

Principal Sabbatical Report

CHARTER SCHOOLS OF NORTH CAROLINA USA

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Acknowledgements

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Purpose

Through this sabbatical my intention was to investigate aspects of Charter Schools in North Carolina, USA. In particular, I wanted to discover how charter schools determine their mission and vision and how they go about implementing their charter.

Background

In 2000/2001 I was part of the Visiting International Faculty programme in USA. As part of this programme I spent twelve months teaching in two state schools in Hoke County of North Carolina. During this time I became aware of Charter Schools within USA.

Upon my return to New Zealand, I continued in my role as teaching principal. In this role I have strived to work with our pupils, staff, board and community to develop a charter that is 'alive' within our school and as such plays a vital role in on-going improvement as opposed to simply meeting compliance.

Over recent years there has been intense debate about the proposed implementation of Charter Schools (Partnership Schools) in New Zealand.

With this background I was interested in looking at the development of charter schools within North Carolina and the similarities and differences to the proposed New Zealand model.

What is a Charter School?

The 'charter' establishing each school is a performance contract detailing the schools mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment and ways to measure success.

Charter schools are public schools run by independent entities sponsored by a state-approved organization such as a state board of education, a state university, community college or local school district. The voluntary enrolment structure is intended to make charter schools more accountable for student achievement.

As a result, charter schools are granted some level of autonomy and freedom from certain local and state regulations. Accordingly, charter schools may hire their own staff, develop their own curriculum and set their own educational programs and methods of operation under the oversight of the school board and authorizer/sponsor.

Charter schools receive funds on a per-student basis from the state in which they operate, just like traditional public schools. As such, they do not charge tuition. Charter schools must admit any student who applies unless the classroom capacity is exceeded, in which case a public lottery is held. In addition, charter schools must be non-sectarian and adhere to all state and federal educational, health and safety regulations.

Charter schools are held accountable through the various structures developed by each state, including their school boards, the universities who grant charters and state boards of education. In addition, if a charter school does not meet specific standards as determined by the state, the school's charter may not be renewed and it may be shut down.

While some charter schools operate independently, others contract with charter school management organizations like National Heritage Academies to help run the school, including hiring and managing staff, providing curriculum and managing the facility.

There are 99 charter schools in the State of North Carolina with a combined roll of 36 000 pupils.

Methodology

This study began with preliminary reading of relevant literature with a focus of gaining a background understanding of the history and structure of charter schools within North Carolina.

This was followed up with visits to schools and discussions and interviews with key personnel including principals, executive directors, teachers and members of the Board of Directors.

The following questions formed the basis of the interviews:

Key Inquiry Questions

- *How do schools consult their pupils, staff, parents and the wider school community?*
- *How do schools determine their vision, mission and values?*
- *What processes are used during the development of the school charter and how are priorities determined?*
- *What is the role of the Board of Directors in charter schools?*
- *How do charter schools go about designing a curriculum that meets the needs of their pupils and the priorities of the school community while at the same time meeting the state requirements?*
- *What are the ways in which schools include and value student voice?*
- *What self-review practices and processes are in place? How effective are these?*
- *How do charter schools report student achievement to their school communities?*
- *How are parent and school partnerships developed?*
- *How do schools go about implementing the intent of their charter?*

Findings

In general terms, the charter schools I visited had many similarities to state schools within New Zealand. They were also very different to my experience of teaching in state schools in North Carolina.

During my teaching in North Carolina I was constantly aware of the restrictions placed on teachers and pupils. In state schools, curriculum programmes and teaching methods are largely driven by state and national testing and reporting requirements. Pupils have little input to their learning. By and large the main focus is academic learning and ensuring readiness for tests rather than what may be best for individual pupils. There seemed to be little evidence of differentiated learning programmes.

In my experience, New Zealand schools have in the most part been able to design and implement a curriculum to best meet the needs of the children they teach. Pupils are encouraged and expected to be involved in their own learning through setting their learning goals and identifying next steps. In most cases this includes academic learning as well as key competencies.

The opportunities within the structure of charter schools in North Carolina enabled schools to implement programmes aimed at the needs of their students rather than the demands of the testing requirements. Pupils can discuss personal learning goals and next steps. Student voice is valued and pupils are actively involved in decision making and carrying out 'real life' projects.

In carrying out this study, my conversations with principals, teachers and members of the Board of Directors covered a variety of aspects about charter schools. We discussed the structural features of their schools, the make-up of their local community and the legislative constraints they operate under. Once I understood the background, our conversations focussed on the development and implementation of each schools charter. By the end of my interviews, several key points emerged. These are noted below:

- Charter schools are public schools and are free to all.
- Charter schools have a performance contract with the State, which holds them accountable for fiscal health as well as high academic standards. The charters are renewed every five to ten years through a charter renewal process. They are also held accountable for North Carolina testing standards and the requirements of federal 'No Child Left Behind' law.
- Charter schools are governed by a Board of Directors. The board is comprised of four teachers, three parents and two community members.
- The board of directors oversees legal and financial matters. They are not responsible for curriculum. Typically the Board of Directors are represented on a variety of sub committees. These often include executive committee, finance, facilities, development, diversity, school improvement and grievance.
- Charter school teachers cited curriculum autonomy, parent/teacher partnerships and collaborative decision making as reasons for higher job satisfaction than reported by state school teachers.
- Many charter schools have arisen from groups of parents and teachers with a shared philosophy.
- Each charter school is unique and has special characteristics which are reflected in the schools charter. Examples of these characteristics include expeditionary learning, service learning, arts academy, environmental education and maths and science academy.
- Charter schools are obliged to follow the state curriculum but they have the freedom to choose how.
- Charter schools must have permission from the state to alter their school vision.
- Charter schools receive less funding per pupil than state schools.

Summary

Schools that reflect the needs of the community have greater capacity to sustain high performance and are better placed to respond to pupil needs. Effective governance enables schools to remain focussed on continual improvement.

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