

Sample 1: Field Notes Thematic Analysis, CSS Spring 2015

From the field notes we collected at charter and magnet school open houses, it is clear that schools have strategies to both attract parents and to filter the type of students and families they receive. I will look at both how school representatives present their students' measurable "achievement" levels as well as how they portray their expectations of parents and families in their school communities.

Achievement First, an elementary charter school, put the greatest emphasis on student achievement and college admissions. The presenters compared their school's test scores to those of traditional neighborhood schools. This information may be misleading because it doesn't take into account the different student bodies at these schools. They also emphasized closing the achievement gap and college throughout the presentation; even the classrooms are labeled with the names of colleges. This emphasis on test scores and college acceptance stands out especially because AF is an elementary school.

To compare, another elementary (and middle) school, the Breakthrough Magnet School, did not emphasize test scores or college, instead emphasizing the school's character building and enrichment programs. The Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy, a middle and high school, put more emphasis on the arts and sciences than on achievement. However, they did emphasize the number of students accepted to college (including by listing some of this year's acceptances) and the opportunity for students to take college courses. The Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts, a secondary magnet school, mentioned the focus of the curriculum on college admissions and the percentage of students passing the ELA and CAPT tests, but went on to focus on the arts program for the majority of the session. The CREC Academy of Aerospace and Engineering Elementary School (a magnet school) did not focus on test scores or college admissions, but the comparison is not fair since this school is new and now only has pre-K and kindergarten. Overall, these schools tended to emphasize special programs and themes more than college admissions and test scores. AF and HMTCA put the most emphasis on college admissions, with only AF openly expressing their objective to bridge the "achievement gap".

Certain schools demonstrated their priority of working with parents who will be involved and align with their mission. Achievement First emphasized that parents are expected to ensure their children get dressed properly, do their homework, and communicate with teachers about behavior. The school representative emphasized that if the parents do not agree with this, Achievement First may not be a good fit. Breakthrough mentioned the importance of having a tight-knit community of families, which creates a supportive, bully-free environment. Parents are also encouraged to attend a training course to learn the "firm and friendly" approach to

parenting. GHAA, Aerospace Elementary, and HMTCA did not emphasize parent participation or community. Kevin Welner discusses charter schools' strategies to avoid serving the most at-risk students. I would suggest adding another strategy: the requirement of parent involvement in schooling. This could prevent some of the most at-risk students from attending if their parents are not available to be involved in their education. On the other hand, encouraging parent involvement and community building could help make schools more successful.