

ANNOTATION

Hollowell, Joseph D. “Collaboration of a Religious Order and a Public-School Charter Authority.” Ed.D. dissertation, Creighton University, 2016. 186 pp.

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James Hollowell’s dissertation “study in practice” (11) focuses on a unique school transition from a Catholic school to a “faith-inspired” (3) charter school: the creation of the Catalyst Schools in Chicago. At the outset of his dissertation, Hollowell highlights the contemporary reality of large numbers of Catholic schools serving financially-challenged populations in urban settings having to close due to declining enrollments and insurmountable financial hurdles. Hollowell notes that some attempts to transition Catholic schools to charter schools proved unsuccessful, for a variety of reasons. He points to the creation of the Catalyst Schools in Chicago as an example of a successful transition from Catholic school to faith-inspired charter school. His case study explores several elements of this unique transition. Based on the results of this study, he offers an “evidence-based series of recommendations for religious organizations and public chartering authorities that choose to collaborate in the establishment of such school” (140).

In particular, Hollowell’s study sought “to understand the process of conceptual development, negotiation, reasoning, and discernment among organizational leaders that led a large metropolitan school system and a religious order to collaborate on the establishment of two publicly funded ‘faith-inspired’ charter schools in impoverished urban neighborhoods” (6). Two research questions guided his case study: “How do leaders of a public school chartering authority and a religious order describe the process of discussion, negotiation, and discernment that led to the agreement to collaborate on the establishment of two ‘faith-inspired’ charter schools in impoverished urban neighborhoods managed by the religious order?”; and “What have been the obstacles, successes, and future opportunities presented since the establishment of these two schools?” (7)

Hollowell’s review of literature explores the educational reform movement in the United States over a 60-year period of time. He begins by citing Milton Friedman’s 1955 essay “The Role of Government in Education” (17). He continues with the 1983 study “A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform,” which, he asserts, stimulated an educational reform movement that continues to the present. He reports on literature related to educational vouchers, charter schools, and school choice. He then reviews the literature related to the founding of religious charter schools in the United States. Finally, he reviews Proehl’s 2015 document, “Catalyst Schools: The Catholic Ethos and Public Charter Schools” and highlights the promising development of “faith-inspired” charter schools (53).

Hollowell uses a qualitative case study methodology. This methodology includes interviews “with leaders of the charter granting authority and leaders of a religious order . . . [in order to help] clarify the dialogue, negotiations, and discernment that took place over a six-year period of collaborative conversation” (58), time spent at the Catalyst Schools, and the review of archival documents related to the process that led to the founding of these schools.

Hollowell’s analysis of all the data gathered yielded seven major themes: Conceptual Development, The Charter Proposition – Discussion and Discernment, Rationale for a Decision, Leadership Issues, Overcoming Obstacles, The Catholic Ethos, and The Ideal Charter Granting Authority. He spends time discussing the findings related to each theme. In his analysis of the findings, the role of leadership across all levels - including at the school level, at the local public school District level, and at the religious congregation District level - surfaces many times across many of the themes as influential in the effort to found the Catalyst Schools.

Hollowell discusses three important innovations in the Catalyst School founding experience that have great potential for those seeking to found similar schools in the future. First, he points to a memorandum written by Brother John Johnston, FSC, of the Midwest District and its role in providing “a previously unparalleled measure of clarity of thought” (79) during the discernment phase of the project. Hollowell asserts that the arguments contained in Johnston’s memorandum “deserve thorough study, contemplation, and prayerful reflection by those leaders who have the power to make decisions about whether or not an agency affiliated with the Catholic Church can rightfully expect a partnership with a public charting authority to serve students in harmony with their mission” (105). Second, he discusses the important and unique role that “faith-inspired training and formation of . . . teacher and staff” (105) played in the strong culture of the Catalyst Schools. Hollowell states: “This innovative approach to formation of all in the Catalyst Schools appears to make a significant difference in the daily life and culture of the schools” (105). Third, he comments on the important role of the spiritual wrap-around program in these faith-inspired charter schools, outlining the innovative program at the Catalyst Maria School and the key role that members of the Sisters of St. Casimir play in it (105-106).

In Chapter Five of his dissertation, Hollowell offers a number of evidence-based recommendations for those persons, charter-granting authorities, religious communities, and/or diocesan offices who are interested in establishing faith-inspired charter schools. He begins with a core recommendation: “The most fundamental step a religious organization can take in establishing a faith-inspired charter school, whether it be sponsored by a religious order or a diocesan office, is for that organization to understand, embrace, and internalize the mission of educating students in a charter school in a way that respects the current understanding of the boundaries between Church and State in charter schools” (112). Following from this, he lays out a series of nine recommendations – steps of a plan, if you will – for “developing a faith-inspired charter school” (119). These recommendations highlight the importance of a clear vision for the school, of hiring leadership that shares the vision, of hiring and forming faculty and staff toward that vision, of nurturing relationships with the multiple entities involved with the governance and operation of the school, of identifying one or more community partners, and of establishing a solid budget and developing and executing a robust marketing plan for the school.

Hollowell concludes his dissertation with a discussion of implications for future research and for leadership theory and practice. He highlights the reality that very little research has previously been done on faith-inspired charter schools and that “the field is ripe for future research” (136). He also encourages further research into “wraparound spiritual formation programs” (136) in these schools, as well as further research more generally in the transition of Catholic schools to charter schools. He also recommends research into the ongoing impact of the Catalyst Schools on students, families, and the Chicago area in order to “validate the contribution these schools are making to Chicago and to lay the foundation necessary to show this model is worthy of replication around the country” (137). In a “Final Observation About Leadership,” Hollowell applauds the work of the De La Salle Christian Brothers in Chicago in the establishment of the faith-inspired Catalyst Schools in Chicago, providing an example that has the potential to “bring a similar gift to impoverished communities across the country” (140).