

WHAT INGREDIENTS MAKE A SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOL?

(PART II OF II)

By Don Gilman

As a recap of Part I of this article, I have come to the conclusion that the truly successful charter schools have six common ingredients. 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

“S,” “P” and “R” were covered in Part I of this article. In Part II, I will cover the remaining three common ingredients.

INNOVATE

One of the benefits of charter schools is that they don’t have many of the restrictions that are placed on public schools. Based on their mission, they are relatively free to innovate and be creative. One charter school principal put it well when he said, “The way we are going about closing the achievement gap for our kids simply would not be possible under the present confines of the public school system.”

Innovation takes different forms, depending on the mission of the individual charter school. For example, some charter schools institute a longer school day, others change their teaching pedagogy, while others completely revamp their scheduling configuration. Now, while these techniques may have been tried elsewhere in the public school system, the freedom that charter schools enjoy allows them to put these techniques together in a way that results in vastly different results from their public school counterparts.

NEW PARTNERSHIPS

At each of the successful charter schools, the shared educational mission helps to create a strong sense of community. The students know why they are there, and all the parents are actively choosing to send their children there. All successful charter schools had a deliberate family-like feel to them. As one teacher said, “We see the whole school as an extended family.” At some schools, the school year begins with the teacher visiting with the family at the family’s home to learn about the student’s home environment. The sense of partnership with the parents is formalized in many of these schools by a signed contract of sorts that details the responsibilities of both the school and the parents.

Interestingly, many of these successful charter schools faced significant challenges when they were getting started, including political battles, facility issues, and funding struggles, to name but a few. But in every case, members of the local community rallied around the school and generously donated everything from auditorium facilities and office space to new learning guides and even a music teacher. Community members have served on the charter schools' boards and helped to mobilize parents and knock down many of the political hurdles. As a result of these partnerships with parents and members of the local community, the schools have successfully integrated themselves into the very fiber of the communities they serve.

GOVERN FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Following on the heels of innovation and new partnerships comes the freedom to innovate with governance models. Each charter school must have a governing board of directors. This board is responsible for school oversight and policy-making. Unlike most public schools, all of the successful charter schools included parents as board members. Indeed, some states, such as Georgia, require parents to hold the majority of seats on the charter school's board. In other states, community members make up the majority.

Since charter schools in many states are exempt from any collective bargaining, teachers are also included on the charter school boards. The benefits of having teachers on the school boards include increasing the teachers' buy-in of the school's mission, providing the teachers a greater voice in policy and organizational decisions that affect them, and helping to ensure that a board's decisions accurately identify and solve the real problems the school is facing.

Finally, charter schools are uniquely accountable, since each family has chosen to send their children there. If a family is not satisfied for any reason, parents can choose to no longer send their children there. It is this incredible openness and this high visibility of the school's quality that is perhaps the highest accountability measure of all. As one charter school principal stated, "The conditions of chartering, if anything, lead us to be more self-analytical and critical, holding ourselves to a higher standard than most schools."

SUMMARY

As these six common ingredients demonstrate, successful charter schools share some of the same key elements, such as mission-driven programming. However, it is equally important to note that the forms that these ingredients take vary widely from one school to another. What makes each school unique is how they have combined these ideas, and others, to coalesce into their individual educational approach. These six elements should not be viewed as a formula or a recipe for success, but rather a framework that, when viewed through the unique lens of an individual charter school, will allow parents, community members, and school founders to "S.P.R.I.N.G." forward with the best chance of achieving success!