

Innovations in Charter Schools:

A Summary of Innovative or Unique Aspects of Michigan Charter Schools

Kim Reynolds

The Evaluation Center
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5237

July 2000

Foreword

Starting in January 2000, we asked all Michigan charter schools to provide copies of existing materials such as annual reports, school improvement reports, parent or student handbooks, etc. In addition, we asked them to provide us with information about innovative or unique aspects of their schools not covered in existing documentation. Specifically, we requested information regarding innovative or unique aspects of their schools in terms of curriculum, instruction, and operation/governance. Approximately 75 percent of the charter schools provided some sort of documentation. Research assistants (Joan Farland, Carla Howe, and Kim Reynolds) at The Evaluation Center read and summarized what the schools reported to be innovative or unique, based upon the descriptive materials received from the schools. We grouped and sorted the innovative/unique aspects into the following three categories: curriculum, instructional practices/methods, and organization/governance. An analysis of these summaries was then conducted by Kim Reynolds and an in-depth report prepared. The charter school representatives judged what they thought was innovative or unique. Because we were not able to visit many of these schools, we cannot confirm the validity of this information.

This report comprises part of the findings from our second statewide evaluation of the Michigan Charter School Initiative. Section 2.6 of the final report (*An Evaluation of the Michigan Charter School Initiative: Performance, Accountability, and Impact*) sums up the main findings regarding innovative or unique aspects of charter schools. This report also represents a work in progress, since Kim Reynolds will be further developing her research on this topic. During the 2000/2001 school year, Kim will be conducting field research in a number of charter schools before she finalizes her thesis for her Bachelors Degree, which will focus on innovations in charter schools.

The topic of innovations is one of the initial objectives behind the charter school legislation in Michigan. In our first evaluation of the charter school initiative (Horn & Miron, 1999) we found few charter schools that were innovative. The findings summarized in this report support our earlier findings. While the charter schools as a whole cannot be perceived as innovative, it is important to point out that a number of charter schools have been able to package a number of important aspects of their school into a model that is clearly unique from surrounding public schools. A number of schools still have innovative plans and visions, but we will need to wait a few years to see if these plans can be fulfilled or whether they revert to more traditional models.

Jerry Horn, *Project Director*, and Gary Miron, *Project Manager*

The Evaluation Center
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5237

Tel. (616) 387-5895
Fax. (616) 387-5923
e-mail Miron: gary.miron@wmich.edu
Horn: jhorneval@aol.com

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Framework for the Report	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Defining Innovation	1
1.3 Charter Schools' Perceptions of Innovation	1
1.4 What is Unique About Charter Schools?	2
1.5 Organization of This Report	3

Chapter Two

Curriculum Innovations	5
2.1 Specialized Focus/Profile	5
2.2 Curricular Packages/Models	8
2.3 Guiding Philosophies	9
2.4 Subscription to Specific Programs/Unique Classes	10
2.5 Accommodations for Student Populations	13
2.6 Case Studies	14

Chapter Three

Instructional Practices	15
3.1 Philosophies for Instructional Practices	15
3.2 Direct Instruction/Constructivist (teacher- versus student-centered)	16
3.3 Students' Role	18
3.4 Environment/Structure of Classroom	19
3.5 Accommodations for Special Student Populations	19
3.6 Specialized Staff	20
3.7 Other Unique Features/Special Programs	20
3.8 Involvement of Parents/Community in Development	21

Chapter Four

Organization and Governance	23
4.1 Decision Making and Structure	23
4.2 Structure of Day/Year	25
4.3 Professional Development/School Improvement	26
4.4 Parental Involvement	27

Chapter Five

Discussion of Findings	28
5.1 Summary	28
5.2 Changes Made in District Schools Based on Charter School Innovations	29
5.3 Innovation Diffusion	30

References	31
------------------	----

Chapter One

Framework for the Report

1.1 Introduction

This report will provide information examining three key areas in innovation: curriculum, instructional practices/methods, and organization/governance, as reported by [and identified from information sent by] Michigan charter schools. Information regarding innovations was requested from all of the charter schools in Michigan. Approximately 75 percent of the charter schools responded to the request to send either a list describing innovations occurring in their school or informative materials in which innovations could be derived by The Evaluation Center research assistants. The data presented in this report was derived from information sent by the participating charter schools. Between 64 and 72 percent of the 172 schools provided data in the areas of innovation that were evaluated. The innovations listed throughout the report are reflective of the majority of the schools that responded.

1.2 Defining Innovation

Due to the ambiguity of the term “innovation,” it is necessary to establish characteristics of how innovations are defined for this report. Mintrom (2000) uses the term “innovative” to refer to “ideas or practices that are new within the context of the school.” More clearly stated, an innovation is “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (Rogers, 1995). Innovations in a school setting or in any particular setting may be new only to that setting. Particular to a school environment, an innovation serves to distinguish one school or set of schools from another. For this report the discussion is based on self-reported lists of innovations and/or other materials sent by Michigan charter schools.

1.3 Charter Schools’ Perceptions of Innovation

Horn and Miron deduced that there are “limited innovations being developed and applied in the PSAs” (Horn & Miron, 1999). It seems that much of what is deemed innovative by charter schools is not; rather, much of what is considered innovative either is already implemented within district public schools or has been implemented by the majority of charter schools already established in Michigan (Mintrom, 2000). According to Mintrom some charter schools are exemplifying innovations, but for the most part they are more traditional than they are innovative. Much of what is considered innovative by charter schools is only innovative within the context of a particular school setting and not for the whole institution of schools. Many charter schools state very assertively that they are not doing anything innovative. These schools often stress their focus on the teaching of basic skills through direct instruction and see this method as being proven successful. Many principals, though, do think their charter schools are distinctive in some manner (Mintrom, 2000). According to Mintrom, in his study comparing innovations in both traditional public schools and charter schools, three innovations are distinctive from traditional public schools: nontraditional scheduling (such as block scheduling or all day kindergarten), requiring a foreign language, and requiring uniforms.

The administration and management of charter schools are innovative in themselves; i.e., the delivery of a public education via charter schools reflects an innovative practice. Other distinctions include financial and management decisions made on-site or by a management company, the principal focuses on academic issues and a business manager focuses on administrative aspects, parents and teachers have input in all major decisions regarding the budget and curriculum, and efforts are made to include students in much of the decision making.

Many innovations with the curriculum include an emphasis on a particular field and the use of the core knowledge curriculum where basic factual information is presented before any abstract concepts, leading to a focus on the mastery of basics. Teaching citizenship and moral value teachings is also considered distinctive or innovative by charter schools.

Mintrom sees little innovation with regard to instructional techniques. In contrast multiage grouping, smaller class sizes, individualized instruction or learning programs for all students, and a longer school year and/or school day are all described as innovative by charter schools.

Some charter schools regard technology as the most innovative thing occurring in the charter schools and provide each family with a computer for use at home. Some not particularly innovative things include computers in each classroom and instruction on use of computer software. Horn and Miron noted that much of what is deemed a technological innovation refers only to computers and nothing else.

Parental involvement is an area where charter schools tend to think they are distinctive. They typically report a higher level of parental involvement than do traditional schools, and it could be said that this is a result of parents making that initial proactive decision to send their children to a charter school. Many charter schools allow parents to visit the school at any time during the day and encourage volunteering, often asking parents to sign a contract for involvement. After school and evening events are provided. In some cases teachers are not only required to hold parent-teacher conferences, but also to make home visits throughout the year. Not only are parents included in these meetings, but oftentimes students are included or lead the conference. A parent room or resource center is also found in some charter schools, particularly with the National Heritage Academies.

Mintrom concluded that charter schools are stuck with a traditional schooling mentality and cannot or do not see beyond that framework. For any innovations to occur, at least in Michigan, charter school organizers need to see beyond the traditional schooling paradigm.

1.4 What is Unique About Charter Schools?

Charter schools begin with an advantage over traditional public schools. They have greater freedom in organizing and developing their schools while providing an opportunity for families and teachers to choose a school other than one in their district. Charter schools were created to allow more freedom in experimentation with innovative techniques or organization resulting in improvements in pedagogy and management. One especially unique feature is freedom from the bureaucracy that traditional public schools must endure, though many charter schools have chosen to create their own bureaucracy. Greater local

control offers a choice to the community. A core curriculum is not mandated, but the Michigan core curriculum is recommended as a framework. Because the MEAP is a highly regarded standardized test, most charter schools choose to follow the recommended framework from the state rather than developing strands outside of the state's core curriculum.

Each school was authorized based on its mission, goals, and purposes. Those who choose a charter school are typically in agreement with its mission. The unifying vision/mission found in many charter schools brings coherence to the schools and enhances a sense of community. The common vision paired with typically smaller settings creates less of an institutional environment and more of a communal learning environment (Massachusetts Department of Education, MDE, 1998). Charter schools, created to spur innovation, encourage educators to try new things and experiment using their knowledge and education while following the school's mission, vision, and goals. In many cases, however, charter schools have adopted a "canned curriculum" (Horn & Miron, 1999) that does not allow the school to adhere to its mission or vision. Facilities such as gyms, sports arenas, or libraries may not be present in the building, forcing the charter schools to utilize community resources.

Horn and Miron (1999), in their final report on Michigan Public School Academies, noted the most common self-reported innovations:

- Specific focus/theme
- Community activity experiences with mentors
- Dual enrollment at community colleges
- Multiage grouping
- Montessori methods
- Before and after school programs
- Individual Educational Plans for all students (individualization)
- Involvement of parents

Other innovations were reported by the schools:

- Team teaching
- Direct instruction
- Cooperative learning
- Modular/block scheduling
- Uniforms (also found in some traditional public schools)

1.5 Organization of This Report

This report is organized into three major categories for innovation within charter schools: curriculum, instructional practices/methods, and organization/governance. Within these categories are subcategories that help to explain the main concepts behind each innovation.

Chapter two, Curriculum, examines charter schools' adherence to specific curricular packages or models, guiding philosophies, or specific programs; curricular accommodations for student populations; and involvement of parents and the community in curricular development. These factors all work to support the creation, development, and delivery of curriculum.

Chapter three, Instructional Practices, investigates charter schools' mission/vision; philosophies for instructional practices; use of direct instruction, or constructivist teaching; student roles and environment or structure of classrooms; accommodations made for specific populations; specialized staff; inclusion of special programs; and other unique features.

Chapter four, Governance and Organization, studies charter schools' decision making and administrative organization; structure of the academic day/year; professional development and/or school improvement; and parental involvement.

These subcategories serve as an organizational method to examine innovations in better detail. Innovations will be looked at specifically with regard to overall trends and specific characteristics of management companies.

Chapter Two

Curriculum Innovations

The curriculum is part of the critical foundation that molds a school. Though charter schools are not required to, the majority have chosen to follow a curriculum package or framework. In most cases the MEAP is an important consideration for schools when determining their curriculum. The following discussion is based on self-reported innovations as well as innovations derived from information sent by Michigan charter schools.

2.1 Specialized Focus/Profile

Many charter schools have developed a specialized focus, with the entire curriculum typically based around their missions or visions. The focus of the charter school indicates what unique purpose the school might have been created for, by whom, and for whom. The focus often is evident through the curriculum, instructional practices, and environment of the schools. The specialized focus of a school often lends itself to the creation of innovative methods and techniques.

One of the most common focuses for the charter schools is a business or vocational focus. These schools typically look to provide students with work experience both within and outside the school setting. Charter School Administrative Services commonly manages schools with a business or entrepreneurship focus. Many of the business-focused schools utilize community collaboration extensively for real life learning opportunities for students. Charter schools that focus on vocational education, much like business education, also utilize community resources and partnerships in order to enhance their programs. These schools allow students to excel in areas where they do well or to receive experience in areas of personal interest and skill. Many of these schools also focus directly on job placement for students while attending school and also for jobs after graduation. Other schools have students create their own businesses at the school, allowing them to sell their products to the community, with profits earned going directly to the students and the operating costs of the business. Schools with a business and entrepreneurship focus typically have some of the following characteristics:

- Students create and plan a business for the entire class, which is then implemented by integrating the plans into the curriculum. Students actually develop and run the business.
- Student-centered classes focus on business ownership and/or management that gives relevance to the students' need to learn basic skills.
- Practical work is experienced through school-run businesses and work placements.
- Job market connections link students and employers in new ways, by bringing technology, resources, and people to one place accessible to students, parents, educators, employers, and the community.
- In-school banking program: Students apply for positions, are interviewed, and hired. Banking is done biweekly, focusing on mastery of science and math skills along with science and math fairs.

- Focus includes three areas: manufacturing technology, information technology, and automotive service technology.
- In a screen printing class, students earn money by serving the community.
- Two hands-on enterprise classes: Culinary Arts—students make lunch for school population and neighboring adult education facility and two area day care facilities. Students share in profits.
- Specializations offered in career preparation.
- Specializations offered in entrepreneurialism and free enterprise.
- Having graphic design and wood technology are a common focus.

Another common focus for approximately a quarter of the schools involves the integration of fine arts into the curriculum. Many charter schools integrate music, art, drama, and dance into all of their instruction. Much of this instruction involves active learning while incorporating academics. Students are given the opportunity to see academics in a different manner, through fine arts. Charter schools managed by either Educare or JCR and Associates characteristically have a fine arts or performing arts focus. The most common characteristics of schools with a fine arts focus include those listed below:

- A substantial program of instruction and study in music, art, dance, and drama at every grade
- Fine arts focus integrated into traditional academic curriculum, geared to active learning, critical and creative thinking, class trips
- Performing arts to expose students to the arts at an early age, develop expertise in the arts through the teaching of dance, art, vocal music, instrumental music, and drama
- Emphasis and connection between fine arts and social arts-community service

Approximately one quarter of the charter schools attract students based on their particular cultural focus ranging from African American, to Middle Eastern, to Hispanic, or Native American. Almost all of these schools integrate language, culture, and history into their curricula. Limited English Proficiency students may receive additional help in bilingual education at these schools. Cultural sensitivity and awareness are typically a curricular focus. The following are characteristics typically representative of charter schools with an international cultures focus:

- Emphasis on multicultural experiences in social studies
- An International Studies Department to provide foreign language instruction and culture, translation services as needed to ensure effective communication between home and school, and in-service training to traditional teachers to ensure cultural sensitivity and knowledge
- An emphasis on cultural and international studies and a focus on technology so graduates will be prepared to participate in the global community
- Special education bilingual program
- Bilingual program
- Multicultural week

Edison schools have a strong emphasis on the integration of technology into the curriculum and classroom instruction as well as at home. Edison provides a computer for each family. A dozen or so other schools also emphasize technology with regard to computers and computer programs/functions such as laser discs,

hyper studio, Internet access, DVDs, and video equipment. Charter schools focusing on the implementation of technology exemplify the following most common qualities:

- Technology integrated with the curriculum: built around math, science, humanities, arts, character, ethics, practical arts, and skills
- Internet–web page development, hyper studio, distance/interactive learning
- Internet access and use of multimedia
- CDs, laser discs, DVDs, video conferencing
- Technology as a way to show learning is fun and for immediacy of results
- Access to computers, video cameras, cassette tape recorders, VCRs, TVs, and laser discs

Character education is the underlying support for approximately half of the charter schools. About one quarter of these schools utilize character education programs in cooperation with another focus, while the remainder focus mainly on character education. Typically, schools with a character education focus return to basic skills or traditional academics. Instilling principles and ethics provides the foundation for the entire curriculum. This focus calls for a return to older educational values and practices, a back to the basics and/or essentials approach. We typically find direct instructional practices in these charter schools. Though these practices are not innovative, they are unique to the schools. The most common characteristics of character education programs include those listed below:

- Traditional, strong academics; an academic core that is demanding and integrated
- Traditional principles and ethics
- Emphasis placed on honor, duty, and country (typical of National Heritage Academy charter schools)
- Etiquette, class, and values education integrated into curriculum

A handful of the charter schools emphasize outdoor, environmental, or agricultural education. A few of these schools have acreage, nature trails, or ponds that are used for instructional purposes. These tools are utilized to enhance subjects and bring relevancy to students lives. Students have opportunities to learn outside of the classroom by examining the natural world around them. The most common theme of these schools is an environmental or outdoor science curriculum that utilizes nature trails, ponds, and other habitats. A less common theme is that of agriculture and renewable resources where students learn all the disciplines through running and maintaining a farm. Most of these schools follow the Michigan Core Curriculum to emphasize training in environmental studies and applied technology so students may become contributing, knowledgeable citizens. One of the main objectives of this focus is to make material relevant for students' experiences.

Many management companies adopt one specific focus for all their schools. American Institutional Management (AIM) focuses on the teaching of foreign languages, specifically Arabic or Spanish. Charter School Administrative Services focuses on business and entrepreneurship. Educare focuses on fine arts as well as an environmental and outdoor focus. JCR and Associates has adopted a performing arts focus. Edison focuses on technology integration and back to the basics. Character education approaches are typical of National Heritage Academies. Though all of these schools are associated with a specific focus,

other charter schools not related to the management companies have chosen some of these as their focus also. The curricula at Beacon Education Management, Helicon, and the Leona Group all have varying focuses.

2.2 Curricular Packages/Models

Though charter schools are not required by the state to follow a set of curriculum standards, many choose to follow, to varying degrees, Michigan's recommended framework. Almost all of the charter schools adhere to the Michigan Model Core Curriculum or Michigan Standards and Benchmarks, with many choosing to emphasize or integrate some areas over others such as science, hands-on applications, environmental science, music, art, and Spanish. The Hirsch Core Knowledge Sequence is another framework that is popular among many of the charter schools. Those charter schools located in Kent County typically follow the Kent County curriculum. In addition to these or in replacement of these are more specific or specialized curricula that are chosen because they fit with a school's focus. Following is a list of specified curricula frameworks. Each framework applies only to a few charter schools, and some are particular to only one school.

- Industry Skill Standards
- World-of-work curriculum
- Outcomes-based education
- Orff Music curriculum
- Curriculum taken from State of Virginia's Standards of Learning Curriculum; multicultural and global perspectives
- Ford Academy of Manufacturing Sciences: Exposure to math, science, technology
- Core Virtues Curriculum for character development (The educational archetypes upon which the curriculum is founded are derived from Austrian philosopher/scientist, Rudolph Steiner)
- Standards-based curriculum
- Curriculum methodologies drawn from the Waldorf School movement, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the vocational-academics movement
- Baldrige goals (read at grade level)/Baldrige Lighthouse Recognition
- Kindness and justice core curriculum
- Choice theory (empowered to control our own lives)

More general characteristics include

- Innovative curriculum based on teachers' own learning
- Arts content knowledge transferred and integrated with academics
- Curriculum tailored to focus on and meet individual students needs
- Integrates national, state, and local standards

These models typically follow the charter schools' focus. Management companies typically duplicate a curriculum throughout their schools. This is true of National Heritage Academies, which share the same vision and back to basics approach with emphasis on citizenship and America's heritage. All of their schools adhere to the HirschCore Knowledge Sequence, following the planned progression for each grade level. Mosaica Academy has developed its own curriculum entitled the Paragon Curriculum. Paragon is a fully integrated curriculum designed around ten ages of history that follow in a chronological sequence. The curriculum for Leona Group schools varies, as does the curriculum for Beacon Education Management. Common for the Foundation for Behavioral Resources charter schools is the Modern Red Schoolhouse Academic Standards.

2.3 Guiding Philosophies

The following is a list of philosophies and opinions relating to innovations and basic purpose or structure of some charter schools:

- One academy claims to be ahead in innovations in education.
- The environment of the school and the presentation of the material are innovations within a not-so-innovative curriculum.
- No new innovations are occurring in education at this time.
- Education is presented as interactive and always evolving.

Nearly all of the charter schools focus on the child, state their beliefs with regard to children and learning, and describe how they attempt to create a positive child environment. With individualized curricula and special programs, many schools exhibit their interest and investment in the child. Child-centered characteristics include

- A fulfilling environment with learning opportunities that are process oriented, active, student-centered, focused on discovery, thinking, evaluation, and striving for quality
- Using one's mind well, a motto very common amongst the charter schools—through reflection, revision, editing, creating real world programs, identifying and promoting individuals gifts, positive citizenship
- Build curriculum around child
- Curriculum, programs, and services offered are based on the needs of the students
- Hands-on, no text programs
- Achievement for all students in math at grade level
- Mastery learning
- High ethical and academic standards promoting cooperation and teamwork
- Development of the whole child
- Community of learners including staff and students featuring integration in learning and student choice

A majority of charter schools also incorporate the philosophies of outside academic authorities in education with the schools' philosophies, curriculum, and instructional practices. Howard Gardner is referred to quite

frequently with regard to his theory on multiple intelligence. Charter schools adapt their curricula and instructional practices to fit each child's different learning styles and needs according to Gardner. Glasser is a prominent figure in directing charter schools into practices of Choice Theory, empowerment to control our own lives, and Quality Schools. The AIM management group charter schools all subscribe to Gardner's Multiple Intelligence, Goleman, Glasser, and the quality school principles.

2.4 Subscription to Specific Programs/Unique Classes

Charter schools, much like traditional public schools, have the opportunity to choose programs to fit in with or determine their curriculum. Special programs within or outside the school often utilize help from the community and parents. Below are descriptions of special programs or unique classes found in a majority of Michigan charter schools. They are separated into specific categories: community programs, reading, math, science/research, social studies/world cultures, fine arts, and character development.

Community programs. Charter schools may have more opportunities to collaborate with community agencies, since often the schools' facilities are limited (i.e., no gym or library). In these case teachers take their students outside the school to utilize community resources. Many charter schools with higher grade levels offer a dual enrollment program with their local community college where students can take classes both at their charter school and also at the community college for credit. Work programs are also a positive collaboration. Local businesses often offer internships, apprenticeships, or other hands-on experiences to students. Field trips provide another means of getting out into the community. All grade levels typically take part in field trips. In most cases partnerships with the community are not only valued and required by the schools, but also at times are a necessity. The following lists the most common community programs.

- Off-site programs offered by different businesses and universities to build student interest in engineering and math and/or to enhance academic skills
- Detroit Area Pre-College Engineering Program (DAPCEP)
- Apply and Analysis school-to-work program
- Building trades
- Consumer math
- Job sharing
- Service projects (student and family involvement)

Reading. When it comes to academic subjects, schools have an abundance of choices from many different programs. Reading is an essential part of our lives and is a crucial feature of all schools. Thus, many charter and district public schools have adopted special programs that help all students or help specifically with lower level or upper level readers. Many of these programs, such as Reading Recovery or Accelerated Reader, require extra assistance in the classroom or in a special resource room. Parents are often enlisted to help administer these programs. It is evident that charter schools, in choosing to adopt a specific reading philosophy—whole language, whole word, or phonics—are engaged in the great debate over reading instruction. The majority of charter schools have chosen a phonics-based approach rather than

whole language. Phonics is more reflective of traditional teaching and curriculum and typically falls together with the whole realm of “basic skills.” All of the following programs are implemented in at least one charter school:

- Explicit phonics
- Riggs program, primarily phonics based
- Hooked on Phonics program
- Phonics and whole language approach to reading and writing across the curriculum
- Speed reading skill development
- D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything And Read)
- Accelerated Reader
- Reading Recovery
- Reader Rabbit* software
- Success for All reading program
- Writing curriculum adapted to individuals
- Great books program
- Literature-based curriculum
- 90 minutes of reading daily/language arts for 120 minutes
- Writer's workshop
- Language skills class to aid low-level students

Math. Math programs, much like the reading programs, are in abundance. The majority of charter schools, if they subscribe to a program at all, subscribe to either Saxon Math or Chicago Math. These are very strict programs that do not allow for much interpretation or alteration. Typically, these programs become the curriculum rather than supplementing or enhancing other curricula. Many charter schools also include self-paced or individualized programs so students may advance at their own pace. The following are the most common programs used:

- Touch Math (manipulatives and constructivist theory)
- Self-paced math (interdisciplinary teaching)
- Remedial math to aid low-level students
- Chicago Math (integrated curriculum with creative writing connections)
- Saxon Math
- Math drills
- Math and science more traditionally taught
- Investigations* and *Connected Math* programs
- Individualized advanced math programs

Science/research. Science typically offers an abundance of hands-on opportunities that especially are found in schools focused on environmental or outdoor education. Students at one charter school, help take care of school property for environmental awareness and learning. There are also clubs directly related to science such as Science Olympiad, where students take part in experiments and compete against other students. The integration of technology into the curriculum reflects a scientific aspect of a curriculum.

Social studies/world cultures. As previously stated in the discussion about school focus, world cultures is a prominent category for about 25 percent of the charter schools. At least half of the charter schools present world cultures or study social studies through a multicultural view. In these schools where there is foreign language instruction, the instruction typically is carried out from kindergarten through grade 12. Common characteristics of these schools are listed below:

- Social studies curriculum research
- History themes integrated into all subjects (particular to Mosaica charter schools with their Paragon curriculum)
- Geography drills
- Spanish language instruction
- French language instruction
- Japanese language instruction
- African-American history
- World languages
- Emphasis on specific tribes in Native-American culture/history

Fine arts. Many charter schools have a fine arts focus; thus, their special programs or unique classes involve music or art. A few schools offer early music education for younger students to enhance their learning. Other schools offer visual art, dance, and choral music classes to supplement and enhance academics. Field trips for students to observe and participate in the fine arts outside of the classroom are also common occurrences.

Character development. Character development is a common focus among charter schools. Charter schools take very seriously their commitment to providing students with character instruction. Programs are often offered for students, parents, and staff. The programs serve to enhance daily instruction as well as before or after school activities for most schools.

- D.A.R.E.
- Street Law Program
- On-site/off-site services to staff, students, and parents aimed at improving teaching and learning through conflict resolution, violence prevention, safety, sex and health education classes
- Social skills instruction
- Skills for adolescents
- Focus on problem solving
- Confronting issues of violence through an antiviolence curricula with conflict resolution, critical thinking, and parent workshops
- A male mentoring program to help male students cope with problems and improve their academic skill levels
- Integration of character and ethics, practical arts and skills
- Instruction in CPR and first aid (staff and middle school students certified)
- Peace Works program focused on peaceful environment and conflict resolution
- Strict disciplinary code; both students and parents must sign a behavioral contract

The majority of the charter schools that use management companies are required to adopt specific programs. National Heritage Academies and Edison schools use the Chicago math program and also subscribe to a phonics program and the Success for All reading program. In addition, National Heritage Academies' science curriculum is divided into life, earth, and physical science. Each month they also focus on moral highlights that are incorporated into every aspect of the curriculum. This type of program is common in most of the charter schools that emphasize character education and social skills development. Cultural literacy, especially with regard to the heritage of the United States, is also presented in National Heritage Academies.

2.5 Accommodations for Student Populations

Many charter schools have a large population of students who were underachievers in the district public schools. Students with special needs seemingly have also been attracted to the charter schools. However, many charter schools do not offer appropriate services for these students. Some students are attracted to the school for other reasons such as the focus or theme, proximity to their house, unhappiness with the district public school, lack of success at the district public school, removal due to behavioral problems, etc. Because they are usually smaller, charter schools typically have fewer resources, but still have to accommodate all their students including special education students. Some charter schools, because of their low student-to-teacher ratio, claim there is no need for a special education classroom or teacher because these students are getting the one-to-one attention they need. The majority of schools have an inclusion policy, with some having specialists who work with the students that need extra help. A surprisingly high number of charter schools report that they provide individualized educational plans for each student, accommodating each student's specific needs. Below is a list of statements the charter schools made in regards to the provision of special educational services.

- A common population that includes students with special needs, behavioral problems, lack of motivation, gifted and talented, lack of reading skills, health problems, unsuccessful at the traditional public schools, suffering from poverty, broken homes, single or divorced parents, or long distance commuting
- A language skills class and remedial math to aid low-level students
- Special needs students included in the classroom
- Individual lesson plans developed
- High turnover rate (may be a result of students' needs not being met)
- Mission is to educate, empower, and support at-risk students
- PASS (Portable Assisted Study Sequence program)—migrant program, vocational education, and job placement with a paycheck
- An alternative learning environment for at-risk students to transition them back to their home schools and give them successful work habits
- Assistance with behavioral problems, specialized achievers, and low achieving students
- Students are either from juvenile court or had trouble in their original school

Most charter schools recognize the diversity of their student population. In most cases, to accommodate an entire population of students, a school needs more resources, including a specialized staff.

2.6 Case Studies

One school can be described as almost entirely innovative. It houses about 170 K-7 students in its school that was established in 1996 and is run by the Educare management company. It realizes that each student has a unique learning style and thus attempts to provide different learning environments. Its ongoing learning communities offer partnerships within the community for students to be involved in environmental and outdoor activities on its acreage of woods and farmland, while also experiencing fine arts education activities. Older students experience hands-on activities where application of skills and knowledge is essential to success. Students are also offered character development focused on citizenship, community, and development of talents and interests in both the arts and sciences. Older students can choose their classes or experiences as well as the order in which they do them and when. While younger students are allowed less freedom, they are still able to choose some of their classes/experiences. This school seems to have successfully synthesized many positive ideas into its school, thus creating an overall innovative environment.

Three other schools have a particularly innovative focus that seems effective throughout the entire curriculum, instruction, and organization, integrating agriculture, marine life, and history into the curriculum. Both the hands-on, experiential environment of these schools and the integration of a particular focus into all academic areas are innovative.

Chapter Three

Instructional Practices

Instructional practices are the driving force of the curriculum. Each teacher's style or the style encouraged by the school determines the success or failure of a curriculum and may promote innovation even if a curriculum isn't particularly innovative. Horn and Miron (1999) list the following self-reported innovations regarding instructional practices:

- Specific focus of curriculum
- Community activity experiences for students with a mentor
- Set aside time for reading
- Co-enrollment of high school students in community college courses
- Multilevel classrooms
- Before and after school programs
- Individual Educational Plans for all students
- Small class size with additional adults assisting teacher
- Greater individualization
- Use of teaching assistants and volunteers in classroom
- Montessori methods

Other methods used, but that are not necessarily innovative:

- Cooperative learning
- Small and large group instruction
- Learning labs
- Foreign language
- Outcomes based
- Direct approach/differential approach to instruction
- Technology—almost always refers to computers

3.1 Philosophies for Instructional Practices

Charter schools seem to fall into two categories: those that practice direct instruction, or a teacher-centered approach, and those that focus on a constructivist or student-centered approach. Self-reported innovations involving instruction lead to overlapping methods with both the direct instruction and constructivist approach. Some charter schools may be implementing either method sporadically without recognizing the methods as either direct or constructivist instruction. But at the basis of each practice lie the philosophies of each school with regard to teacher and student roles and capabilities in learning. While some schools have established that they only use direct instruction, others implement characteristics from

both constructivist and direct instruction. The DISTAR program is used by the Advantage Academies and is a research-tested direct instruction program. The constructivist model is student-centered and thus may incorporate one or more of the following programs or beliefs:

- Individualized Learning Plan for all students
- Accommodates learning styles of all students
- Project based
- Active learning approach of learning by doing
- Center-based learning
- Whole education
- Integrated themes
- Academics centered, highly individualized format
- Thinking with doing
- Critical thinking skills
- Goals established by teachers and students
- Enthusiastic interactive learning environment
- Cooperative learning
- Seminars and Socratic discussion
- Hands-on activities
- Instruction based on multiple intelligence
- Teaching to multiple intelligences (Gardner)
- Incorporating emotional intelligence into classroom (Goleman)
- Incorporating Quality School principles (Glasser)

Often, both direct instruction and constructivist approaches are utilized within one school.

3.2 Direct Instruction/Constructivist (teacher- versus student-centered)

Constructivist characteristics/methods. Constructivist methods involve the teacher as a coach rather than the bearer and distributor of knowledge. Students play an active role in their learning and work cooperatively, interacting with each other, with teachers, and with their environment. Approximately half of Michigan charter schools show an emphasis on constructivist teaching. In many cases constructivist teaching seems to be used to attract students and accommodate their differing needs. This is evident in the following list of descriptors from these charter schools:

- Teachers work with each child at his/her own learning rate. It is a priority to get the child to his/her grade level.
- Individualized instruction allows students to progress at their own pace, supplemented with cooperative learning and team teaching.
- Individual learning plans are developed by both students and parents.
- Utilizing teaching methods that work best for each student.

- Multiage classes where students are grouped by ability level, and often receive one-on-one help if not performing at grade level. Learning occurs through hands-on materials, computers, fine arts, and field trips that are incorporated into the curriculum.
- Flexible grouping, small and large group instruction, peer teaching and mentoring, individual instruction, inclusion, thematic units, interdisciplinary instruction, and integrated technologies all characterize a constructivist teaching approach.
- Teachers choose the subject in which they are most efficient and knowledgeable and teach that subject at grade level.
- A cooperative reading program with upper and lower grade students is implemented.
- Small groups and tutoring for students with specific learning challenges is available.
- Direct interactive learning or learning by doing is emphasized.
- A strong emphasis on skill development as well as content.
- Emphasis is placed on a multisensory approach to teaching and learning.
- Teachers teach a variety of strategies to organize students' thoughts (drawings, charts, outlines, spreadsheets, etc.).
- Not classroom based; instead, workshops and units are created based on the curriculum and student, teacher, and staff input.
- Montessori method followed—philosophy and psychology of child, pedagogical methods, curriculum embracing body of knowledge and skills, prepared environment.
- Flexibility allows teachers to design instruction, approaches, presentation, and assessment.

Direct instruction characteristics/methods. In contrast, approximately half of the charter schools offer constant direction from the teacher. In this model the students are the receivers of the knowledge. This focus typically accommodates each student, but only to bring her/him up to grade level. Charter schools that choose direct instruction often refer to it as “research-based methodologies,” stating that direct instruction is the tried and true method and referring to other methods as “fads.” Many charter schools are steadfast in their beliefs about direct instruction and the back to the basics approach. The following are characteristics typical of charter schools following the direct instruction approach:

- Research-based methodologies
- Single program sequence for all students
- Do not follow fads; follow core content, hard work model
- Basic skills taught as foundation, when necessary
- Teacher is the sole source of instruction and information coupled with applications in project-based learning
- Direct instruction with group work, individual guided practice, and student-centered processes
- Direct instruction emphasizes mastery of basic academic skills and development of strong moral character
- Explicit phonics
- Phonics, basic skills, traditional well-structured, sequenced, incremental program
- Phonics with literature, based on a moral focus, and mathematics drill and practice

The majority of the management companies use direct instruction as their main methodology, with other constructivist-type approaches supplementing instruction. American Institutional Management advocates using seminars, Socratic discussion, and cooperative learning through direct instruction. Beacon Education Management also supports direct instruction, but sees the teacher as a coach and offers looping, where students remain with the same teacher for at least two years. Both Educare and the Leona Group use multilevel grading or multiage grouping, which could be seen as constructivist depending upon how these multigraded classes are taught. National Heritage Academies also follow the trend with direct instruction and teacher-directed methodologies, but include multiage grouping to some extent. According to its web site, students are engaged in hands-on, project-based, active learning. An extreme to direct instruction is the Advantage schools' DISTAR program. This is a scripted curriculum where what the teachers and students say are printed on the page. This style is based on research and certifies learning and understanding, "Teacher wording is thereby controlled, making it easier for students to learn" (Advantage Academy).

3.3 Students' Role

Students' roles are determined by the philosophy to which each charter school subscribes. Typically, if the charter school utilizes direct instruction, the students are to listen to the teacher, take part in the given activities and assignments, and learn. If the charter school supports constructivist teaching, then students have a larger or main role in their own learning. Students are actively involved in the creation of their assignments and activities and work with the teacher instead of sitting quietly. Though both approaches value the students, one gives them more responsibility than the other. A particularly innovative aspect of students' roles in some charter schools is the student-led conference, where students conduct the conference with their parents while the teacher is present for assistance only. Student-led conferences are a rare, yet innovative practice in the charter schools. The most common practices include

- Students take responsibility for their own learning
- Students move at their own pace— students are given special assistance and more time to learn as needed; others move on to advanced levels as they are ready
- Student sharing is significant; whole child focus

Less common practices include those listed below:

- School is a functional democracy where students cooperate and participate as full citizens.
- Teachers are coaches, guides, or observers.
- Students, with parents, devise schedule, recognizing individual student styles, strengths through multiage learning/grouping.
- Students help to plan units and integrate content area study.
- Mastery level proficiency achievement provides alternative paths for success with computer-assisted learning, traditional texts, lectures, tutoring, thematic units, individual inquiry.

3.4 Environment/Structure of Classroom

Environment and structure reflect each school's philosophy. Those classrooms that are more flexible and less rigid, with students taking responsibility and an active part, use more constructivist instructional practices. As an example, a few charter schools with a large amount of land utilize outdoor educational opportunities such as farming, nature trails, gardens etc.

Direct instruction, typically occurs in a more structured classroom. A dozen or so charter schools have alternative learning environments for their students. A great majority of the charter schools include field trips and community hands-on experiences in their curriculums, creating an alternative learning environment. A few schools offer an alternative within the school itself. Some examples are listed below:

- Vegetable production, demonstration fields, acres of nature trails, a greenhouse, garden, a wet lab, food lab
- Populations of plants and animals and their interactions are studied, ecosystems, natural world focus, each classroom responsible for an outdoor area
- Classroom learning centers
- Open classroom environment
- Learning not confined to a building; rather, students take part in educational field trips and/or service learning projects
- No classrooms

3.5 Accommodations for Special Student Populations

Accommodations in instructional practices may be made for students with special needs (lower and/or higher achieving) and/or special education students using both programs and instructional techniques, including use of specialists for remedial assistance, tutoring, and adapting materials to fit a particular student or group of students. These extra programs or accommodations may be sustained by having a special staff or by involving parents in these programs. Following are common programs implemented by charter schools in order to meet their populations' needs:

- Adapt materials to accommodate special needs
- Remedial instruction and individual tutoring available throughout the day or after school (by teacher or parent volunteer) for a child who is not at grade level in reading, language arts, or mathematics, or if a child has not scored satisfactorily on the MEAP
- Intensive remediation of reading and math deficiencies
- A special education inclusion model that parallels the federal 1997 IDEA law
- Strategies used to help at-risk students, such as Reading Enhancement
- Cross-grade tutoring
- Scheduled tutoring for those needing special assistance
- Approved independent studies
- Accelerated, regular, remedial instruction developed to meet the needs of each student
- Remedial tutoring in core academic areas throughout school year and summer

- After school tutoring
- One-on-one tutoring, small classes, computer-aided instruction, and integrated classrooms
- Identification of all students who are at risk for failure or experiencing difficulty with learning
- Placement in regular and special classes based on actual performance

3.6 Specialized Staff

The use of additional staff to implement special programs or classes depends upon the budget, resources, and availability of specialized teachers or volunteering parents. A specialized staff is a rare commodity in charter schools. Many schools utilize their Intermediate School District facilities for specialized help or instruction, while others follow an all inclusion philosophy and have a teacher and/or teacher aid make accommodations for students. Sometimes parents and students may find the school unsuitable for their needs. The following is a list of examples of specialized staff in a dozen charter schools:

- Youth Care Specialist—addresses on-the-spot problems as they arise and acts as mentor
- Resource room, social worker, and speech therapist
- Individualized programs for low-achieving students, full-time Title I facilitator, full-time building substitutes, classroomaides, and a special needs teacher to work with individual students on a daily basis
- Full-time teacher's aide
- A bilingual/resource center and bilingual teacher aides in each classroom
- A full-time social worker and a part-time psychologist are employed.
- Special education specialist to ensure equitable access to quality education
- Building substitutes
- All classrooms staffed with a teacher, paraprofessional, and a foster grandparent
- Home visits by counseling and support staff
- A student needs liaison between community and school

3.7 Other Unique Features/Special Programs

In addition to making necessary accommodations for students, schools often offer special programs that attract different kinds of learners. The most common practice is multiage grouping whether it be out of necessity due to low student enrollment or by choice. Other less common practices include those listed below:

- Classical music played in every classroom during lunch; upper elementary and middle school classrooms decorated to represent a music/art period
- Saturday reading group
- Work-based learning and school-to-work philosophy
- Uses Destinations, a student-based computer educational assistance program to supplement classroom instruction
- Bloom's Taxonomy
- Day divided equally between arts instruction and academics

- True Colors learning styles used to identify preferred learning styles and interaction, used in lesson planning and discipline
- Mentoring program for students, with mentor training for staff
- Kindergarten is organized first for children of community, but it is also used to combine ideals of community service with an introduction to a career path in child care.
- Art-based outcomes
- ESL or bilingual instruction is provided.
- Set up using a family/house concept (a group of teachers is responsible for a larger group of students in an attempt to create a familial environment)
- School constitution

3.8 Involvement of Parents/Community in Development

The involvement of parents and the community is an essential aspect of most charter schools. The majority of charter schools encourage parent participation and volunteering, with many schools needing the volunteers in order to fully function. Parents are welcome to visit most of the schools at any time during the day and are also encouraged to help in the classroom or within some area of the school. Field trip chaperones or drivers, tutors, mentors, lunch and recess supervisors, traffic monitors, etc., are all positions in which parents may take part. The schools often use community resources such as the library, gymnasiums, and business representatives speaking to students. Community involvement brings real-life experiences to students. The following list reveals the many ways in which charter schools have utilized community and parent help to enhance their schools:

- Focus on connecting real-life situations to the educational environment
- Utilization of community and career-related personnel and resources
- Dual enrollment
- Fine arts field trips
- Participation in school and out-of-school activities to enhance fine arts education
- Encouragement of application of concepts learned in real life (several classes are practicing business concepts being taught in their business classes by creating their own businesses and finding innovative ways to raise funds for their schools)
- Innovative student- and parent-centered programming with nonprofit organizations that help with social services, before- and after-school programs, counseling, parenting, academics, basic needs
- Nursing students involved in teaching health and safety
- Storytellers visit
- Computer and business organizations work with schools to develop school-to-work programs
- Relationship with local university—professors visit classes
- Workshops for parents
- Home visits in the fall
- Staff, students, parents, resource experts, and greater community interact, with an emphasis on educating the whole student
- Partnerships and internships to receive college credit
- Includes both school- and work-based learning experiences

- Parents and community members volunteer to serve as tutors and mentors
- Partnerships with business and industry to prepare students for higher education, advanced vocational training, employment, and entrepreneurship
- A Career Exploration Day: career choices and realistic career expectations

Chapter Four

Organization and Governance

One of the unique features of charter schools is their freedom from bureaucratic governance. They can decide how their school will be governed. Other organizational considerations include the involvement of parents, teachers, and students in decision making as well as more structural considerations such as the length of the school day or year and professional development opportunities for staff. Horn and Miron (1999) identified self-reported innovations for both management/organizational aspects as well as governance:

- Use of for- and not-for-profit management companies
- Privatization for hiring teachers
- Transportation provided by parents
- Renovation of buildings for school use
- No lunch program
- Lack of tenure for teachers
- Shared or sole decision making by teachers
- Bonuses for teachers to supplement low salaries
- Students accepted from any area
- Less costly but functional buildings
- Facilitator role of building administrator
- Self- or board-appointed school founders (heads of schools)

The report for the Massachusetts Department of Education indicates that many charter schools have a board of directors. Though the authority of the board differs, it typically follows a hierarchical direction. Other schools are run by for-profit companies or hire managers to take care of the business end of running the school. Some schools depend solely on volunteer parents and the community for both time and for fund-raising efforts (MDE, 1998).

4.1 Decision Making and Structure

Charter schools are free to create their own governance structure for their school. Most have created their own board of directors, administration, and oftentimes used outside help from a business manager. Other schools, because of start-up costs, have been developed or taken over by management companies. Typically, there is a hierarchical flow from management company to the board, to an administrator, and then to the school improvement team, staff, parents, and students. Most schools report that they use site-based management or decision making. Only a few schools exemplify a faculty-run school.

The management companies usually establish procedures that support policies and report to the board of directors. Few management companies reported weekly meetings with teachers in an effort to stay on top of classroom activities and achievement of academic goals. Meetings between the presidents of management companies and the principals of their respective schools are held even less often.

Having a board of directors is the most common organizational aspect of the charter schools. A majority of the boards have some sort of relationship with pertinent parties involved in the school including administrators, and sometimes teachers, parents, and students. Typical duties for a board of directors are listed below:

- Meet monthly to set policies
- Academy Board of Directors meets monthly with at least one representative from the management company
- Shared decision making, Total Quality Management program. Stakeholder committees, parent/teacher organization and council
- A Total Quality Management process for self-evaluation (Shared decision making and empowerment of all stakeholders: board, administration, faculty, staff, parents, students, community)
- Decision making is focused at the building level. Teaching and paraprofessional staff meet weekly with administrators/principal to participate in decisions that impact instruction (such as student rules/expectations, teacher/parent expectations; refining core curriculum standards; researching, reviewing, selecting teaching materials; implementing use of technology; improving teaching techniques)
- Chief administrator and principal: one person fills those two positions and/or one person acts as assistant administrator and counselor

Site-based decision making is another extremely valued aspect of governance, although only one school claims to be run totally by the teachers. Most schools see the importance of site-based decision making, however. This decision making is typically democratically based. Characteristics of schools that implement this system are listed below:

- Staff-empowered school (responsible for day-to-day management)
- Striving to become a faculty run/faculty administered school—no principal—each teacher carries specific responsibility in area of choice and competence
- Democracy-consensus, students involved in governance and operations, perform roles such as scheduling, working in office, custodial needs, planning field trips, board of directors (student members)
- Teaching and paraprofessional staff meet once a month with administrators/principal in team decision making that impacts instruction
- Administrative staff plan, implement, and evaluate the school's educational program consistent with local policies and procedures
- Curriculum, instructional practices, and assessment systems developed collaboratively by staff, parents, students and community and are aligned with school district's improvement plan, written curriculum, and assessment
- School's administrative team and staff plan, implement, and evaluate the educational programs of school consistent with local district board of education policies and procedures
- Staff input in decision making/organization
- Building level collaborative decision making through the School Improvement Team

- Committees and specialty work groups
- Building level decision making (All major constituencies—administrators, teachers, students, support staff, parents, and communities—are actively involved in school decision-making processes through various forums; all constituencies participate as members of the school improvement team.)
- Site-based leadership team
- Teachers participate in direction of school, meeting once a week.

Nearly all of the schools reported having a school improvement team that collaborates in helping to run the school. Most school improvement teams were made up of representatives from the administration, teachers, parents, community, and students.

American Institutional Management, Charter School Administrative Service, and National Heritage Academies report that their schools use site-based decision making. Beacon Education Management schools, although they vary in curriculum and instruction, are all run by the faculty.

4.2 Structure of Day/Year

The structure of the school day and year reflects the chosen organization for each school. The structure of the day outlines instructional and planning time for teachers and hours of academic engagement for students. Many charter schools opt to utilize multiage grouping as a means for enhancing instruction or because of their limited number of teachers and lower number of students. Schools sometimes choose to use looping: teachers remain with the same group of students for at least two years, which gives students and teachers extra time with each other for a better, more developed learning situation. The school day is longer for some, with schools setting aside a set number of hours for the core academic subjects. The length of the school year has also been lengthened in some cases. Some schools go year-round with incremental breaks throughout the year. Others have chosen to supplement a regular school year with before- and after-school programs as well as summer school. Some charter schools have assimilated the following programs into their schools: all-day kindergarten, a longer school day and/or year, and looping. Other programs are listed below:

- Block scheduling
- Continuous school year, interspersed with small breaks
- Before- and after-school care, activities, tutoring
- Summer school programs
- Team teaching on alternate Fridays
- Dismissal at noon on Fridays for team and individual planning, team decision making

Beacon Education Management utilizes looping, while Edison has lengthened both the school day and year. National Heritage Academies have also lengthened their school day to 7 hours, with 6 hours of instruction in core subjects. Their classroom sizes are limited to 24 students, about the same as the average district public school.

4.3 Professional Development/School Improvement

An important consideration for charter schools is additional professional development for teachers and staff as well as the future development and improvements for the school. Professional development seems to be an area where charter schools are lacking. Some schools require teachers to report for professional development a certain number of days before school starts or remain a certain number of days after school ends. Other schools choose to have half days or special in-service days where teachers go to professional development workshops.

In attempts to improve their schools, some charter school are modifying their curriculum and practices for alignment with specific programs or guiding philosophies. As other schools grow or become better established, they make changes that previously were not affordable either because of cost or resources. Characteristics for improvement are listed below:

- One school is attempting to attain certification as a Quality School, employing Glasser's Choice Theory on a school-wide basis (The school budgeted funds for teacher training)
- Provide teacher substitutes to allow observation of other classrooms
- Require certification or work toward certification (half of tuition paid by school)
- Encourage team teaching
- Staff takes part in professional development opportunities throughout the year—local in-services and state conferences.
- Professional development in teaching: fine arts, hearing impaired, technology, and hyper studio
- Extended professional development time (two planning periods in the day, 4-week summer institute, allotment of one afternoon a week for professional development)
- Professional development 5-7 days prior to the start of school
- Professional development for teachers is a part of annual budget (Ongoing professional development plans provide opportunities to assure continued commitment to a community-based program. Grant monies help provide financing for professional development. Selection of professional development opportunities are in alignment with mission statement, adult roles, and learner goals.)
- Teachers are sent to extensive training sessions.
- Highly specialized staff take part in organization/management of school.
- Teachers are year-round employees and attend one 6-week summer in-service.
- Evaluation of each staff member twice yearly
- Extensive summer and school year training for teachers

Especially unique features include these:

- School employs an on-site teacher trainer for support and direction.
- Employee pay is linked to parent satisfaction.
- Teacher bonuses are tied to student performance.
- Teachers receive financial bonuses for high student achievement.
- There is no tenure for teachers.

4.4 Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is one area where charter schools are expected to produce improvements and innovations. Charter schools often rely on parents' help to run programs or serve as tutors or mentors. Many charter schools require parents to volunteer an X number of hours per semester or year, asking them to sign a volunteer agreement contract. In most cases parents serve as chaperones or drivers for field trips, supervisors in the lunchroom or at recess, classroom or office aids, tutors, mentors, or fund-raising coordinators. Most charter schools also have established some variation of a parent organization whether it be a parent-teacher organization or one that includes students as well. Parents' input certainly seems to be valued. National Heritage Academies often set aside one room in the school to be used as a parent resource room. This encourages parents to visit the building. In the majority of charter schools, parents are encouraged to volunteer and take part in their child's education. Open door policies make parents feel welcome to visit anytime throughout the day.

Transportation is another area that sometimes requires parent involvement. Since many charter schools do not provide transportation for their students, parents must either drive their students to school or find some other means. Other common characteristics of parent involvement in charter schools are listed below:

- F Parent conferences
- F A parent/teacher program in which teachers meet parents during visiting hours and share teachers' perceptions of the students' progress
- F Parents are periodically invited to attend parent/teacher conferences
- F Fund-raising help, lunchroom supervisors, field trips, school functions (i.e., plays, musical programs)
- F Volunteers, parent survey, provide classroom assistance
- F Parent Involvement Committee meets monthly
- F Parent-Teacher-Student Association
- F Parent members of School Improvement Team review progress of students and update curriculum

There are some especially unique features for charter school parents:

- F Parents expected to volunteer X hours as a condition of their child's enrollment. Parents may be involved in fund raising, tutoring, minor repairs, and a variety of other activities.
- F Parent conferences at request only
- F Parent-Student Contract provided in Student/Family Handbook, which parents and students sign.
- F Bilingual parenting program
- F Parent computer class
- F Initial parent orientation sessions where participants directly participate in setting expectations for students, staff, and parents
- F Parent room
- F Foster grandparents tutor students individually, provide role modeling and emotional support (cross-generational relationships are strengthened)

Chapter Five

Discussion of Findings

5.1 Summary

Charter schools were established to fulfill specific educational goals and purposes. Two of the six main goals establish the expectation for innovation: *To stimulate innovative teaching methods and to create new professional opportunities for teachers in a new type of public school in which the school structure and educational program can be innovatively designed and managed by teachers at the school site level.* Are the charter schools currently fulfilling these goals, or will they fulfill these goals in the foreseeable future?

Rogers outlines five key characteristics of an innovation: (i) the amount the new idea is better than an old one (perception of the potential advantages of the new idea); (ii) the consistency of the new innovation with current values; (iii) complexity of the innovation, which determines the rate at which it diffuses; (iv) the ability for the innovation to be tried out or used on a trial basis with no commitment; and (v) the visibility of the results from the innovation to others. A report completed by Rosenblum Brigham Associates suggests that innovations must be “transferrable,” “robust,” and “potentially effective” (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1998).

We began with an assumption that innovations would occur in charter schools, that their sheer development would be cause for innovation. The report for the Massachusetts Department of Education suggests that it is improper to try to identify individual or isolated innovations within charter schools. Rather, the report suggests that we look at the whole of the school, at the main vision of the school. Specific isolated practices are not innovative. Instead, the combination of individual practices as a whole is innovative. If we agree with this premise, then charter schools are to some extent innovative, since many have taken traditional practices or new practices and recombined them to fit their particular needs. The focus on the unifying vision of each charter school, incorporating both the goals and the mission of the schools and how each school attempts to achieve its vision, is where the innovation lies (Michigan Department Education, 1998).

Prevalent innovations in a curriculum focus on development of character, citizenship, respect for self, and promotion of a positive school climate. In charter schools we see a broad range from alternative, progressive educational designs to a more traditional structure. Some develop charter schools because they share a common feeling that education needs to return to the basics, having lost the traditional education that has taught generations. Those schools return to a traditional style that is unique, but not innovative.

Marketing is an innovation in accountability. Charter schools are now accountable for accommodating parents’ requests. Those requests have not been for innovative practice but reflected a desire for a return to basic skills and a more traditional approach to education. Innovation is a risk for charter schools to take,

not only because they must make their clientele happy, but also because the success of innovative practices is often not seen through MEAP or other standardized test scores that are regarded so highly.

Many charter schools have not taken full advantage of the opportunities that surround them. Unfortunately, instead of adopting new and innovative things, many charter schools use some of the same practices that are found in district public schools. Some are even reverting farther back to reach for the roots of tradition. A number of charter schools, though, are considered innovative based on their focus, vision, and beliefs regarding student, parent, and teacher roles. It can be argued that what has happened with charter schools is exactly what should have happened: the creation of a group of schools that direct themselves to a specific population. Those individuals who want, enjoy, or succeed in a traditional setting will be attracted to the back to the basics, traditional charters. Those who need a less rigid environment may go to a school with open acreage and the promise of hands-on, student-centered work; while others may be attracted to the cultural focus of a school seeking camaraderie and sense of heritage or ethnicity.

5.2 Changes Made in District Schools Based on Charter School Innovations

According to Rofes (1995), charter schools have had some influence on the district public schools. Charter schools have prompted district public schools to “create additional thematic schools focused on a particular educational philosophy. Most prevalent have been the expansion of back-to-basics and core knowledge schools . . .” For example, the Grand Rapids (MI) Public Schools created a middle school focused on environmental sciences. Other changes have taken place in district schools over time. It is questionable whether these changes were made in response to the charter school movement or if they were works in progress. Some of these changes are listed (MDE, 1998):

- Uniforms required
- Addition of after school program in elementary schools
- All day kindergarten
- School choice within districts
- An alternative middle school curriculum
- Community service in middle schools
- Foreign language in elementary school
- Reduced class sizes
- Alternative high schools

District schools claim that innovations occurred due to educational reform, not charter schools, although many consider the charter school movement to be an effort in educational reform. The following is a list of innovations district officials claim are not based on charter innovations (MDE, 1998):

- Performing arts programs
- New reading programs
- Strategic plans and coordinated curricula
- Integrated arts
- Integrated science

- Increased focus on assessment
- Preschool programs
- Block scheduling in high school

Many innovations that have occurred most recently in the district public schools had already been developed, but had not been implemented. One district public school official said, “We do have a block scheduled school this year that may not be a result of competition, but it’s a result of delivering a better product. And I think that whole product, results-driven effort to redesign schools was heightened and then moved more quickly because of the competition from charter schools” (Rofes, 1998). Charter schools served as a catalyst or motivation to get those innovations moving more quickly into the district public school system. A common thought throughout district public schools is that there isn’t anything different going on in charter schools that would “offer new knowledge to the district” (Rofes, 1998). Some schools, both charter and traditional, may say that their goal is to create a better product for students in response to this effort in reform.

5.3 Innovation Diffusion

“What, if any, innovative teaching methods or educational practices have been stimulated by the charter schools? To what extent are these transportable to other schools?” (Horn & Miron, 1999) Both classic and innovative practices have been observed, with charter schools taking some of the old and incorporating with the new. Charter schools can use new ideas and old ideas as they see fit, where traditional public schools are more established.

Rofes (1998) found that school districts “had rarely taken innovations in teaching or learning produced by charter schools and put them to use in district schools.” The opportunity for charter schools to share information on innovations’ successes or failures with public schools is present, but currently not being utilized. The two seem to be paired against each other in competition. Charter schools were created in part to foster competition in order to spur innovation and reformation within the schools. At the same time the competitors are expected to share their ideas. Rofes foresees innovation diffusion as possible in the future, but only after both charter schools and district public schools go through the natural responses to this new educational reform. Mintrom urges that an information-sharing lever be put in place—a mechanism both parties can work through in order to share ideas.

References

Horn, J., & Miron, G. (1999). *Evaluation of the Michigan public school academy initiative final report*. Kalamazoo, MI: The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University.

Massachusetts Department of Education. (1998). *Innovation & Massachusetts Charter Schools*. Rosenblum Brigham Associates. Boston MA.

Mintrom, M. (2000). *Leveraging local innovation: The case of Michigan's charter schools*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University.

Rofes, E. (1998). *How are school districts responding to charter laws and charter schools?* Berkeley, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education, University of California.

Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations*, (4th ed.) New York: The Free Press.

Street, M., & Street, S. (1999). *Charter school study*. Michigan for Public Education Newsletter 5(1).