The Economic Impact of a Charter School in an Urban Neighborhood, a Board’s Perspective: Case Study of Herron High School

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary – page 2

Report – page 3
  • History and Context – page 3
  • Herron High School – page 4
  • Methodology – page 5
  • Findings – page 5
  • Analysis – page 6

References – page 8

Appendix – page 9

From the Cover: Herron High School sits just north of the center of downtown Indianapolis and the neighborhood known as Herron Morton Place, earned a spot on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. The gentrification of the neighborhood has seen the restoration of architecturally significant homes built between the 1870’s and the 1920’s. Most are Queen Anne style, with a few Italianate, Colonial Revival and Arts and Crafts cottage.
Executive Summary

There are numerous factors that contribute to the vitality of an urban community. Some studies have pointed to municipal operations as a key influencer in urban development (Bluestone, 2014; Brown, 2006). Others have listed migrating seniors (Lambert, Clark, Wilcox, & Park, 2007), and housing development trends (Mehdi Pourpeikari, 2017) as indicators for urban renewal and development. Ultimately, for the health and wealth of the nation there is a need to concentrate of the development of dilapidated and sometimes forgotten city centers in regards to concerns with equity and access (Benner and Pastor, 2015). This case study looked at urban renewal through the lens of a municipally-served charter school, Herron High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. Findings indicate that although there is a consensus in the perception that Herron High School has had a tremendous effect on the economic growth of the Herron Morton community, major concerns regarding the community’s grasp of the mission of the school and apprehensions on expansion also resonated. These findings indicate that a deeper look should be taken in ensuring the infusion of the school mission into future community revitalization initiatives.

Shown Below: Foundry Provisions, 236 E. 16th Street, Indianapolis, Indiana
Popular with Herron students, Foundry serves up their provisions in a little red brick building a short walk from Herron High School.
Education is one of numerous factors that contribute to the vitality of an urban community. Some studies have pointed to municipal operations as a key influencer in urban development (Bluestone, 2014; Brown, 2006). Others have listed migrating seniors (Lambert, Clark, Wilcox, & Park, 2007), and housing development trends (Mehdi Pourpeikari, 2017) as indicators for urban renewal and development. Ultimately, for the health and wealth of the nation, there is a need to concentrate on the development of dilapidated and sometimes forgotten city centers in regards to concerns with equity and access (Benner and Pastor, 2015). This case study will look at urban renewal through the lens of a municipally served charter school Herron High School in Indianapolis Indiana. Through a qualitative study of board members, the researchers question what is perceived economic impact of a charter school in an urban neighborhood from a trustee board perspective.

History and Context for the Study

Charter schools are currently a hot topic in conversations surrounding United States education. However, they are not a new concept in North American culture. A concise definition highlights that charter schools are “non-religious public school operating under a contract, or ‘charter,’ that governs its operation” (Center for Public Education, 2010). The “charter” that establishes each school is a performance contract that details the school’s mission, program goals, students served, methods of assessment and ways to measure success (Akey, et. al, 2009). One of the main reasons for the creation of charter schools was to seek an alternative vision of education that could not be realized in traditional public schools. Even though there is significant variation from state to state in offering charter schools the flexibility to be innovative, state laws are structured so that charter schools are not typically confined to the constraints of traditional public school requirements — such as certain bureaucratic and union rules (Eckes & Rapp, 2006). With the growing disparity in equal access to quality education, charter schools are often seen as vehicles to promote school choice because of the institution’s open enrollment policies (Akey, et. al, 2009). According to Indiana Code, the entity that issues the charter is known as a sponsor or authorizer. The authorizer serves as the public’s formal agent for holding charter schools responsible for their performance, making them centrally-important in this growing trend of educational access. As a result, authorizers control the application and selection process, the charter contracts, oversight of the charter schools, and renewal and revocation decisions (Eckes & Plucker, 2004).“
The first charter school laws in the United States were passed in the state of Minnesota in 1991. Since 1991, the charter school movement has grown, and now 40 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have adopted charter school legislation (U.S. Charter Schools, 2008). This growth led to federal support for charter schools beginning in 1995 with the U.S. Department of Education’s authorization of the Public Charter Schools Program (USDOE - Office of Policy and Program Studies Service, 2004). The Center for Education Reform reported in the 2007-08 school year that there were 4,128 public charter schools serving over 1.24 million students in the United States (Center for Education Reform, 2008). In 2001, the Indiana General Assembly passed charter school legislation enabling the first charter schools in the state to open their doors for the 2002-03 school year. In May 2011, House Enrolled Act 1002 passed by the Indiana legislature established the Indiana Charter School Board with the purpose to (1) review a proposal to establish a charter schools; (2) make a decision on the proposal as required; (3) monitor charter schools sponsored by the charter board; and (4) publish guidelines concerning the review process (Indiana Charter School Board, 2017). As of the 2015 – 2016 school year, 88 charter schools are operating in Indiana. These schools are spread throughout the state, with the largest concentration located around the Indianapolis area.

**Herron High School**

In 2003, under the leadership of Joanna Beatty Taft, Executive Director of the Harrison Center for the Arts, the concept for Herron High School originated. Ms. Taft saw education as the key to urban renewal in Indianapolis’s downtown neighborhoods. This ideology created the foundations for the core values of Herron High School. Through a partnership with local residents, educators, non-profit organizations and business leaders, Ms. Taft sought to create an original structure for a high-quality classical, liberal arts education that was tuition-free within the city.

Along with the belief that education serves a role in urban renewal, the revitalization of historic properties is a unique goal of the Herron High School system. From its inception, the vision for Herron High School was focused on the adaptive potential of the vacant former John Herron Art Institute campus. For many decades, these historically-important buildings were the centerpieces of the arts movement in Indianapolis. Herron High School’s founders believed the rebirth of the historic campus as a center of learning would provide an anchor for the community landscape and honor the heritage of the buildings.

Head of School, Janet H. McNeal has led Herron High School to become one of the top public high schools in the country. Designated a 4 Star School by the Indiana Department of Education, Herron High School students have a ninety-nine percent graduation rate. Additionally in 2017, according to U.S News and World Report Herron High School is ranked as the fifth-best school in Indiana and in the top 3 percent of schools in the nation.
Methodology

The Herron Morton neighborhood, as well as Herron High School staff, students and faculty are the impetus for Herron High School’s goals as a change agent in Indianapolis. In order to gain a greater understanding of the mission behind Herron High School, its social and economic impacts on the community, and assess the viability for the expansion of the Herron High School model to other communities in the Indianapolis area, we interviewed members of the Herron High School administration, Board of Trustees, and key economic contributors to the Herron Morton community. The interview questions and paraphrased responses are below, followed by an analysis of the respondents’ themes and trends as well as the strengths and weaknesses of this data collection. Five individuals contributed to this qualitative research study. Qualitative research methods are characterized by an inductive approach, implementing structural elements as the study matures (Krathwohl, 2009). Seven open-ended questions were posed to all the interviewees as well as the opportunity to provide any additional feedback regarding their perceptions that may have not been covered in the interviewer’s questions.

Findings

Findings for this qualitative study for the most part did not veer from what the researchers anticipated receiving from individuals closely associated with the Herron High School community. Most of the comments were positive regarding the affect that Herron High School has had on the surrounding community; however, there are mixed reviews on the community's view of the school. The two major concerns voiced by respondents were the Herron Morton community's grasp of the mission of the school and apprehensions on moving the Herron High School model to the Riverside neighborhood. It is important that the Board continues to assess its plan to expand Herron High School's model to other communities within the Indianapolis area given the differences in the communities. Critical questions were raised regarding the viability of expanding to a neighborhood that is vastly different from Herron Morton without a deeper understanding of the current organizations impetus success.

Each of the respondents had different reasons for joining the Herron High School Board of Trustees. The diversity of the professional associations, gender and racial/ethnic make up of the members gave some insight into the diversity of the members of the Herron High School community. There was a consensus that the most important contribution that Herron has made to Indianapolis has been the revitalization of the surrounding Herron Morton community. As a new school in a depreciated area, Herron High School has provided both economic and social benefits to its neighbors. It has also expanded business development opportunities for the neighborhood that were not accessible prior to the school's
opening. As a charter school, Herron High School provides an alternative option for educational attainment for students in the surrounding neighborhood if public school does not fit the student’s or parent’s need making the neighborhood more conducive to growing families.

The Board believes that the successes at Herron High School can transfer to the Riverside community; however, they also understand that the communities are different and that their model may need to be tweaked to be accepted at Riverside. This move will give the Board the opportunity to serve more students in need. In order to assist with their growth model and to sustain the expansion, the Board is looking into developing a direct feeder system through one of the local middle schools. Examples of this is the economic impact that the school has had on the community such as the increase in home buyer value and increase in both small and franchise businesses in the area. There is also a keen sense of ownership that the community now has for itself in order to protect its members, most notably its students.

Analysis

The interviews with the Board members and administrative staff for Herron High School allowed us as a third-party to understand the purpose behind the community-building Herron High School. The perspectives of the interview participants provided personal and diverse opinions on the impact of Herron High School on the Herron Morton community as well as reasoning why the Board is hoping to expand the academic institution with a second school in other communities in the Indianapolis area.

Some interesting trends represented in the data were the concerns about the program’s ability to scale without diluting its mission. Mission creep is a common fear when nonprofit or social organizations expand, so it is good that the Board is considering this rational fear and making plans to mitigate that potential issue. Another common theme represented throughout the interview was the focus on the business development and economic impacts that Herron High School has had on the Herron Morton neighborhood. Since the school’s founding in 2006, the surrounding community has experienced an economic spark. This is due to the creation of small businesses in the area, the access and visibility of students in the neighborhood, and the re-entry of families back into urban spaces.

Although this is great qualitative data to have, it does not take account of the statistical data that is needed to prove the true economic impact that Herron High School has had on the surrounding neighborhood, so it is difficult to build a causal case for the implementation of a secondary location of the charter school. The data does give us a good grasp of the goals, challenges and critiques of the Herron High School initiative by the educational leadership, but it is biased information and does not capture the full picture of the school’s economic impact.
The strength of the data is that it is pulled from first-hand experience by the Board members and school administrators who are at the table making the decisions that affect the school. This data also reflects a good sample size of quotes from the overall number of Board members. Each Board member that was chosen to be interviewed for this report represents a different aspect of the Board and the Herron Morton neighborhood.

Shown Below: Herron High School
In 1895 John Herron’s bequest founded the John Herron Art Institute, and funded new construction of a new main building and an art museum in Morton Place.

In 1906, the school hired architects Vonnegut & Bohn to plan a museum and library building. This fine Italian Renaissance Revival building in the photo includes high-relief portrait roundels of the Renaissance and Baroque greats, Leonardo da Vinci, Peter Paul Rubens, Albrecht Durer, Diego Velazquez, and Michelangelo. Rudolph Schwarz, sculptor of much of the ornament on the State Soldiers and Sailors Monument, carved the portraits.

The Herron Museum later became the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and today is the home of Herron High School.
References


Appendix

Interview Questions and Responses

Interviews

1. Why did you decide to be a member of Herron High School’s Board?

Respondent 1: I decided to join the Board for the parental connection and to be associated with another charter school. I ended up connected to the Board because of professional acumen.

Respondent 2: N/A

Respondent 3: I had a deep belief that great schools make great neighborhoods.

Respondent 4: I was interested in the property.

Respondent 5: N/A

2. What do you perceive as Herron’s contribution to the Indianapolis community?

Respondent 1: Education is a vital anchor to growth. I believe that Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) is not enough to provide quality education, and it’s not that the school system is faulty – it has poor infrastructure.

Respondent 2: N/A

Respondent 3: N/A

Respondent 4: They have been an anchor for the neighborhoods growth because the area was vacant before the school was created. Herron also is there to educate youth and revitalize the surrounding community. Herron sets the standard for education in the community.

Respondent 5: There was an urban flight going on – the school has aided people feeling they can have a safe urban environment at an urban institution.

3. What specific changes have you seen in the community surrounding Herron High School?

Respondent 1: Business development in the community. The population of
individuals that walk around the neighborhoods has increased and there are less vacant homes.

Respondent 2: The #1 factor for home buying is proximity to a good school. While this does not prove that a good school will stimulate change, it is undeniable that it correlates directly. Herron also incentivizes families to move to the Herron-Morton Community. This neighborhood outpaced the housing growth in all of Indy. The school also gives the perception of stability, what is a neighborhood like in the presence of a good school. Makes the pull deeper than just people with children.

Respondent 3: N/A

Respondent 4: Business Development

Respondent 5: I knew that community engagement was important, but when we got here, the neighborhood was a different place. When the institution opened, there were prostitutes and drug dealers on the corner, needles and syringes on the sidewalk, and today there are new business that have cropped up that are mostly locally-owned. The neighborhood is a lot safer. It is an explosion of people feeling ownership in the community.

4. What do you see as some potential areas of growth for Herron High School?

Respondent 1: Serving more students – there is clearly a need for more young people to have access to a quality education. We also need to provide more growth opportunities for all teachers and keep up with the changing criteria for charter school. Funding – the continued autonomy.

Respondent 2: The obvious answer is Riverside; however, it is important that the community is independent and autonomous but open-access school. Hopefully, the model will allow for more growth beyond the two communities because there is a need for good schools in the Indianapolis community.

Respondent 3: The staff leadership would like to establish a high-quality school in every corner of the community

Respondent 4: Student enrollment – should double once we add Riverside and other areas in the Indianapolis area. Real estate – concerned with the scale of the scale of the model. Geographic – Talked about a middle school as a direct feeder.

Respondent 5: N/A
5. What do you see as transferable revitalization efforts from the current location be to the future campus location?

**Respondent 1:** The retained effort to have a space with history and community. We wanted an urban location that was in need, and the Riverside community fits perfectly.

**Respondent 2:** N/A

**Respondent 3:** Understanding that “doing school” really well can make instrumental changes in the community. Not having certain facilities inside the school make the school members actively apart of the cities environment.

**Respondent 4:** Not sure the classical model work, or be a sale to call communities. A classical model does speak to a particular type of education “elite”.

**Respondent 5:** There are some differences in the campuses. We are interested in serving more at-risk students. The new location will provide this, along with the partnership with IPS. I think the students will short-term come less prepared but the infrastructure allows for at-risk students.

6. What is the surrounding community’s perception of Herron High School?

**Respondent 1:** They are either confused on what a liberal arts school is or they think that it is just an academically-rigorous high school and not aware that it is open and accessible.

**Respondent 2:** The immediate surrounding area has a positive perception. They may not like the model, but have positive perception of the school’s impact on the community. City-wide extremely positive. Outside of the neighborhood they are more willing to cling to the ideological issues people have against charter schools.

**Respondent 3:** Agree they may not like the model but see the positive impact of the school on the overall community. Those that know Herron have positive opinions, those that don’t.

**Respondent 4:** Most people outside of the community are not aware of Herron High school so it’s a very neighborhood central effort. IPS was a broken system and Herron is working to fix the system.

**Respondent 5:** There is a perception that this was am arts school but we have fought hard to change that perception. Now it is seen as a quality education. The connection to IPS will allow us to go into the IPS middle schools to recruit students.
7. Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding your experience as a Herron High School Board member within the context of our project?

Respondent 1: I want the Board to have the ability to sustain growth and development when the current leadership team leaves.

Respondent 2: Synergetic relationship between education and neighborhood revitalization. Herron is the gasoline for change not necessarily the agent for change. It is a case for one stakeholder's impact when done well.

Respondent 3: N/A

Respondent 4: When you start scaling the quality of the product becomes diluted unless you have excellent managers in your organization. When then scales they it becomes bureaucratic. The vastly different communities of the two school neighborhoods. That needs to be taken into consideration as decisions are made by the Board.

Respondent 5: I know that there are studies done about emerging neighborhoods we may want to look at that. Also if we had not been a good school you would not see the impact that we see today. The pride in the school ok provides and energy about the school that we capitalize upon.

Study Completed By:

This research based case study was completed though a partnership between the Mayor-sponsored charter school boards and Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs. This partnership is known as “Board Fellows”.

The Board Fellows program matches highly-qualified IUPUI SPEA graduate students with Mayor-sponsored charter school (MSCS) boards. SPEA has partnered with the Indianapolis Mayor’s Office of Education Innovation (OEI) to offer first and second-year SPEA graduate students the opportunity to serve as Board Fellows on a MSCS board. MSCS are public charter schools which operate as nonprofit organizations with a board that is responsible for school oversight. MSCS boards are typically comprised of individuals with nonprofit management, legal, community engagement, education, finance expertise.

Specifically, the Board Fellows program:

- Exposes students to a supportive network of working professionals who serve as board members for the participating school
• Provides each student with a board mentor in their field of studies (e.g., law, finance, nonprofit management, etc.)

• Allows students to meaningfully contribute towards educational advancement for Indianapolis K-12 students

• Exposes students to nonprofit management, business, and governance

• Boosts/builds participating students’ resume with fulfillment of a project to the board in the area(s) of research, facilities planning, finance, etc.

Herron High School attempts to match Board Fellow candidates with engaging real-world projects and board meeting exposure each academic year. This year’s project was completed by Angel Cassandra Nathan and Dorian Davis.