

Charter Schools: Choice of Somali-American Parents?

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I. Introduction

Most of the Somali community in the United States came here after civil war broke out in Somalia in 1991. During the war, hundreds of thousands of people fled to neighboring countries where many received resettlement aid from yet other countries, including the United States. The largest Somali community in the United States lives in Minnesota, mainly in the Minneapolis area.¹

According to the Minneapolis Public Schools in 2010, there are about 2,000 Somali students attending public schools in Minneapolis. More than ten charter schools have been formed that primarily serve Somali students. Although students living throughout the metro area can choose these schools, most come from Minneapolis. In total, more than 5,000 students attend the charter schools.

Minnesota passed the first charter school law in the nation in 1991.² Less than two decades later, forty states and the District of Columbia have also adopted charter school laws. Over the years, charter schools have gained political support from both major political parties in the United States. Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley underscored that former President Bill Clinton pledged to support charter schools before the end of his second term in his State of the Union Address in 2000.³ Likewise, Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama continued to support charter schools.

A charter school is a public school that is developed by parents, teachers, or community members and is independent from the school district and the city in which the charter school is located.⁴ A charter

Table 1. Select Minnesota Education Laws that Apply to District and Charter Schools

Charter Schools Must:

Adhere to compulsory attendance laws.
Administer statewide, standardized assessments.
Comply with educational data requirements.
Comply with requirements regarding the length of the school year.
Comply with special education requirements.
Comply with Minnesota Human Rights Act.
Comply with the Pupil Fair Dismissal Act regarding when and how to suspend, exclude, and expel students.
Conduct financial audits, follow audit procedures, and comply with audit reporting requirements.
Conform to required academic standards.
Enforce requirements regarding reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.
Ensure equal opportunity in athletic programs.
Ensure that teachers satisfy teacher licensure requirements.
Follow all relevant state and local health and safety requirements.
Follow the Minnesota Public School Free law regarding authorized and prohibited fees.

Source: Minnesota Office of the Legislative Auditor, 2008, p. 5.

school must have a sponsor in order to operate. Each charter school is governed by a board of directors that is elected by charter school members. Charter schools are nonsectarian, do not charge tuition, and are open to the public.

Between 1991 and 2007, the Minnesota Department of Education approved charters for 195 schools. Currently, 143 charter schools remain in operation while thirty have been closed. The remaining 22 have not yet opened.⁵ According to the Office of the Legislative Auditor (OLA) in 2008, charter schools in Minnesota are exempt from public school laws, with the exception of certain statutes that apply to both public schools and charter schools. Table 1 lists these laws.

According to Danny Weil in 2000, public schools are facing competition because many parents feel that charter schools are viable alternatives to public schools for their children.⁶ Charter schools are filling an educational gap that public schools cannot fill. Many educators believe that charter schools provide solutions for problems that public schools are facing. A number of public school leaders admit to feeling pressure from dissatisfied parents as a result of competition from charter schools. In fact, a former Minneapolis superintendent of schools called for changes to the system's statutes because the district was losing students to charter schools. Similarly, the interim superintendent maintained that the district should reorganize.

Table 2. Schools Approved, Opened, Operating, and Closed (1991–2007)

| Year | Number of Charter Schools | | | |
|-------|---------------------------|--------|-----------|--------|
| | Approved | Opened | Operating | Closed |
| 1991 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1992 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 1993 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 0 |
| 1994 | 7 | 7 | 13 | 0 |
| 1995 | 5 | 4 | 17 | 0 |
| 1996 | 1 | 3 | 19 | 1 |
| 1997 | 8 | 6 | 24 | 1 |
| 1998 | 13 | 14 | 38 | 0 |
| 1999 | 22 | 16 | 53 | 1 |
| 2000 | 16 | 14 | 62 | 5 |
| 2001 | 14 | 11 | 66 | 7 |
| 2002 | 13 | 12 | 77 | 1 |
| 2003 | 21 | 12 | 87 | 2 |
| 2004 | 31 | 19 | 104 | 2 |
| 2005 | 8 | 22 | 121 | 5 |
| 2006 | 18 | 12 | 131 | 2 |
| 2007 | 11 | 15 | 143 | 3 |
| Total | 195 | 173 | 143 | 30 |

Notes: Years reported are calendar years.

Seven of the approved charter schools never opened and 15 plan to open no earlier than September 2008.

Number of schools operating as of December 2007.

Source: Minnesota Office of the Legislative Auditor, 2008, p. 7.

Bulkley and Fislser noted that the main reasons for starting a charter school are to create an alternative vision for schooling, serve a specific population, increase autonomy, provide innovative public education, and/or be accountable to the public.⁷ The practical theory behind chartering has five components: (a) adoption of charter school law, (b) creation of new or conversion schools, (c) creation of schools with more autonomy, (d) accountability through markets and governments, and (e) innovation and quality in charter schools.

Finn and colleagues underscored the worry of many parents that public schools cannot meet the needs of their children, illustrated by the fact that many students are graduating from high schools without the skills necessary for college or the work place.⁸ Joe Nathan writes that, "A Public Agenda Foundation study found that 61% of Americans say academic standards are too low in their own local schools. Parents routinely complain that their children are being allowed to 'slide through' without developing strong skills."⁹ Clearly there is a need for the nation to reform the public education system.

According to Angeliki Lazaridou, many countries have experienced dissatisfaction with their public schools.¹⁰ People tend to view public schools as bureaucratic and inefficient. Lazaridou and Fris also suggested that public education should incorporate choices for the parents, competition among schools, entrepreneurial opportunities, greater accountability, greater responsiveness to customers' needs, decentralization of control, and a dismantling of a monopoly. These ideas will surely generate vigorous debate about reform in public schools.

Chubb and Moe argued that efficiency, innovation, and student achievement are not the only goals of charter schools.¹¹ Proponents also contend that charter schools will break down the monopoly that public schools have on education. If parents and students are seen as customers, as in a business model, they ought to have choice and there should be competition.

Charter school funding is based on the number of students that a school serves. The more students a charter school can attract, the greater the likelihood that it will have sufficient operating funds to survive. In contrast, a charter school that fails to attract parents and students will lose money and, in all probability, will not survive.

According to William Bond, the mission and vision of public schools have become more difficult to achieve in our era of post-industrialization.¹² He asserts that today it is difficult to advance the social and moral needs of young people because they are growing up in a toxic environment. The priorities are to educate efficient employees who can "work smart" and who have developed intellectual and problem-solving skills.

Public schools are facing challenges; but so, too, are charter schools. The Edutrain Charter School in Los Angeles was the first charter school in the United States to close amidst allegations of the misuse of public funds. Finn and colleagues noted that the school was \$1 million in debt, while the principal was leasing a \$39,000 sports car with a \$7,000 down payment.¹³ The Arizona Career and Technology High School closed its doors because of management issues. The Urban League Charter in San Diego closed because of a dispute among its stakeholders, even though student test scores were high. The list goes on and on, revealing the problems of management incompetence as well as negative feedback from stakeholders.

In addition, some charter schools have not lived up to their acclaimed potential. According to the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment of 2007, overall, charter schools in Minnesota have not performed aca-

demically as well as public schools.¹⁴ Only 50 percent of charter schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2007, while 68 percent of district schools made AYP. Booker, Zimmer, and Buddin conducted a study in Texas to compare the test scores of students at charter schools to those of students at public schools. They found that charter school students performed, on average, lower than the students at the public schools from which they had moved.¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that in their study of Arizona's charter schools, Solomon and Goldschmidt found that students just entering charter schools got lower scores on tests than did comparable students in public schools.¹⁶

Charter schools in Minnesota have experienced high student mobility.¹⁷ For example, Lighthouse Academy of Nations in Minneapolis had a 125 percent mobility rate, and charter schools in Minneapolis overall had a 23 percent mobility rate, compared to Minneapolis public schools, which had a two percent rate. Charter schools in the entire state had a 13 percent mobility rate compared to the statewide public school mobility rate of less than one percent.

According to the city of Minneapolis, during the 2009–10 school year, in the entire district there were 1,858 students, or 5.6%, who were Somali speaking.¹⁸ Charter schools in Minnesota attract large numbers of minority and immigrant students, many of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.¹⁹ Fifty-two percent of students enrolled in charter schools are minorities as compared to 22 percent in public schools. In the charter schools, 53 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Twenty-one percent of charter school students have limited English skills, whereas seven percent of public school students have limited English proficiency.

The high schools that Somali students attend are among the poorest performing in the state. Table 3 shows how six Minneapolis high schools are doing in math and reading scores. Three of these schools are public schools and three are charter schools. As the data shows, only one school is making Adequate Yearly Progress, as defined by federal and state standards. Most of the charter school students are Somali, while only small numbers of Somali students attend the three public schools. Since Somali students are not native English speakers, Table 3 shows how English language learners are doing in charter schools. Of the three public schools, only one is meeting AYP requirements, although even that school is significantly below the state's target index, which is 50 percent or above.

Table 3. Comparison of English Language Learners in Public and Private Schools

| School Name | Type | Math Proficiency | Reading Proficiency | AYP |
|-------------------------------|---------|------------------|---------------------|-----|
| Edison Senior High | Public | 0% | 6.80% | No |
| Washburn Senior High | Public | 8.19% | 26.19 | Yes |
| Roosevelt Senior High | Public | 0% | 17% | No |
| Lighthouse Academy of Nations | Charter | 0% | 0% | No |
| Ubah Medical Academy | Charter | 4.80% | 6.81% | No |
| Lincoln International School | Charter | 0% | 0% | No |

Source: Minnesota Department of Education

II. Focused Study of Lighthouse Academy of Nations Charter School

A. Research Method

The study employed qualitative interviews of twenty Somali parents who had children attending Lighthouse Academy. To avoid researcher bias, the author debriefed the participants to validate their responses after the data were transcribed. According to John Creswell, "We use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples, or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining."²⁰ Creswell explained qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive study of things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.²¹

B. Site and Participant Selection

The researcher selected Lighthouse Academy of Nations because the school is located in South Minneapolis, where most Somali families currently reside. Approximately sixty families have students enrolled at Lighthouse Academy of Nations. According to the school administration, more than 60 percent of the students at this charter school are Somali speaking.

The participants were parents representing twenty Somali families, selected at random, who had students enrolled. All twenty that the researcher selected accepted the invitation to be part of the study. The interviews were conducted using the Somali language, which the researcher then translated into English. In order to triangulate the data, the researcher analyzed data from three other charter high schools, additional Lighthouse Academy of Nations' data, and data from three Minneapolis public schools. (Somali students attend all of these schools.) The researcher used the secondary data in order to compare and contrast how each school was faring in terms of math and reading tests.

The researcher asked the participants ten questions based on the concepts from Farid and McMahan's 2004 book. The authors cited a number of ways that public schools can accommodate students of differing cultural backgrounds:

In the decades to come, the level of cultural diversity in the United States will continue to rise. As teachers, we need to broaden our points of view and seek to learn about the cultures of our students. As we learn, it becomes our responsibility to change the institutions where we work. Teaching refugee children who have come from cultures that are vastly different than our own is only part of the immense challenge we are facing. Each of us needs to answer whether we will resist the change, or whether we will help to shape the change for a better future for our students.²²

Somali students and their parents have special concerns and they need teachers and schools to accommodate their culture. The researcher devised five main questions to discover why Somali families chose charter schools over public schools:

1. Why did you choose a charter school for your children?
2. Did you choose this school because it accommodates your cultural needs, such as *halal* food, time and space for prayer, etc.?
3. How do you want your children to adapt to American culture?
4. How is the school helping you and advancing your child's education? Do know how the school is doing?
5. Do you want to enroll your child in a public school?

C. Results of the Study

In regard to satisfaction, most of the parents reported being very happy with the charter school. When the researcher asked participants why they chose the school, one parent said:

One of the reasons that I chose this school is because it is small. You are able to control the school. The school is safe and I don't have to worry about the children's security. The second reason that I enrolled my children here is the small class size. One is able to know everybody in the school. The relationships between my children and the teachers, and the school with me, are good. The school administration listens to us.

Another parent said, "All the communication between you and school is clear. It is community oriented. They open the doors for parent involvement. There are continuous teacher/parent conferences. The class size is small, not like in the public schools."

The researcher asked how parents found out about the charter schools. One participant mentioned that school administrators reached out to them. Charter schools usually door knock, post flyers at malls and community centers, and send notices to homes.

Another parent said that the main reason that they chose the school was because they were dissatisfied with public schools, and that the administrators of charter schools respected their culture. For example, the participant said, "One teacher refused to allow my son to pray. When I went to the school, the principal immediately called the teacher and explained my concern. After that, the teacher did not stop my son from praying."

The researcher also investigated parent views about the balance between acculturation and preserving Somali culture. Somali parents are proud of their culture and want to preserve it. Kapteijns and Arman contend that, "In general, Somalis have a strong sense of communal identity and cultural confidence and pride. They feel strongly about their cultural values and habits as well as their religion, Islam, which appears to strengthen their resilience."²³

The researcher asked the parents if they were concerned that sending their children to a small school where there was not much diversity might make it difficult for them to integrate and adapt to American culture. One parent replied:

I want my children to be multicultural. That is, I want my children to take from American culture everything that is positive. As long they are in United States, I am not worried about them getting enough exposure to American culture. At the same time, I want my children to keep their own culture. But if there are some negative aspects of Somali culture, I do not want that for them. For example, the way Somali people use politics these days is not good. Also, some Somali people are working hard, but not pursuing the higher education they need to make a good life. This is what I want to take from American culture. On other hand, some Somali people try to work hard to get a good life, such as a nice car, or business, or house, etc., but not through education.

Another parent disagreed with this view and said, “We want to keep 100 percent of our culture. There is not anything that is bad about my culture. We are the first generation in the United States and we want to pass on our culture to our children.”

In regard to parent assessment of the school’s academic performance, one participant said:

I do not know how the school is doing compared to public schools. However, Lighthouse is a relatively new school and it is making a lot of improvements. I get a student report card every quarter, and I see how my child is improving. I am happy with this school. My children are happy, too, and that is what I consider more then anything else. Even if the school is performing at a lower academic level then the public schools, still I want to keep my child at Lighthouse.

Some parents were aware how the school is doing in terms of test scores, and they acknowledged that the school was improving. Most parents, however, were not aware how the Lighthouse Academy compared to other schools.

Based on this sample, generally speaking, most parents who have children in charter schools want them to stay at the charter schools. They like the good service that charter schools provide and the steady communication about how their children are doing. One parent asserted that his children will not go back to public schools. The parent said, “Never! My main goal as a parent is for my child to learn and to keep our culture. The only places that allow me to do that are charter schools. In addition, public schools have an average of 1,500 students, whereas Lighthouse has less then 200. In small schools, you are better able to control and teach the students. Charter schools are quieter.”

When asked same question, another participant said, “Never! If public school were the only choice, my child would be in home schooling.”

A third parent has one child in public school and another in charter school. She said that she likes the public school her child is attending. One student was doing fine in public school and she kept her there. The other child, who was having problems, was transferred to Lighthouse. In contrast to some other parents, the priority of this mother was more about education, rather than culture. The parent further elaborated that she can teach her children about Somali culture at home.

D. Discussion

Most of the parents in this study seemed to echo what Farid and McMahan asserted regarding accommodation of parents. Farid and McMahan argue that educators need to learn about the culture of their “customers” in order meet their needs. One parent stated strongly that it is a high priority to keep their culture, saying, “In Somalia, we used to have *Wasaarada Waxbarashada iyo Barbaarinta*, which means Minister of Education and Nurturing, while here we have only the Department of Education. Nurturing children is big deal for us. For us, charter schools are filling those shoes.” That was the main reason parents cited for enrolling their children in charter schools.

Most parents were not well informed about how to choose and evaluate a school. Even though most of the parents did not care about comparing their chosen school to the public schools, they were handicapped by not being able to compare the charter school options.

The interviews with this group of parents seem to indicate that Somalis’ highest value, in terms of school choice, is keeping their culture. As mentioned previously, parents do not want their children to assimilate into American culture 100 percent. When parents see that their children are assimilating beyond their level of comfort, many bring their children back home so that they can relearn their culture. This is most common among those who value their culture most strongly and do not believe in assimilation.

E. Conclusions/Recommendations

Choosing the best and most appropriate school for one’s child is not an easy decision, especially for Somali immigrants in Minnesota. Parents

need to be well informed when it comes to educating their children and choosing schools. To summarize, the findings from this study identified several reasons why Somali parents choose charter schools over public schools. Most participants clearly agreed that the main reason to choose a charter school was to preserve their culture. The participants also asserted that they will not send their children to public schools, even if the charter schools have lower academic ratings than the public schools. Finally, as the interviews showed, most parents are not well versed in how to evaluate the quality of schools.

The following are a few recommendations for Somali parents to aid them in choosing a charter school:

- (1) One of the main things that parents ask themselves is how to compare schools and determine which one is the best fit for their children. Most of the schools where Somali parents enrolled their children were the lowest performing in the state. Thus, parents need to know how to evaluate the options. These days, most of the information they need is available on the Internet. Parents need to know how to locate the school report card and how to read it. Most schools are willing to help, so parents should visit the schools and ask every question that they have.
- (2) Parents need to balance the value that they place on culture with the quality of education their children receive. Ignoring the quality of education is not a solution in the 21st century, when the world expects a person to have a certain level of knowledge and be able to work effectively and efficiently.
- (3) The final recommendation for the Somali parents is to acculturate and become proficient in the aspects of American culture they need to master to get ahead. It is essential to learn the environment and culture where you live, without leaving behind your own culture. In general, without acculturation, the immigrant cannot succeed.

One area that is important in the U.S. is getting involved in one's children's education. Most of the parents in this study did not become involved in their children's schools unless they were invited. This is not because they are indifferent to the quality of education. In Somali culture parents expect teachers to educate their children. It is not common for parents to become involved with their children's education

unless there is some problem. Somali parents need to learn the concept of parent involvement, which is an important component of American education. Without parent involvement students will have difficulty succeeding in school.

Notes

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21. Ibid., p. 36.

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