

4-2015

# A Closer Look at Rochester Charter School A: Factors that Contribute to the School's High Performing Status

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### Recommended Citation

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The purpose of this study is to present Rochester Charter School A as a high performing school who's neighboring schools are currently in a state of emergency. Rochester Charter School A is located in a low socio-economic area where the public school district is failing. This study revealed some of the cultural norms at Rochester Charter School A and how they are able to overcome the current struggle of closing the achievement gap. It also exposed some of Rochester Charter School A's best practices that contribute to their students achievement, like longer school days and a longer school year, frequent and consistent teacher observation and feedback, and school-wide systems and routines.

**Document Type**

Thesis

**Degree Name**

MS in Special Education

**Department**

Education

**First Supervisor**

Susan Schultz

**Subject Categories**

Education

**A Closer Look at Rochester Charter School A:  
Factors that Contribute to the School's High Performing Status**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
M.S. Special Education

Supervised by  
Dr. Susan M. Schultz

School of Education  
St. John Fisher College

April 2015

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to present Rochester Charter School A as a high performing school who's neighboring schools are currently in a state of emergency. Rochester Charter School A is located in a low socio-economic area where the public school district is failing. This study revealed some of the cultural norms at Rochester Charter School A and how they are able to overcome the current struggle of closing the achievement gap. It also exposed some of Rochester Charter School A's best practices that contribute to their students achievement, like longer school days and a longer school year, frequent and consistent teacher observation and feedback, and school-wide systems and routines.

Cities across the United States are experiencing high poverty rates and a failing education system. It is becoming an epidemic and currently a hot topic in modern day politics. It is disheartening and has people questioning what could be done to fix this national problem and ultimately provide a future for the children who were dealt a bad hand. The issue of poverty and failing schools hits close to home for those whom reside within the city boundaries of Rochester, New York. In addition to the majority of the city's residents having a low socio-economic status, the city's public school district is not making adequate yearly progress and providing a disservice to its residents. According to the results from the grades 3-8 spring 2014 New York State assessments only 5% of students demonstrated basic proficiency in the area of English Language Arts and 6% of students demonstrated basic proficiency in the area of Mathematics. The results reveal evidence that the city schools are not providing their students with the foundation they will need to succeed post high school, if they do indeed graduate from high school.

Over the past five years, there has been a boom in charter schools opening in Rochester, New York in hopes of providing a better quality education to its city's residents. Charter schools are an innovative approach to public education. They are independent from state laws and regulations; therefore, more able to experiment with alternative curricula, pedagogical methods, and different ways of hiring and training teachers. Charter schools are publically funded and held accountable for improved student achievement and upholding the promises made in their charters. The "charter", granted from the state, is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, students served, performance goals, and methods of assessment. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools may be shut down by their authorizers for poor performance. Nearly two decades after the establishment of the first charter schools, debate continues over whether they are more or less effective than conventional public schools in

raising student achievement; therefore, shrinking the achievement gap surrounding socio-economic status.

In my study, I closely examined one particular charter school in Rochester, New York, Rochester Charter School A. I chose this school for my study, because of its label as a high performing school. Rochester Charter School A has been open for five years and is currently thriving and providing their students, who they refer to as scholars, with a high quality education; therefore, providing them with a bright future. I surveyed current Rochester Charter School A employees in hopes of exposing what contributes to the school's high performing status. I asked questions that were privy to the school's culture and uncovered some differences between public school educators and Rochester Charter School A educators that may contribute to the success that is being celebrated within Rochester Charter School A.

The results of this study exemplify Rochester Charter School A's culture and provide insight into what makes the school flourish. The data reveals evidence of teacher dedication and the "whatever it takes" attitude their educators embody in hopes of changing history by providing students who come from low-income areas with quality education to further their future and become a successful member of society. The data should be shared with other charter schools, as well as, public school districts, that are also providing an education to children coming from high poverty areas, so they are aware of some systems that are currently working to increase student achievement and ultimately shrink the achievement gap. It is important for schools to implement school-wide systems and routines in order to provide structure. A highly structured learning environment leads to greater student achievement.

### **Research Stance**

As an educator at Rochester Charter School A, I feel as though I have won the lottery. I love working what I do and I love the population whom I work with. We come together, as a team, with a common end goal in mind; closing the achievement gap. We work to close the achievement gap a little more each day and prepare low-income students to graduate from college. Even at the Kindergarten level, I am making a commit to ensure my students are one step closer to college. My students understand that they work hard with the end goal in mind of graduating from college and becoming a successful member of society. Along the way, we celebrate the tenacious effort that leads to true achievement – and ultimately, to a college diploma. As our school cheer states, one school, one vision, together we are on a mission.

### **Purpose**

The researcher's background of teaching at a charter school inevitably prompted the curiosity of wanting to know more. The researcher wanted to dive deep into the culture at her charter school and how school's teachers feel about some of the cultural norms at Rochester Charter School A. The purpose of this study is to examine Rochester Charter School A's culture i.e. longer work days/weeks, constant observation and feedback, professional development, school wide systems and routine including a behavior system, and parent communication.

### **Design & Data Collection**

Utilizing an internet application called "Qualtrics," an anonymous survey was sent to approximately twenty staff members at a Charter School in Rochester, New York; after reception of approval from the Instructional Review Board (IRB). Surveys are relatively inexpensive, or free of charge, to administer and they allow the respondent to fill it out at their own convenience. Due to it being the end of the school year, which is an extremely busy and stressful time for teachers, it was ideal to utilize an electronic manner in which to collect responses because staff

members are able to submit responses on computers or cell phones which assures a bounty of responses.

### **Participant Population**

One charter school, grades K-4, was chosen to participate in completion of this survey. The school serves approximately four hundred forty four students who reside in the city of Rochester, New York. There are approximately sixty staff members. The fifteen respondents for this study range in their job titles and have different roles within the building. After receiving permission from the school Principal to survey fifteen staff members, respondents were randomly selected by picking names out of a hat. The fifteen staff members were sent an e-mail over the internet with a request to complete the anonymous survey. In being employed within the school that was being surveyed, the researcher had access to e-mail for all employees. Respondents were given three weeks to complete the survey. All fifteen respondents completed the survey in its entirety.

### **Data Analysis**

The survey that had been given to respondents had two types of questions, response and scale questions. The data for each question was analyzed in two different manners, percentages and common categorical themes. Questions that required a written response were reviewed and common themes were detected, which created categories in which each respondent's answers were tallied. The researcher's categorical themes were then weighed out as percentages using a mathematical computation. The remaining questions that allowed respondents to choose an answer on a scale 1-10, were easily analyzed and converted into percentages by means of Qualtric's website that was used to create the survey.

The first three questions of the survey asked questions related to the number of hours staff members typically work on a day-to-day and weekly basis. A Rochester Charter School A teacher's contract states that their workday is Monday through Friday 7:00am – 4:45pm. That means that teachers must be in the building during that time frame; unless there are special circumstances i.e. late arrival/early departures due to childcare obligations, which applies to one of the respondents from the study. One respondent has permission to arrive by 7:15am due to family and childcare obligations.

Of the fifteen staff members who were surveyed, 33% of respondents arrive to work at or before 6:30am, 40% arrive between 6:31am – 6:45am, 20% arrive between 6:46am – 7:00am, and 7% (one respondent) arrives after 7:00am. When asked what time they typically leave work the majority of respondents, 47%, reported they typically leave work between 5:00pm – 5:15pm. Of the remaining respondents, 20% reported typically leaving work at 4:45pm when their contracted time was up, 20% reported typically leaving work between 5:16pm-6:00pm, and 7% (one respondent) reported typically leaving work at 6:30pm.

When asked how many total hours their typical workweek consists of, respondents answered varied from fifty hours to eighty hours. The majority of respondents, 80%, reported that they typically work 50-55 hours per week. 7% (one respondent) reported working 60 hours per week, 7% (one respondent) reported working 62 hours per week and 7% (one respondent) reported working 80 hours per week.

Questions four through six on the survey addressed teacher observation and feedback and knowing one's strengths and weaknesses as an educator. 100% of respondents replied with "yes" when asked if they know their strengths and weaknesses. 67% of respondents feel they are provided with adequate observation and feedback from administration and coaches while 33%

feel they are not provided with adequate observation and feedback. Out of the 67% of respondents that answered “yes” to receiving adequate observation and feedback, 100% of them explained that they receive frequent observations, including but limited to video taping, and are regularly given feedback to follow up the observations.

Some respondents reported having a coach who formally observes their teaching regularly and provides them with feedback including strengths, and constructive criticism. Other respondents reported receiving shout outs from administration for shining teaching moments. Many respondents discussed having teaching goals and action steps to meeting those goals. Of the 67% respondents who feel as though they receive adequate observation and feedback, 50% reported receiving weekly observations and feedback from a coach or administrator, 30% reported receiving biweekly observations and feedback from a coach or administrator, 10% reported receiving monthly observations and feedback from a coach or administrator, and 10% reported they receive “frequent” observation and feedback, not giving a specific time stamp.

Rochester Charter School A employees are required to attend summer professional development starting August 1<sup>st</sup> leading up to the first day of school, which is typically the third week in August, from 8:00am – 4:00pm daily and sometimes 2-3 day development trainings that require travel to another city like, Syracuse, Albany and Brooklyn. In addition to summer professional development, the school schedule has weekly allotted time for professional development. Every Wednesday the school day ends earlier, at 1:45pm, and Rochester Charter School A staff has professional development from 2:30pm – 4:45pm. On question seven of the survey, respondents were asked if they feel as though they receive adequate and relevant professional development, 93% replied “yes.” 7% (one respondent) replied with “no,” stating, “the network does not provide enough not enough music teacher training.”

Respondents who replied “yes” were asked to explain why they feel that professional development is adequate and relevant. Responses attended to the weekly professional development staff receives and how it is targeted and could be put into action the following day. Some respondents discussed how professional development can be school wide or grade level focused while others discussed how it could be individually focused. One respondent included how professional development not only provides information regarding specific instruction techniques but also allows for practice of the skill. 100% of respondents discussed how professional development improves the school as a whole by addressing targeted areas of need and finding ways to improve them.

The school has in place many school wide systems and routines ranging from the way arrival and dismissal are run, silent lunch, behavioral expectations including the way students walk in the hallway and sit in the classroom, and a behavior system including checks next to a student’s name and a color chart. Staff receives training on these systems and routines at summer professional development and throughout the year during weekly professional development. The survey asked respondents if they feel supported to carry out the school wide systems and routines; 100% of respondents replied with, “yes” they feel supported. When asked to explain their answer, several respondents, 47%, offered specific titles of school personnel who help them feel supported i.e. administrators, coaches, the school’s deans, veteran teachers, co-teachers and grade level chairs. Respondent 2 wrote, “Yes. I have been supported within systems and routines. My coach has pushed me to tighten up each routine in my classroom. The scholars strive off of structure.” 7% (one respondent) wrote that as the Dean of Students, he is provided with supported by the other deans and as well as provides support to classroom teachers when it comes to carrying out the behavior systems and routines.

Respondents discussed the school-wide system being uniform so that there is a lot of accountability for making sure management systems are uniform and are being carried out appropriately. Many respondents, 47%, alluded to all staff working as team and being on the same page when it comes to managing student behavior. Respondent 4 wrote, “Since everyone follows the same behavior plan there is a school wide set of expectations upheld by all and it also allows the consequences to be predictable.”

Questions nine through twelve were scaled questions based on a scale of one to ten, with ten being positive. Questions nine and ten asked questions related to the respondents’ feeling of happiness when working, and how they viewed overall staff morale.

#	Question	Min Value	Max Value	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Responses
9	I am happy to come to work every day.	4.00	10.00	6.87	1.88	15
10	How would you rate staff morale?	2.00	10.00	5.87	2.36	15

The majority of respondents, 80%, ranked their happiness when coming to work everyday between five and nine on a ten-point scale with the average happiness being a seven out of ten. There were three outliers who reported their happiness levels at four, ten and ten. The majority of respondents, 87%, ranked staff morale between four and eight on a ten-point scale with the average staff morale score of a six. There were two outliers; one ranking staff morale at a two and other at a ten.

Rochester Charter School A has an operations team that consists of three staff members who are on site. Their job consists of making sure all school operations are running smoothly

including making sure classroom teachers and additional personnel have the resources necessary to do their job to the best of their ability. Question eleven asked respondents to rank their ability to get the supplies and resources they need on a ten-point scale.

#	Answer	Min Value	Max Value	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Responses
11	I am able to get the supplies and resources that I need	6.00	10.00	8.80	1.08	15

Most respondents, 87%, ranked their ability to obtain proper supplies and resources between an eight and a ten on a ten-point scale. There were two outliers, 13%, who ranked their ability to obtain supplies and resources at a six out of ten.

Classroom teachers are mandated to make biweekly check in phone calls to all parents of students in their class providing them with an academic update, school information, behavioral updates, etc... The deans are required to call parents any time a student is sent to their office to update them on whatever the situation might be. Administrators are also required to call parents during the final academic quarter whose child is at risk for retention, weekly. Students all have a behavior sheet in their binder that is sent home daily reporting the child's behavior color for that day (green, yellow, or red) and requires a signature from a parent. There is also a space for comments to be recorded or can serve as communication between the parents and teacher. Respondents were asked to rate how they feel their parent interaction is on a ten-point scale. Only fourteen out of fifteen respondents answered the question.

#	Answer	Min Value	Max Value	Average Value	Standard Deviation	Responses
12	How would you rate parent interaction?	5.00	9.00	6.93	1.27	14

71% of respondents ranked parent interaction between a six and an eight on a ten-point scale. There were four outliers that did not fall within the standard deviation of the average. Two respondents, 14%, ranked parent interaction at five out of ten and two respondents, 14%, ranked parent interaction at nine out of ten.

### **Discussion**

I chose to take a closer at a Rochester Charter School A, because what they are currently doing is working. Rochester Charter School A is thriving in comparison to the city's public school district, Rochester City School District, which is currently in a state of emergency. Last spring Rochester Charter School A's 2014 New York State test scores revealed they were only a few points away from nearby suburban district's scores, like Pittsford, Penfield and Brighton. The population of students at Rochester Charter School A and Rochester City School District are the same. Their students come from the same zip code, where the current poverty rate is 31%, and nearly all of their students come from low-income families (Rochester 5th Poorest City in U.S., 2014).

A child is granted admission to Rochester Charter School A using a lottery system. Any citizen residing within the city of Rochester can sign their child up to be in a lottery for Rochester Charter School A. Without having any background information on the children, except knowing they live within the city boundaries, names are randomly selected to fill the grades; each grade has ninety spots. Therefore, every year ninety names are drawn in the spring for the

upcoming Kindergarten class. When there are vacancies amongst any grade, students are pulled from the wait list. As an educator at Rochester Charter School A, I believe the students, who are lucky enough for their name to be pulled from the pool of hopeful Rochester residents, are receiving something huge; a quality education that places them on a path heading to college.

There must be several factors that contribute to the charter school's achievement, but what might those factors be? How can two students living in the same zip code be receiving two very different educations? Sometimes one receives a quality education similar to their peers who reside in the suburbs, and one receives their education from a failing district.

Rochester Charter School A's approach to education is structure based learning along with intentional practices and teaching. Everything that occurs at the school has a purpose. From silent launch to the way the students walk in the hallway. The school operates using rigid systems and routines to maximize learning time, which leads to the ultimate goal of creating lifelong learners and college bound scholars.

Rochester Charter School A has longer school days and a longer school year than public schools. Rochester Charter School A's school day is from 7:00am-4:00pm and their school year typically begins the third week of August and wraps up the last day of June whenever that may fall. The charter organization believes that students should have a longer school day and minimal summer vacation to optimize student learning. The survey, participants received for this study, asked respondents to reflect on what their typical workweek looks like.

The majority of respondents stated that they arrive to school between the hours of 6:31am and 6:45am and the majority stated they leave work between 5:00pm and 5:15pm. Taking the average arrival time and average departure time into account, Rochester Charter School A staff members are at work for roughly 10.5 hours per day. Keep in mind, that does not take into

account any work done outside of the building i.e. home, at coffee shops, etc... That work hours statistic aligns perfectly with the results from the following question on the survey. It stated, “How many hours is your typical work week?” The majority of respondents stated that their typical workweek ranged from 50 to 55 hours per week, which can be proven given the fact that most staff members are in the building for about 10.5 hours per day.

There are 52 weeks in a calendar year; after factoring in school breaks and the month of July as summer vacation, Rochester Charter School A employees work roughly 42 weeks out of the year. Therefore, their total yearly work hours clock in at 2,205 hours per year. Local public schools have the same school breaks as Rochester Charter School A, however their summer vacation is nearly twice as long, usually around ten weeks. For that reason, local public school employees work around 37 weeks per year. Since this study did not survey employees from local public schools, the average amount of hours they work in a typical workweek is unknown. In spite of this, if they work the same amount of hours as Rochester Charter School A employees, between 50 to 55 hours per week, public school employees would work roughly 1,942 hours per year. However, with their school day being shorter, it is unlikely they are working on site for 50 to 55 hours per week.

The difference in teachers yearly work hours at Rochester Charter School A and public school teachers could be one contributing factor as to why Rochester Charter School A is outperforming their public school district. The assumption could be made that the charter organization’s belief in longer school days and a longer school year could positively affect student achievement based on the evidence of last year’s New York State test scores. The following conclusion can be made; as the number of hours teachers are “clocked in” increases, student achievement could also increase.

In today's society, there is often a lot of pressure put on teachers, Charter teachers, private teachers, public school teachers, etc... for their students to succeed, meaning receiving high scores on high stakes tests. There is a fear of their scores not reaching the benchmark, and have their teaching reputation and status could be tainted. Education has always been a state issue when it comes to government. Some states are going as far as changing state legislative to require teachers to all have a public score rating their ability to teach. Low test scores could significantly impact a teacher's score. However, those jurisdictions only apply to public school teachers.

Charter school organizations are in charge of managing their own teacher reviews and renewal process. The charter organization that operates Rochester Charter School A requires frequent observation and feedback and does not follow a tenure system. Teachers' contracts are up for review and renewal every year. Rochester Charter School A places great value on observation and feedback, because they believe that teacher's awareness of their strengths and weaknesses as an educator could lead to increased student achievement. If teachers have goals for themselves as educators, their students will benefit.

This study examined professional development and teacher observation and feedback within Rochester Charter School A. A common trend amongst the respondents was that they seem to know their strengths and weaknesses as an educator. The majority of the respondents included their frequent meetings with their coaches in regards to improving their teaching. The survey question regarding knowing one's strengths and weaknesses was to gauge the mindset of educators at Rochester Charter School A. Teachers who are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, incorporate what they know they need to work on and keep doing what they excel at into their teaching everyday.

Reflection is a portion of teaching that is often overlooked. However, self-reflection is incredibly important when it comes to educating others. Teachers who regularly reflect on their teaching, what is going well and what could go better, are continuing to better themselves as educators. Self-reflection is a major component of observation and feedback meetings at Rochester Charter School A. When a teacher and their observation and feedback coach have a meeting the coach starts the conversation with asking the teacher how they think the lesson that was observed went. This question prompts the teacher to reflect on what went well and what could have gone better. After self-reflecting, the coach will begin talking about their beliefs on what the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson. The meeting concludes with the coach and the teacher discussing possible goals for the teacher and action steps to reach their goal.

Rochester Charter School A teachers always have a goal they are working on and an action plan to reach their goal. According to the survey, the majority of respondents feel they receive adequate observation and feedback. They are required to have frequent observation and feedback meetings, typically around every two weeks, which inevitably means their teaching is being observed regularly and frequently. In the survey, respondents discussed being observed by their coach as well as being video taped regularly. On question six, Respondent 7 stated, “we meet once a week to discuss her (the coaches) observations. I even had the chance to video tape one of my lessons so we could both watch it and discuss my strengths and weaknesses.” Rochester Charter School A teachers must have the personality trait of being able to consistently receive constructive criticism and feedback and apply it to their practice without letting it get them down. They understand that knowing their weaknesses could only allow them to better their teaching. The school’s highly constructive environment could be something that ultimately accelerates student achievement.

When asked about observation and feedback, 87% of respondents mentioned weekly professional development. The staff at Rochester Charter School A gathers every Wednesday from 2:30pm to 4:45pm. The students have early dismissal on those days and the staff meets for what they refer to as professional development. Professional development is a time when staff comes together with the intention of improving their school by increasing student achievement. Whether it is by practicing a teaching strategy or brainstorming ways to increase rigor, Rochester Charter School A staff work together to find ways to benefit student achievement and quickly implement what is learned from professional development to the classroom the following day.

Charter schools are lucky to have more flexibility than public schools because they are not bound by all state regulations. This allows them the time to have weekly professional development. Setting aside two plus hours every week to better the school is something that Rochester Charter School A is fortunate to have and differentiates them from public schools. When question seven on the survey asked, “Do you feel you are receiving adequate and relevant professional development? Please explain.” Respondent 8 wrote, “Yes! Before coming to (Rochestest Charter School A) I would receive professional development once every couple of months. Here at uncommon I receive professional development once a week.” Typical public schools do not have time in their weekly schedules to dedicate to professional development. Therefore, the allotted time out of the weekly schedule for professional development could be one reason impacting Rochester Charter School A’s high performing status. The school is constantly bettering itself by bettering its teachers.

An overarching Charter Management Organization (CMO) operates Rochester Charter School A. That CMO requires all of their 42 schools to have similar, if not identical, systems and routines including, a school wide behavior management systems. The CMO believes in

predictability and a highly structured learning environment, because structure leads to more time spent on task and minimal time spent dealing with non-academic related issues like, classroom behaviors. Staff receives extensive training, typically during their summer professional development, to learn the ins and outs of the systems and routines.

All 42 schools within the CMO network believe in having high expectations for their students in regards to academics as well as behavior. Educators within the network believe that if the bar is set high, students will rise to the occasion. With that being said, Rochester Charter School A provides a rigorous curriculum that requires students to rise to the occasion and reach their full potential as a learner. Although the curriculum and behavioral expectations can be challenging and asks lot of the students, Rochester Charter School A students know that is it okay to struggle, because without the struggle they would not know the overwhelming feeling of accomplishment that comes with achievement.

Rochester Charter School A holds weekly school meetings where all students and teachers are in one location for thirty minutes. These meetings often consist of building school spirit by recognizing how hard the students work. During one of the school meetings, in January 2015, school administrators addressed the feeling of struggle by creating an interactive performance where they built up how everyone struggles, but how we all must overcome struggle in order to succeed.

Rochester Charter School A students are required to walk a certain way in the hallway (HALL), sit a certain way at their desk and on the carpet (STAR), and follow a specific behavior management system. The acronym HALL stands for, Hands are flat, All eyes forward, Legs moving safely, and Lips are zipped. While walking in HALL, students are also required to walk in taped boxes, or on taped lines to ensure safe and smooth transitions. Minimizing transition

time, leads to more time spent on academics. The acronym STAR stands for, Sit up straight, Track the speaker, Ask and answer questions, and Respect. When a child is sitting in STAR they have their hands folded in their lap or folded on their desk. As part of STAR, students are required to always be tracking the speaker, meaning to always have their eyes on the person who is talking, whether it be the teacher or their peers. Rochester Charter School A believes in students tracking the speaker, because it encourages active listening.

When students are not doing what is asked of them, or behaving inappropriately they receive a check. Rochester Charter School A uses a color system along with a check system to encourage appropriate student behavior. Student's behavior is reported home daily by using color terms, green meaning the child had an excellent day, yellow meaning the child had a somewhat tough day with some misbehaviors, and red meaning the child had an extremely hard time following directions and needed several reminders. The behavior system is fluid, which means a child can go from red back to yellow and possibly back to green. Checks can be erased if a student fixes what he or she received the initial check for.

A student can receive three checks and still go home on green. When the student receives a fourth check, their color is changed to yellow and they can receive two additional checks to remain on yellow. When a student receives a total of seven checks, their color is changed to red. When a student is on yellow they lose half of their choice time, which is an allotted time for fun at the end of the day. When a student is on red, they lose all of their choice time. Students who consistently go home on green earn prizes like, a school tie/headband, or a school scarf. The special items are handed out during a school wide assembly where students are individually recognized. This serves as a great incentive for students who struggle to be on green.

In every school there are students who can be behaviorally challenging. Rochester Charter School A uses a three-tiered system for handling these cases. The third tier being the child is sent to the dean's office where the child receives an appropriate consequence for their behavior and typically involves a phone call home. Their consequence can be anything from in/out of school suspension to redoing an assignment to writing an apology letter to their teacher. During a student's visit to the dean's office students discuss their actions that lead up to the send out and the action steps they will take to ensure a send out does not happen again. After visiting the dean's office, the student returns to class with a slip of paper that states the child's next action step. The teacher is required to greet the child and encourage he/she to "bounce back," which is a term used by Rochester Charter School A educators referring to positively changing one's behavior.

Rochester Charter School A has high expectations for their students, but also has incredibly high expectations for their staff. In order for the school's systems and routines to be successful, staff must execute them properly. The survey asked respondents to reflect on the school's systems and routines and whether or not they feel supported to carry them out. 100% of respondents stated they do indeed feel supported to carry them out. Many respondents spoke of the training they receive as well as the staff personnel they work with. Respondent 1 stated, "Yes- I have been given adequate training for systems and routines and am given feedback if needed." Respondent 9 stated, "I definitely feel supported whether it be from my co teacher, grade level team mates, grade level chair, the ops team or our new principal." The comradery at the school was very evident based on the responses to this question. In addition to the intricate systems and routines of the school, the support the teachers receive to carry out the systems could very well be what sets this school apart from other schools and lead to success.

The expectations put on teachers at Rochester Charter School A could be lead to pressure and anxiety, which is why this study also took a deeper look at the staff's happiness and staff morale. Questions nine and ten on the survey asked respondents to use a scale of one to ten, which ten being positive, to rate their overall happiness when coming to work and their opinion of staff morale. Based on the results of the survey, the average level of happiness respondents feel when coming to work is a seven and staff morale is around a six. Therefore, I believe there is room for growth in the area of happiness with one's job and staff morale.

I was not surprised by these two items being areas of improvement because of the demands that Rochester Charter School A teachers feel on a day to day basis from longer work hours, to their teaching being constantly reviewed to carrying out intricate systems and routines, could be what has led to some feeling unhappy; therefore, lowering staff morale. For example, longer work hours lead to less time spent at home with their family or weekly observation and feedback meetings have led to stress to execute flawless lessons. Whatever the trigger may be, Rochester Charter School A teachers could be feeling stress.

The elimination of stress could increase happiness and overall staff morale. However, eliminating what is set in stone by the CMO, like frequent observation and feedback, and longer workdays, is not feasible. Therefore, Rochester Charter School A employees may find happiness in more incentives or work related perks. One way to increase happiness and staff morale could for the school to plan events for employees, like a dinner out at a restaurant or providing a meal once a week.

Question eleven on the survey asked respondents to use a ten point scale, with ten being positive, to rate their ability to access supplies. I was not surprised by the average being close to a nine out of ten, because from my experience I have never had any issues trying to access

supplies. Rochester Charter School A has a large supply room teachers can access at any point. It contains classroom supplies such as, pencils, erasers, expo markers, charter paper, scissors, tape, folders, etc... Teachers are allowed to take supplies as needed. If there are any special requests teachers are asked to email the operations team and typically the operations team is able to get whatever supplies may be needed. The operations team also takes care of all technology in the building. They make sure each classroom has working and updated technology.

The operations team is very helpful when it comes to obtaining supplies, but they are also instrumental in making sure the school is running smoothly by providing teachers with resources like information on medical coverage, retirement accounts, and savings plans. Having an operations team on site can be extremely helpful for staff. Having the ability to obtain the supplies and resources needed, contributes to the overall success of Rochester Charter School A.

Rochester Charter School A places a great emphasis on the relationship between the school and its families. Teachers and families are in constant communication and work together as a team to ensure student achievement. From bi-weekly phone calls to curriculum nights to parent teacher conferences, families are being provided with the necessary resources to help their child succeed. From my experience working at the school, Rochester Charter School A families are typically very excited for their child to be attending the school. From day one, when the principal of the school holds an assembly for parents to get them amped up on overcoming the current state of education in the city to the moving up ceremony where families come to celebrate the success of their child, parents are always a critical part of their child's educational journey.

Sometimes the obligation of having to make consistent phone calls for every student in your class can seem like an overwhelming task, but once teachers figure out a system and get in

a groove, it becomes natural as part of their everyday tasks. I would consider my experience interacting with Rochester Charter School A families to be positive. I have never had a bad experience with a parent. The parents I interact with are generally eager to hear how their child is doing. However, sometimes it can be difficult to get a hold of a parent and you end up playing phone tag or come to find out they have a new phone number you were not informed of, which can be frustrating when teachers are required to log two phone calls per month. Families of students who are below grade level require more updates. Rochester Charter School A requires weekly phone calls, four per month, to families of those students.

The survey asked, “On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being positive. How would you rate parent interaction?” The average of all the respondents was nearly a seven out of ten. I would consider that to be an accurate portrayal of interacting with parents at Rochester Charter School A, generally a pleasant experience with occasional bumps. Although teachers could feel stressed by not being able to reach a parent or having to make a difficult phone call home, they oblige to making those regular phone calls therefore, keeping their parents up to date. Having everyone in a child’s life on the same page when it comes to his or her education can be vital to ensure achievement. Constantly interacting with families of their students could be what takes Rochester Charter School A from good to great.

## **Conclusion**

This study revealed several factors that could contribute to the success of this particular charter school, Rochester Charter School A. The survey that was distributed to respondents asked questions that were closely related to the school’s culture and their feelings regarding some of the things that go along with working for a school who requires what could be considered a lot out of their staff. Questions surrounding the intricate systems and routines required by the

school's charter managements organization revealed the training Rochester Charter School A staff members receive in order to effectively carry out their obligations. The study exposed the high expectations that each Rochester Charter School A employee are held accountable to.

This study revealed the school's longer school day and school year, constant observation and feedback provided for teachers, professional development, school wide systems and routines, and parent communication are just some of the factors that contribute to the school's high performing status. If I were to conduct this study again, or if someone else were to further this study they may add a comparison factor. The survey could include questions like, "rate your happiness coming to work here (at Rochester Charter School A) as opposed to another school or previous job." Questions including a comparison could be very helpful to greater expose the differences between Rochester Charter School A and other schools.

A limitation I faced when conducting this study, was being constrained to only one school. If the circumstances allowed for more time, I would have gathered data from other Rochester charter schools as well as data from the city's public school district. It would be interesting to compare culture at Rochester Charter School A to other charter schools to schools within the city's public school district. The next steps in this study will be to collect more data regarding school culture from a variety of participants. Gathering data from more schools, will allow educators to implement the best/most successful qualities of each school into their own.

Educators became educators for a reason. Most would say, that reason is to make a difference, to make a difference in a child's life and future. Unfortunately, many educators are currently teaching at a failing school and are not seeing their results of "making a difference" because of the school's low performance. It is hard to feel like you have made an impact when the statistics prove otherwise. I believe their should be more sharing of ideas and practices

between schools. Rochester Charter School A is a high performing school that is within blocks from schools that are labeled as failing, so why not adopt some of its practices?

### Literature Review

The charter school movement contains multiple theories of action that have reflected different, sometimes competing, theories of action. Despite the differences, in the past researchers have tended to treat charter schools as an “undifferentiated mass,” with little regard for the values and assumptions that give rise to particular types of charter schools (Henig, Holyoke, Brown, & Lacireno-Paquet, 2005, p. 514). However, recently the increase in the number of established Charter schools and high performing charter schools have researchers wondering about what makes them successful. What are the high performing charters doing that sets them apart from other schools? Huerta and Zuckerman’s research suggests three distinct theories of action that reflect the assumptions about educational change advanced by charter school reform. They label the action theories as local control, market forces, and management recentralization.

When state education laws opened the door for local control in the form of charter schools in the early and mid-1990s, the first founders were teachers and leaders of groups with a shared vision, mission and purpose. Local control of education is appealing to many types of people. Huerta and Zuckerman suggest that there are two different groups who take on the cumbersome task of starting a charter school. The first, educational professionals, who seeking greater autonomy and are usually motivated by a particular pedagogical vision, which they cannot realize in the traditional public school system. The second, community organizations, seeking greater control over the education of their students.

Although they are two very different groups of people, both need qualified and motivated principals and teachers, who share similar pedagogical visions. These individuals have to be highly motivated in order to put in the long hours and tedious tasks that come with opening a

new school. The local control theory of action depends heavily on teachers' and principals' sense of mission and purpose to build schools according to their own visions for education (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009).

Huerta and Zuckerman's market forces theory differentiates from the local theory, because market forces is a theory of action that depends on competition and corporate efficiency as the key to better education. The groups of people who fall under the market forces theory believe the problems of public education all stem from government control over. Charter schools are thought to compete with one another for students in an educational market that determines which schools succeed and fail based on consumer choice and decision making. By creating new incentive structures, competition forces charter schools to improve their performance as they attempt to meet the needs of their clients (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009). The idea of competition amongst schools provides motivation for teachers and school leaders to ultimately produce the best product (students) and the "do whatever it takes" attitude to make it happen. Competition raises the bar and leads to several schools in the same education market being recognized for its achievements. The idea of competition amongst schools is also looked at in Nathan L. Gray's paper. He suggests that competition amongst charter schools not only raises the bar for charter schools, but also for public schools. When charter schools raise the stakes, the public schools feel the pressure to also raise the bar. Therefore, all students are being challenged and held to high expectations and student achievement increases (Gray, 2012).

The third theory Huerta and Zuckerman reveal is management recentralization. The term is used to describe the theory of action that corresponds with the newest wave of charter school reform, the emergence of nonprofit Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). According to Huerta and Zuckerman, "CMOs are centrally directed nonprofits that manage networks of

schools, usually in one region or one state, utilizing common instructional models and school designs to achieve consistency and alignment across their schools (2009).” An example of a CMO is the Uncommon schools network. Uncommon is a CMO located across three states, New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts, who all follow the Teach Like a Champion model for education and have the same vision and mission.

The management recentralization theory of action differs from Huerta and Zuckerman’s other two theories because adherents to the management recentralization theory believe that the pace of charter school reform has been too slow. They believe that the establishment of new charter schools needs to increase even more, which can be done by CMOs. Successful charter school founders, who opened their schools under the local control theory of action, now seek to replicate their success by opening up additional schools (Huerta and Zuckerman, 2009).

Huerta and Zuckerman clearly stated that whatever theory of action is taken student achieve is the ultimate goal of founders. Their research suggests that a successful charter school reaches that high performing level by having the resources such as, qualified professionals, a hefty budget and location where there is a market for quality education –location, location, location.

The journal, “Charter School Authorizers and Student Achievement”, supports Huerta and Zuckerman’s case that there are three different types of authorizers for charter schools. However, the authors of the journal, Deven Carlson, Lesley Lavery and John F. Witte, took their research a step further. They conducted a study to see if there is a correlation between charter school authorizers and student achievement. They used a 10-year panel of data from all types of authorizers. Their results revealed no statistically significant relationship between charter school authorizing type and mean levels of student achievement (Carlson, D., Lavery, L., & Witte, J.F.,

(2011). Their study did reveal that schools that are authorized by nonprofit organizations, like CMOs, exhibit substantially more variability in achievement than schools authorized by local school boards. Most high profile charter schools are part of a CMO.

In order to establish a charter school, authorizers must conduct research to find best practices and strategies they want to include in their school. Lake et al. (2012) conducted research to identify practices associated with student achievement. The study measured impacts on math and reading among the middle schools of 22 CMOs. Lake et al. (2012) argued that high performing charter schools have two clear practices that exhibit a strong association with impacts on achievement: schoolwide student behavior programs and teacher coaching. After the association was revealed, Lake et al. (2012) closely studied four CMOs that demonstrated above-average impacts and tend to emphasize teacher coaching or schoolwide behavior programs (or both) more than other CMOs.

Although each CMO had a slightly different behavior program, it was concluded that high performing CMOs had six common principles amongst their programs. Each program was designed to foster a safe and focused learning environment, encouraged consistency across classrooms, expected adults to model and enforce norms for student behavior, asked parents to reinforce and support school actions, and emphasized teacher training to support high standards for classroom behavior. Lastly, each CMO prescribed some student behavior policies, but gave their schools flexibility in implementation (Lake et al., 2012). Each CMO was a highly structured environment with a “college-going” culture. The students are being held to high expectations and are explicitly taught the behavior system when they enter into the school. Teachers are provided with extensive training, which includes role playing scenarios, in order to correctly implement the program. Staff from the schools mentioned in the study, “Hope that

students mature and experience a behavioral system over time, they will begin to internalize the organizational expectations and start thinking more critically about why their behavior is right or wrong rather than just reacting to consequences (Lake et al).”

The research stressed that high performing charter schools provide relatively intensive coaching for teachers and new teachers are observed and monitored much more than other charter schools or public district (Lake et al., 2012). Teachers at high performing charter schools are observed frequently and by several different school leaders including, master teachers, teacher coaches, administrative personnel, etc... Teachers receive constant feedback, therefore, establishing high expectations around performance. Teachers are provided with goals that are aligned with the school and central office goals and teacher performance is often assessed using observations and formative assessment data. Some teachers feel pressure or stressed by the idea of constantly being coached. Consequently, administration often uses a similar coaching format during the interview process in order to determine best-fit candidates for the job.

Julie Radoslovich, Shelley Roberts, and Andres Plaza discuss how a charter school in New Mexico designed a growth and evaluation plan that helped teachers and students. The school measured teaching effectiveness by a teacher’s ability to identify a student performance challenge, to collect evidence that systematically addresses this challenge, and to adjust instruction based on the evidence. Their teacher evaluation system inspires teachers to develop throughout their careers, seek feedback from peers and students, and collect accurate data about student learning. They require teachers to submit annual professional development plan that includes improvement objectives, action steps, and measures of desired results (Radoslovich, J., Roberts, S., Plaza, A., 2014). The administration and teachers are committed to bettering

themselves in order to better the students at their school, which is a quality of a high performing charter school.

In Lake et al.'s paper, they also closely examined high performing charter schools and uncovered seven factors that might be related to impacts on student achievement: the amount of instructional time, consistent educational approach, student behavior practices include specific rewards, consequences, and commitment, intensive teacher coaching and monitoring, performance-based teacher evaluation and compensation, frequent review and analysis of student formative assessment data, and the number of CMO schools. However, according to researchers, Scott and Villavicencio, there needs to be better research design to gather accurate data to use in the charter school versus public school debate regarding academic achievement (2009).

There is research being conducted to determine if academic achievement is being met at charter schools. However despite numerous studies two issues remain unclear, "how charter school outcomes fare in comparison to those of traditional public schools and how to best execute such comparisons (Scott, J. and Villavicencio, A., 2009, pg. 228)." Researchers are being challenged to come up with new measures to capture how charter schools are doing. Scott and Villavicencio suggest two different types of studies to make it happen. In their paper, they discuss single point-in-time studies and value-added studies. Single point-in-time studies essentially match a charter school to a comparable non charter school and researchers build in controls for various student characteristics including, race/ethnicity, English language learners, etc... Value-added studies examine year-to-year score changes rather than single-year scores.

According to Robert Mark Silverman, author of *Urban Education: Making Waves or Treading Water? An Analysis of Charter Schools in New York State*, there is no real answer to finding out the effect of charter schools on student achievement. He states that charter schools

differ drastically from each other; consequently there is no single charter school effect on student achievement. However, Silverman states that there are factors that can contribute to being a high performing charter school. Similar to other researchers like Huerta and Zuckerman, Silverman believes that a competitive environment needs to exist. Charter school founders should view opening a new school as a way of letting the public school district know they are ready for a healthy competition to see who can produce the most achievement (Silverman, 2012). It should be viewed as an athletic game rather than a war. Students and families at the charter school should want to prove to the public district that they are able to match or beat their scores.

Silverman also discussed the impact of a strong disciplinary environment on student achievement. Silverman and Lake et al. would agree that all high performing charter schools have a rigid behavior system in place. Silverman suggested that the system usually does not allow for several absences; therefore, schools have a high attendance rate and students are getting the most academic instruction they can receive (Silverman, 2012). Although, Silverman is an advocate for charter schools, he explained in his paper that there are currently more charter schools treading the water than making waves. He states that because the charter school reform is somewhat new, he anticipates more charters making waves once they learn best practices from high profile charters.

This literature review synthesizes the findings from published reviews and key individual studies of charter school authorizers and student achievement. The findings reveal that there is a lack of data surrounding charter schools and academic achievement, because the charter school reform is still new to our country. However, developing ways to gather research surrounding charter schools and achievement, like using single point-in-time studies and value-added studies, could help the public gauge the effect charter schools are having on student achievement and help families make choices regarding education for children.

There also needs to be accurate information surrounding each individual charter school, because like the literature stated, charter schools cannot be labeled as one entity. Cities should be responsible for collecting data on charter schools in their region; then over time residents will be able to comparable school to school to decide which school best fits the needs of their child. Charter schools can be a great alternative to public education; it is just a matter of having the data to make an informed decision.

Based on the findings from the literature review, the most highly ranked charter schools are CMOs. They are the ones that are growing at a rapid pace and having a larger scale helps them to educate more students, have a greater impact on local communities, and capitalize on economies of scale by centralizing many administrative tasks. CMOs emphasize how important it is to focus on developing a mission and establishing systems and routines, specifically behavior management programs and teacher training programs.

There are common best practices high performing charter schools, many CMOs, are using across the country with evidence from the literature. Good standing or high performing charter schools are using a school or organization wide behavior management program that allows everyone in the school to be on the same page when it comes to discipline and goals. It is

important for schools to develop a highly structured environment in order to gain more time spent on academics and greater student achievement. High performing charter schools also place great emphasis on teacher training programs. They include intensive teacher coaching programs that provide teachers with constant feedback and help teachers plan, develop and execute goals in their classroom.

The research proves that in order for a charter school to be successful their needs to be a united front amongst staff, students, families and the community. Everyone needs to working towards one mission; typically involving closing the academic achievement gap and ensuring college bound students. All parties also need to be on board regarding the school's behavior program. It is important for the students to have stability and be held to the same expectations in all parts of their life.

However, my background as an educator at a charter school and the research from the literature review has planted a question in my mind. What specific behavior programs are high performing charter schools using? I work at a successful charter school and know the program my school uses, but I am interested in other programs being used by other high performing charter schools and how their programs effect student achievement. I believe that a strong school wide or organization wide behavior program can lead to an increase in student achievement. Ultimately, with increased student achievement, come more college-ready students who will make great contributions to our communities across the country. There needs to be more research surrounding charter schools, in order for more people to get on board with the new age way of educating our youth in order to achieve the ultimate goal of closing the achievement gap.

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