PSI
Public Safety Institute

November, 2024

Take A Closer Look

The Boarding School Model For Vulnerable Youth

Madeline Arriaza
Research Assistant
Public Safety Institute

Dr. James McCutcheon
Senior Research Developer
Public Safety

Dr. Amaia Iratzoqui
Research Director
Public Safety Institute

Bill Gibbons
Executive Director
Public Safety Institute

The University of MEMPHIS tm

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this paper is to explore the academic literature pertaining to boarding schools for vulnerable youth, particularly boarding schools that operate as non-profits or are publicly funded. First, the boarding school model itself is explored. Second, the charter school outcomes are discussed with particular attention to the KIPP and SEED models. Finally, two boarding schools in the Memphis area are highlighted to explore what this model looks like in the local context.

THE BOARDING SCHOOL MODEL

Possible Advantages of the Boarding School Model

Students who experience instability at home may benefit from the stability of the boarding school schedule. Attending boarding school may help lessen the academic gaps attributed to low-income challenges (Behaghel et al., 2017; Curto & Fryer, 2014). Boarding schools aim to alleviate some of the issues with parental involvement by providing dorm parents, after school activities, mentorship, positive community, and schedule stability (Curto & Fryer, 2014; Martin et al., 2016; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014; Lakind et al., 2014; Lindt & Blair, 2016; Owens, 2017; Schafer & Vargas, 2016; Wolf et al., 2014). Hawkins (2020) writes, "...boarding schools lower some of the risk factors associated with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as having an incarcerated parent" (Curto & Fryer, 2014; Bright et al., 2015; Soleimanpour et al., 2017; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2018).

Challenges of the Boarding School Model

Boarding schools have a few challenges to consider. For example, there is potential for emotional stress for students including "homesickness, stress, lack of positive parental support or input, and loss of identity" (Curto & Fryer, 2014). Behaghel et al. (2017) found that, after two years, boarding school students outperform control students in math and that this effect comes mostly from the strong students. This is coupled with their findings that boarders have lower levels of well-being initially and then adjust. As a

result, Behaghel and team (2017) argue that boarding schools could be "...disruptive and that strong students, after adapting to the new environment, benefit the most from the boarding model." Additionally, sociologists have a term "double marginalization" which describes a situation where a child's sense of identity is confused due to being moved from lower socioeconomic classes to more mainstream society. As a result of this, a minority student can develop negative views about academic achievement and see it as "acting white" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fryer and Torelli 2010).

Aside from potential emotional and psychological threats, boarding students is expensive. According to the Education Data Initiative, the average annual tuition cost for a 5-day boarding school is $55,425, and for 7-day boarding schools the annual tuition is $69,150. This compares to $8,900 per charter school day student in 2017-2018 according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Tennessee has an average boarding school cost of $59,093 according to boardingschoolreview.com. There is high cost involved with housing and educating students. Of course, these figures reflect the cost of boarding schools designed to attract students from high income families.

NEW TENNESSEE STATE LAW AUTHORIZING AN OPPORTUNITY PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL FOR "AT-RISK" STUDENTS

A new state law enacted in 2024 in Tennessee authorizes an opportunity public charter school to be formed to provide high-quality educational options for students residing within this state. The new law requires a sponsor seeking to establish an opportunity public charter school to apply to the local board of education. A sponsor applying to establish an opportunity public charter school must comply with the application process in existing law. An "opportunity public charter school" means a public charter school serving any of the grades 6 through 12 for which at least 75 percent of the students enrolled in the public charter school, at the time of enrollment, are at-risk students and providing (i) instruction to students in a traditional classroom setting or (ii) a residential program for enrolled students that includes instruction to such students in a traditional classroom setting.

The new law defines “at-risk student” as a member of a family with a household income that does not exceed four hundred percent of the federal poverty level and has either dropped out of high school, been adjudicated (or awaiting adjudication) as a juvenile delinquent, previously been detained/incarcerated in a juvenile detention center, been retained at least twice in K-8th grade, is pregnant (or is a parent), has a documented substance abuse issue, has experienced circumstances of abuse or neglect, or is chronically absent as defined in Tennessee’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Moreover, this new law authorizes an opportunity public charter school (authorized to serve a student population composed of at-risk students in grades six through 12) to operate a year-round residential program as a single-sex school. Given the potential opportunity under this new state law, this paper takes a closer look at the charter school model including the charter boarding school model.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Brief Definition and History

The charter school sector grew from 2 percent of public enrollments in 2005 to about 6 percent in 2017. (U.S. Department of Education, 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Charter schools differ from standard district schools in four important ways:

1. Operate independently (with freedom from some, but not all, state restrictions) but publicly funded;
2. Choose their own curriculum and personnel (with freedom from some, but not all, state restrictions);
3. Receive funding according to the size and composition of their enrollment; and
4. Do not exclusively serve students from a defined geographical area.

Charter schools have been the subject of scrutiny since they began in the United States. Charter school advocates have argued that they are a source of competition, are a space for education innovation, and provide options for families (Finn et al., 2001). The opponents have argued that there is no evidence that the charter schools perform better, that they increase racial segregation, and that they decrease funding going to district schools (Wells et al., 1998).

Limitations on Charter School Research

Most researchers agree that the best charter school research involves using data from charter school lottery enrollment processes. However, this has limitations since many charter schools do not use lottery enrollment consistently. Schools that consistently use lottery enrollment are those that are oversubscribed year after year. This means the best studies can only be done with schools that are in high demand and therefore likely high performing. Therefore, conclusions from oversubscribed schools are not generalizable to all charter schools (Zimmer and Engberg, 2016). Additionally, these conclusions are not generalizable to students whose families did not seek charter school enrollment. There are many different methodological approaches that studies have used to get around these limitations, including a fixed-effect approach with student-level longitudinal data, a virtual control records (VCR) approach (CREDO, 2009; CREDO, 2013), an OLS regression model (school type as the independent variable of interest and controlling for observed student characteristics), and finally an instrumental variable(s) approach (uses a variable or set of variables to tease out the effects of charter schools on student outcomes when reverse causality may be present) (Booker et al., 2014; Zimmer et al., 2021.

Charter School Impact on Student Achievement

Cohodes (2018) along with some other studies, through extensive reviews, found that charter schools, on average, don't do better for student achievement (Betts & Tang, 2016; Teasley, 2009). However, there are a few caveats to consider. Schools in urban areas serving minority and low-income students that use a "no excuses" model tend to have greater impacts on student outcomes (Gleason et al., 2010; CREDO, 2015; Angrist et al., 2013; Chabrier et al., 2016; Hastings et al., 2012; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). There are more positive results for disadvantaged students, those in urban contexts, and those in the northeast United States. Certain cities have had significant positive impacts from charter schools. For example, Boston (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2011) recorded a two-thirds reduction for charter middle school students in the black-white test score gap in reading and eliminated the gap in math. Additionally, students in charter middle schools were able to completely make up the black-white achievement gap in math. Similarly, Harlem charter elementary school students were able to completely make up the achievement gap (Dobbie and Fryer, 2011). In general, lottery-based studies of urban charter schools find large, statistically significant

impacts on test scores. These good charter schools that have positive impacts on test scores also seem to have positive impacts on college outcomes (Zimmer et al., 2021).

Overall, researchers have not reached consensus on charter school effectiveness when examining test scores because of differences in findings across methodologies, studies, and location (Zimmer et al., 2021). In examining educational attainment, many studies have shown that charter high school students were more likely to attend college (Booker et al., 2011; Dobbie and Fryer, 2013; Sass et al., 2016; Harris and Larsen, 2018). Although some studies have found no impact on high school graduation, there is evidence of positive impact of charter school attendance on applying to four-year universities (Angrist et al., 2013). Cheng and Peterson (2016) found that parents of students at charter schools are more satisfied than parents at district schools. Additionally, one study found that charter students were less likely to be convicted felons or convicted of misdemeanors as adults (McEachin et al., 2020). Generally, there are multiple studies that show other positive impacts, including increased support for college and decreased student mobility (Angrist et al., 2013), and fewer risky behaviors (Wong et al., 2014; Dudovitz et al., 2018).

Teacher Impact and Challenges

There is some qualitative research that suggests charter teachers may have lower job satisfaction (Roch & Sai, 2017). Some charters have responded to these challenges by using highly structured curricula and teacher co-planning (Cohodes, Setren, & Walters, 2021). Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) in Pennsylvania found that their teachers improve more quickly compared to teachers in district schools. They attribute this success to "systematically identifying and promoting their most effective teachers to instructional leadership positions" giving them the opportunity to help other teachers. It is also possible that their recruitment strategies are more successful. Specifically, their success with hiring and sustaining high performing teachers may be attributed to following the "School Leader's Toolbox." This involves hiring by leading with honesty and clarity about the type of teacher desired, the challenges of the school, as well as the exciting aspects of the school (Steinberg & Yang, 2020).

Charter School Models, Practices, and Policies

Test score gains have been steep for charter students in urban settings while serving minority and low-income students. There have been attempts to understand which elements of charter schools are important to the positive gains in outcomes like test scores and educational attainment (Cohodes, 2018).

KIPP as a Model

Charter schools associated with a network (CMO) perform better than independent charters, with non-profit CMOs outperforming for-profit CMOs, and larger networks more successful than smaller ones (CREDO, 2017; Furgeson et al., 2012). Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools are a CMO that have a "no excuses" model and are mostly located in urban areas. KIPP schools have shown statistically significant improvement in test scores (Clark Tuttle et al., 2013; Clark Tuttle et al., 2015; Gleason et al., 2010; Knechtel et al., 2017).

The "No Excuses" Model

The "no excuses" model is popular in urban charter schools, including KIPP. Defining factors of this model include high academic expectations, strict behavioral expectations, extended-school day, small-group learning, tutoring, frequent teacher observations that include feedback, and high-frequency assessments. It is difficult to decipher which aspects of the model are important for positive impact compared to aspects of the model that may not be as influential (Zimmer et al., 2021). Dobbie and Fryer (2013) highlight high expectations, regular teacher feedback, data driven instruction, increased instructional time, and high-dose tutoring as important for charter success. Angrist and colleagues (2013) emphasize the importance of strict discipline, cold-calling on students, teacher feedback from recorded lessons, and Teach for America alumni. Chabrier, Cohodes, and Oreopolous (2016) found that tutoring could be the most important part of the "no excuses" model. Finally, Gleason and team (2017) found that long school days, clearly defined behavioral polices, and a mission and focus on boosting student achievement were all very important to student achievement gains.

Since most “no excuses” charter schools are in urban contexts, it is difficult to untangle the impact of the “no excuses” model from the impact of the general school context. Dynarski and team (2018) looked at a non-urban charter network with some of the characteristics of the “no excuses” model. This charter network did produce test score gains although at a smaller scale.

Despite test score gains, the disciplinary practices involved in this model have been criticized as racist, harmful, and oppressive. Additionally, these disciplinary practices may not be a necessary aspect for success of the model (Golann & Torres, 2018) and could be better replaced with restorative justice or positive behavioral intervention systems (Denice et al., 2015). Moreover, Felix (2020) found that, when Massachusetts law limited the ability to suspend charter students, there was no difference in the charter school test score performance. While Dobbie and Fryer (2013) found that each aspect of the “no excuses” model contribute to test score advancement, it seems plausible, given all the evidence available, that the disciplinary practices could contribute to the success of the “no excuses” model but may not be necessary.

SEED Schools as a Boarding School Model

The SEED Foundation has a network of charter, college-preparatory 5-day-a-week boarding schools for students coming from poor neighborhoods. Additionally, each SEED student is assigned an advocate who is with that student through college graduation. It has more than 1,000 6^{th}-12^{th} grade students in D.C (1998), Maryland (2008), Miami (2014), and Los Angeles (2022). It uses a “no excuses” model and advertises the following as “Our Beliefs” on its website: college-bound culture, 24-hour learning environment, positive culture of high expectations, an integrated and engaging program to foster love of learning, individual student support, community relationships, family and school partnership, recruiting and nurturing outstanding educators, and a focus on data and continuous improvement (Unterman et al., 2016).

SEED schools seem to outperform average charter schools. Curto and Fryer (2014) estimate the impact of attending SEED schools on achievement by analyzing data from the lottery-driven admission system. They compare achievement of students admitted and rejected by the lottery and the achievement in SEED schools is higher by about 20 percent of a standard deviation in reading and math, with the results being mainly driven by females. Curto and Fryer (2014) also find that achievement after staying in a SEED school for 4 years is enough to close the black-white

achievement gap in both math and reading. Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch also make more progress than ineligible students in reading.

A TENNESSEE AND MEMPHIS CONTEXT

Turning to the more local context, the goal of this section is to summarize some background of charter school and boarding school work done in Tennessee. According to the Tennessee Charter School Center, in the 2023-2024 school year, there were 115 charter schools operating in Tennessee with over 50 of those schools being in Memphis or Shelby County. Tennessee charter schools have had high staff turnover, and the high turnover rate has been linked to unsuccessful charter turnaround efforts (Pham et al., 2020). This year (2024), the Tennessee Senate approved a bill to phase out the Achievement School District (ASD) model. The ASD has historically given state education commissioners authority to take over the 5 percent lowest performing schools in the state. Most of those schools are assigned to be charter schools. In the 2022-2023 school year, according to Tennessee Score, "61 percent of charter schools (non-ASD charters only) earned a Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS) Level 5 (Significantly Exceeding Expectations) score as compared to 29 percent of standard district-run schools in districts with charter options (non-ASD charters only)." The average charter high school (non-ASD charters only) graduation rate was 91.1 percent compared to 83.9 percent at district-run schools in districts with charter options (non-ASD charters only). In 2022-23, chronic absenteeism rates were higher at public charter schools (31 percent) as compared to district-run schools (25 percent) according to the TN Department of Education.

Zimmer, Henry, and Kho (2016) reported on schools opened in Tennessee (including iZone schools in Memphis). They found "...significant improvement for schools that remained under the district's governance [while being given]... greater autonomy in management." One specific tool used was increasing the pay for those remaining under the district's management. This shows there may be other strategies besides the charter school model to consider for student achievement in the Tennessee context.

There are two existing schools in Memphis that educate low-income students in a boarding school context. PURE Academy is a non-profit private boarding school for

high school aged boys. Binghampton Christian Academy (BCA) is a non-profit private school that boards kindergarten through eighth grade aged girls and boys living in Memphis zip codes 38111 or 38112.

PURE Academy

PURE Academy is located in the Whitehaven area of Memphis, TN. As of October of 2024, it served 24 high school aged boys. The school has both year-round boarding students as well as day students. The school receives word of mouth referrals as well as referrals from juvenile court and local organizations like Youth Villages. The school has a focus on AgriSTEM education and athletics. Short-term goals of PURE include graduating current students on time and for all students to surpass ACT readiness benchmarks. Long-term goals of the school include completing campus expansion and expanding to other cities. Last year, the school had a 100 percent high school graduation rate, and 83 percent of the graduates pursued a college degree (all receiving scholarships), and 17 percent of the graduates entered jobs or military service.

“Potential Unleashed” is how PURE describes its residential program philosophy. The key pillars are educational intervention and enrichment (personal tutoring and tailored tutoring), mental health support (therapeutic interventions, counseling, trauma-informed care, and conflict resolution), life skills training (workforce development including mock interviews, resume writing, workplace etiquette sessions, and career exploration activities), and character development (group activities/challenges/projects to encourage teamwork and camaraderie and individual mentorship).

PURE Academy is currently working on a renovation and expansion project. Two of the three existing structures on the new north Memphis site will be renovated. Phase 1 of this project will allow for residential accommodation of 64 students, AgriSTEM labs, and a commercial kitchen. Phases 2 and 3 involve additional classrooms, a wellness center, and significant outside improvements.

Binghamton Christian Academy

Binghampton Christian Academy (BCA) is in the Binghampton neighborhood of Memphis. Currently there are fourteen boys and fourteen girls who board in the school dormitories. The students live in dormitories that are located on BCA's campus Monday-Friday and return home on the weekends and during school breaks. The school has a total of about 135 students. BCA's staff includes eleven full-time teachers, a school principal, an office and facilities manager, and a director of development. The residential program has two full time dorm parents and six part time staff members who support the students. BCA has more than 300 volunteers who give their time and talents to the school to help keep the budget low and provide meaningful additions such as tutoring and mentorship to the school day and after school.

98 percent of the students live at or below the poverty level, and more than 50 percent of the students speak English as a second language. All BCA students are on full scholarship, with parents paying only $200 per year per family. Residential students' families pay only an additional $50 per semester for their children to live in the dorms. The remaining cost for BCA is supported by the generosity of the Memphis community, including private individuals, local foundations, church partners and businesses.

The main short-term goals are for 25 percent of students to have one year's growth as measured by the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) English Language Arts statewide assessment. Additionally, it has a focus on comprehensive staff development in core curriculum areas. Long-term, the school aims to "…have high expectations, create a positive classroom culture, build relationships with the students and their families, expose students to places outside the classroom, and teach students social-emotional learning strategies." A final focus is put on graduation and success after BCA. The school aims to have 100 percent graduation from high school and 75 percent graduation rate from college or post-secondary training/educational programs. Overall, the school has about a 92 percent high school graduation rate, and more than 50 percent of the students enter college.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that any boarding school aiming to serve vulnerable youth identifies the students who will benefit most from the boarding school model. This appears to be students who are particularly affected by negative home environments and those at high risk for ACEs.
- Prioritize emotional and academic support for students, particularly in the first two years as they adjust to boarding life. Ensure that the environment incorporates racially inclusive and anti-racist practices.
- Sustain aspects of the "no excuses" model, including high academic expectations, extended-school day, small-group learning, tutoring, frequent teacher observations that include feedback, and high-frequency assessments.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there continues to be some debate over the effectiveness of charter schools, there are some specific contexts that seem to result in increased advancement for students. Particularly schools located in urban contexts that enroll low-income students and that follow a "no excuses" model seem to impact students most. SEEDS schools offer a boarding school model with a record of success. The new Tennessee state law authorizing an opportunity public charter school for "at-risk" students (including a boarding school) may offer a unique opportunity for the Shelby County community. Additionally, while more expensive and potentially emotionally difficult initially, the boarding model has many positive impacts for students. This is especially true for vulnerable and low-income students.

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