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Community Schools: A More Effective Solution for School Improvement in Tennessee

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that the community school model is a more effective solution than the charter school model for improving K-12 schools in Tennessee. I begin by providing background information on both models, including an explanation of key concepts and a brief history. In the methods section, I explain my comparative case study approach, which examines charter schools within the Achievement School District in Memphis and the community schools in Knoxville. I then outline the three indicators I use to evaluate each educational model. These are: (1) student achievement, (2) parental engagement, and (3) public accountability mechanisms. Next, I introduce the two case studies, providing background and context for each. In the results section, I use data and outcomes from each case study to demonstrate that community schools have been more effective in improving schools in Tennessee than their charter school counterparts. Finally, I discuss policy implications and provide recommendations to policymakers. This thesis contributes to the literature on school reform by making the case for community schools as a more effective alternative to the “school choice” approach that has dominated the education reform movement for the past two decades.

Community Schools: A More Effective Solution for School Improvement in Tennessee

Introduction

Public schools in Tennessee have struggled for decades with low achievement and graduation rates. According to Education Week's 2017 Quality Counts report, Tennessee's public schools ranked 36th in the nation. In recent years, Tennessee has implemented sweeping education reforms, with Memphis serving as the main laboratory for these experimental policy changes. These reforms have been driven by the theory that increasing competition and choice through charter schools will benefit all students. In 2010, the Tennessee state legislature created the Achievement School District (ASD) and authorized it to take over the operation of public schools ranked in the bottom five percent of the state in terms of performance. Due to the city's high level of poverty and the chronic under-funding of its public school system, the vast majority of these poor-performing schools are in Memphis. So far, the ASD has taken over 31 public schools in Memphis and converted almost all of them into charter schools run by private charter operators. The stated policy goal of the ASD was to catapult its schools from the bottom five percent to the top 25 percent of schools within five years (Zimmer et al., 2015). However, more than five years after its creation, the ASD has made little progress towards meeting this ambitious goal. Additionally, the ASD has eroded the trust between schools and community members who resent the takeover of their public schools by charter school operators from out of the state who are not held accountable to the community.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the state in Knoxville, a very different approach to school improvement has been quietly developed and expanded over the past decade, with overwhelmingly positive results. This approach, known as the community school model, forges partnerships between traditional public schools and community organizations to provide services

that meet the non-academic needs of students and their 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. Ideally, the services are provided at the school building itself, transforming it into a hub for the community. In this way, community schools support healthy development and higher achievement by addressing the holistic needs of students and families. Knoxville's first community school was opened in 2009, and today, the city is home to 15 community schools. Students in these schools have achieved significant improvements in test scores and attendance rates, and they have had fewer disciplinary referrals as well. Additional benefits of this model have been increased trust and engagement between schools, families, and the surrounding communities.

In this thesis, I argue that the community school model is a more effective solution than the charter school model for improving K-12 schools in Tennessee. I begin by providing an overview of each model, including definitions of key terms and a brief history. Next, in the methods section, I explain my comparative case study approach, which examines charter schools within the ASD in Memphis and the community schools in Knoxville. I also explain the three indicators that I use to evaluate each educational model, which are student achievement, parental engagement, and public accountability mechanisms. Next, I introduce the two case studies, providing background and context for each. In the results section, I present data and outcomes from each case study to demonstrate that community schools have been more effective than charter schools in improving outcomes in K-12 schools in Tennessee. Finally, I discuss policy implications and recommendations for moving forward.

Background

What Are Charter Schools?

Charter schools have been implemented in various distinct ways across the country. Thus, it can be difficult to articulate a single definition of the term “charter school.” Scholars generally define a charter school 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). As of 2015, 41 states and the District of Columbia had authorized charter schools to operate, but the specific regulations and requirements that govern these schools vary greatly from state to state (Epple, Romano, & Zimmer, 2016). In general, states grant charter schools a certain degree of autonomy, meaning that they are not subject to the same regulations as traditional public schools and they are not held accountable to the local elected school board. Instead, states set benchmarks for improved student achievement that charter schools are expected to meet (Brouillette, 2002). On average, each school’s charter lasts for three to five years, although this varies by state, and the charter is either reauthorized or revoked based on the school’s progress towards improving student achievement (Brouillette, 2002).

Two related yet distinct terms that are important to understand when studying charter schools are *authorizer* and *operator*. An authorizer is any entity that has the power to grant charters for schools. As mentioned above, in most states, local and state government agencies (usually the local school district and the state department of education) are the primary authorizers (Epple et al., 2016). However, in some states, other entities, including universities and nonprofit organizations, are delegated the power to grant charters (Epple et al., 2016). Each charter is granted to a charter operator, which is the organization that directly oversees the day-

to-day operation of the school. Charter school operators generally fall into one of three categories. First, they may be freestanding individuals who are not affiliated with any organization and who often have deep ties to the local community (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Second, operators may be part of a non-profit Charter Management Organization (CMO) that operates multiple schools (examples include Green Dot and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)) (Epple et al., 2016). Finally, in some states, charter operators may be part of an Education Management Organization (EMO), which is a for-profit entity (Epple et al., 2016).

Charter schools are considered 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 affiliated with a CMO or EMO, also solicit funding from private donors (Fabricant & Fine, 2012).

Despite its rapid proliferation as a central strategy for school improvement, the charter school model is relatively new. The nation's first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991, and the first charter school opened there the following year. The concept was originally championed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) as a way to allow teachers to experiment with innovative teaching methods in an environment free from the constraints of the traditional public school system (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). AFT president Albert Shanker envisioned charter schools as incubators where new ideas could be tested and, if effective, eventually implemented throughout the public school system (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). However, as the charter school model spread, education reformers began to frame it as an alternative to public schools that had poor student outcomes (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Thus, a

more market-based ideology emerged, with proponents claiming that more competition and choice within the education system would lead to improved outcomes for all students (Brouillette, 2002). Today, this ideology dominates the charter school movement, with many leaders championing the so-called “no excuses” mentality (as in, poverty is not an excuse for poor academic achievement) (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Charter schools have received broad political support from both Republicans and Democrats, and from philanthropists such as the Gates and Walton families as well (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Today, there are over 6,000 charter schools operating across 42 states (Berends, 2015).

What Are Community Schools?

A community school is a traditional public school that is open year-round, both before and after regular school hours, and on the weekends (Dryfoos, 2002). These extended hours allow the school to provide a host of services and programs that are tailored to meet the specific needs of that school’s students and their families. In this way, community schools seek to support the holistic development of students by addressing both academic and non-academic needs. Each community school has a full-time coordinator, known as a site coordinator or resource coordinator, who is responsible for coordinating with various governmental and non-profit agencies to provide the needed services at the school. The site coordinator also works closely with the school’s administration, teachers, and staff to ensure that the delivery of services is well-integrated into the daily operations of the school (Dryfoos, 2005).

The services provided at a community school can vary greatly depending on the needs of the student population, but they generally fall into one of three categories. The first category encompasses services that address the basic needs of students, and these include meals, health care, and mental health services. The second category includes services that are more oriented

towards families, such as housing and employment assistance, GED courses and other adult classes, and assistance applying for public benefits. A third category includes services and programs that aim to enrich students' learning experiences and expand their horizons, like academic tutoring, sports programs, gardening, and language classes and other cultural programs. These are just a few examples, since community schools across the nation offer a wide range of innovative services. The key is that these services are always tailored to meet the specific needs of the students and their families. As Joy Dryfoos, a leading scholar of community schools, explains, "One of the mantras of this emerging field is 'no two alike'; each community school evolves according to the particular needs and resources of the population and the neighborhood" (Dryfoos, 2005, p. 8).

Essential to any community school program is an intermediary, or an organization that is responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating the program (Melaville, Jacobson, & Blank, 2011). There are three major types of intermediaries through which community schools can be implemented. The most common intermediaries are non-profit organizations, which provide resources and work with schools to implement the program. Alternatively, the school district itself can implement this model directly by designating certain schools as community schools and providing site coordinators, other support staff, and resources. Finally, a university can serve as an intermediary, supplying its partner schools with financial support, personnel, and student and faculty volunteers. This model is known as the University-Assisted Community School, and has been implemented most notably in Philadelphia through the University of Pennsylvania and in Knoxville, Tennessee through the University of Tennessee. While these are the three most common types of intermediaries, they are not the only ones. The distinct needs

and resources of each community determine which intermediary, or intermediaries, will be most effective in implementing community schools on a broad scale.

To explain the main goals of the community school model, I will refer to the leading national voice of the community school movement. The Coalition for Community Schools (CCS) is an alliance of over 150 national, state, and local organizations that advocates for community schools, provides resources, and fosters connections among leaders in the field. CCS defines a community school as “both a place and a set of partnerships,” underscoring the importance of collaboration between school personnel, local leaders and organizations, parents, and community members (Roche, Blank, & Jacobson, 2017). The goal here is for all stakeholders to work together to support student success, and this spirit of collaboration is fundamental to the community school model. The Coalition also underscores the importance of valuing diversity and pursuing equitable outcomes for students of all backgrounds (Roche et al., 2017). Additionally, CCS emphasizes the importance of local control and community-based decision-making when crafting and implementing community school programs.

In addition to outlining broad, guiding principles, the Coalition also identifies more specific goals for individual community schools. In their latest report, CCS identifies three main goals that the ideal community school works to achieve. The first is “college, career, and civic-ready students” (Roche et al., 2017, p. 5). Thus, community schools seek to improve the academic achievement of students and to ensure that they are prepared for success in college and the workforce after graduation. In order to attain this goal, community school leaders focus on addressing the holistic needs of students to eliminate barriers to academic success. The second goal is to foster “strong families” (Roche et al., 2017, p. 5). In pursuit of this goal, community schools focus on engaging with parents and increasing parental involvement in their children’s

education. They also seek to connect families with the resources and services they need to be successful. The third and final goal is to create “healthy communities” (Roche et al., 2017, p. 5). This represents the ultimate aim of the community school, which is to serve as a hub of services and an anchor for the entire community. Joy Dryfoos sums up these goals in a more succinct way, stating, “Community schools are committed to school transformations that lead to improved academic achievement along with other goals related to youth development and family and community well-being” (Dryfoos, 2002, p. 394).

It is clear that community schools take a broad view of school improvement. Rather than focusing solely on increasing grades and test scores, a community school also seeks to improve the holistic well-being of students and their families while strengthening the communities that surround them. Scholars generally trace the community school concept back to Hull House, the Chicago settlement house founded in 1889 by social reformer Jane Addams (Benson, Harkavy, Johanek, & Puckett, 2009). Addams designed Hull House to be a hub for the surrounding low-income, immigrant communities, providing much-needed services and support. Drawing inspiration from Addams, philosopher and progressive reformer John Dewey applied this approach to public education, envisioning the school as a “social center” (Benson et al., 2009).

Thus, beginning in the early 1900s, the concept of the school as a social center began to take hold. Reformers experimented by opening up schools to host cultural programs and community meetings, and many also arranged for services such as health and dental care to be provided directly at the school (Benson et al., 2009). During this period, the public school gradually assumed the role of a central institution that anchored the entire community. This philosophy of community-centered schooling continued to be developed as the 20th century progressed, with innovative programs led by pioneers such as Elsie Clapp in West Virginia and

Leonard Covello in New York (Benson et al., 2009).

The community school movement was revitalized in the 1980s and 1990s, as education reform emerged as a central issue in national discourse. The Coalition for Community Schools was founded in 1997 and has played a crucial role in the proliferation of community schools. According to the National Center for Community Schools (2018), there are now over 5,000 community schools across the United States. Today, Chicago and New York City, both central sites in the development of the community school movement, each have over 150 community schools. Thus, what began as a philosophy of community-centered, service-oriented public education is now a national model for school improvement.

Methods

To demonstrate that the community school model is more effective than the charter school model in improving K-12 schools, I conduct a comparative case study of these two models as they have been implemented in Tennessee. Specifically, I examine charter schools within the state-run Achievement School District (ASD) in Memphis, where the most aggressive and widespread “school choice” reforms have occurred. I then examine the implementation of community schools in Knoxville, which is home to the state’s highest number of community schools. To evaluate the effectiveness of each educational model, I rely on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data on student achievement, parental engagement, and public accountability mechanisms.

Student Achievement

To understand student achievement in charter schools and community schools, I rely on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). Calculated and published by the Tennessee Department of Education, TVAAS measures the growth in student achievement over

time and assigns a numerical score to each school yearly. TVAAS scores are a helpful way to measure student achievement across schools and districts because they focus on change over time, rather than just proficiency levels. This measure provides a more accurate reflection of school improvement (or lack thereof) than test scores alone because it recognizes that students often begin at different levels of proficiency, and may be making progress even though their scores remain below proficient. In my analysis, I compare the TVAAS scores for the 2016-2017 school year for all 15 community schools in Knoxville, as well as 18 ASD schools in Memphis that are run by Charter Management Organizations. This portion of my analysis is largely quantitative, relying on numerical measures to understand student achievement across charter and community schools.

Parental Engagement

In addition to student achievement, I am also interested in the effects that each educational model has on families. Thus, my analysis includes a discussion of the effects of charter and community schools on levels of parental engagement. While a positive relationship between schools and families is a desirable outcome in its own right, there is also evidence that students in schools with high levels of parental engagement are more successful both in and out of the classroom (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2015). Therefore, studying parental engagement is crucial to understanding the effectiveness of both charter and community schools. In this section of my analysis, I rely on a variety of qualitative sources. On the ASD side, I examine research conducted by a team of scholars at Vanderbilt University on public engagement within the ASD, as well as public interviews and reports published by local newspapers in Memphis. For Knoxville's community schools, I rely on research conducted by Dr. Robert Kronick, director of the University-Assisted Community Schools program at the University of Tennessee.

Public Accountability

Finally, I examine the mechanisms for public accountability that exist for each model. The issue of accountability has long been one of the main flashpoints in the debate over charter schools and school choice, so I assess it here from a comparative perspective. For each model, I examine what mechanisms are in place to provide accountability to the public. I then explore what implications this has on the effectiveness of each model as a sustainable strategy for school improvement. In this section, I again rely on qualitative sources, including public records and reports.

In sum, to support my thesis, I rely on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data on student achievement, parental engagement, and public accountability mechanisms. I draw data from a variety of sources, including the Tennessee Department of Education, public interviews and reports published in local newspapers, and research conducted by scholars at Vanderbilt University and the University of Tennessee. Measuring the effectiveness of an educational model is a complicated task, as there are several complex and overlapping factors at play. I chose these three indicators to provide a holistic understanding of the effects of each model on school improvement in Tennessee.

Introduction of Case Studies*The Achievement School District*

In January 2010, the Tennessee state legislature passed the Tennessee First to the Top Act. This act created the Achievement School District (ASD), a legal entity under the state department of education that was granted the authority to take over the operations of any school that did not meet state performance standards. The legislation called for the state commissioner of education to compile a list of Title I schools in the lowest five percent of the state in terms of

achievement (Zimmer, Kho, Henry, & Viano, 2015). These schools would then be eligible to be taken out of the jurisdiction of their local school district and be placed within the ASD (Zimmer et al., 2015). The ASD could either oversee the operations of the school directly, or contract with an individual, governmental entity, or nonprofit entity to oversee the operations of the school (Zimmer et al., 2015). The stated policy goal of the ASD was to move its schools from the bottom five percent to the top 25 percent of achievement within five years (Zimmer et al., 2015).

In March 2010, Tennessee was awarded a national Race to the Top grant of \$500 million to implement the education reform strategies outlined in the First to the Top Act. Among other things, the Race to the Top program encouraged states to develop extensive school turnaround strategies that included removing low-performing schools from their local districts and replacing the principals and most teachers at these schools (Zimmer, Henry, & Kho, 2017). Part of the theory behind this strategy was that it would encourage local districts to design and implement school improvement strategies of their own to compete with the ASD and to maintain control of their schools (Zimmer et al., 2017). This prediction has materialized to a certain degree, as local school districts have created Innovation-Zone (i-Zone) programs to improve their lowest achieving schools. I will discuss the i-Zone programs in more detail in the results section.

Once Tennessee received the Race to the Top grant, the state wasted no time in implementing the ASD's school takeover strategy. The Tennessee Department of Education released its initial list of 83 priority schools, or those in the bottom five percent of the state in terms of achievement. A handful of these schools were located in Nashville and Chattanooga, but the vast majority, over 80 percent, were in Memphis (Zimmer et al., 2017). Thus, over the past five years, the ASD's efforts have been concentrated in Memphis. In fact, as of the 2016-2017

school year, the ASD has only opened 3 schools in Nashville (with one slated to close at the end of the school year), and the rest of its schools are in Memphis. Beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, the district took over its first 6 schools, adding an additional 11 the following school year, and 8 the next (Zimmer et al., 2017). By the 2016-2017 school year, the ASD was operating a total of 31 schools in Memphis. Although the ASD is authorized to operate its schools directly, it has largely chosen to contract this responsibility out to nonprofit Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). These CMOs are mostly national organizations that operate charter schools across the country and have little knowledge of or connection to the local communities in Memphis.

As of the 2016-2017 school year, out of the 31 schools under the ASD in Memphis, 26 were operated by CMOs. These charter schools are the focus of my analysis in this thesis. It is important to note that the charter schools within the ASD differ from ordinary charter schools in two key ways. First, they are not new, independent schools that have been created to provide competition and choice within the school district. Instead, these are existing, traditional public schools that have been taken out of their local school district and converted into charter schools run by CMOs. Second, instead of accepting students on a lottery basis or through some other selection process, the charter schools within the ASD are required to remain neighborhood schools and to accept all students that are zoned to attend that school, even those with disabilities. This eliminates the advantage that charter schools usually enjoy of being able to select which students will attend. These key differences impact the effectiveness of the ASD as a school improvement model, and they also expose some limitations of the charter school model in general. These issues are discussed further in the results section.

On the one hand, the ASD has been lauded as a national model for effective school

reform that should be replicated in other states across the country. On the other hand, local community members and elected officials have strongly opposed the ASD, claiming that it has disenfranchised the local community by eliminating their control over their own schools. Regardless of which camp one is in, the data shows that five years after the first ASD schools were opened, the district has fallen far short of its goal of moving its schools from the state's bottom five percent to the top 25 percent in terms of achievement. As of 2017, only three ASD schools had been removed from the state's priority list, and none had come close to ranking in the top 25 percent of the state (Bauman, 2017). In light of this reality, and considering the substantial federal and state resources expended on the ASD, it is prudent to reevaluate the effectiveness of this strategy.

Knoxville Community Schools

Knoxville's first community school was established in 2009 at Pond Gap Elementary School. Dr. Robert Kronick, professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling at the University of Tennessee, established a University-Assisted Community School (UACS) program at the school, which offers kindergarten through fifth grade. Pond Gap serves a highly diverse population, with students from 23 different countries who speak 19 languages (Lester, Kronick, & Benson, 2012). In addition, Pond Gap is a Title I school that serves primarily low-income students, with 90 percent receiving free or reduced-price lunch (Lester et al., 2012). Through the UACS program, Dr. Kronick leverages the resources of the University of Tennessee to support a holistic community school program at this local elementary school. He also secures funding from private individuals, including local businessmen, and nonprofit organizations, including United Way.

With these resources, Pond Gap operates an after-school program for its most at-risk

students. In this program, students receive academic support and one-on-one tutoring with local university and high school students. Students also participate in a variety of extracurricular activities, including music class, circus class, and gardening in the school's community garden. These activities help increase students' self-esteem and build soft skills (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Monday through Friday, Pond Gap serves dinner free of charge to its students, and family and community members are highly encouraged to join. This evening meal is one way in which the community school program seeks to foster greater engagement with families and the community. Through the UACS program, Pond Gap also offers a health clinic, mental health services, and ESL and GED courses for adults.

The main goals of Pond Gap's UACS program are to provide a safe place for students to go after school and to provide activities and services to meet students' academic, physical, and emotional needs (Lester et al., 2012). Additionally, Pond Gap seeks to be an anchor for the community, supporting its families and community members (Lester et al., 2012). These goals are achieved through the work of a team of staff that coordinates activities and services and ensures a seamless transition between the regular school day and the after school program. The students who participate in the after school program have achieved higher grades and test scores, fewer disciplinary referrals, and better attendance rates. Pond Gap remains Knoxville's flagship community school, serving as a blueprint for other local schools to follow.

For a few years, Pond Gap was Knoxville's only full-service community school. However, the community school model eventually spread, as principals witnessed Pond Gap's success and sought to implement similar programs at their own schools. This diffusion was assisted by the Great Schools Partnership (GSP), a nonprofit organization founded in 2005 to provide support and funding for innovative school improvement initiatives within Knox County

Schools. In 2012, GSP founded their community school initiative to provide resource coordinators and support for community school programs across the county. Today, GSP supports 13 community schools in Knox County, most of which serve low-income, at-risk youth from diverse backgrounds. Some of these schools serve largely rural populations, while others are located in the heart of the city. Recently, the University of Tennessee began operating a second UACS program at Inskip Elementary School. Thus, the total number of community schools in Knoxville as of the 2016-2017 school year was 15. Broad support from local leaders, school board members, nonprofit and community organizations, and private citizens has driven the growth and proliferation of the community school model in Knoxville.

Key Differences

From the beginning, Knoxville's community school movement has followed a grassroots, locally-driven approach to school improvement that places the needs and input of the community at the center. This method provides a sharp contrast to the approach of the ASD in Memphis, which has favored interventions by the state and by out-of-state charter operators over local decision-making and input from the community. Another key difference between the two programs lies in the theoretical foundations of each educational model. Community schools seek to improve academic achievement by addressing the holistic physical and emotional needs of students. Dr. Kronick emphasizes the importance of understanding how various economic, social, and political systems impact the performance of students and schools (Kronick & Basma, 2017). In contrast, charter school operators within the ASD believe that academic achievement can be improved by removing the school from local control, restructuring the school, and replacing most of the school's administrators and teachers. Charter schools seek a shift in culture and expectations, often referring to their students as scholars, for example. However, charter

schools generally do not seek to address the various systemic factors that can contribute to poor academic achievement. In fact, a favorite motto of many charter schools is that “poverty is not an excuse.” This “no-excuses” mentality, combined with a general disregard for community input and control, represents perhaps the most significant contrast between the two educational models outlined here.

Results

Student Achievement

To compare the effectiveness of charter and community schools in Tennessee, I begin with an analysis of student achievement. When measuring the effectiveness of any school improvement initiative, scholars and policymakers generally rely heavily on indicators of student achievement, which is often measured by examining student scores on standardized tests. However, I am taking a slightly different approach. Rather than analyzing raw standardized test scores, I rely instead on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS). TVAAS measures a school’s growth in academic achievement from year to year. TVAAS relies on results from the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) assessment administered yearly in grades 3-8, and results from End of Course (EOC) assessments for various subjects. Each year, the Tennessee Department of Education assigns each school in the state a numerical TVAAS score. The scores range from 1-5. A score of 1 or 2 indicates that the school fell below the expected level of growth in student achievement for that year. A score of 3 indicates that the school achieved about the expected level of growth for that year. Finally, a score of 4 or 5 indicates that the school achieved greater than the expected level of growth for that year.

Since I am measuring school improvement in historically low-achieving schools, the TVAAS scores provide a more useful indicator than test scores alone. TVAAS recognizes that

students begin at different levels of proficiency, and that students may be making academic progress even through their test scores remain below proficient. By measuring the growth in academic achievement over time, TVAAS scores reflect the progress, or lack thereof, that each school is making. These scores are often incorporated into teacher evaluations, which has caused some controversy in the state. However, I am solely focused on the composite TVAAS scores for each school.

For this analysis, I examine TVAAS scores from the 2016-2017 school year (the latest data available). As of the 2016-2017 school year, there were 26 schools run by Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) within the ASD in Memphis. Out of these schools, four did not have any TVAAS data available because they only offer kindergarten through second grade, which means they do not administer any standardized tests. Additionally, four schools had just been taken over by the ASD and converted into charter schools beginning in the 2016-2017 school year. Out of fairness, I have excluded these four schools from my analysis. Thus, my final sample includes 18 charter schools within the ASD in Memphis. In Knoxville, there were 15 community schools as of the 2016-2017 school year, and I examine TVAAS scores for all of these schools. Each school is assigned an overall composite TVAAS score ranging from 1-5. Additionally, each school receives a literacy composite score, which isolates the results from literature and reading assessments, and a numeracy composite score, which isolates the results from math assessments. In sum, each school receives three scores, and I analyze and compare these scores for both groups of schools.

After isolating the data for each group of schools, I calculated the average score in each of the three categories (overall composite, literacy composite, and numeracy composite) for each group of schools. My findings reveal that in each category, the average score is higher for the

Knoxville community schools than for the ASD charter schools. The average overall composite score for the ASD charter schools is a 2.2, which reflects less than sufficient growth in academic achievement. In comparison, the average overall composite score for Knoxville’s community schools is a 2.7, which borders on sufficient growth in academic achievement. The difference in average literacy composite scores is less significant, with the ASD charter schools scoring an average of 2.9 and the Knoxville community schools earning an average of 3. Finally, the ASD charter schools earned an average numeracy composite score of 2.4, while the Knoxville community schools scored an average of 2.8 in this same category. In each category, the average score for the ASD charter schools reflects less than sufficient growth, while the averages for the Knoxville community schools are at or near sufficient growth. Figure 1 presents this data in more detail.

	Average Overall Composite Score	Average Literacy Composite Score	Average Numeracy Composite Score
ASD Charter Schools	2.2	2.9	2.4
Knoxville Community Schools	2.7	3	2.8

Figure 1. Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

Comparing the average scores does not provide the full story. An analysis of the distribution of TVAAS scores within each group of schools reflects an even more stark difference in student achievement. Of the 18 ASD charter schools examined in this analysis, 11 received an overall composite score of 1 for the 2016-2017 school year. Put another way, 61 percent of charter schools within the ASD received the lowest possible score for growth in student achievement. On the higher end of the scale, one ASD charter school received a score of 3, one received a score of 4, and four of these schools received a 5. Therefore, out of these 18 schools, just 6 achieved sufficient or greater than sufficient growth in student achievement for

the 2016-2017 school year. Overall, one-third of these schools received a score of 3-5, while two-thirds earned a score of 1 or 2. Thus, the vast majority of charter schools within the ASD are not achieving the expected levels of growth in student achievement from year to year. Figure 2 presents the full distribution of overall composite scores for the ASD charter schools.

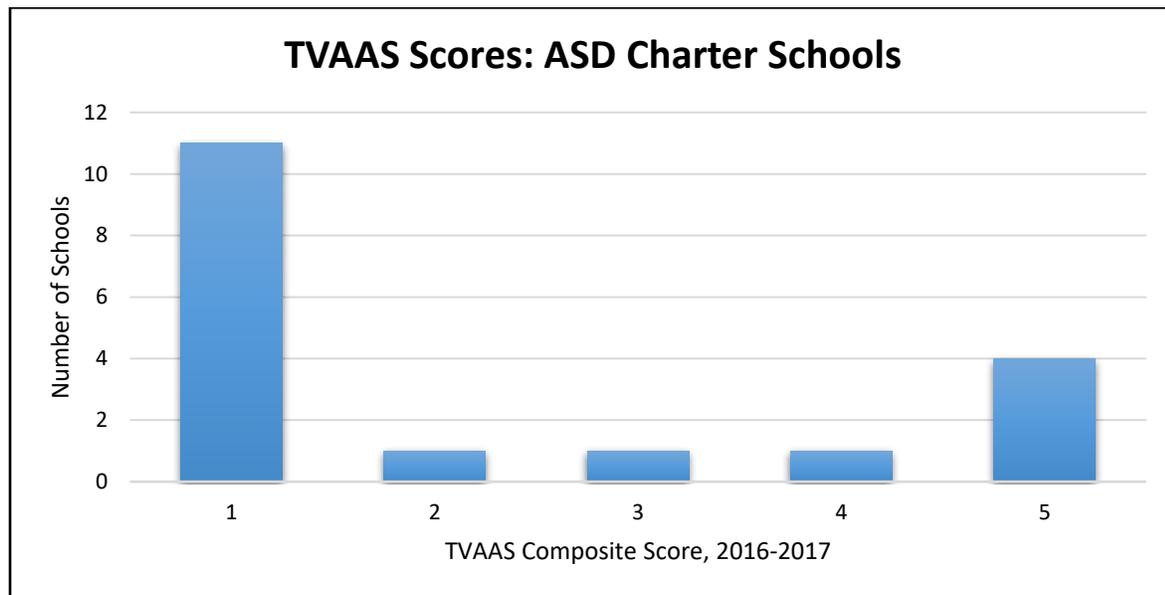


Figure 2. Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

The distribution of scores among Knoxville's community schools is markedly different. Out of those 15 schools, five received a score of 1. Thus, 33 percent of Knoxville's community schools received the lowest possible score for growth in student achievement. However, four schools received a score of 3, and four received a score of 5. This means that in total, 53 percent of Knoxville's community schools achieved sufficient or greater than sufficient growth in student achievement for the 2016-2017 school year. This figure is much higher than the 33 percent of ASD charter schools that achieved the same. Overall, a majority of Knoxville's community schools are attaining at least the expected levels of growth in student achievement from year to year. Figure 3 presents the full distribution of scores for Knoxville's community schools.

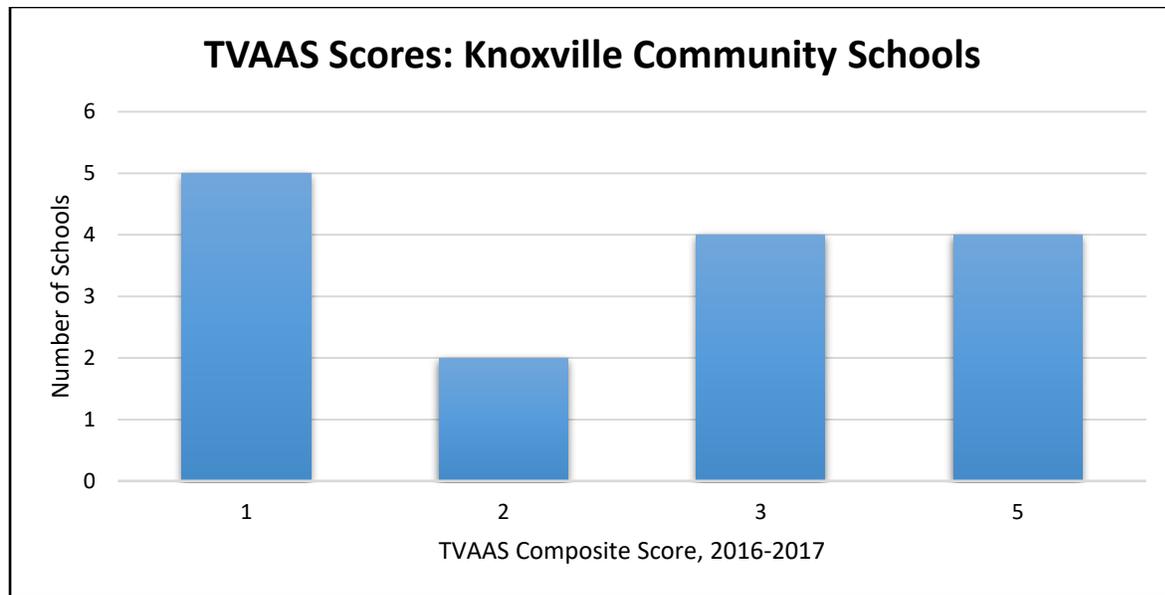


Figure 3. Source: Tennessee Department of Education.

This analysis of the most recent TVAAS data reveals a significant divergence in gains in academic achievement between charter schools and community schools in Tennessee. A majority (53%) of Knoxville's community schools are meeting or exceeding expectations for growth in academic achievement. In contrast, a large majority (67%) of the charter schools within the ASD in Memphis are not meeting these same expectations. These findings are consistent with research conducted by a team of scholars at Vanderbilt University. In 2015, they published a report that analyzed similar data from the Tennessee Department of Education and found that schools within the ASD made no significant gains in student achievement (Zimmer, Kho, Henry, & Viano, 2015). In some cases, researchers found that ASD schools actually had negative effects on student achievement. Interestingly, the schools with the poorest levels of academic achievement were those within the ASD that were run by CMOs, which are the same schools I am examining in my analysis.

Another significant finding of the 2015 Vanderbilt report was that schools within a Shelby County Schools program known as the Innovation-Zone (i-Zone) did show significant gains in student achievement. The i-Zone program features elements that resemble a community

school approach, including partnerships with community organizations to provide support and longer hours for the school day. The success of the i-Zone schools in improving student achievement provides further evidence that the community school model and similar approaches are more successful in improving student outcomes than the charter school approach.

Before moving on to examine parental engagement, I must add a footnote to my analysis of the ASD charter schools' TVAAS scores. Recall that just five of these schools received a composite score of 4 or 5. Two of those schools, Humes Preparatory Academy and Klondike Preparatory Academy, were run by a CMO called Gestalt Community Schools. In the fall of 2016, Gestalt announced that it would be exiting the ASD and would no longer operate those two schools, despite the fact that both schools were showing significant gains in student achievement (Kebede, 2017). Leaders of Gestalt blamed the decision on low enrollment and a subsequent lack of funding (Kebede, 2017). The ASD later announced that one of the schools would be taken over by another CMO, and the other would close completely. Thus, even when a CMO is demonstrating significant gains in student achievement, it may exit the ASD and abandon the schools it has chosen to take over if it does not feel there are sufficient incentives to stay. This example underscores the volatility and disruptiveness of the ASD charter school takeover model, an issue which will be discussed further in the following section.

Parental Engagement

I now switch gears, taking a qualitative approach to examine how the ASD charter schools and the Knoxville community schools engage with parents and families. Parental engagement is crucial to the success of any school, as research has shown that students in schools with higher levels of parental engagement are more successful in school and in life (Putnam, 2000; Putnam, 2015). Parental engagement is even more integral to the success of

school improvement efforts, which inevitably involve change and uncertainty. As I demonstrate in this section, the ASD charter schools have approached parental engagement in a different manner than the Knoxville community schools. While the community school model prioritizes meaningful engagement with parents and families as a key component of its strategy, the charter operators within the ASD have generally viewed parental engagement as a secondary concern, and in some cases, a barrier. I argue that these distinct approaches have seriously affected the success or failure of each model in improving student outcomes.

I first examine parental engagement within the ASD charter schools in Memphis. In 2016, researchers Joshua Glazer and Cori Egan published an extensive report on public engagement within the ASD. Glazer and Egan interviewed 41 local leaders, community members, and officials from both Shelby County Schools and the ASD to understand various perspectives on the efforts of ASD schools to engage with the public, and with parents in particular. Before delving into the results of these interviews, however, the researchers provide a brief history of the social and political context surrounding education in Memphis, which I will briefly summarize.

African Americans have historically comprised 50 to 60 percent of the Memphis population, and there has always been a sizable White minority in the city. In Memphis, tense race relations have long been a fact of life, and deep racial prejudices and inequities exist even today. For most of the city's history, there were two separate school districts: Memphis City Schools, which served those that lived within the city, and Shelby County Schools, which served the suburban areas outside of the city limits. School desegregation efforts in the 1960s and 1970s were largely unsuccessful, only causing White students to abandon the city school system for private schools or the suburban district. By 2000, Memphis ranked behind Detroit as the nation's

second-most segregated city. While Shelby County Schools had sufficient resources and favorable student outcomes, Memphis City Schools struggled with low student achievement, low graduation rates, and a chronic lack of funding.

In 2009, city leaders began to discuss merging the city and county school systems in an attempt to pool resources and provide greater opportunities to all students. Despite heavy opposition from the suburban communities, Memphis City Schools surrendered its charter in 2010, and the merger was complete. However, a change in state law allowed six suburban municipalities to withdraw from the consolidated district and form their own independent school districts. The result is that today's Shelby County Schools serves almost exactly the same population as did the former Memphis City Schools, a population that is largely low-income and African American. The battle over the merger was highly racially charged. One Shelby County official bluntly explained:

“I think that race and socio-economics, the fear that somebody one day would do a bunch of busing and integrating- I think that was a concern. I also think [it was] just a perception of Memphis City Schools, and everything that is Memphis. The suburbs just want no part of that” (Glazer & Egan, 2016, p. 10).

In addition to this history of racial discrimination and segregation, it is also important to know that Memphians identify quite strongly with their neighborhoods, and that neighborhood schools are often a central part of this identity. Given this historical and cultural context, parents in Memphis were highly skeptical of charter operators coming in from outside the community to take over their neighborhood schools. This skepticism was compounded by the fact that most charter operators did not make sufficient efforts to engage with parents in a meaningful way. One interviewee described the ASD's early community engagement process as feeling “very

disjointed, finite, and short-term and ‘get it done’. It doesn’t feel like it’s authentic. There are no parents involved” (Glazer & Egan, 2016, p. 12). In addition, many respondents indicated that the ASD lacked an understanding of the unique culture and history of each neighborhood, which fueled misunderstandings and mistrust (Glazer & Egan, 2016).

At an institutional level, it appears that, at least initially, ASD leaders viewed parental engagement as a diversion of resources away from their primary goal of improving student outcomes. Rather than viewing these two goals as being linked, ASD leaders considered meaningful engagement with parents and communities as a secondary concern, almost an afterthought. This approach seems a bit naïve, especially given the highly disruptive nature of the ASD model, in which local schools are taken over by charter operators from outside the community that replace most teachers and administrators. Former ASD superintendent Chris Barbic acknowledged that “the ASD found it difficult to stay focused on community engagement” and did not prioritize it sufficiently (Glazer & Egan, 2016, p. 19).

Some community members felt that the ASD’s efforts only created the “illusion of community power,” while the true power remained with the ASD itself (Glazer & Egan, 2016, p. 20). There have been instances in which the ASD has proceeded with a charter school takeover despite strong and vocal opposition from parents and community members. Perhaps the most contentious and highly publicized example of this was at Raleigh-Egypt High School in North Memphis, a neighborhood in which several schools have been converted to charter schools under the ASD. Raleigh-Egypt High was on the state’s priority list, and therefore eligible for takeover by the ASD. In order to prevent this, parents, community members, and elected officials came together and created a plan for improving academic achievement at the school, which was approved by Shelby County Schools superintendent Dorsey Hopson (Buntin, 2015).

Nevertheless, the ASD announced in 2014 that it planned to allow CMO Green Dot Public Schools to take over the school. This announcement led to weeks of protests led by parents and community members who were outraged by the ASD's disregard of their wishes (Buntin, 2015). Finally, in November 2014, Green Dot announced that it was withdrawing its application to take over the school, citing a lack of capacity to conduct the necessary community outreach (Buntin, 2015).

By not prioritizing meaningful engagement with parents, the ASD has undermined its own school improvement efforts. Community members perceive the ASD as a group of outsiders telling parents what is best for their children rather than working with parents and trusting them to make decisions about their children's education. Recently, in an effort to improve its community engagement efforts, the ASD created Neighborhood Advisory Councils (NACs) to approve or reject applications by CMOs to take over schools beginning in the 2016-2017 school year. Parents must make up at least half of each NAC's membership. Time will tell whether this approach will result in more meaningful engagement between parents and CMOs within the ASD.

In contrast, Knoxville's community schools have prioritized meaningful engagement with parents and families from the beginning. It is important to note that the approach of the community school model is far less disruptive than the ASD's charter takeover model. Knoxville's community schools have merely implemented a new intervention program within existing neighborhood schools, with the explicit goal of collaborating with families and the community to address their needs. This difference offers a partial explanation for why the Knoxville community schools have had more success in engaging with parents and families than the ASD charter schools. In addition, one of the stated goals of the community school model is to

foster meaningful partnerships with parents and families. As noted earlier, the Coalition for Community Schools lists fostering “strong families” as one of the three main goals of any community school program. This goal is pursued through engaging with parents, increasing parental involvement and presence at the school, and connecting parents with the services and resources they need to be successful. The leaders of Knoxville’s community schools have put this philosophy into practice in their schools.

Pond Gap Elementary School offers several programs that are designed to increase parental involvement with the school. Parents are highly encouraged to join their children for dinner, which is served free of charge five nights a week. This meal not only provides an opportunity for parents to spend quality time with their children, but it also allows them to form relationships with the community school teachers and staff. Pond Gap’s community garden is another venue for parental engagement, as parents are encouraged to assist their children and learn gardening skills themselves. In addition, various evening classes are offered at the school that are specifically for adults, including GRE courses and English classes (Basma & Kronick, 2016). These services are especially useful for the school’s sizable immigrant and refugee populations. The classes provide incentives for parents to come into the building and interact with the teachers, staff, and volunteers in ways that they might not otherwise.

As discussed earlier, the site coordinator plays an integral role at each community school. The site coordinators in Knoxville’s community schools place a heavy emphasis on building relationships with parents and families. One of their primary objectives is to conduct both a preliminary and ongoing needs assessment, in order to coordinate services that meet the specific needs of the families they serve. Thus, engaging with parents is crucial in order to fully understand what needs exist within families and the community. Site coordinators often go above

and beyond in fulfilling this role. When one child abruptly stopped attending the after school program at Pond Gap, the site coordinator made a home visit and learned that the family, headed by a single mother, did not have a car or other means of transportation (Kronick & Basma, 2017). The site coordinator then assisted the family in purchasing a car so that the children could attend the after school program, which in turn helped the mother secure employment (Kronick & Basma, 2017). This is just one of many examples of community school site coordinators investing time and effort in cultivating strong relationships with parents and families. As Dr. Kronick explains, “Families are a critically important facet of children’s school success. School family collaboration is critically important” (Kronick & Basma, 2017, p. 51).

In a 2017 study, parents at Pond Gap were interviewed about their perceptions of the community school program (Luter, Lester, Lochmiller, & Kronick, 2017). Respondents reported that the program had improved their children’s academic achievement and supported positive emotional and social development. Notably, respondents also described the program as “providing support to the parent as well” (Luter et al., 2017, p. 71). Thus, parents had positive perceptions of the program in terms of both student outcomes and support for families. The authors of this study concluded that strong parental engagement is one of the strengths of the community school model. In this way, Pond Gap and other community schools can become a model for “how to collaborate and build strong connections with families and communities” (Luter et al., 2017, p. 75).

In sum, the current literature suggests that Knoxville’s community schools have been more successful in forming meaningful relationships with parents than have the ASD charter schools in Memphis. As with any generalization, there are exceptions to this one. Some individual charter schools within the ASD have prioritized parental engagement, and some

CMOs report that parents, when surveyed, report high levels of satisfaction with their programs. However, there is a great deal of variation among CMOs, which itself is one of the downsides of the ASD approach. Additionally, many parents perceive the ASD and its CMOs as being hostile actors from outside the community that do not prioritize meaningful engagement with or input from parents. In contrast, proponents of the community school model emphasize engaging with parents and families as an integral component of their overall approach. Knoxville's community schools have put this theory into practice, and parents, when interviewed, seem to agree that these programs seek to build strong relationships with them. I argue that this emphasis on parental engagement has helped Knoxville's community schools achieve more positive student outcomes, as compared with the ASD charter schools in Memphis.

Public Accountability

So far, I have compared outcomes on a student and family level for both the ASD charter schools in Memphis and Knoxville's community schools. I now shift my focus to outcomes at the community level by examining the mechanisms for public accountability that exist for each educational model. Public accountability has long been a contentious issue in the debate over the charter school model. Charter schools receive public funding, but are operated by private entities. The accountability mechanisms in place for charter schools vary greatly from state to state. These issues raise questions about whether charter schools are truly held accountable to the public in a meaningful way.

In the case of the ASD, the issue of accountability is even more pronounced, since public schools are being removed from the jurisdiction of the local school district and school board and placed under the control of private charter operators. Thus, the main mechanism traditionally used to hold schools accountable to the public, the democratically elected school board, is lost.

Parents and concerned citizens have few institutionalized outlets through which to voice their opinions and concerns regarding the operation of the ASD charter schools. There is evidence that this lack of accountability and oversight has led to mismanagement and a misuse of funds within the ASD.

In 2016, the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury conducted its first full audit of the ASD, and it was highly critical of the ASD's management of finances and human resources. Among other things, the audit states that the ASD did not implement adequate controls and oversight of its expenditures and travel expenses. Specific examples of unreasonable or unapproved expenses include \$83,363 in expenditures that were not approved by management, \$2,500 spent on a holiday event that included alcohol and expensive finger foods, and another \$1,631 spent on alcohol for another event. These funds came almost entirely from the state and federal government. The audit concludes, "Failure to implement adequate internal controls over expenditures and travel claims increases the risk of fraud, waste, and errors in ASD's financial reporting that could go undetected" (State of Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, 2016, p. 29). The audit also reveals that the ASD did not perform sufficient fiscal monitoring of the charter management organizations operating schools directly. The abuses and inconsistencies outlined in this audit highlight the need for greater oversight and accountability measures for both the ASD as a whole and the individual CMOs operating within it.

In contrast, the community school model eliminates these issues surrounding public accountability. By operating within the established framework of the traditional public school system, community schools maintain the link between local schools and the elected school board. Additionally, the emphasis of community schools on engagement with parents and the larger community often provides additional channels through which community members can

voice their opinions and concerns. At Pond Gap Elementary in Knoxville, parents and community members are encouraged to attend events and access services at the school itself. In this way, community members have the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with school leaders to whom they can provide feedback. More importantly, if the community feels that they are not being heard by school leaders, or if they have concerns over the use of public funds, they can take those issues to the district superintendent and the school board. These mechanisms are critically important because they allow the local community to maintain autonomy over their own schools. Unfortunately, no such formal channels exist within the ASD. Thus, in terms of public accountability, the community school model is the more effective option.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

The data presented here reveals that the community school model has been more effective than the charter school model in improving schools in Tennessee. Specifically, community schools in Knoxville have seen higher levels of growth in student achievement on average than the charter schools within the ASD in Memphis. In addition, Knoxville's community schools have been more successful in engaging with parents and families, which has led to increased parental support for their efforts. Conversely, the failure of the ASD charter schools to prioritize meaningful engagement with parents and families has hindered their school improvement efforts. Finally, the community school model has maintained the traditional mechanisms for public accountability for schools, such as the elected school board, while the ASD model has not. These findings have important implications for education policy in Tennessee.

It is important for policymakers to understand the causes behind both the success of

Knoxville's community schools and the lack of progress in the ASD charter schools. The primary explanation for the divergent outcomes is that the community school model seeks to address the holistic needs of students and families. In other words, the community school model has been successful in improving outcomes in traditionally low-performing schools that serve low-income families by striving to meet the unmet physical and emotional needs that hamper student success in the classroom. In contrast, the charter school approach in Memphis seeks to improve student achievement by simply changing the governance and culture of the school. The data demonstrates that, overall, this strategy has simply not worked in Memphis. Former ASD superintendent Chris Barbic has reflected on the challenges of addressing the negative effects of poverty through the charter school model. In an interview with online education news outlet *Chalkbeat* given shortly before his resignation in 2015, Barbic said, "I think that the depth of the generational poverty and what our kids bring into school every day makes it even harder than we initially expected. We underestimated that" (Burnette, 2015).

One of the reasons that ASD leaders may have "underestimated" the challenges of serving very low-income communities is that charter schools are not usually required to serve all students in a particular neighborhood. Typically, charter schools are independent schools of "choice" that admit students through a lottery system and can reject or expel students at will. In contrast, when a charter operator takes over a school within the ASD, it is required to accept all the students that are zoned to attend that school. This is not the favored approach of charter school leaders, because it makes the task of school improvement more difficult, as former superintendent Barbic himself has admitted. In an open letter announcing his resignation in 2015, Barbic wrote:

“Let’s just be real: achieving results in neighborhood schools is harder than in a choice environment... As a charter school founder, I did my fair share of chest pounding over great results. I’ve learned that getting these same results in a zoned neighborhood school environment is much harder” (Cramer, 2015).

These comments from the former superintendent and the poor overall outcomes of the ASD charter schools lead to a key conclusion: the charter school model is not an effective solution for improving schools on a large scale. The question of whether or not charter schools can be effective as hubs of innovation, as they were originally intended, is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, the results of the ASD experiment in Memphis demonstrate that when it comes to improving outcomes in traditionally low-income, low-performing schools on a district-wide scale, charter schools are not a viable approach. Since passing the First to the Top legislation in 2010, Tennessee has devoted significant resources to the implementation and administration of the ASD. Eight years later, the charter schools within the ASD have fallen far short of their goal of catapulting the lowest-performing schools into the top quintile of schools in five years. In fact, these schools on average have not produced significant growth in student achievement. Thus, it is imperative that state lawmakers reexamine the ASD and begin to divert resources to more effective models for school improvement, such as the community school model.

Policymakers in Tennessee should look to the community school model as a solution for improving schools across the state for the following reasons. First, the data shows that community schools improve student academic achievement over time. Second, the community school model prioritizes meaningful engagement with parents and families, which is crucial to the success of any school improvement effort, especially when working with historically

underserved communities. Third, community schools provide services to meet the physical and emotional needs of students and families, promoting healthier, more stable families and communities. Fourth, the community school model can be tailored to fit the unique needs of each community and each school. Finally, the community school model is far less disruptive than the ASD's charter school takeover approach, which makes it a more durable, long-term policy solution. Tennessee can look to Knoxville as a model of the successful implementation of community schools on a district-wide scale that can be replicated across the state.

Recently, there have been some promising developments in education policy that suggest a shift towards community schools and similar models. On a local level, Shelby County Schools Superintendent Dorsey Hopson has repeatedly discussed the need for more wraparound services in schools (Aldrich, 2018). At the state level, Tennessee Education Commissioner Candice McQueen has echoed Hopson's call. In a speech to state lawmakers in February 2017, McQueen criticized the poor results of the state's current school improvement strategies, including the ASD (Tatter, 2017). She stated that Tennessee should look to strategies that have been proven to work, including "community and wraparound supports, such as mental health care services" (Tatter, 2017). Perhaps surprisingly, given the conservative ideology of the current presidential administration, support for community schools even seems to be growing on a national level. The federal budget for fiscal year 2018-2019 increased funding for a grant program to fund community schools by 75 percent. According to the Coalition for Community Schools, this increase will allow 15 more communities across the country to apply for a five-year grant to fund community school programs. Given this shifting political climate, the time is right for Tennessee policymakers to invest in the community school model as a solution for school improvement statewide.

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