoning behind these scheduling decisions is that if children can spend more time in the classroom, then they are given the opportunity to learn more and hopefully advance academically. While this is a noble cause, there are multiple consequences that can arise from overwhelmingly extended work hours that can cause charter school teachers to become dissatisfied, stressed and underperforming. For example, some charter schools require teachers to be on call until 9:00 p.m. to make themselves available for student questions.⁶ Such a policy may place limitations or unnecessary stress on teachers' personal lives.

A teacher from a small Chicago charter school described the consequences of an overwhelming work schedule with me at length. She obtained her first teaching job at this charter

⁵ Ravitch, D. (2010). What Would Mrs. Ratliff Do?, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (pp. 180-188). New York, NY: Basic Books.

⁶ Kahlenberg, R. D., & Potter, H. (2014). Reduced Teacher Voice, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (pp. 38). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

school as a Teach for America member. She worked from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. each weekday. During the school day, she only had a forty-five minute lunch break—and no free periods to prep lesson plans. As a new, inexperienced teacher, prepping was essential for her to perform well in the classroom and develop her teaching strategies. Without this time, she felt that her lesson plans were not as effective, which was reflected in her consistently poor evaluations. As a consequence, she would take work home with her and try to make up prep time during afterschool hours. However, this quickly took a toll on her personal life, giving her very little time to spend with family and friends or on hobbies. Another consequence of her lack of free time during the school day was that there were very few opportunities for her to communicate with other teachers to discuss their curriculum and their students' progress. She would try to make up for this by walking into other teachers' classrooms as often as she could, but this was a very unsystematic approach that sometimes disrupted instructional time. Even though there were some more experienced teachers in her school, she was unable to connect with them often enough to seek their mentorship or help. Ultimately, her inability to dedicate enough time to lesson planning, coupled with not getting enough chances to speak with and learn from her colleagues led her to continue to receive poor evaluations and she was fired after teaching at the charter school for one year. Since then, she has worked at a public school for a few years, where she believes she now has substantial time to prep for her classes and meet with other teachers. As a result, she has seen significant differences in her performance and has achieved a healthy work-life balance.

Charter schools also have problems with retaining long-term teachers. A significant number of teachers across various charter school models are either fired or quit after one to three years. This is partly because these teachers are inexperienced and underperform, or they are

unwilling to deal with work conditions that are typically less favorable than in regular public schools. Although charter schools have not necessarily seen a shortage in teachers to hire, there are other negative effects of their high turnover rates. First, there is a lack of reliability for charter school families: parents are unable to build long-term connections with their children's teachers and may hence be less willing to be involved in the school environment.⁷ Second, children are discouraged and psychologically drained from constantly having to become familiar with new teachers in their schools. Children may also feel betrayed and unsupported, as they may view their teachers' exits from the school as a sign that they are not good enough or that teachers do not want to stick around to teach them. Third, high teacher turnover rates are also draining to school administration, as they must "reinvent the wheel" every school year by searching for new staff and familiarizing them with their schools' mission, policies and procedures.⁸ Finally, it is expensive to consistently replace staff, as schools would likely have to pay for advertising the position, recruitment, administrative processing and training.⁹

The unfavorable conditions in charter schools that lead to high teacher turnover rates are left unsolved because charter teachers are rarely unionized. The lack of unions in an overwhelming number of charter schools is somewhat ironic, since Albert Shanker, one of the earliest proponents of charters, was president of the American Federation of Teachers, a national teachers union. In his original vision, charter schools and unions were supposed to work closely

⁷ Kamenetz, A. (2015, May 12). A #BlackLivesMatter Leader At Teach For America. *NPR*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/05/12/404966655/a-blacklivesmatter-leader-at-teach-for-america>

⁸ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 129). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

⁹ Kahlenberg, R. D., & Potter, H. (2014). Reduced Teacher Voice, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (pp. 36). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

together to create an environment in which schools were able to experiment with various new teaching practices and policies while also ensuring that teachers' rights were not violated in the process.¹⁰ In reality, charters and unions do not often see eye-to-eye and unions are increasingly in a difficult position in which they have to balance their duty of defending teachers while also typically opposing charter schools (because they harm the interests of the teachers that they represent in regular public schools).

As of 2015, less than 10% of charter school teachers were unionized across the United States.¹¹ While this percentage is on the rise, a mass movement to unionize charter schools does not seem to be on the horizon, leaving many teachers unrepresented and without a means to organize and voice their grievances. Some scholars are perplexed by the overwhelming resistance of charter leaders to the idea of unionizing their workers. The experimentation and innovation that was initially expected from charter schools was believed to be more easily achieved without unions, which could have halted the process of implementing new policies to ensure that teachers agreed with them. However, research has shown that unions do not get in the way of identifying the best approaches for educating children. A recent study concluded that unionization of teachers has little effect on student achievement; they also argued that it would actually help students in the long run by attracting higher quality teachers and reducing teacher turnover rates.¹²

Without union representation, charter schools are not required to negotiate employment contracts with their teachers. As a result, charter teachers are “at-will employees” that may be

¹⁰ Cohen, R. M. (2015). When charter schools go union. *The American Prospect*, (3), 40.

¹¹ Isquith, E. (2015, July 18). Charter schools' nightmare: A pro-charter movement may change charters forever. *Salon*. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2015/07/18/charter_schools_worst_nightmare_a_pro_union_movement_may_change_charters_forever/

¹² Cohen, R. M. (2015). When charter schools go union. *The American Prospect*, (3), 40.

fired at any moment in the school year for any reason. This is meant to ensure that charters can selectively keep their highest quality teachers and easily fire those that they deem to be ineffective. However, this also causes teachers to have low morale and constantly fear losing their jobs. In describing this fear in KIPP schools, Jim Horn, author of *Work Hard, Be Hard*, states that teacher's status as "at-will employees" "creates higher stress levels among teachers who are already under intense pressure, and the ability to fire teachers at-will creates a negative energy that runs counter to KIPP's advertised face of positivity..."¹³ This is certainly not unique to the larger charter networks or to "no excuses" schools (which are described in more detail in Chapter Two). The teachers that I interviewed for this paper from small, independent charter schools also noted the discomfort that came with the lack of job security; and not only did they fear losing their jobs, but they also became afraid to speak up about problems in the school or to make suggestions, as they believed that they would be fired if the administration began to view them as troublemakers. One such teacher mentioned to me that after doing some research into the company that ran her charter school, she realized that there were some conflicts of interest that may have suggested a financial scandal in the operation of the school. However, she kept this information to herself and decided to not share it with any of her coworkers, who were too overwhelmed with work to realize what was going on, because she did not want to lose her job. She, like many other teachers, was not in a financial situation in which she could easily decide to put herself at risk of being fired for the sake of seeking justice or solving problems within the charter school.

¹³ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 113). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Hence, the fear of losing their jobs was a big motivator to not only leave problems unaddressed within the school, but it also prevented teachers from wanting to mobilize and seek any kind of representation. Aside from their lack of job security, there are other factors that prevent charters from unionizing. First, being that many teachers that begin working at charter schools come straight out of graduate school or alternative certification programs and are inexperienced, they sometimes are unaware of the value of a union, or they do not anticipate facing any difficult work conditions that would lead them to want union representation, or they were persuaded to adopt an anti-union stance during their training.¹⁴ Second, one of the staff members that I interviewed from a small New York charter school noted that she observed that even when teachers wanted to unionize, they did not want to go through the effort of fighting for it. She stated that teachers at her school often do not view their positions as long-term, so when they are fed up with the work environment, they leave the school and seek employment elsewhere, rather than sticking around to fight for union representation.

Interestingly, charter schools that have managed to provide union representation to their teachers do not always fare much better. This emphasizes that unions themselves are not a panacea for teachers' problems or for student success. This may be in part because unionized charter school teachers do not receive the exact same representation as regular public schools teachers; they sign different contracts than other public school teachers in their neighborhoods. I interviewed a teacher from a small unionized New York charter school, who had previously worked in a regular public school and was able to compare the two experiences. He stated that working in the charter school was the "most un-unionized experience [he] ever had," because he still felt a lack of job security and did not feel that the union was fighting for their interests as

¹⁴ Cohen, R. M. (2015). When charter schools go union. *The American Prospect*, (3), 40.

much as for other teachers. Similarly, another unionized charter school teacher in New York that I spoke with described her union contract as “just a bunch of papers,” since she, too, felt little job security. She was still employed under yearly contracts; although this was an improvement in that she wouldn’t have to worry about being fired mid-year, she still felt little confidence that her contract would be renewed for each new year. This persistent lack of job security prevented teachers from filing complaints with the union and seeking their assistance, rendering their union representation useless.

At the same time, there are examples of charter schools that have been able to unionize their teachers in a more satisfactory manner. One often-referenced example of this is Amber Charter School in Harlem, where teachers are offered a “thin” contract, which provides general guidelines for work conditions that still give administrators leeway to implement changes if they believe it would be most beneficial for the students. At the same time, there is a framework for negotiation that teachers can use when they do not agree with administrators’ decisions, and there is a specific process for how teachers can be fired. These protections make teachers feel more comfortable to voice their opinions and more secure in their positions. Their satisfaction is also evident in Amber Charter School’s high teacher retention rates.¹⁵ Merely signing a union contract is not enough to ensure that teachers feel protected, as seen with the previous two examples of charter school unionization. Instead, there must be clear mechanisms in place that protect the rights that teachers are promised in contracts, as in Amber Charter School.

Given that so few charter school teachers are unionized, Amber Charter School is surely not representative of most charters. While it would also be unfair to state that all charter school

¹⁵ Kahlenberg, R. D., & Potter, H. (2014). *The Disappointing Results in Many Charter Schools, A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (pp. 93). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

teachers face miserable working conditions, a recent study confirmed that charter school teachers are generally paid less, work longer hours, are not covered by collective bargaining agreements, and have higher rates of attrition.¹⁶ Hence, these complaints and experiences are not anomalies. So why do teachers decide to continue to teach at such schools? One teacher that I interviewed argued that the reason why charter school teachers are accepting of these conditions is that many of them are new teachers, fresh out of college, that do not have any prior experiences to compare charters with, so they may think that the problems that they face are normal or acceptable. She also noted that the teachers get pulled into their work and fall into such an overwhelmingly busy routine that they do not even stop to evaluate their work experience or consider whether they should try to seek something better.

Another explanation is that they stay because they are motivated by the children and want to support them. In KIPP charter schools, administrators are accused of manipulating this sentiment to convince teachers to continue to bear with the difficult work conditions: “school leaders had convinced [teachers] of their unique importance to the children and how their work at KIPP was saving children who, otherwise, would be lost to the public bureaucracies that operated for the benefit of adults, not children. As a result, [teachers] committed [themselves] to carrying out the mission, regardless of what it took and regardless of personal consequences.”¹⁷ In a smaller charter school, a staff member that I spoke with noted that she saw coworkers coming to the school with a desire to fulfill the school’s mission and “save” the children, even without influence from the administration. She described this as the “white savior complex,” where young, white individuals would take up teaching at charter schools to make a difference in

¹⁶ Stulberg, L. M. (2010). The Teachers Union-Charter Impasse: Moving Forward from the New York Caps Fight. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 18(24): 1-36.

¹⁷ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 12). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

black and brown children's lives. Of course, there is a compassionate element to teaching; the best teachers typically stay in the profession because they want to help children and see them succeed. However, this staff member stated that these young teachers did not put in much effort to get to know or understand the children and their backgrounds; they seemed to want to be teachers for selfish reasons, rather than truly wanting to do it for the children.

Despite these motivations to continue to teach at charter schools and to continue to make sacrifices for the job, whether they are well-intentioned or not, it is very common for charter school teachers to eventually reach a breaking point, after which they finally decide to quit their jobs as charter school teachers—or to leave the teaching profession altogether. For example, a KIPP teacher elaborates:

“before you know it, you're in there a year, you're in there two years. ... Then, finally, I just had to stop. I mean you become physically ill. Your body breaks down—you can't take it anymore. I fell asleep one day driving home from work, and I hit a car in front of me. That's when I woke up, and I was like, okay, this is enough.”¹⁸

Similarly, one of the charter teachers that I interviewed stated: “Working conditions were starting to take a toll on me and most others. I'm all for sacrificing as much time and talent as I can in order to give children a quality education, but I hit a point where I just couldn't do any more without major consequences on my health and my family.”

As aforementioned, the struggles that these charter school teachers faced are not exceptions in an otherwise satisfactory system; whether to a large or small extent, these teachers

¹⁸ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 12). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

faced noteworthy dissatisfaction with their work environment. At the same time, these experiences are not representative of every charter school nor every charter school teacher.

Although all of the teachers interviewed for this paper experienced some, if not all, of the aforementioned problems in their work conditions, there are charter school teachers that love their jobs and have more favorable environments. Furthermore, there are things that charters currently do or can do to improve conditions for their teachers.

For example, an employee from a “no excuses” large charter school network in New York described the ways in which they were able to successfully take some of the burden off of teachers. This school used their funding to hire a well-staffed operations team that exclusively worked to complete tasks that teachers are typically responsible for outside of actually teaching. This includes scheduling events for teachers and parents, overseeing lunchtime so that teachers could maximize their break time, ensuring that teachers had all the supplies that they needed, and calling parents. An obvious caveat to this solution is that it clearly requires a significant source of funding and resources to support the hiring of additional staff members. While this may not be a reproducible action plan for all charter schools, it is nonetheless promising that charters are moving in the direction of trying to alleviate some of the struggles that charter school teachers face.

Similarly, the spotlight has recently been placed on New Orleans, which is notorious for its charter schools, because of their newly developing realization that their charters need to ensure that they have “happy teachers” if they are to improve the conditions and results in their schools.¹⁹ While charter schools are just beginning to seriously focus on teacher satisfaction,

¹⁹ Neason, A. (2015, April 12). Charter Schools’ Latest Innovation: Keeping Teachers Happy. *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/blogs/schooled/2015/04/27/charter_schools_and_churn_and_burn_how_they_re_trying_to_hold_on_to_teachers.html

charter school teachers have long voiced the significance of their satisfaction. As stated by teachers in my interviews: “if teachers aren’t happy, how can the children be happy?” “If teachers aren’t supported, how can the children be supported?”

CHAPTER TWO
DISCIPLINING CHILDREN:
FROM “NO EXCUSES” TO NO REPERCUSSIONS

Discipline policies are essential to the smooth functioning of all schools; there need to be clear expectations for students’ behavior in the classroom, as well as a general approach to dealing with children that do not follow such expectations, to help ensure an orderly and productive learning environment. Behavior and discipline policies in charter schools can vary greatly from school to school in regards to their level of strictness and enforceability. Some charters struggle with classroom management and have weak guidelines for detentions and suspensions, while others have very rigid and well-enforced behavioral expectations. However, more attention in the media has been given to charter schools with the latter, stricter approach, particularly larger networks of “no excuses” schools, such as KIPP, Uncommon Schools and Success Academy. Of course, regular public schools also come under fire for their approaches to discipline, including suspending an overwhelming number of students of color, but charter schools seem to struggle with these issues more; for example, a recent study of the 2011-2012 school year found that charter schools suspended students at a rate that is almost three times higher than in traditional public schools.²⁰

In regards to the controversial “no excuses” model, *Teach Like A Champion*, by Doug Lemov, sets the strict, no-nonsense standards. Lemov argues that such a strict approach is

²⁰ Disare, M. (2016, March 7). ‘No excuses’ no more? Charter schools rethink discipline after focus on tough consequences. *Chalkbeat*. Retrieved from <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2016/03/07/no-excuses-no-more-charter-schools-rethink-discipline-after-focus-on-tough-consequences/#.VzV1JmQrLjB>

necessary when dealing with poor, disadvantaged children to ensure that they too can learn and be successful; alternatively, they are taught in an environment that does not push them enough and justifies weak academic performances with their socioeconomic status. *Teach Like a Champion* originally set forth a series of 49 steps, which have recently been updated to 62, that teachers could utilize in their classrooms to be the most effective teachers and bring out the full potential of each student. Some examples include “Right is Right” in which teachers are supposed to expect very specific answers to the questions that they ask their students and never accept an answer that deviates from this, “Cold Call” in which teachers are supposed to establish the expectation in their classroom that any student can be called on at any moment to answer a question whether they are raising their hand or not, and “J-Factor” in which teachers are to incorporate joy into their lessons in the form of very controlled and specific opportunities for children to express excitement for what they are learning.²¹ These methods, as well as the tens of others that he mentions in his book, can be endlessly analyzed and criticized for whether they actually work and whether children are responsive to them. Nonetheless, Lemov presents these steps, and the process by which he identified them, as very systematic, rigorous and backed by evidence from endless observations of many teachers. He also greatly believes in a data-driven approach to teaching and assessing children and argues that, at the end of the day, the numbers (test scores) of children that are taught using his methods reveal that they truly work, and that the worst-case scenarios in which children do not respond positively to these teaching strategies are highly uncommon.

KIPP schools embody Lemov’s “no excuses” practices, with school leaders often referring their staff word-by-word to the *Teach Like a Champion* text. KIPP teachers are

²¹ Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach like a champion: 49 techniques that put students on the path to college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

expected to teach “49% academics and 51% character.”²² This emphasizes how important they consider character and behavior to be to their students’ success—so much so that it just surpasses the significance of the academic content that they learn. They prioritize instilling in their students a sense of “grit” and “self-control” as the most important character traits, followed by zest, optimism, gratitude, social intelligence and curiosity. While these are positive traits for children to have, KIPP is criticized for their adamant efforts to essentially try to change children’s character to fit a very specific mold that they deem to be best. It is also pointed out that the list of traits that KIPP and other “no excuses” schools value are often lacking in moral character traits, such as honesty, integrity, thrift and humility.²³

Nonetheless, this approach to discipline is often supported because it is believed to be the only way to guarantee that children learn—essentially, children’s test scores are often seen to rise under these policies (although this is increasingly contested), so the ends justify the means. Many parents also like that their children are in an environment where they believe they are being held to a high standard of strict expectations. For example, one parent of a Success Academy student states: “I think discipline is necessary. If you don’t like it, don’t bring your kids here.”²⁴ The reason why some parents would not like it, though, is because some schools take these behavioral expectations too far. In Brooklyn Ascend charter schools, school administrators began to realize that they were fostering a questionable learning environment when they saw that parents would ask teachers and staff more about how their children were

²² Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 38). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

²³ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 39). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

²⁴ Disare, M. (2016, February 12). Moskowitz defends teacher shown yelling in video, calls Times coverage biased. *Chalkbeat*. Retrieved from <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2016/02/12/moskowitz-defends-teacher-shown-yelling-in-video-calls-times-coverage-biased/#.VzV4wmQrLjD>

behaving in class than whether or not they were learning and performing well academically; the strict implementation of “no excuses” for behavior completely shifted the focus of the school.²⁵ Furthermore, it is argued that under such a regimented learning environment, children are merely “trained to comply and not educated to think.”²⁶

This concept of training children to act and speak a certain way is often criticized for not taking into consideration the uniqueness of each child, whether in terms of their preferred learning style or cultural background. First, this is evident in that children are subject to expectations that demand them to act almost like robots—they must all be doing the same thing at the same time and are continuously monitored for it. A teacher from a “no excuses” school describes an example of this:

“Another part of this behavior management system is the scoreboard. It’s a script followed repeatedly all day. The teacher puts a two-column chart on the board first thing in the morning. A smiley face and a frownie [sic] face are at the top of each column. One script for getting the attention of the class is when the teacher calls out, “Class, class,” and the students respond, “Yes, yes” with the same intonation. If the students quiet down and turn their attention to the teacher, the teacher makes a tally mark in the smiley column. Then the students must respond with an enthusiastic, “Oh yes” with an accompanying gesture of lightly clapping the hands and the hands make wide circles in opposite directions. If, on the other

²⁵ Disare, M. (2016, March 7). ‘No excuses’ no more? Charter schools rethink discipline after focus on tough consequences. *Chalkbeat*. Retrieved from <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2016/03/07/no-excuses-no-more-charter-schools-rethink-discipline-after-focus-on-tough-consequences/#.VzV1JmQrLjB>

²⁶ Nelson, S. (2015, November 5). The Secret to Success (Hint: it’s not Success Academies). *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-nelson/the-secret-to-success---h_b_8478148.html

hand, they remain noisy despite calling back, “Yes, yes,” or they don’t make the accompanying gesture, there’s a tally mark put in the frownie [sic] column.”²⁷

It seems absurd that children must all answer in the same tone in unison and be punished for failing to do so. Whether or not they make a gesture seems insignificant to whether or not they will effectively learn the lesson for the day. However, the “no excuses” approach requires children to follow instructions extremely closely, as any deviation is believed to potentially open the door for children to break more rules and ultimately become distracted from learning. This seems like a stretch, but proponents of this approach argue that no chances can be taken with these disadvantaged children. Every second in the classroom counts. In *Teach Like A Champion*, Doug Lemov even states that when allowing children to cheer to incorporate joy into the classroom, it should be done for a “fraction of a full second”—if children spend too many seconds each day on distractions, then those seconds add up over the weeks, months and years to a substantial loss of instructional time.²⁸

Certainly, this approach cannot be expected to work for all children, particularly if they have special needs. For example, children with ADHD struggle with sitting still for extended periods of time, but this is often not taken into consideration in “no excuses” schools. Teachers at KIPP schools have revealed that they had to have the same behavioral expectations for students with ADHD. Instead of having a tailored approach to their needs, they were put in “time-out,” sent to the Dean’s office or even suspended as frequently as a couple times a week.²⁹ This

²⁷ Ravitch, D. (2014, March 27). Confessions of a teacher in a “no excuses” charter school. Retrieved from <https://dianeravitch.net/2014/03/27/confessions-of-a-teacher-in-a-no-excuses-charter-school/>

²⁸ Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach like a champion: 49 techniques that put students on the path to college*. (pp. 164). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

²⁹ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 160). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

certainly takes away from their instructional time and essentially punishes them for having special needs. At the same time, the teachers are unable to adjust their teaching approach because they are under pressure from administration to strictly implement the behavioral policies, which causes these teachers to feel like they are unable to truly reach out to and help their students. This pressure is another driving force behind teachers leaving their jobs.

Aside from not considering children with disabilities, “no excuses” policies have also been criticized for not considering children’s unique backgrounds and cultures: “Teachers who practice in “no excuses” schools are encouraged not to accommodate children's problems that are created by adversity, but to lay down strict rules and rigid expectations that challenge children to overcome—even ignore—their personal backgrounds and circumstances.”³⁰ Additionally, in regards to culture, Lemov gives teachers the following advice for language differences:

“Yes, you should correct slang, syntax, usage and grammar in the classroom ... even if it falls within a student’s dialect ... In fact, you may not know how a student’s family or community speaks or what it views as normal or acceptable.... To gloss over the vast sociological discourse on what’s standard, whether it’s the only right form of language and even whether it is in fact correct, champion teachers accept a much more limited but practical premise: there is a language of opportunity...”³¹

Of course, there are grammar rules in the English language and all children should learn these rules. However, it is problematic for teachers to individually conclude what the “language of

³⁰ Bryant, J. (2016). A New Lawsuit Challenges the Legality of ‘No Excuse’ Charter Schools. *The Progressive*. Retrieved from <http://www.progressive.org/pss/new-lawsuit-challenges-legality-no-excuse-charter-schools#sthash.p00ffnBn.dpuf>

³¹ Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach like a champion: 49 techniques that put students on the path to college*. (pp. 47). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

opportunity” is without having an understanding of their students’ background. It essentially gives teachers the power to impose their own views of what is correct onto their students and expect them to adhere to it. Lemov does not encourage teachers to familiarize themselves with their students’ cultures, which can create a rift between students and their teachers.

Furthermore, “no excuses” policies are criticized for subjecting children to years of being constantly overseen and told what to do, which does not prepare them for the “real world”. According to Doug Lemov, the strategies outlined in *Teach Like A Champion* should apply to children in kindergarten through twelfth grade in high school. While Lemov occasionally provides some elaboration on how teachers can tweak the methods to take students’ age into consideration, it is nonetheless argued that maintaining consistently strict discipline expectations for children limits their opportunities to learn to think for themselves, become responsible for their own actions and gain independence as they grow older. However, the “no excuses” school staff member that I interviewed mentioned that it is misleading to assume that teachers use the same level of close oversight of their students at all ages. Although the teachers in his school are told to use *Teach Like A Champion* as a framework for their classroom policies, they are not necessarily expected to follow Lemov’s methods word-for-word. They are given the freedom to change the methods in accordance with their students’ age, level of maturity and learning abilities. For example, he notes that in elementary school, students are closely monitored when they switch from task to task in class. However, as they move up into the junior high school, they are expected to move between their classes independently and are given more individual responsibility for their actions.

As aforementioned, charter schools have very varied approaches to discipline. While the “no excuses” model has generally received more spotlight, other charters often struggle with

ineffective discipline policies. A teacher that I interviewed from a small charter school, which was eager to appeal to parents and gain support in the community, stated “their culture was that the best discipline is no discipline.” They feared that responding strictly to students’ behavior would cause parents to pull their children out of the school, so they had few repercussions for inappropriate behavior. Of course, this made the teachers’ job more challenging. He stated that students began to question his authority, since there were no means for him to punish students for not listening to him. As he lost control of his classroom, he was the one that got the blame. This approach made him wonder: “If you don’t hold the children accountable, why squeeze the teachers?”

The teacher that I interviewed from a small charter network in Indiana noted that her school had an inconsistent approach to discipline. When the school initially opened up, it attracted high achieving students that rarely misbehaved. As the years passed, they began to enroll a much more diverse group of students, including many that defied teachers and had to be frequently suspended. When these issues with discipline arose, the administration demanded teachers to implement strategies similar to those used in “no excuses” schools. As a more experienced teacher, she believed that she knew how to manage her classroom without having to use the “no excuses” strategies, which she disagreed with. However, the administration was unwelcoming of her alternative approach and gave her poor evaluations for not following the new standards. The administration struggled to find appropriate solutions for the issues that arose in their schools and the teachers suffered because of this. The tension that often exists in charter schools between teachers and administration is further discussed in Chapter Four below.

Although charters were originally established with the intention of having them identify successful and efficient educational policies to be shared with regular public schools, it seems

that on the issue of discipline, charters may have more to learn from regular public schools than the other way around. As research has increasingly highlighted the negative effects of zero-tolerance discipline policies and high suspension rates, there has been a budding discussion of alternative methods. One such promising method is implementing a system of restorative justice, in which students are expected to take responsibility for their actions and identify appropriate punishments through group discussions.³² This is believed to be beneficial because it gives students a voice in decision-making, encourages students to play an active role in correcting their mistakes, and allows them to express their feelings. While there have not been any rigorous, scientific studies on the effectiveness of this approach, there have been multiple schools identified throughout the country that have experienced a drop in suspension rates and disciplinary action, as well as improving student-teacher relationships, after implementing a system of restorative practices.³³

Other discipline policies have also been highlighted in public schools as being effective alternatives to zero-tolerance policies. For example, a public middle school in Maryland was able to decrease their discipline referrals by an impressive 98% in just one year. Some of the changes that they implemented included: using peer mediators to help identify solutions to disciplinary issues, matching students with mentors, obtaining student input for “behavior contracts” that outline expected behavior for the school year, and working through minor incidents with

³² Acosta, J., Chinman, M., Engberg, J., & Augustine, C. (2015, October 13). Rethinking Student Discipline and Zero Tolerance. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/10/14/rethinking-student-discipline-and-zero-tolerance.html?qs=restorative>

³³ (2014). Evidence from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices. *International Institute for Restorative Practices*. Retrieved from <http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/IIRP-Improving-School-Climate.pdf>

warnings instead of automatically referring students to the dean.³⁴ While these policies have also not yet been applied or evaluated on a mass scale in schools, they are associated with more favorable behavioral outcomes and less disruptive classroom environments. Charter schools can likely implement these policies even better. Given that some charters often have more resources than regular public schools because of large private donations and grants, they have resources available to fund mentoring programs and peer mediation programs. Furthermore, because charter schools also typically have longer school days, they have more time at their disposal for group discussions. Hence, charter schools have the opportunity to use their unique conditions to experiment with these alternative discipline policies and improve their schools' climate.

³⁴ Holcomb, S. (2016, February 17). How One Middle School Cut Discipline Referrals By 98 Percent in Just One Year. *neaToday*. Retrieved from <http://neatoday.org/2016/02/17/middle-school-discipline-referrals/>

CHAPTER THREE

EXPERIENCES WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

In December 2015, parents of four former students with special needs in Success Academy in New York City filed a lawsuit against the charter for allegedly failing to provide their children with adequate disability services and for attempting to push their children out of the school.³⁵ In January 2016, another lawsuit was filed against Success Academy by parents of thirteen current and former students, along with New York City Public Advocate Letitia James, the Legal Aid Society, and others, for similar reasons: their children were not offered alternative instruction to serve their special needs, and the parents were pressured by school staff to remove their children from the charter schools. Success Academy founder, Eva Moskowitz, dismissed the validity of these lawsuits, stating: “We provide 11,000 students, including over 1,400 special needs students, with an excellent education and have thousands more students on waiting lists. We are disappointed that these 13 families do not feel the needs of their children were met.”³⁶ She described these instances of dissatisfaction with the school as rare exceptions and not representative of the network overall.

It has yet to be seen which side of these lawsuits will prevail in court. However, just because there is not a greater number of parents filing lawsuits against Success Academy or other charters for inadequate disability services does not necessarily mean that this is not a larger

³⁵ Landau, M. (2016, February 4). Success Academy Under Fire. *UFT*. Retrieved from <http://www.uft.org/news-stories/success-academy-under-fire>

³⁶ Taylor, K. (2016, January 20). Filing Alleges Bias at Success Academy Network Against Students With Disabilities. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/nyregion/filing-says-success-academy-network-discriminated-against-students-with-disabilities.html?_r=0

issue. It is probably safe to assume that most parents decide to merely remove their children from charter schools when they feel that they are being treated unfairly, rather than to pursue lawsuits that are straining on parents' time and money. Nonetheless, even without a larger number of lawsuits, many charter schools have been exposed and accused of inadequately serving children with disabilities, as well as children that are English language learners. The motivation behind these actions is the pressure that charter schools face to obtain high standardized test scores, which are then used to justify the renewal of their charter and keep the school open. Students with disabilities or English language learners are usually expected to not perform very well on these tests, since they face obstacles to their learning. Hence, charter schools attempt to exclude these children from their student body to maintain high academic performance.

The pressure to perform well on standardized tests does not exclusively explain the inadequate teaching and exclusion of children with disabilities. A lack of resources and experience in charter schools is also an issue. This problem was emphasized in one of my interviews with a teacher from a relatively large charter school network, which struggled with funding. She described how the school was unable to effectively use its resources to develop a satisfactory special education program. First, they did not have enough funding to hire enough special education teachers. There was just one such teacher in a school of approximately four hundred students, and this teacher was hired straight out of college with no prior experience. Nonetheless, she had to develop a special education program on her own. Surely, this raises questions about the quality of the program. This teacher that I interviewed also noted that the school began to not admit students with disabilities, as a result of their inability to support them. They often told parents of these students that their charter school "is not the right fit for your child" to discourage them from enrolling and hence avoid having to deal with special education

services as much as possible. This was almost always effective, as the parents were unwilling to place their children in a school that outright declared that they are unable to meet their needs. At the same time, the teacher did mention just one example of a parent of a child with a disability, a hearing impairment, that fought against the charter school's claim of being unable to serve their child by threatening to sue. In that situation, the school ended up paying for an interpreter for the student. However, overall, the school was unable to provide the right services for special education students.

These issues regarding students with disabilities are not unique to large charter networks. One of the teachers that I spoke with from a small New York charter school discussed his school's struggling approach to special education, which was to essentially largely ignore the issue, as well. He highlighted many examples of teachers and administrators giving inadequate attention to the needs of children with disabilities and believed that his school was "able to hide deficiencies and subpar services." For example, unlike the public schools in which he previously worked, the charter school did not evaluate children in any way to develop an understanding of the services that they needed. Hence, few steps were taken to provide suitable services to these students, for they did not have much of a record of a need for such services.

Furthermore, the administration's actions in this charter school suggested that they did not feel obligated to give special education students tailored resources and instruction—even though it is required by law. More specifically, the teacher stated that the director believed that parents were essentially waiving their rights to special education services by deciding to place their children in charter schools; the services that they would most likely have been guaranteed in public schools could not be guaranteed in the charter. It is noteworthy that this was not directly communicated to parents. This teacher hence took it upon himself to reach out to the

parents of children with disabilities and inform them that the charter school did not offer the resources that their children needed and that they were likely better off in a regular public school. Other charter schools, like Success Academy mentioned above, have been accused of trying to convince parents of special education children to not enroll their children in their schools so that they would not have to deal with or allocate resources to the development of alternative curricula. In this case, the parents were not counseled out (although this teacher tried to benevolently provide advice to parents). Their children were accepted into the charter school, but they still did not receive the right resources.

Another of the teachers that I interviewed was actually a special education teacher at a small charter school and discussed some of the struggles that she faced in her position. After graduating college, she applied to Teach for America with the intention of gaining experience and certification as a special education teacher. With very little training, she obtained a job as a special education teacher in a relatively new and small charter school in Chicago. Even though the school was fully aware of her lack of experience, they quickly hired her and placed her in charge of the curriculum for the special education students in kindergarten through fourth grade. She was to pull these students out of their regular classes every day to provide them with additional attention and assistance with their learning. Although she was only responsible for working with approximately eighteen students, it was very overwhelming for her, as she had to familiarize herself with different lesson plans for each grade. Furthermore, as the only special education teacher in the entire school, she had no one to turn to for guidance. When she sought help from the administration, they provided her with some model lesson plans, but she nonetheless struggled to implement them because of her lack of training in teaching special education students. Her struggles were amplified due to difficult working conditions. She worked

long hours and had very little free time during the day to prepare for her lessons or to communicate with other teachers to discuss her students' progress. Whenever she was able to make the time to speak with other general education teachers, she found herself asking them for advice and support when they were simultaneously looking to turn to her for advice on how to better teach their special education students. No matter how hard she tried, she faced an uphill battle with trying to learn how to do her job. After just one year, she was fired. She stated that she "realized very quickly that you can come in to do good but it doesn't always turn out that way." Ultimately, charter schools' pressure to perform well on standardized tests, their inefficient allocation of resources and hiring of inexperienced teachers all contribute to an environment in which special education students are clearly not receiving the academic support that they deserve.

CHAPTER FOUR

TEACHERS VS. ADMINISTRATORS

In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, Diane Ravitch presents a chapter entitled “The Trouble with Accountability” in which she discusses the rise of and issues with the expectation that teachers are primarily (if not exclusively) responsible for the academic progress of their students. Ravitch describes how the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, encouraged the use of standardized testing to assess students’ academic achievement. In his speech delivered during the signing of the No Child Left Behind law, President George W. Bush stated: “I understand taking tests aren’t fun [sic]. Too bad. We need to know in America. We need to know whether or not children have got the basic education.”³⁷ Ravitch counters this demand for testing by emphasizing that “[w]hat is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student’s ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently.”³⁸ Nonetheless, testing was believed to be the solution to the nation’s education problems and indicative of students’ progress. These tests scores began to be matched back to teachers, who were then praised for good results or criticized for underperformance. Despite the ample research

³⁷ Strauss, V. (2015, December 9). Why it’s worth re-reading George W. Bush’s 2002 No Child Left Behind speech. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/12/09/why-its-worth-re-reading-george-w-bushs-2002-no-child-left-behind-speech/>

³⁸ Ravitch, D. (2010). Lessons Learned, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (pp. 226). New York, NY: Basic Books.

that suggests that students' scores on these tests do not accurately reflect their learning, teachers have been under an overwhelming pressure to produce good results.

Ravitch points out that this has led to many practices that diminish the quality of American education, even if they may simultaneously lead to higher test scores. Such practices include cheating. Many well-performing districts, such as Washington, D.C. under the supervision of Chancellor Michelle Rhee, have been accused of changing students' answers on multiple choice test sheets. Another harmful practice is "teaching to the test," where teachers extensively train their students to perform well on standardized tests through endless repetition of particular exam questions. This has led to students being able to perform relatively well on these exams but being unable to answer questions on the same topics when asked in ways that differed from the standardized tests, suggesting that they did not really learn the material but rather just learned how to effectively take an exam. It also diminishes the amount of time that they are exposed to other less-tested or untested subjects, such as art, history, music and science, which severely limits their education. Nonetheless, the Obama administration has continued this culture of accountability through its Race to the Top program, which made federal grants for schools dependent on following strict testing guidelines and also made teacher evaluations dependent on their students' standardized test score results.³⁹ This approach to education policy continues to put the focus and blame on teachers. However, the teachers themselves feel very differently about who is accountable for student performance and school progress. Throughout my interviews, I have heard that teachers overwhelmingly hold their administration, including principals, directors and school leaders, most accountable and believe that their lack of

³⁹ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 76). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

experience or lack of connection with teachers are often sources of problems within their schools.

Running a school is a very challenging and demanding responsibility. This is especially true of charter schools, which often have more independence and autonomy. Administrators must establish and maintain a specific mission for the school, develop a well-rounded, thorough and effective curriculum, and provide support and guidance to their teachers, among other things. Considering this, it is quite puzzling that some charter schools, according to their teachers, have very inexperienced leadership. One of the teachers that I spoke with described how her charter school was struggling to retain administration staff in its first few years of operation. After an assistant principal left the job in the middle of the school year, the charter network directors, who were a group of businessmen with no prior experience in education, opened up the position to current teachers in the school. Ultimately, a beginner teacher with less than one full year of experience was hired as the assistant principal and given many responsibilities that he was unprepared for. The teacher told me that this decision, of course, weakened the progress of the school. For example, the new assistant principal had to conduct occasional evaluations of teachers, but he was unable to give teachers constructive comments or support. My interviewee reasoned that the directors offered him the job because he showed a great passion for education and helping children. She stated that the charter school directors believed “that anyone with a desire and passion can learn the position. I understand that to an extent, but anyone who is going to evaluate teachers or work with children needs experience.” However, the directors failed to view experience as a priority, which ultimately created tension in the school between the teachers and administrators.

In Jim Horn's *Work Hard Be Hard: Journeys Through "No Excuses" Teaching*, a KIPP teacher described similar experiences with inexperienced leadership:

"... I didn't feel a sense of unity or collaboration there, and I think that is something that has to come from the top. ... I don't think that charters are evil and the people who run them are evil, but I think they are incredibly misguided. I think our principal was very young. I think she was without a lot of experiences, and I think when you have those combinations you are not going to guide your faculty with wisdom, and so I think that is why there is just so much miscommunication."⁴⁰

Hence, many of the problems that these teachers were experiencing, which greatly impacted their effectiveness and the schools' overall quality, including a lack of guidance and communication, were stemming from inadequate leadership. When the principals and administrators do not have enough experience themselves, it is hard to expect them to build a team of teachers with adequate experience and effective strategies, especially when they are dealing with a significant number of new teachers. This is essentially a situation of the blind leading the blind. These charters were trying to figure out how to function while having children in their classrooms receiving a questionable education.

While some charter school teachers struggled with having little guidance because of inexperienced leadership, others described tensions between teachers and administration because of an overwhelming sense of control from the top down, particularly in regards to the development of lesson plans and curricula. For example, one former charter school teacher from

⁴⁰ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 158). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

New York stated the following about her teaching experience: “I felt silenced: I could offer no wisdom, no teaching techniques, no ideas for the classroom. My sense of self-worth was challenged. I had no autonomy in creating either the content or the style of my teaching.”⁴¹

Another charter school teacher that I interviewed similarly stated:

“There’s nothing worse than entering into the new school year with all these great ideas for teaching that I spent my entire summer developing and being told that I can’t implement them. We turned into a testing and data crazy school. There was almost no autonomy at all. The creative lessons and units were pushed aside for scripted lessons. People outside of my classroom were making decisions for me about what my students needed. Our daily schedules were locked into time frames for every subject with no flexibility...”

She went on to describe a reading curriculum that teachers were expected to follow word for word. This was the administrations answer to developing effective teaching strategies. However, even if it got all the teachers on the same page and provided a very specific guide for what to teach, the teacher concluded that this scripted approach made children feel disconnected from their work and led them to hate reading. Such experiences undoubtedly contributed to added stress for the teachers. Whether they were led by inexperienced individuals or restricted by very specific curriculum demands, these teachers were in an environment that did not support their development. As a result, students were being taught by struggling teachers and a lack of creativity. The charter school promise of innovation and development of new ideas cannot be upheld under such conditions.

⁴¹ Ravitch, D. (2014, March 27). Confessions of a teacher in a “no excuses” charter school. Retrieved from <https://dianeravitch.net/2014/03/27/confessions-of-a-teacher-in-a-no-excuses-charter-school/>

At the same time, although these were consistent themes in the conversations that I had with charter school teachers as well as in the experiences that I read about in other sources, it would be unfair to suggest that this is a universal theme in charter schools. There are certainly examples of charters that have strong leadership that encourages collaboration between teachers and provides them with a level of autonomy in the classroom. For example, the operations coordinator that I interviewed from a large network of “no excuses” charter schools described how administrators encouraged teachers to speak up about the progress of their students and to adjust the pace of the curriculum to better meet their needs. They even had a Dean of Curriculum, who was a member of the administration team that exclusively worked with teachers on developing their lesson plans. This Dean held frequent team meetings with teachers to discuss their progress and provide guidance. Outside of these meetings, teachers were also encouraged to work together and give each other advice on effective teaching strategies. The operations coordinator told me that he would often see teachers going across the hall to other classrooms to ask each other for help. Even if teachers were inexperienced, the administration helped establish a culture in which teachers felt that they were a part of a team that was working towards a common goal of providing their students with the best education. This all also contributed to a positive work environment. He further noted to me that teachers were ultimately trusted to make their own decisions for their students, even when it came to the “no excuses” discipline policies. While there was certainly an expectation for teachers to hold their students to a high behavioral standard and they were encouraged to achieve this through a series of outlined strategies, they were not pressured to follow a script. They were allowed to customize the strategies and work with their students to identify the most productive ways to achieve the desired goals. While this school is just in its first few years of operation and is admittedly not perfect, this operations

coordinator believes that his school has developed an admirable network of trust and support between and among administrators and teachers within the school that is moving the school in the right direction and allowing them to serve their students as best as they can.

Not all charters are as lucky. Many of the other teachers that I spoke with described a lack of trust between teachers and administrators. For example, one teacher stated that there was such a disconnect between the teachers and the administrators that he did not feel that he could freely speak his mind about what was going on in the school. He stated that as a teacher “you had to watch who you spoke to because some colleagues would go back to the admins with what you said.” This goes back to the issues of job security. When charter school teachers are not guaranteed their jobs for the following school year or can be fired at any moment, they are less willing to voice discontent in the school. This teacher explained that he did not want to state his true opinions because he did not want to be viewed as a problem-starter in the eyes of the administration. The fears of getting fired are amplified when administrators are unwilling to listen to their teachers and take their criticisms seriously. Another teacher agreed that administrators were not interested in communicating with their teachers and when they received criticism they brushed it off as teachers merely complaining. As teachers were not taken seriously, morale quickly declined. Furthermore, without union representation they essentially had nowhere else to turn to voice their opinions, making them feel silenced and powerless.

One of the charter school teachers that I interviewed from a small school in New York also described the resentment that teachers felt towards the administration. She believed that both the principal and assistant principal at her school were very inexperienced, which presented many of the aforementioned problems, but obtained the job anyway because they were well connected with the previous leadership of the school. Even though they performed their jobs

poorly, they were accountable to no one. They got away with doing things like giving staff positions to family members. At the same time, teachers were held to a very high standard and held accountable for everything that went wrong in the school, whether it was in terms of students' underperformance on state tests or their sometimes inappropriate behavior in the classroom. Teachers believe that administrators hold a significant portion of the responsibility for the schools' success. However, administrators spend their time trying to make their schools look good with elaborate marketing to people on the outside, but they do little to work on what was actually going on inside their schools. Under such circumstances, a lot of the responsibility falls back on the teachers' shoulders, putting them under immense pressure that oftentimes becomes overwhelming.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT DO PARENTS SAY?

Since the establishment of the first charter school in the United States in Minnesota in 1991, the number of charter schools across the country has continuously been on the rise. By 2000, there were 1,524 charter schools in operation in the United States, enrolling 340,000 students; by 2011 the number of charter schools rose to 5,696 and enrollment also ballooned to 2,058,000.⁴² Similarly, in New York City more and more charter schools have been established every year. In 2015 there were approximately 200 charter schools across the city, which had enrolled about 8% of the total student population.⁴³

These numbers suggest that there is a demand from parents for these schools. Charters differ from zoned public schools in that students are not automatically enrolled according to their home address; instead, they require additional action by families to fill out an application and enter into the lottery admission process. Hence, the rising enrollment in charter schools reflects a growing number of parents that are making the decision to seek an alternative school for their children. In fact, in 2015 in New York City there were an estimated 42,600 children on charter school wait-lists, after the approximately 22,000 available seats were filled.⁴⁴ Aside from the large number of applicants to charter schools each year, parents' support for these schools is also evident in their active participation in events to defend them. For example, in New York City in

⁴² (n.d.) National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_216.30.asp

⁴³ (n.d) New York City Charter School Center. Retrieved from <http://www.nyccharter schools.org/sites/default/files/resources/NYC-CSC-growth-15-16.pdf>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

2014, more than ten thousand parents were present at a rally demanding more funding for charter schools.⁴⁵ In 2016, hundreds of parents showed up at a neighborhood hearing in Harlem to support the expansion of a charter school network.⁴⁶

These parents believe that charter schools are essential to their children's success. Some parents believe in charter schools so strongly that they are willing to have their children brace a long commute to attend them, instead of their local regular public schools. This reflects a dissatisfaction with these regular public schools, which has led parents to view charters as a much needed alternative source of education. At the same time, not every charter parent is enthusiastic about their charter school; one charter school teacher from a small network of two schools in New York noted that these parents did not have many other options anyway—for them, the charter was either the “lesser of two evils” or not much different from their local school. Regardless of the level of support for charter schools, parents frequently bring up comparisons between their local public schools and charter schools in explaining their decisions to send their children to charters.

This is exemplified in a recent *New York Times* article that called on parents to share their stories about and experiences with Success Academy charter schools, the largest charter school network in New York City. While there were stories of varying tone and sentiment, those that held a more favorable view of Success Academy noted that they specifically placed their children in those schools because they considered them a better option than other local public

⁴⁵ Short, A., Fonrouge, G., & Fredericks, B. (2014, October 2). Protesters rally in support of charter schools. *New York Post*. Retrieved from <http://nypost.com/2014/10/02/protesters-rally-in-support-of-charter-schools/>

⁴⁶ Christ, L. (2016, January 6). Hundreds of Parents Show Up to Hearing to Support Their Charter School's Plans to Expand. *Time Warner Cable News – NY1*. Retrieved from <http://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/education/2016/01/6/hundreds-of-parents-show-up-to-hearing-to-support-their-charter-school-s-plans-to-expand.html>

schools. More specifically, one mother stated: “Prior to my son getting accepted to this [charter] school, I did my research on every single public and charter school in District 6. Most of the schools had a C grade. Would you send your child to a C school?” Another parent similarly noted: “For many of us, there isn’t a better option than Success Academy.” These parents also highlighted the academic achievement of children in these schools: “If this does not qualify as a good education for life, I honestly don’t know what else does.”⁴⁷

At the same time, within the same *New York Times* article, other parents expressed very different opinions about Success Academy charter schools. For example, one parent noted a negative school environment: “The teachers and the students are stressed; it’s a pressure cooker.” Another parent mentioned her disapproval of the ‘no-excuse’ behavioral expectations which, according to this *New York Times* article, was a main cause of parent complaints and led to many parents pulling their children out of the Success Academy schools: “Children are reprimanded for not sitting with perfect posture or not remaining silent during all instruction. For a child with his [ADHD] diagnosis, these things are impossible. He was beginning to feel under constant attack by teachers.”

This news article emphasizes the disagreement that exists amongst parents over whether charter schools are a favorable model through which to educate their children. Even when considering a single charter school network, like Success Academy, or even a single school within a particular network, there are parents that firmly support and believe in their mission and there are parents that disapprove of it just as strongly. Of course, charters try to combat the negative views of their schools. Along with achieving high standardized state test scores, it is

⁴⁷ (2015, April 17). Stories From Current and Former Success Academy Parents. *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/04/17/nyregion/success-academy-parents-voices.html?_r=0

essential for them to maintain high enrollment and demonstrate that there is a demand for their schools to facilitate the renewal of their charters every few years. They mainly try to achieve a positive image and a good reputation with parents through extensive marketing campaigns. The marketing and positive framing of their mission takes place across each part of the education process—from recruiting families to defending disciplinary policies to championing testing strategies.

In regards to recruitment, despite the long waiting lists that may be amassed each year for each grade, charter schools nonetheless conduct recruitment campaigns to attract neighborhood families to their schools. This ensures that parents at least become familiar with the charter schools and hopefully gain a favorable view of them, especially at a time when there is much debate over how much charter schools should be allowed to expand and whether their models for educating children are truly better or preferable when compared to traditional public schools. The operations coordinator that I interviewed from a large “no-excuses” charter school network discussed his elementary school’s recruitment efforts. He indicated that they typically recruit mainly for their incoming kindergarten classes. To do this, a school representative visits local daycare centers and preschools and approaches parents to tell them about the particular characteristics of their school that make them unique and provide an environment in which they expect their children to thrive.

Another charter school teacher I interviewed noted a somewhat different recruiting experience. She taught at a relatively smaller charter school network during its first few years of operation. Being that it was a new school, they certainly needed to advertise themselves to the community and explain their pedagogy model and approaches to education. However, unlike in the large charter school network described above in which a school representative was

responsible for recruitment, in this case teachers were required to partake in neighborhood recruitment. This raises issues about the teachers' working conditions. Not only were they responsible for teaching for a longer school day and staying in the school until late to prepare lesson plans for their upcoming classes, but they also had to make time to seek out and speak with new parents. For the school, though, this method was more effective: having the teachers themselves advertise the charter school made it seem like a more credible pitch to parents. This teacher noted that parents were more willing to trust the opinion of a teacher directly, gain interest in the school and decide to enroll their child. This was also particularly true in this situation because the charter school was new to the neighborhood and had opened up at a time that there was growing dissatisfaction with the local public school. Nonetheless, this charter and the aforementioned charter made sure to utilize their resources to introduce their institution to the community and frame a positive image of their schools.

This positive imagery expressed to parents is also utilized to defend some of the controversial practices associated with charters: discipline and testing policies. In regards to discipline, "no excuses" charter schools, most notably big networks like KIPP, Uncommon Schools and Success Academy, frame their high behavioral expectations as a unique, effective approach to help disadvantaged children achieve high academic standards. Not only do they promise that their behavioral model will lead to better test scores in children, but they also promise that it will give them the skills to ensure that they attend and complete college. This is certainly a big promise, but it appeals to parents. Even if the end result cannot be achieved, parents are drawn to the rhetoric of a school that is devoted to big, long-term goals. These charters claim to mainly help children develop "grit" and maintain their self-control, while also

focusing on optimism, intelligence and zest.⁴⁸ This is easily viewed by parents as a dedication to hard work and good character, which are likely traits that parents look for in a school. However, while these ideas may motivate them to enroll their children in these charter schools, some parents eventually realize that this model is actually negatively impacting their children's psychology and academic performance, or that this model is incompatible with their children's needs, as the parent of an ADHD student in Success Academy described above. Even when such parents speak out, though, or when incidents of mistreating children are highlighted in the media, "no excuses" charter leaders continue to try to use marketing and publicity to emphasize that their model is nonetheless achieving high test results and that the children that are negatively affected by their behavioral approach are not representative of most children's experiences. Eva Moskowitz, Founder and CEO of Success Academy in New York City, for example, stated that some parents disagree with their methods and "find their way, obviously, to the press. And I don't deny we have upset parents that don't go to the press. And we try as respectfully as we can to resolve issues. I think we have a really high level of customer service," and ultimately always work hard to "prepare children for life."⁴⁹

While these strict discipline policies are not universal in charter schools, a high expectation for impressive results on standardized tests is much more common across charters of varying sizes and in cities across the United States. With test scores being the most commonly referred-to indicator—and often the only indicator—for a school's success, charters are eager to inform parents that they are approaching testing with great seriousness and that they are

⁴⁸ Horn, J. (2016). *Work hard, be hard: Journeys through "no excuses" teaching*. (pp. 38). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

⁴⁹ Jorgensen, J. (2016, January 22). Eva Moskowitz Defends Success Academy Charter Chain From Critics. *Observer*. Retrieved from <http://observer.com/2016/01/eva-moskowitz-defends-success-academy-charter-chain-from-critics/>

achieving the positive results that parents would hope to see in their children. Pep rallies are a common medium through which this is done. Larger charter school networks are well known for hosting rallies before state tests at which their students sing songs and yell out chants to voice their support of rigorous testing and their confidence in their abilities to perform well on those tests. New York City's Success Academy is particularly infamous for their "Slam the Exam" pep rallies, at which they gather over 1,500 children to sing and dance before state exams.⁵⁰

Many of the teachers from small charter schools interviewed for this paper also described some sort of a pep rally taking place within their schools with the intention of championing their strategies to parents and all the other eyes that are on their schools. This is not surprising, given the pressure that schools face to show improvements in their scores. Such rallies are also increasingly common in public schools too, as the data driven approach to education policy throughout the country also puts failing public schools at risk of closure or other punitive action.⁵¹

Aside from rallies, one charter school teacher that I interviewed also described her school's use of "data walls" throughout the building, which posted their students' scores on exams; she believed that parents appreciated the focus on data and viewed it as a representation of a thorough, strategic and effective approach to testing and education—although the parents of children that struggled the most with these tests were less enthusiastic about having their children's relatively lower scores made public. Nonetheless, these practices of championing and

⁵⁰ Cramer, P. (2013, April 15). Success Academy convenes 1,500 students to "slam the exam". *Chalkbeat*. Retrieved from <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2013/04/15/success-academy-convenes-1500-students-to-slam-the-exam/#.VzWd4OcrLjA>

⁵¹ Ravitch, D. (2010). *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

emphasizing their focus on data, results and scores is intended to make parents and community members feel like they are actively working towards improvement.

Of course, it is not surprising that these schools would want to present themselves and their practices to parents in the best light possible; it is in their best interest to build a strong supportive base of parents that believe in their practices and would be willing to defend the charter school and fight for their continued support from the government in the forms of more granted charters and financial resources. However, while charter schools seem to make a great effort to communicate their positive attributes to parents, it is noteworthy to mention that this communication with parents is not always as common or transparent when it comes to some of their more questionable or controversial practices.

A teacher that I interviewed from a New York charter school stated that he believed that “parents are conned and charmed by the word ‘charter’ and the uniforms and the after school programs when the school doesn’t perform better than other public schools”. Charter schools have been trying to build a reputation that suggests to parents that they are superior to public schools because of their better resources, better approach towards behavioral management and ultimately their better academic results. However, while charters try to put their best face forward with the aforementioned pep rallies and other strategies, this teacher suggests that there is still a lot that is being left unsaid about the quality of their schools. He noted that his charter did not always tell parents that they lacked sufficient resources for children with disabilities. Other things brought up by the teachers that I spoke with include: a school’s administration specifically telling all teachers and staff members to not inform parents that they had the right to opt their children out of state tests; a school failing to accurately explain to parents the extent and frequency of test prep and the ways in which it replaced other essential subjects, like art, music

and foreign language; and a school not informing parents about which tests counted for their children's grades and which ones did not, which could have helped decrease the level of stress and anxiety over exams.

These miscommunications and omissions of information to parents came up quite frequently in my interviews with the charter school teachers, and it was certainly something that teachers felt uncomfortable about. As a response to his discomfort and disagreement with the occasional lack of transparency between the school and parents, one teacher described his attempts to individually speak with parents and fill this informational void: he would always try to meet with parents one-on-one to tell them his honest opinions and advice. When he met with parents of disabled children, he would inform them of the resources that local public schools were guaranteed to offer for their children's specific needs, that were not offered in the charter school. When he met with parents of fifth grade children, he would suggest to them to seriously consider other schools besides charters for a junior high school. He noted that he always felt a lack of job security at the charter school and that he knew he was putting a target on his back by telling parents things about the charter that might make them develop an unfavorable opinion of the school; however, as an educator that truly believed in helping parents make the best decisions for their children and establishing an environment that would most likely help children succeed, he felt an obligation to connect with parents and tell them the best advice whenever he had the chance, even if he increased his chances of getting fired.

Another interviewed charter school teacher faced the same dilemma—she disapproved of a lot of the policies enacted in the school and knew that parents were left in the dark about them. For example, parents were never explicitly told about the ways in which their children's schedules would be changed in the months before state exams to make time for more test

preparation by replacing subjects like gym and foreign language. She also stated that parents were likely not aware of the heavy workload that teachers were responsible for, nor of the hiring of inexperienced teachers. Although she believed that these were important circumstances that parents should have been informed of, she never attempted to discuss them with parents herself. Nonetheless, she still tried to maximize her communication with parents to discuss children's progress and encourage parents be involved in the school, but she steered clear of any conversations that may have led parents to raise issues with the administration. This was because of her lack of job security. Without a contract, she could be fired at any moment, and she believed that if she were found to be the source of any discontent in the school, she would be fired. The stress and guilt that came with fearing that she would be fired and hence being unable to be completely honest and open with parents ultimately led her to make the decision to stop teaching in charter schools.

Hence, communication between charters and parents is complicated by multiple factors: the administrations' desire to keep potentially controversial practices under wraps in order to establish a pristine image, the teachers' fears of being fired for bringing problems to parents' attention, and teachers' lack of free time to speak with parents due to demanding work hours. These factors, especially when they all coexist within one school environment, make it difficult for parents to be well informed about charters and make the best decisions for their children. Would they still be willing to send their children to charters if they knew more about the high pressure environments in which teachers work? Would they still be willing to send their children to charters if they were more informed about issues with inexperienced teachers and high teacher turnovers?

Recently, Success Academy came under fire over an incident in which a teacher harshly yelled at a student and ripped up her work after she was unable to correctly answer a question.⁵² This incident sparked heated debates about whether the “rigorous and effective” teaching practices at Success Academy were actually harmful to students. In a very prompt response, Eva Moskowitz held a press conference at which parents, teachers and principals characterized the event as an isolated incident that was not reflective of Success Academy and did not warrant criticism from the media, particularly the *New York Times*. One parent added: “The Times seems to be saying that we parents of Success Academy students don’t know what’s going on in our children’s schools, that we parents need to be educated. The Times seems to think that it has a responsibility to tell us that we’ve been blind and we can’t see.”⁵³ This parent was suggesting that he believed that Success Academy parents were fully aware of and fully supported the culture of their schools. Furthermore, in light of the controversy, he suggested that parents have the right and the ability to come to their own conclusions about whether something is appropriate for their children. Of course, these statements should be considered in context—they were made at a press conference that clearly had an agenda of defending Success Academy. Nonetheless, there are certainly parents that are relatively more informed than others, and there are schools that do a better job of transparently communicating with their parents; even if these factors were held equal, parents would still come to different conclusions, as they have different beliefs, expectations and priorities for their children’s education.

⁵² Taylor, K. (2016, February 12). At Success Academy School, a Stumble in Math and a Teacher’s Anger on Video. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/nyregion/success-academy-teacher-rips-up-student-paper.html>

⁵³ (2016). 2.12 Press Conference. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33utMIALM8U>

Furthermore, it is argued that most charter school families are typically more involved and concerned with their children's education; this is because the voluntary application system for charters can be considered a filtering process in which only the parents that are relatively more interested in their children's academic success would make that extra effort to look into charter schools and apply. However, despite this, and despite the valid argument of the Success Academy parent quoted above, one must also keep in mind that charters often serve low-income and disadvantaged families. These parents typically work long hours and are less accessible to teachers; many of the teachers interviewed noted that they had a hard time communicating with such parents—not because the parents were indifferent, but because they were difficult to get into contact with due to conflicting schedules and parents' overwhelming familial and work obligations. In the case of such parents, when the aforementioned factors that complicate communication between parents and charters are present, they are left even more vulnerable to being misled about the quality of a school. This is significant, as many charters were established with the intention of serving disadvantaged communities in high need for better quality education; however, if schools are mainly concerned with crunching numbers and influencing public opinion to ensure renewal of their charter, and if teachers are unable to freely communicate with parents due to job security concerns, then these families and their children suffer instead.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

On March 31, 1988, Albert Shanker, as President of the American Federation of Teachers, gave a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. in which he introduced in great detail the concept of charter schools.⁵⁴ In this speech, he made the following statements:

“There are things that have happened as a result of education reform that are not so good. One is the great obsession with standardized testing, where we spend lots of time getting kids to figure out how to pass these idiotic tests instead of how to read good books or how to do real mathematics.”

“...reforms are very good for kids who are able to learn in a traditional system, who are able to sit still, who are able to keep quiet, who are able to remember after they listen to someone else talk for five hours, who are able to pick up a book and learn from it—who’ve got all these things going for them.... It will likely improve their grades and their abilities ... but it will not do anything for those students who are not able to sit still and listen for that many hours, and are not able to read that long.... They have special problems and deserve lots more help.”

⁵⁴ (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://reuther.wayne.edu/files/64.43.pdf>

“I would also include a provision [in a proposal for the establishment of a new school] for cooperative learning, the notion that kids can sit together around a table and help each other just as the kids help each other on a basketball team or a football team ... [t]he research on that is extremely strong.”

“I would also ask the teachers who submit a plan to show that the group of kids that they’re taking in reflects the composition of the entire school. That is, we are not talking about a school where all the advantaged kids or all the white kids or any other group is segregated to one group.”

These were some of Shanker’s suggestions for important reforms that needed to be made in the education system, which he hoped could be achieved through the development of alternative, independent schools, which he later named charter schools. After reading his speech for the first time recently, I almost forgot that it was delivered nearly thirty years ago. All of the points that he made seem much too relevant. The problems that he highlighted have not yet been solved. Although charter schools have become a reality, they have not made as much of a noticeable positive impact on American education as expected, arguably because the implementation of charter schools has deviated from Shanker’s original vision, especially regarding teacher voice and union representation.

Since the opening of the first charter school in the early 1990’s, there have been endless articles, research papers and books written on their effectiveness. Based off of the research that I have done and the things that I have learned from the interviews that I have conducted, I cannot make a sweeping claim about whether charter schools are good or bad. While I have certainly

seen examples of inexperienced leadership, unqualified teachers, misallocated funds, inaccurate communications with parents and inappropriate discipline policies, I know that there are also charter schools across the country that have a better handle on these issues and have high satisfaction ratings from teachers and parents.

Nonetheless, there are various ways in which charter schools can improve to become a more productive component to the American educational system. First, the antagonism that exists between charter schools and traditional public schools is unproductive and must end. Although charters were originally intended to work together with public schools and share their strategies, they have actually become a source of competition, with some people suggesting that charter schools should replace public schools altogether. Some parents, as described above, are strong supporters of charter schools particularly because of the ways in which they compare with other public schools in their neighborhoods. While parents' support and desire for charter schools should be respected if they believe that it is the best option for their children, this cannot take attention away from the effort to improve public schools in general. One of the teachers that I interviewed spoke at length about her concern with the ways that charters market themselves to parents in comparison to public schools:

“[Charters] prey on struggling urban districts. Instead of bringing the community and parents together to improve their public schools, the charter school message to parents seems to be ‘Just run away from the problem. You don’t have the power to help improve your school and community so come to us.’ They perpetuate the lie that public schools are bad and the only choice they have is to leave.”

Of course, parents cannot be blamed for pulling their children out of failing public schools or for searching for the best educational opportunities for their children. They cannot be expected to leave their child in one school when they believe that they can get a better education elsewhere. However, while it is important for parents to have options, we cannot resort to shuffling children around from school to school as an alternative to actually seeking to change and improve the schools that they are being pulled out of.

The example of restorative justice being successfully introduced in some public schools, discussed in Chapter Two, shows that reform within the public school system is possible. It certainly took time and effort, but it is possible. Are charter schools really necessary, then? They were supposed to speed up the process of identifying effective strategies, but there is little sharing of these strategies between charters and regular public school systems. This has left public school systems to have to continue to improve on their own, as they did before the establishment of charters. This emphasizes the point that charter schools have essentially become an alternative system through which to educate children, rather than helping to improve education overall.

Not only has this competition between charter and traditional public schools hindered the progress of public education, it has also contributed to the unfavorable conditions that charter school teachers experience. As long as charter schools try to advance their own agendas by comparing themselves to other public schools, there will be an increased pressure to succeed, particularly in producing higher standardized test scores. This pressure falls on the shoulders of the teachers who are held accountable for student performance. Hence, they are expected to work longer hours or use stricter discipline strategies than other public schools, which, as discussed throughout this paper, contribute to an unfavorable and overwhelming work environment. This is

further amplified when teachers are inexperienced and lack adequate resources, as well as when they do not feel that their school administrators care about their opinions.

Aside from eliminating the competition between charter schools and traditional public schools, my interviews have led me to conclude that if anything is to be changed in charter schools to improve teacher's job satisfaction and teaching experiences, it must be to give them more of a voice in their schools. This includes giving them some decision-making power and ensuring that they feel comfortable expressing their opinions, especially when it comes to any grievances that they may have. Charter schools do not necessarily have to allow the same kind of union coverage as other public schools in order for this to happen. As discussed in Chapter One, the Amber Charter School is an example of a charter school that has been able to give their teachers some workplace protections without having to compromise the administration's ability to swiftly enact new policies. Their efforts have been successful because both teachers and administrators are dedicated to the idea of establishing a positive and comfortable work environment with ample opportunities for communication.

While the Amber Charter School contract model might be more difficult to implement on a large scale,⁵⁵ it is still a worthwhile goal to pursue, as it can translate to many gains for teachers, as well as students and parents. First, if teachers are included more in decision-making processes, they can negotiate a work schedule that is less overwhelming and can reduce the rate of teacher turnovers. Perhaps in their contract it can be a given that teachers will work for an extended school day and school year, but teachers can negotiate for prep periods during the day and opportunities for routine meetings with other teachers and staff. Second, if teachers can be

⁵⁵ Kahlenberg, R. D., & Potter, H. (2014). *The Disappointing Results in Many Charter Schools, A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (pp. 97). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

made to feel more secure in their job by ensuring that there is a fair and systematic process through which teachers are fired, then they will be more comfortable about voicing their opinions. This can allow them to bring attention to problems within the school and work towards constructive solutions. It can also allow teachers to speak openly with parents, which would lead to more transparency with school policies. Finally, teachers would be able to forge better relationships with their administrators and establish a better sense of community and joint commitment to a common mission. This may all be dismissed as wishful thinking, but all of these goals have been achieved on a small scale. In recent decades, American education policy has been a series of trial and error to find the most successful approach to educating children. Charter schools are undoubtedly one of these biggest trials that have resulted in a lot of error. However, we can at least make use of the lessons learned from these errors and start appreciating and acknowledging teacher voice.

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