

WHAT INGREDIENTS MAKE A SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOL?

(PART I OF II)

By Don Gilman

After researching dozens of charter schools across the country, I have come to the conclusion that the truly successful charter schools have some of the same ingredients. This is not to say that they use the same recipe, mind you. But when you look into what really contributed to their success, there are about six ingredients that are common across the different “dishes” that make up the small but growing number of effective charter schools. And since I tend to remember items better when the list makes a memorable acronym, I have called these six common ingredients “S.P.R.I.N.G.”, which stands for the following:

Start Well

Provide a Clear Mission

Reflect

Innovate

New Partnerships

Govern for Accountability

START WELL

There are many reasons for starting a charter school and many types of individuals and groups who choose to take the challenge, including thoughtful community leaders, concerned parents, university educators, and dedicated teachers, among others. As anyone who has met this challenge can attest, starting a charter school is fraught with peril, entailing obstacles that were never imagined at the outset. Some of the more common challenges usually include crafting the mission and vision for the school, wrestling with every facet of the school program, putting together the official charter, hiring the staff, deciding about the curriculum, and, of course, finding the facilities and funds to open the doors. Having the right team in place to address the myriad of issues that will arise is absolutely critical to the long-term success of the charter school.

Most people I’ve talked to dramatically underestimated the sheer number of decisions they would need to make in the process of starting their charter school. But the successful charter schools, the ones that have not only survived, but thrived, have all started with a clear mission. This all important mission provides the unifying framework of what the founders envision for the students, and why.

PROVIDE A CLEAR MISSION

With every successful charter school, I found a clear and powerful mission statement that provided the guidance for every decision at every level within the school. Often the mission was seen all over the campus, on placards, banners, t-shirts, etc. Without fail, teachers, students, parents, and administrators could all clearly articulate the school’s mission, reinforcing the notion that all involved parties were operating from the same playbook.

The actual content of the mission seems to be secondary to its clarity and its widespread acceptance. For example, some successful charter schools have the mission of preparing low-income urban students for higher education. Others focus on the needs of the whole child, “educating the whole person, mind, body and will for peace, justice, freedom, compassion, wholeness and fullness of life.” (The Community of Peace Academy, St. Paul, Minnesota).

A clear mission serves to provide a strong focus for the work that is required to achieve the school’s goals and objectives. A clear mission also makes it painfully obvious when a teacher is not in sync with the school program. And, above all else, a clear mission serves to motivate and inspire all the individuals involved to make the necessary effort to assure that their school will be a success.

REFLECT

One interesting trait that was common across many of the high-performing charter schools was the priority placed on open feedback and professional development for the teachers. At one charter school, the teachers reflect on their own learning, and submit a professional portfolio annually to the board of directors. At another charter school, each teacher’s pay is partially linked to achieving specific learning goals. And these are not random learning goals. They are closely tied to the school’s mission and uniquely tailored for the teacher’s self-identified individual development needs. For example, when one school found that their approach to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) was below expectations, a team of teachers met with an ESL specialist on a weekly basis to help improve their ESL teaching approach.

At the same time, most successful charter schools also allowed less structured time in a teacher’s weekly schedule to enable interaction with other teachers. For example, at one charter school, the teachers would get together on Friday afternoons to share problems, analyze student work, reflect on practice, and bounce around some new ideas. In all the successful charter schools, parents can’t say enough about the commitment of the teachers to their students, their availability, their openness for honest communication, and their dedication. Scheduling a time for active reflection seems to be a common element leading to the improved performance of the teachers and, as a result, the successful charter school.

(Continued in Part II)