

Why Parents Choose Charter Schools for Their Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

This study used an open-ended structured interview to investigate seven parents' of students with disabilities perceptions of charter schools and why they chose this type of school to educate their child. Findings showed a general theme of parents believing that the traditional area public school did not meet their child's needs in terms of size, academics, and addressing the student's unique educational needs. When commenting on the positive aspects of charter schools, parents indicated the charter school's willingness to address the disability and strong communication with families. Reported negative aspects of charter schools included high staff turnover and academic changes in short periods of time. When comparing the special education services provided by the charter school and the child's previous public school, the participants noted differences in staff flexibility, teacher accessibility and attentiveness, and school size favoring the charter school program.

Introduction

School choice, or allowing parents to choose a school for their child, has been an increasingly popular education reform since the 1980s. School choice allows students to enroll in another public school or district outside their traditional public school attendance area without justification or special approval. Between 1993 and 2002, the number of students attending a school of choice has increased nationwide (Wirt, Choy, Rooney, Provasnik, Sen, & Tobin, 2004). In the early years of the charter school movement, charter schools were generally very small with numbers well under 100 children (U.S. Department of Education, 2004); but, charter schools are becoming larger and the median student enrollment has steadily increased (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Across the United States, charter schools have become one of the most frequently used alternative choices for parents to send their children (Schneider & Buckley, 2003). Charter schools are public schools that may include grades K-12 or any combination of those grades as specified in its contract or charter, and cannot be selective in terms of race, religion, sex, or test scores (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998).

National studies indicate that students with disabilities attend charter schools at the same rate, or in some cases in higher proportions, than students with disabilities attending the traditional area school (Finn, Manno, & Bierlein, 1996; RPP International and University of Minnesota, 1997). Even though charter schools are subject to all mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), lawyers and advocates for students with disabilities are concerned that charter schools may be unprepared to meet the requirements for educating students with disabilities, citing a potential for discrimination, a lack of expertise in service delivery, and limited funding (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998). Further, research shows that some charter schools are struggling with special education mandates and procedures such as student referrals, placement in special education, and fulfilling the goals of the individualized education program or IEP (Education Commission of the States, 1995; McKinney, 1996).

Even with these concerns, some parents choose to send their child with a disability to a charter school and few studies have been completed to find the reasons why parents choose this type of school. Findings from Colorado show that some charter schools may be able to offer specific instructional approaches and more individualized training, which may attract parents (McLaughlin & Henderson, 1998; McLaughlin, Henderson, & Ullah, 1996). Studies indicate that a majority of parents believe that the charter schools in which their children were enrolled were better than the traditional area public school they had previously attended with respect to class size, school size, teacher attentiveness, and the quality of instruction and curriculum (Estes, 2004; Finn et al., 1996; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Lange & Ysseldyke, 1998). Further, Bomotti (1996) found that parents believed that charter schools provide higher academic standards and greater accountability for students' learning while expecting a higher level of parental involvement.

Because of the relatively limited studies, more information still needs to be gathered on the perceptions of parents of children with disabilities about

charter schools and about their decision to leave the traditional area public school. The present study was designed to identify and describe the perceptions of parents who have students with disabilities in a college preparatory charter school in the midwest and why they chose this particular charter school for their child. Specifically, we sought to explore the following lines of inquiry:

1. Identify the reasons why you (as parents) decided to transfer your child to this charter school.
2. Identify what you (parents) appreciated about the special education services provided at the charter school.
3. Compare the special education services provided at the charter school to the traditional area public school your son or daughter previously attended.

Methods

Participants

Study participants were seven parents who placed their child with a disability in a charter school in the midwest. Each parent had one child who attended the charter school; one parent had two children who were receiving special education services at the charter school. The charter school is located in a rural area that contains five public schools and four parochial schools. The focus of the charter school is on college preparation.

The children of the seven parents who were interviewed ranged in age from seven years to 14 years. Parents reported a variety of disabilities for their children, including three students with speech impairments, one student diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, one student with a behavior disorder, two students with learning disabilities, and one student with both a learning disability and an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Of these children a majority were boys ($n = 7$).

Instrumentation

The research was conducted using open-ended structured interviews (see Appendix). The exact wording and sequence of questions were determined in advance and used consistently throughout the interviews. Thus, all of the interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order by the same interviewer to eliminate as much bias as possible.

Two pilot interviews were completed before the actual study with personnel who had knowledge about charter schools and the use of effective open-ended interviews. Based on their feedback, a revised interview was created, which was subsequently used in the present study.

Procedures

Invitations to become involved in the study were e-mailed by the charter school's special education teacher to all parents of children with disabilities at the elementary level. In order to yield broad representation in terms of age, other parent groups from the charter school were approached by the researchers and also asked to participate in this study. A total of seven parents agreed to be contacted for this study. The charter school special education teacher provided the researchers with the telephone numbers of parents who agreed to participate in the study.

A packet consisting of a formal invitation to participate, a consent form, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope was mailed to each of the parents who agreed to participate. Participants were asked to indicate a convenient time when the researcher could call and conduct the interview and to return the form along with their signed consent using the pre-paid envelope. Upon receiving the consent form, the interviewer called the participant at the designated time and conducted the 30 minute telephone interview. The interview was audiotaped, and notes were also taken by the interviewer to provide reliability (Seidman, 1998). The audiotape contained the raw data, and once the interview session had been transcribed, the audiotape was destroyed to protect participant anonymity.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the audiotapes, the researchers identified and wrote down initial code categories. A copy of the transcripts was made and cut or divided into topical units that indicated patterns across the questions. These units were placed in file folders. The result was a set of folders that contained excerpts from the interviews divided into specific categories. The cutting and sorting into file folders is the traditional approach used in qualitative analysis to organize categories, themes, and patterns (Berg, 2004). The categories along with responses from the parents of children with disabilities are reported below.

Results

Analysis of the transcripts revealed the reasons why the participating parents had transferred their child to a charter school, what they perceived as the strengths and limitations of the charter school's special education services, and comparisons of the services of the previously attended school and charter school. The following results are presented by line of inquiry (see Table for summary of results).

Table
Inquires and Themes

Inquiry	Themes	
	Positive	Negative
#1 - Reasons for transfer	perceived academic excellence previous school not able to address disability unwanted changes in previous school	
#2 - Perceptions of the special education services at the charter school	willingness to address disability effective communication	staff turnover unwanted changes in philosophy
#3 - Comparing services	charter school staffs' flexibility and accessibility small school size	

Inquiry #1

This question asked interviewees to report why they had decided to transfer their child to a charter school. The researchers found a general theme of the students' traditional area public school not meeting the child's needs. Within this general theme, three specific themes were as follows: a) changes viewed as negative in the traditional area public school district, b) the perceived academic excellence of the charter school, and c) the traditional area public school's inability to address the student's specific and special needs.

Unwanted changes in former traditional area public school. Parents reported that they were concerned with the traditional area public school's new teaching and restructuring policies. For example, one traditional area public school district had switched to a focus school system. With this focus school system, a clumping of grades occurred for the whole district (for example, one elementary school contained this district's entire K-2 grades while another school had grades 3-5). This restructuring led to the elimination of the traditional neighborhood K-5 elementary school and forced some parents to send their children of different ages to various schools within the district. One parent commented:

We [my husband and I] like the idea of having our kids in the same school rather than having them in two different schools across town.

Perceived academic excellence of charter school. Interviewees reported that they believed that the charter school had higher academic standards than the local traditional area public schools. It appears that the charter school's students themselves strive for academic excellence, rather than the parents and teachers emphasizing academic growth. One parent stated:

The students push for academic excellence ... they are the ones who have set the standards to do the work. They [students] define what is accepted and expected [at this school].

The curriculum itself also pushes students to do well. The curriculum and class sequence were reported as being rigorous while also focusing on the individual needs of each student. One parent remarked:

Their [charter school] overall curriculum was much more individualized ... he [my child] could work at his own pace in the areas where he excelled so he wasn't being bored silly, yet in the areas he really needed extra help he could get that help in the resource classroom.

Traditional area public school's failure to address special needs. Another common theme that was reported was that the traditional area public school was not addressing the special needs of the students with disabilities. In addition, often the traditional area public school did not offer testing to determine a possible disability—even when parents brought their concerns about their child's needs to the district. When testing did occur, the parents reported that often the traditional area public school did not qualify the student for special education services. One parent noted:

I had asked every year [at the traditional area public school] if they would evaluate him [her child] for speech services and every year they said that he did not need it [the speech services]. When we went to charter school they [the charter school's teachers] asked to evaluate him [my son] and my daughter before we brought it [possibility of testing for a disability] up. They [charter school special education evaluators] suggested speech for both of them [son and daughter]. We [parents] were quite happy with this willingness to test.

Many parents commented extensively about the adversarial position that they felt they had to take with the traditional area public school because of the school's unwillingness to test a child for special education. One participant commented:

At [the traditional area public school], I almost felt like I was asking too much to get all the necessary testing and services for my son. I felt like I was a bad guy and had to fight for our rights and get the services [at the traditional area public school]. They [traditional area public school] were not willing to jump in to help.

By contrast, the charter school's teachers and administration willingly provided testing and, if the student qualified, the necessary services. This openness and willingness to provide immediate testing and services prompted parents to make the switch. In addition, the charter school accepted private testing without question compared to the traditional area public school's reluctance to accept and act upon the results of private testing. One parent responded:

He [my child] wasn't getting any special services at [the traditional area public school], and although they [traditional area public school]

tested him repeatedly, they kept saying they couldn't qualify him and he was failing his classes even though he's a very bright kid. We had him tested outside of the school by a private psychologist and he [private psychologist] said that he [child] should qualify [for special education services].

Other parents indicated that testing was suggested by the charter school teachers when the child demonstrated deficit areas in the classroom. That is, parents felt that the charter school was proactive with regard to their child's needs and did not take an adversarial role with the parents concerning testing. As one parent noted:

I guess it was within the first two months of my son being in the classroom that they [the teachers at the charter school] suggested the testing [for special education], got the testing completed and got him on a special education program and made accommodations in the [general education] classroom.

Inquiry #2

In this question, the interviewees commented on the special education services at the charter school. Both positive and negative observations were reported. The themes surrounding the positive aspects of the charter school's program included a) willingness to address the child's disability areas, and b) effective communication and relationships between faculty and student's family. The themes surrounding the negative aspects of the program included a) high staff turnover, and b) recent unwanted changes in the school's philosophy. Each of these themes will be explored in more detail below.

Addressing disability areas. Parents held positive views of the charter school's willingness to test for a possible disability along with concentrating on the individual needs of the student. The charter school analyzed the student's weaknesses and wrote out a plan to help solve the deficit areas. At times, this plan involved many different specialists. One parent noted:

I'm happy with it [special education services]. He [son] saw an occupational therapist for at least a year. She [occupational therapist] helped him with the mechanics of writing, the sitting position and ways to angle the paper to make it [writing] easier. He [son] sees the special education teacher for his reading speed and organizational skills. He [son] also sees a therapist [counselor] because he has low self-esteem.

In addition, the charter school was agreeable to provide special education testing and services for students who did not qualify or were not tested for these services at the traditional area public school. Parents, frustrated with the traditional area public school's reluctance to qualify their son or daughter for special education, were happy about this change in attitude.

Communication and responsiveness. Another positive observation by the parents related to the effective communication and responsiveness of the charter school staff. In particular, they commented on the teachers' willingness to build relationships with the students and their families. Parents appreciated this extra effort. A parent reported:

My son works with a speech teacher and I really like that she [speech teacher] not only works with him on speech, but she has built a relationship with him [student with a disability].

Parents reported that they wanted to know what their child was doing in class, and often their children and previously attended school personnel were reluctant to give information. However, clear communication did exist in the charter school. In particular, progress reports were an important piece in the effective communication between school and home. Through these extensive and thorough progress reports, the teachers communicated to parents that the school personnel understood the children and their individual needs. One parent remarked:

The progress reports that they [charter school teachers] sent out are so thorough and so detailed. It's [progress reports] very nice, and it just seems like the teachers really get to know each student. This [type of communication] makes for a nice community.

Not only were the special education teachers very accessible, but participants also remarked on the willingness of the general education teachers to work with their son or daughter with a disability. These teachers seemed prepared to go the extra mile to help their child. One participant said:

It just seems like they [charter school's general education teachers] really get to know the students individually and do a lot of tapering to what their [students with disabilities] needs are. They [charter school's general education teachers] have all been very pleasant, helpful, and willing. It seems like there are quite a few of them [charter school's general education teachers] that go above and beyond.

Frequent staff turnover. A negative perception of the participants was the theme of constant changes within the charter school faculty and administration due to staff leaving to take positions in other schools. Specifically, the changes within the special education teaching staff were viewed as negative. A participant reported:

We [my child and our family] are on our fourth special education teacher, now. In four years! That's a new teacher each year.

This lack of continuity, especially when rapport was built between a special education teacher and student, was disheartening to the participants.

School's change in focus. Another negative theme was the frustration with the new administration's change in direction in recent years. It seems that the charter school started out committed to very small classroom sizes; however, the school has been growing thus each class has added more students. Participants were negative about this new growth.

With this change from a small school to a larger school, the structure of the classes also seemed to change its focus. Currently, the students in special education receive support only in academic subject areas, while other non-academic areas such as study and organizational skills are being ignored. Because of this change in the school's academic focus, parents expressed concern that students with disabilities were not receiving the individualized attention that was a key component to their student's previous academic success. During an interview, one parent stated:

I don't feel like he [student with a disability] is getting the individual attention that he got before [this academic change and growth period] and they [charter school staff] are not helping him [student with a disability] like they did before [this change] to get through the struggles that he is having now.

Inquiry #3

This question asked interviewees to compare the special education services provided at the charter school to those offered at the traditional area public school previously attended by their child. Some parents were unable to comment because special education services were not provided for their child at the traditional area public school. Other participants noted differences in, a) the flexibility and accessibility of the staff at the charter school, and b) school size.

Flexibility and accessibility of school staff. Parents noted that there was a feeling of partnership with the charter school's teachers and the home. They reported feeling comfortable discussing their child with staff at the charter school and that the staff was flexible and willing to make changes in the classroom that would benefit the student with a disability. While discussing the flexibility of the staff, a parent stated:

The charter school staff is much more flexible [than former traditional area public school] ... and it seems more of an open door policy at this school [the charter school].

In addition, the charter school teachers were willing to listen and collaborate with the parents. Parents reported that teachers at the charter school were not intimidated by the parents, or treated the parents as if they had limited knowledge about education. Instead, the charter school teacher's were willing to listen and encourage parents to be a part of the education team. One parent commented:

If I come up with ideas, if I read an article, or if I made suggestions, she [the special education teacher at the charter school] really listened to me.

Size of school. Even though the school was growing, the parents repeatedly commented that the smaller class size had a positive effect on their children with disabilities. It seems that even though the school was getting bigger, the classroom numbers and overall number of pupils attending this charter school were still smaller than the traditional area public school setting. A participant said:

I don't think he [child with a disability] would be better off going to [the traditional area public school] because the bigger schools are a big piece in his emotional issue and his anxiety. He would fall apart. He wouldn't handle it. He's got a social position at the charter school. He is somebody. It's a small school. He's well liked and well received. If he went to a large school, like [his traditional area public school], he would be so lost.

Many parents noted that the charter school's smaller class sizes lead to a better sense of community. The smaller classes seemed to help students

be comfortable in the environment and reduced anxiety when changes or movements are made between school buildings, grade levels, and different teachers. One parent reported:

My kids are known. Once they have been there for a couple of years, they [the students] are pretty well known by the majority of the staff. I don't know exactly how that works, but people [staff at the charter school] get to know the students' names like when they [elementary students] go over to the big [high school and middle school] building for lunch. Because of this, the transition from fifth grade to the middle school was seamless for my son [with a disability].

Discussion

Interviews were conducted with parents of children with disabilities about their perceptions of charter schools and why they chose a charter school to educate their child. Several themes emerged. Positive themes included the relatively small size of the school, perceived academic excellence, willingness to provide services and addressing disability areas, responsiveness of the staff, and clear communication between school and home. Negative themes involved faculty turnover and change of focus in the school. Each of these themes will be discussed below.

Size of School

Based on participants' responses, school size played a major role in the parents' decision to change from a traditional area public school to the charter school. It seems that smaller school size was viewed positively.

Parents believed that the smaller size allowed students to receive more individual attention than in the larger traditional area public school where class sizes are determined by the number of students residing within the school boundaries. This belief is supported by research. Cushman (2000) found that the small size and tight-knit structure of school communities allow teachers to give increased individualized attention to students and afford them the ability to deal faster with problems or concerns. This, in turn, enables staff to start work early to look at a child's special needs and all possible interventions. To be a contributing and productive student, a young person must feel part of the school; this belonging brings allegiance, willingness to contribute and work

towards improvement, and to defend the regulations of the school (Meier, 1992; Sommers, 1997).

Because the interviewees reported that they liked the smaller school atmosphere, it is not surprising to learn about their dissatisfaction and concern to the reported new, rapid growth of the school. This growth was viewed as destroying the school's special atmosphere created by the school's small size.

Perceived Academic Excellence

Parents reported that they believed that the charter school had better academics and higher standards than the traditional area public schools. Further, the curriculum at the charter school was perceived to be rigorous and challenging. The high expectations were perceived to encourage students to strive for their best. Thus, parents reported that their children thrived in this atmosphere and that attaining academic excellence became students' personal goals.

Bomotti (1996) similarly found that parents believed that charter schools provide higher academic standards and greater accountability for a student's learning. Sudetic (2001) reported similar results when examining charter schools in three different states. However, parents' enthusiasm for the curriculum at the charter schools did not necessarily mean improved student performance when compared to traditional area public schools (Sudetic, 2001). Choy and colleagues (1997) reported that parents of students who were very satisfied with the academic standards of their child's school were more satisfied in chosen schools than in traditional area public schools. One might wonder if this perception of academic excellence is tied to the right for the parent to choose a school instead of being mandated to a specific local school.

Addressing Disability Area

Parents were pleased with the charter school's immediacy in responding to their child's needs. While the traditional area public schools seemed slow to respond, the charter school was willing to start addressing perceived needs before these needs became larger problems. In general, finding a school that meets a child's special educational needs is an important factor when choosing a school (Jenkinson, 1998). One might wonder whether, if the traditional area public school had responded quickly and appropriately to the immediate needs

of the students, the switch to the charter school would have taken place or been needed.

Staff Responsiveness

Interviewees commented about the extra effort of the charter school's staff in building relationships with students, emphasizing that this extra effort improved their child's education. Participants believed that because of the small school size, the charter school's faculty was more willing to make personal relationships with the students and their families. Participants reported that this personal attention was not found in the larger traditional area public school system. This is an important finding. Rogers (1992) pointed out that for optimum learning to take place, students must be known by their teachers. To instruct properly, a teacher must know his or her students well, be aware of each student's abilities and circumstances, and be able to clearly communicate with parents while treating the child fairly and with respect (Rich, 1998; Rogers, 1992). No matter what the advantages of small schools are over large ones in providing quality education for children, all types of schools must be staffed by caring competent teachers and administrators (Sommers, 1997).

Communication

The communication between parents and teachers seemed to be more prevalent and ongoing at the charter school. Specifically, parents reported that the charter school's teachers took time to communicate with them regularly and listen to their concerns. This is an important finding since keeping parents involved in their child's education is of primary importance (Lucyshyn, Dunlap, & Albin, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Webster-Stratton, 1998) and can be effectively accomplished through thoughtful and meaningful communication between school and home. Jenkinson (1998) reported that parents believe that strong parent-teacher communication is the number one reason for choosing a school. The practice of good communication between home and school is also important because helping children learn more at home is important to improving their school performance (Walberg, 1984; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Also, IDEIA requires schools to collaborate and communicate with parents and students with disabilities in the design and implementation of special education services (IDEIA, 2004; Patterson, 2005).

Faculty Turnover

The changes within the faculty raised concerns among interviewees that their children were not receiving the best education possible because of the high teacher turnover rate at the charter school. The perception was that as soon as a charter school teacher seemed to get to know a student well, this teacher moved on to a different position at another school and the process had to start all over again.

Teacher turnover has long been a concern in both special education and general education because it represents instability in the teaching force and raises the prospect of shortages of qualified replacement teachers (Boe, Bottitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1997). Teacher turnover can also be associated with factors such as teacher job dissatisfaction and teachers pursuing better jobs or other careers (Han & Rossmiller, 2004; Ingersoll, 2001).

Change of Focus

The participants also noted dissatisfaction with the change within the charter school's administration, which they believed caused a shift in focus from the school's original intent. At the time of the interviews, more emphasis was placed on increasing the charter school's size and parents felt this had impacted their children's education. In particular, changes to the charter school had caused tension among parents whose students receive special services. The focus of the charter school has shifted closer to that of the traditional area public school, a focus that parents had intended to leave behind.

Also, changes in the charter school's course offerings left parents disgruntled, feeling that as a result of the restructuring of the program, the needs of students with disabilities were no longer being met to their fullest capacity. Although students still received services in core academic subjects, peripheral classes (such as study skills) were no longer offered. It was these types of classes that parents appreciated because they felt their children were gaining skills necessary for success in the core classes.

Limitations of the Study

This study incorporated qualitative research to study why parents of children with disabilities decide to send their son or daughter to charter schools. Despite some important findings, some limitations deserve mention.

First, the generalizability of the findings is limited because of the nature of the participant sample. That is, the parents whose perceptions were sought constitute a limited group and may not be representative of all the individuals who choose charter schools for their students with disabilities. Further, social desirability is a concern when using interviews in research. That is, some participants may respond to questions based on what they perceive is expected of them or what they deem to be the socially or politically correct response (Patton, 1990). Thus, although participation was voluntary, the validity of the findings may be limited by the bias inherent in the data-collection methods used. Third, the study only focused on one specific charter school located in the midwest. Therefore, is not possible to conclude what influenced parents of children with disabilities to switch to a charter school in a different area. In addition, the participating charter school was small in size; hence results might have been different in larger charter schools.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

The study provides new information with regard to the perceptions of parents of children with disabilities and why they choose a particular type of school for their son or daughter. Parents appreciated a small sized school, high academic standards, rigorous curriculum, staff willing to provide services while addressing the student's disabilities, and immediate communication. Concerns of parents include high faculty turnover rates in special education as well as change in specific educational focus.

Many unanswered questions remain. Future research is needed to investigate the perceptions of various other individuals who chose different types (private, charter, traditional area public) of schools for their children. Comparisons of attitudes and reasons could provide important information relative to what parents deem important in schools for their children with disabilities. In addition, it would be interesting to question parents who moved their son or daughter from a charter school back to a traditional area public school. Research can also be gathered on why the teacher turnover rate is high at the charter school and if other charter schools or traditional area public schools have similar turnover rates. Reasons for the teachers leaving could shed new information concerning the charter schools.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to survey parents from larger charter schools to determine if similar outcomes occur. More information could be

gleaned by interviewing parents from a smaller traditional area public school. By combining these two types of interviews, the researchers can determine whether parents like the philosophy of the charter schools or the specific small size of a school--whether this school was a charter or traditional area public school.

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Appendix

1. How old is your son or daughter? What is your son or daughter's primary disability?
2. You chose to go to this charter school instead of an area public school or private school.
3. Which school did your son or daughter previously attend? How long did he/she attend this former school?
4. There are many important reasons why parents decide to transfer their child to a charter school. What are the reasons that you decided to make this switch?
5. What do you appreciate or like about this charter school's services for special education?
6. How do the special education services provided at the charter school compare to the school your son/daughter previously attended?
7. Any other comments?