

# Twin System of a Successful Charter School and Policy Implications

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## 성공적인 차터스쿨의 쌍둥이 시스템과 정책적 시사

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**Abstract** American charter schools are independent public schools of choice, freed from rules but accountable for results. Charter schools have celebrated the 25th anniversary of its creation in 2017 and become part of landscape of public education in America. However, little research has been conducted on an individual charter school. This study aimed to examine the major factors of a successful charter school. A qualitative approach was employed. Seven one-hour in-depth interviews were conducted with semi-structured interview questions. And four teachers were participated. The conclusions are as follows: First, there is the combination of system and cultural factors as major successful factors of the Dayton Early College Academy. Second, system factors are the gateways and the advisory that is a twin at the charter school. The findings are considered to be applied for Korean educational settings and the implications can be used for policy development in Korea.

**Key Words** : Charter school, Gateway, Advisory, Successful factors, Students success

요 약 미국의 차터스쿨은 규제로부터 자유로우나 결과에 대해 책임지는 선택권 기반의 독립적 공립학교이다. 차터스쿨은 2017년에 출범 25주년을 맞았고 미국 공교육 지평의 하나로 그 위상이 자리를 잡았다. 그러나 단위 차터스쿨에 대한 연구는 아직 미흡한 실정이다. 이 연구의 목적은 성공적인 차터스쿨의 주요 성공요인을 분석하는데 있었다. 이러한 연구 목적을 달성하기 위해 질적연구 접근방법을 선택하여 7차례의 심층면담을 실시하였다. 4명의 교사가 참여하였으며 반구조화된 질문지를 활용하였다. 중요한 연구결과는 다음과 같다. 첫째, 데이튼 차터스쿨의 주요 성공요인으로는 구조적인 요인과 문화적인 요인의 조화를 꼽을 수 있었다. 둘째, 게이트웨이와 어드바이저리는 구조적인 요인의 쌍둥이 시스템으로 작동하였다. 이러한 연구결과는 한국의 교육적 상황에 시사하는 바가 크며, 교육정책적 발전을 위해 활용될 수 있을 것이다.

주제어 : 차터스쿨, 게이트웨이, 어드바이저리, 성공요인, 학생 성공

### 1. Introduction

American charter schools have celebrated the 25th anniversary of its creation in 2017, and become part of landscape of public education in America. However, little research has been conducted on the successful factors of an individual charter school.

In 2004, twelve years later since the creation of the first charter school in 1992, US Department of Education (US DOE) selected eight schools out of 2,996 charter schools operating in US. The selection was taken based on student performance and meeting the demands of parents. US DOE (2005) pointed out six factors for becoming a successful charter school:

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getting a good start, leading with a mission, innovating across the school program, promoting a community of continuous learning, partnering with parents and the community, and governing for accountability [1]. Weber (2010) identified ten key elements that every charter school should have in place to ensure that all students are successful [2]. This list included challenging classes, personal attention for all students, extra help for those who need it, bringing the real world to the classroom, family and community involvement, a safe learning environment, skilled teachers, strong leaders, necessary resources and user-friendly information.

Scollo, et al. (2015) studied over 250 charter schools with approximately 130,000 students enrolled in Los Angeles Unified School District [3]. Seventeen charter schools were selected with criteria such as representative schools from all areas of the city, including different levels, organizational models and curriculum types. There are seven essential factors in place that make charter schools outstanding and successful: purposeful vision, teachers and staff, no single curriculum, system and structures, collaborative leadership and professionalism, partnership with community organizations, and family and community integration. Although three studies mentioned above found a kind of commonality of successful charter schools, the key factors are much related to software of success besides one factor such as system and structures that was pointed by the study of Scollo, et al.

The Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) has been known as a successful charter school in Dayton, where is one of Ohio's poorest and most academically challenged districts. Dayton is well known for a significant low-income population, and generally high school students do not go to college if they are not academically or motivationally exceptional. However, recently 98 percent of DECA's students were proficient on the reading portion of the Ohio Graduation Test, and 100 percent were in math, compared to 67 percent and 57 percent for Dayton Public Schools.

What makes DECA successful? One is the advisory system that would be a homeroom in general high schools. In an advisory, adult mentor-teachers oversee student advisees' learning and provide a support network that students might not otherwise receive in their home life. Imbimbo, et al. (2009) states that "an advisory offers support in two forms. First, it supplies built-in peer groups for all students in a high school, including new students. Second, it gives students an adult who knows them well and who can offer advocacy and support in difficult social and academic situations [4]." Therefore, it is possible for the advisory to connect a student's emotional and social experience with their academic achievement [5].

Also, DECA students are required to pass gateways instead of a traditional grade promotion. "Gateways are reflective of academic performance and adoption of college readiness behaviors [6]." Willard et al. (2015) mentions that "gateway program provides a comprehensive alternative education where students work toward earning their high school diplomas while simultaneously earning credits toward an associate's degree or postsecondary certificate [7]." Students in gateway are enrolled in both the K-12 district school and the community college, which is serving as the host institution. In general, "gateway provides a mature and respectful learning environment for at-risk young people who are ready, willing, and able to commit to a rigorous academic program and who are interested in pursuing a postsecondary education [7]." Ninety-two percent of gateway program participants graduate from their high school, which can be compared to sixty-nine percent in nation [8].

This study aims to examine the major factors of a successful charter school, DECA, and find policy implications for use in Korea.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Dayton Early College Academy

DECA is an early college charter high school that serves nontraditionally inner-city students in Dayton, Ohio. DECA was “founded on an educational philosophy that advocates personalized, rigorous, and relevant learning” [9] in 2003. According to mission statement, DECA is “singularly focused on preparing urban learners from the Dayton Public School District to go to college and be the first in their families to graduate.”

As of the 2017-2018 school year, enrollment was 357 students. Fifty-six percent of students at DECA qualify for free or reduced lunch. Eighty-two percent of students are ‘first generation students’ (neither parent has a bachelor’s degree). Despite the odds stacked against these students, DECA boasts a ninety-seven percent attendance rate and a one hundred percent college acceptance rate.

## 2.2 Participants

Interviews were used to explore and understand the experiences of participants. Seven one-hour interviews were conducted with semi-structured interview questions. Participants were four; one is administrator and three are teachers, and one is male and the other female. Years of experience in DECA ranged from three years to ten years that is from the first of the school. Table 1 presents the general participants demographics data.

Table 1. Participants’ demographics

	Gender	# Experience	Positions
1	F	10 yrs	Principal
2	F	5 yrs	8 <sup>th</sup> Science teacher
3	M	3 yrs	10 <sup>th</sup> English teacher
4	F	7 yrs	10 <sup>th</sup> Science teacher

## 2.3 Data collection and analysis

Interviews are a key source of data for the study. Ten-time site visits including three classroom observations were conducted throughout the three months (Oct. through Dec., 2017) of data collection.

The various sources of documents were collected: newsletters, materials of advisory and gateways, professional development agenda and planning materials, and other sources from internet. Data analysis were conducted by crafting initial codes while inputting data into Atlas ti. The data were revisited and codes were solidified as they were triangulated to find convergences of information [10]. Lastly, member checks with the participants were conducted to confirm the findings [11].

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Gateway system

At DECA, “students matriculate by passing through six ‘gateways’ instead of traditional grade promotion …, and this educational philosophy, along with the academy’s overall focus on college readiness, helps students succeed [6].” The gateway system is a unique set of graduation requirements incorporating academic and extracurricular designed to prepare students for college readiness. While students are successfully earning mastery in the majority of their core high school requirements, they begin a curriculum focused on early college access, internships, and research opportunities. The other purpose of the gateway system is to prepare students the post-graduate life that typically aren’t taught in school.

Each gateway has clearly specified learning standards that are delineated in Table 2. These gateway requirements include college visits, internships, community service, and job shadows on top of rigorous academic standards.

According to DECA (2017), “students pass through gateways at their own individual pace; however, students are expected to go through all six gateways during their four year tenure at DECA [6].” Students should complete a minimum of one gateway at their first year, during subsequent years they are expected to attempt two gateways per year, and to complete all requirements on the appropriate gateway checklist.

Table 2. Gateway requirements

Gateway	Focus	Details
1	Presentation of Learning/ Curiosity	-Exemplary creative class project -DECA life forms -Journals -Cluster finder
2	Demonstration of Learning/ Research	-Independent creative project -Job shadow -Goal setting -College entrance test
3	Career Prep/ Interpretation	-Career interest project -Job shadow -Resume -College general Ed class
4	Career Prep/ Communication	-Argument-based research project -Internship -Self-study project -College general Ed class -Graduation test
5	Internship/ Problem Solving	-Internship research project -Internship -College visits -College entrance documents -College general Ed class
6	College Readiness/ Precision and Accuracy	-Autobiography presentation -College readiness essay -College application

The advisor submits a gateway request form for its students and gateway panelists will then be assigned to the gateway. The panelists will review all of the documentation. They reserve the right to cancel the gateway if numerous documents are missing from the gateway portfolio or the gateway project does not meet the standards of the rubric. If a student is awarded a single '0' on a gateway checklist rubric, the gateway is failed. When a gateway is failed, the student's passage level cannot exceed the original passage level. "In the past, many pieces of the gateway process are incorporated into classes. However, the vast majority of gateway work should be completed during advisory period under the advisor's direction [12]." Although the gateways have remained an integral part of DECA's mission, the revision of these gateway requirements has not ceased in order to maintain the development of the indelible skills of college preparedness. As a Science teacher notes:

*"So the gateways when they were first started were*

*100% self-driven, they were independent projects. Every assignment that we did was in addition to classwork and what we did in traditional class. And we're still trying to fine-tune that system"*

For classroom teachers, they have to be responsible to uphold the gateway system by expanding students' ability to accomplish their gateway requirements. As an English teacher mentions:

*"We try to look at the ways to make the gateways align with the classes. One of the nice things is as the classes change, we can make the gateways form around what we're doing in class. So like I said the gateways deal with writing. And we try to do a lot of different styles of writing in all the classes, so it's not just literary analysis. ...so it reinforces it."*

As mentioned above, students served by gateway are both challenged and promising. While they are behind in credits and demonstrate troubling behaviors of grades and poor attendance, they should also have a certain level of maturity, motivation, and readiness to commit to a rigorous academic program. However, most students in the program reported positive relationships with the gateway. According to Willard et al. (2015), "students appreciated being treated with maturity and respect by the advisors. If they started to fall behind, program staff members worked with them to identify ways of mitigating challenges rather than chastising them or solving the problem for them. Students also appreciated being in an environment of like-minded students who were motivated to graduate high school and pursue postsecondary degrees [7]."

### 3.2 Advisory system

The advisory system is another contributor to DECA's success. In addition to a rigorous academic program with the gateway system, DECA's students attend advisory class for fifty minutes every day. During advisory period, students meet with their advisor for consultation on their gateway requirements,

complete assigned projects, and receive continual support and encouragement from their designated advisor. The principal says:

*“The advisory is probably what makes us most successful. It’s the cornerstone of the work we do. It’s constantly making people revisit what is most important and that’s the students. It’s a daily reminder to teachers that they are a champion to their group of children and that they need to be the bridge between home and school for the child. Having that relationship is what makes us so successful.”*

According to DECA (2013), “in a regular high school advisory would be a homeroom. This is where students report during an advisory period. Students go to the advisory when they do not have a class. It is where students may work on gateway work.” Advisor is “a teacher who provides advice and pushes students toward academic success. An advisor is whom students spend the entire year with. Students get to know and trust their advisor on a deeper level than most teacher–student relationships. Advisors teach classes and if a student doesn’t have a class while their advisor is teaching, they stay in an advisory and work on their course and gateway material. An advisor is a contact person for advisees and parents [12].” Advisors should design their advisory around the completion of the gateways and advisories should not be used as a study hall or as a social period. The advisor must review all materials to ensure that the documents are complete and meet the expectations of the gateway rubric.

Teachers, staff and school leaders of DECA take seriously the job of assigning students to a designated advisor in order for the advisory system to reach maximum potential. When newcomer students are enrolled in the first year, a larger advisory group of all first-year students is assigned to an advisor. They are assigned to permanent advisors based on careful considerations after the first year.

In general, a teacher has sixteen to twenty advisees,

who consist of 10th, 11th and 12th grades. “Small groups allow for the personalized attention and close relationships between teacher and student that are the key to the program’s success [13].” A student sticks with the same advisor all three years with some exceptions. Once a student is assigned to an advisory, the advisor becomes the primary contact point for their advisees’ parents. As a science teacher states, “if a student is having an issue, or doing really good in class, teachers will generally communicate that with an advisor and then that advisor can communicate that with the parent.” Teachers talk to parents of students, but mostly they talk to parents of their advisory. If parents voice any concerns, the teachers as an advisor will take that to the principal. That is how the parents give their voice to the school. However, teachers play the most effective role as an advisor in communicating to parents about their students’ performance in class.

Advisors are dedicated to holding their advisees accountable for completing the gateway requirements during advisory period. One of the ways that advisors ensure students to be on track is confirming that students are maintaining the GPA requirement. Therefore, advisors go through grades one or two days of the week. Because grades are part of the gateway, and their advisees have to maintain a 2.0 or higher. And advisors pay special attention to their senior advisees in order to check the graduation requirements and to meet upcoming deadlines: they set a solid plan because senior advisees are getting ready to graduate. On top of the advisor, the DECA graduate is a great deal of support for the advisory system, as a teacher notes:

*“Former students return from college to talk to the student body about their experiences and the importance of developing skills now for success later.”*

As Imbimbo, et al. (2009) insists, the role of the advisors “is not supposed to lead discussions but rather to ask thought-provoking questions and challenge students’ assumptions. Advisors are also expected to

act as a student's advocate, representing and supporting that student in any academic or behavioral problems he or she might have. The student knows there is at least one teacher who will take his or her side, thus counteracting the 'us vs. them' mentality that students may have toward adults in the school [4]."

### 3.3 Relationship of the two systems

There are, in summary, two major roles of a teacher at DECA: teacher and advisor. DECA teachers are called officially advisors rather than traditional teachers, like Math advisor, English advisor, Science advisor Social Study advisor and etc. A teacher teaches subjects [Instruction], but as an advisor the teacher guides students through the gateway system a lot and pushes them to be prepared for college readiness during advisory period as shown in Fig. 1 The principal says:

*"With regards to curriculum it's based on what students need. 9-12 grade students take a practice ACT test. And we look at the data and we see what kids struggle with and adjust the curriculum to hit those areas students struggle with. We've also taken a different approach to literacy this year. At the end of the day, it's a reading test. You have to know math and science, but really, you have to read the questions. So our literacy approach this year has really enforced reading across the curriculum, not just reading and language arts classes."*

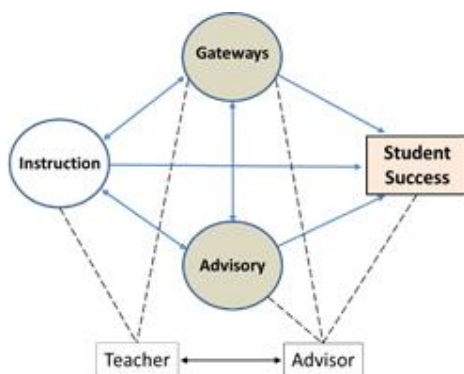


Fig. 1. DECA's twin system for its success

In other words, teachers do everything with students for their success in the school and beyond. Fig. 1 shows the roles of DECA teachers and the relationship of the twin system at DECA.

Student success does come not only from vision and ideas but also from the energized structure that thrives in the charter school [14,15]. What, then, is the relationship between the gateway system and the advisory system at DECA? The principal notes:

*"It's kind of a chicken and egg thing. You could look at gateway and say that's the only reason we have advisory. We had gateway first, and advisory is a mechanism to help us do that well. It depends on how you look at it. The easier one to replicate is advisory. It's much easier to do advisory, and do it well. Gateways are much more distinctive. And it's incredibly impactful. It requires that you as a student understand yourself and your future and as you go through school, not being passive not sitting back and letting the system take you."*

However, it should be known that there are various structures and functions of an advisory. For example, Baruch College Campus High School's advisory serves administrative functions, reinforces academic skills, and provides them a space to discuss issues they face in their lives. The school's administration sees the advisory as "an invaluable part of the curriculum and places as much importance on it as on any other class." At The Beacon School, an advisory meets twice a week for 35 minutes, and each group consist of 15-20 students in the same grade. The school's advisory has an educational focus. Within this framework, the advisory curriculum varies by grade. And New York City Museum School's advisory meet only twice a week for 25 minutes, and each group averages 14 students. While the Museum School breaks a year into quarters, "the school has advisory work on specific projects (such as creating a mural, writing a newspaper, or developing school-wide community building workshops) and makes time for same-sex

groups that facilitate the discussion of gender-sensitive topics. At the end of the first semester, advisories present their projects to the school [4].” Regardless of structures and functions of an advisory, the advisory offers support in two forms: supplying built-in peer groups for all students and giving them an adult who knows them well and who can offer advocacy in difficult social and academic situations.

Also, concerning gateway, Willard et al. (2015) suggests two things: “First, [gateway] programs serving at-risk and dropout young adults that are interested in implementing a flexible model may need to strike a better balance between being flexible and providing concrete guidelines for implementation. Second, gateway may need to take a closer look at which aspects of the model need to be bolstered, consider setting clearer guidelines about what implementation practices are in line with the model’s core principles and values [7].”

#### 4. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the major successful factors of DECA, and find its policy implications. The conclusions drawn from the study are as follows.

First, systems and structure should be in place to ensure the success of every students. There is a routine in DECA that students, teachers, staff and school leaders can count on to plan their day and use their time wisely. In this regards, all students can get frequent and ongoing support from at least one advisor through the academic system (like gateways) until they graduate successfully from the high schools. On top of the academic system, a variety of academic supports such as extended instruction before or after the school day, the help of an aide, or individual tutoring, are to be in place to assist the struggling students. To make an advisory effective, the advisory needs to be a substantial component of the school’s vision and mission. In other words, an advisory is not just an add-on to the curriculum because the advisory requires

a substantial investment of time, money, energy, planning and reflection, and it should be constantly reconfigured over times to address the needs of students.

Second, it is recommended that every high school should become small enough, or divided into small enough units to allow students, teachers, staff and school leaders to get to know and understand each other as a person, and to respond and support effectively to students’ specific learning needs. In this regards, students can have a clear plan for graduation including the specific courses they must take, their opportunities and extra help they should ask for their success in high school and beyond. Therefore, small schools are characterized by positive relationships and climate. Students at the small high schools are less likely to be suspended. Teachers may agree that there exists greater feelings of safety as well as stronger and more respectful relationships with students in the small schools. Also, it is in the small high schools where students, teachers and school leaders are effective to move towards increasing their engagement and creating more rigorous teaching and learning environments.

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