

## Chapter 8

# Community Schools: Improving Academic Achievement Through Meaningful Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the connection between a school's efforts to engage with parents and community members and the academic achievement of its students. The author examines two case studies from Tennessee- the charter school model within the state-run Achievement School District in Memphis, and the community school model in Knoxville. The chapter begins with an explanation of key terms, followed by an introduction of each case study. Next, the author compares student academic achievement within each educational model, demonstrating that the community schools have achieved greater gains than the charter schools. The author then analyzes survey and interview data from parents and community members to compare each educational model's parental and community engagement efforts. Ultimately, the author concludes that in Tennessee, the community school model has been more effective than the charter school model in improving student academic achievement in large part because of its emphasis on meaningful engagement with parents and community members.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, policymakers across the nation have adopted charter schools as a policy prescription to improve student academic achievement in poor-performing school districts. Tennessee is a prime example of a state in which charter schools have been embraced as a wholesale remedy to improve poor-performing public schools. In 2010, the Tennessee state legislature created the Achievement School District (ASD), a state-run special school district with the authority to take over the operation of public schools within the bottom five percent of the state in terms of academic achievement. The ASD can either run the schools directly or convert them into charter schools. The majority of the state's worst-performing schools are located in Memphis, due to the city's high level of poverty and its

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school district's lack of resources. By 2017, the ASD had taken over the operation of 31 public schools in Memphis, converting almost all of them into charter schools. The stated policy goal of the ASD was to move its schools from the bottom five percent to the top 25 percent of academic performance in the state within five years. However, more than five years after taking over its first schools, the ASD has fallen far short of this goal.

As the ASD rapidly expanded in Memphis, a very different approach to education reform was quietly being developed on the other side of the state in Knoxville. Led by University of Tennessee professor Dr. Robert Kronick, a movement was launched in Knoxville to embrace the community school model. A community school is a traditional public school that partners with community organizations to provide services that meet the holistic needs of students and families. These services are tailored to meet the unique needs of each school, and can include meals, after school care, health care, and adult classes, to name a few. The goal is to improve academic achievement by addressing the development of the whole child, and to transform the school into a hub for the community. Knoxville's first community school opened in 2009, and by 2017, the city was home to 15 community schools. Knoxville's community schools have substantially improved the academic achievement of their students.

Tennessee provides an excellent case study to examine two divergent approaches to education reform: the ASD's charter school model in Memphis, and the community school model in Knoxville. Perhaps the most striking difference between these two models is their approach towards parental and community engagement. The community school model is deeply rooted in meaningful engagement with parents, families, and the larger community. In contrast, many of the charter schools within the ASD have not sufficiently prioritized parental and community engagement. In this chapter, the author argues that in Tennessee, the community school model has been more effective than the charter school model in improving academic achievement in large part because of its emphasis on meaningful engagement with parents and community members. The chapter begins with a definition of key terms, followed by an introduction of the two case studies and a comparison of academic achievement within each educational model. The chapter concludes with an analysis of each model's different approach towards parental and community engagement and a discussion of the key implications of these differences.

## **DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS**

A charter school is generally defined as a publicly-funded school that operates independently of the local school district (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). These schools operate under a written agreement, known as a charter, usually issued by a state or local government agency (Brouillette, 2002). The charter is granted to a charter operator, which directly oversees the day-to-day operations of the school. There are several types of charter operators, but for the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be on charter management organizations (CMOs), which are non-profit entities that operate multiple schools (Epple, Romano, & Zimmer, 2016). Well-known national CMOs include Green Dot and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP). The majority of the schools within the ASD are run by CMOs, and the analysis of the ASD in this chapter focuses exclusively on those schools.

Charter schools are considered to be public schools because they are funded by public money. Each school receives a payment per pupil that is close to or equal to the amount spent per pupil in the local school district (Epple et al., 2016). In addition, these schools often rely on the local school district to provide certain services, such as busing (Epple et al., 2016). Some charter schools, especially those af-

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