CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL CHARTER MIDDLE SCHOOL IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Education Department
Carson-Newman University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
By
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May 2018
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Dissertation Approval

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Dissertation Title: The Successful Characteristics of a Charter Middle School in a Urban Community

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Approved by the Dissertation Committee Date: April 2, 2018
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Colinnc Robertson
April 5, 2018
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this grounded qualitative study was to examine the characteristics of an urban charter middle that contributed to its success. The data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with three students, five teachers, one school counselor, and two administrators. Observations were conducted in the school’s hallways, classrooms, front office, and library. The urban charter middle school is an all-girls school with a STEM focus. Analysis of the data identified eight themes that contributed to the school’s success. The eight themes were single-gender instruction, high expectations of everyone in the school, positive relationships between faculty and students, greater opportunities to explore college and career-readiness experiences, personalized learning for students and attending to their individual needs, increased accountability for teachers and students, autonomy for faculty, and parental choice in their child’s education. These eight themes are in line with the theoretical framework of Choice Theory and Self-Determination Theory, which states that human beings are naturally motivated to engage in activities that are self-chosen, not imposed. Student and parental choice have been proven for student motivation and other self-driven tendencies, which agrees with the charter school concept.
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank God for giving me the dream of going back to school to earn my doctorate degree. There were plenty of nights that I had to say and believe the scripture, I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me. It is true.

I would like to express my sincerest appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Brenda Dean. Her guidance and support has empowered me to complete this process. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Taylor and Dr. Walker, for their support and feedback.

I would like to thank my reader, Dr. Andy Rines, for bringing my words to life. He also encouraged me in more ways than he will ever know.

I would like to thank two great friends, Lindsay and Edna, for encouraging me through the tough times. They never let me quit, no matter how many times I tried. They always found ways to encourage me to keep going.

I would like to thank my parents for encouraging me to be anything I want to be, even at this age. They always encourage me to do anything I put my mind to, and for that, I am forever grateful.

I would like to thank my daughter, Zoe, for her support and encouraging words. She never let me quit even if it meant I missed a softball practice. Thank you for understanding.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Matt, for being my backbone and support throughout this entire process. He is the reason that this dissertation is complete. He has been my motivator and voice of reason. He would not let me give up and has continued to push me to be great in everything that I do.
Dedication

I dedicate this study to my parents, Willie and Linda. You have always pushed me to be great at anything I choose to do and for that I am eternally grateful. You are always there to provide encouragement and support when I know it’s needed and sometimes when I don’t think it’s needed. You are two of my biggest cheerleaders and I love you.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Charter schools have established themselves as a powerful force in the educational world as a reform strategy used to combat school choice and underperformance in schools (Ertas and Roch, 2012). Charter schools have grown in popularity as an alternative to traditional public schools. These schools are free of many district regulations and are financed with public dollars. Most of the rules and regulations are established by chartering organizations and governing boards.

The charter school movement started in Minnesota in the 1990’s to close achievement gaps and provide choices for underserved students (Clark, Gleason, Silverburg, & Tuttle, 2011). As of the 2015–2016 school year, more than 6,800 charter schools served nearly 3 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia. The charter movement was aligned to coincide with public education values of United States citizens. Those values include schools that are tuition-free, non-religious, non-selective in admission, and accountable for high student achievement.

Charter schools and traditional public schools aspired to improve student learning. Early supporters of charter schools believed that charter schools would have positive effects on public education because of a different perspective chosen to improve student achievement (Ertas and Roch, 2012). Since charter schools and traditional public schools have many characteristics in common, the positive results should be based on different characteristics. Charter schools are public schools that are free to students and publicly funded. Charter schools have similar accountability standards as public schools and are also free of some of the regulations of public schools. Charter schools are different from traditional public schools in a few ways: they are governed by a chartering board or organization, are allowed to create their curriculum, and are
operated in a fashion designed by the individual chartering organization (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010).

Charter schools have become increasingly popular in the United States in the last decade. They serve over 500,000 students each year. (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003). The effectiveness of charter schools regarding student achievement has received mixed reviews throughout academia. Some research has shown that charter schools had negative effects on student achievement (Bettinger, 2005). Other research has indicated that there is no significant difference regarding students’ achievement in charter schools and traditional public schools (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1999). Some research has noted charter schools were more effective than traditional public schools (Hoxby, 2002). Additionally, some research has stipulated that charter schools are more effective in urban settings that serve disadvantaged populations (Abdulkadiroglu, et al., 2011).

**Research Problem**

Poverty in the United States has been a concern of government officials, school administrators, and teachers for decades. It affects all levels of society, directly and indirectly, and becomes a bigger issue in public schools as students of impoverished families learn and achieve with families that are not depleted of resources. Education has been a discussion point for decades on how schools can equalize educational opportunities for all students, especially those who come from a low socio-economic background.

One of the original hopes for charter schools was that they would serve as a sort of educational laboratory. Without the oversight and regulations of traditional public school districts, charter schools would be free to innovate and test out new ideas. Some charter schools would fail, but the hope was that others would succeed and the new ideas and approaches that
they successfully tested could be used in other schools. In a May 2014 proclamation of National Charter Schools Week, President Barack Obama highlighted this point by stating that successful charter schools could hopefully provide effective approaches for the broader public educational system (Grady, Bielick, & Aud, 2010).

The Alliance for Excellent Education reported that 38% of African-American students and 33% of Latino students attend high schools that researchers at Johns Hopkins University call “dropout factories.” These 2,000 dropout factories produce 51% of the nation’s dropouts; they produce 81% of all Native American dropouts, 73% of all African-American dropouts, and 66% of all Hispanic dropouts (DePaoli, Balfanz, & Bridgeland, 2016).

**Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this research was to explore the different characteristics of a successful charter middle school in a low-income area. There are data that report the effectiveness as well as ineffectiveness of charter schools. This indicates that the effectiveness of the school does not rely on the fact of it being a charter school in nature. The researcher studied the successful characteristics of this school to add to the body of research. The results of this research were shared with traditional public middle schools to aid in the search for successful strategies. This paper scrutinized specific criterion that prompted success in charter middle schools with regards to teaching and leading practices, school choice, and overall practices.

Many urban traditional public schools struggle with low student achievement. A Nation at Risk (1983) provided direct insight as to how schools should operate to ensure that students were achieving and offered specific recommendations on how to measure student success. One such measure was the standardized test given to all high school students prior to graduation to
ensure they are on track with learning. The No Child Left Behind legislation of 2001 (NCLB) provided the formal pathway to require states to design and implement standardized testing to formally track all student academic progress and added accountability measures, such as school grading systems and parental choice for school attendance.

Many reform activists believe that charter schools may be an alternative way to combat the issues of traditional public schools in urban areas. Charter schools have as many critics as proponents, and the research suggests that they have positive and negative results on achievement. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) (2015) found that many charter schools had both positive and negative effects on students’ math and reading achievement. The remainder of charter schools did not significantly influence student achievement. In their lottery-based study, Clark, Gleason, Silverburg, & Tuttle (2011) determined that impacts on reading achievement, if positive, were less than 1%. Research in math indicated greater positive results. The wide variation in the effects of charter schools prompts the following questions:

- What characteristics distinguish good charter schools from bad?
- Under what conditions are charter schools most likely to be successful?
- Can we identify the policies and practices that make a charter school successful?
  Can these policies and practices of successful charter schools be replicated in other schools—charter or traditional public schools—equally successfully?

**Research Question**

- What are the characteristics that make a successful urban charter middle school?
**Rationale of the Study**

Charter schools are a prominent and growing component of the public school system in the United States, with roughly 6,400 charters across the country enrolling more than 2.5 million students (Details from the Dashboard: Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools and Students, 2014).

According to National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) in 2013, charter schools served a larger proportion of minority and low-income students than all traditional public schools, due largely to the disproportionate number of charter schools located in urban areas. Nationally, minority enrollment in charter schools is 61%, compared to 47% in traditional public schools in the states where charter schools are located. The same pattern is noted with regard to low-income students. Nationally, approximately 49% of charter school students are enrolled in the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) program, compared to 45% in traditional public schools.

In school year 2012–2013, the percentage of students attending high-poverty schools, in which more than 75% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) under the National School Lunch Program, was higher for charter school students (36%) than for traditional public school students (23%). In the same year, 20% of charter school students and 21% of traditional public school students attended low-poverty schools, in which 25% or less of students qualify for FRPL (Charter School, 2015).

The researcher explored this topic because this urban charter middle school utilized in this study has been successful for the last 3-5 years. While this charter middle school is successful, there are several traditional middle schools that are struggling with low student achievement. This researcher is an administrator of an elementary school in the area with
students that attend the successful charter middle school and would like to identify and scrutinize the characteristics that make the charter school successful. This charter school went from being in the bottom 10% in the state to being in the top 5% in a two-year period. This researcher has a good working relationship with several administrators in both the charter school and traditional middle school and is eager to share the findings. This research will be shared with both the traditional middle school and charter middle school for the purposes of discovering and sharing strategies to help all students be successful.

**Operational Definitions**

The researcher chose to define terms that would add clarification to the research. Definitions have been derived from various sources and cited in other areas.

There is a **School Administrator** or more than one **Administrator** of each school campus. This person is in charge of making managerial and instructional decisions in the school.

An **Urban Community** is an area with a large group of people living in a designated space. It is considered an urban population if there are at least 2,500 people living in the community.

A **Charter School** is a school that is funded with federal dollars and is operated by a chartering board or organization. The school is governed by the board or organization and is under a contract or charter by state legislation. Charter schools are exempt from many regulations that public district schools are not. The regulations are reviewed in the charter contract and upheld by the board.

The federal poverty level is established by the United States government each year. This number clarified to aid in the configuration of eligibility of government assistance available for families. This number is determined each year to account for food cost and the average cost of
feeding a family of four. **Low-Income Families** are classified as such by earning less than twice the federal poverty line as determined by the federal government.

**School Choice** is an educational term designated to give students an alternative in public schools. Students are generally assigned to schools based on location of residence, but school choice serves as an alternative and provides the student and family a choice of a public school to attend.

**Autonomy** is a building block of all charter schools. It was a key focus of the establishment of charter schools. Autonomy gives authority to officials in charter schools to make rules independent of district regulations. This applies to every area of the school, including curriculum, teaching practices, personnel, finances, and building operations.

**Summary**

Frequently, the schools with the lowest performance ratings were those with the highest levels of children in poverty. Many explanations from authors over the decades have attempted to illuminate answers about how to help schools with poor children to succeed. Numerous causes such as parent behavior, parent education levels, teacher attitudes toward poor children, student race, facilitating standardized tests, and blaming standardized tests, have been identified. However, solutions appear to be multi-faceted. Accordingly, standardized tests are likely to remain the benchmark measurement of all student academic learning and achievement. Until there is a better way to determine public school student levels of learning, it is imperative that schools and communities find and implement the best measures possible to help those less fortunate to enjoy academic success.

Traditional public schools are doing the best they can, but this particular charter middle school may have some answers to assist in the work of educating middle school children.
Although there are differences in the way charter schools and traditional schools are operated, there may be ways to incorporate best practices to increase student achievement and learning.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Although public education has been a popular topic of debate and critique for an extended period of time, the late 1990’s spurred deliberation over student achievement and outcomes. The United States federal government measured education through four categories: accountability, school finance, development of teachers, and school choice. The Federal Government of the United States realized that families in poverty did not have the same school choices as other families. The charter school movement was established to provide more families school choice and to address low achievement scores in schools of poverty.

Charter schools emerged in 1992 as a school reform strategy in the United States (Clark, Gleason, & Tuttle, 2011). They were founded to be innovative, creative, and have certain autonomy that traditional public schools do not have. A charter school is a school that is funded with federal dollars and is typically managed by a group or organization under a contract (or charter) with the state. The school operates with freedom from certain state or local rules and regulations due to the charter. In order to have flexibility and autonomy, the charter school must meet the accountability standards provided by its charter.

Charter schools have emerged as an important part of the public education system in the United States. There are approximately 6,400 charter schools in the United States, and that number is growing each school year. Charter schools are enrolling students at a rate twice that of traditional public (Details from the Dashboard: Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools and Students, 2014). As charter schools continue to enroll students at a high pace, all stakeholders scrutinize accountability measures such as accountability, finances, and success rates.

This chapter presents a review of the literature as it pertains to different components of a
successful charter middle school in an urban area in Southeast Tennessee. This chapter includes research on the history of charter schools, how these began, and the reasoning that supported their development and implementation. This chapter also provides detailed information on charter school types, accountability, school choice, funding, and autonomy in charter schools. The theoretical frameworks were presented as Choice Theory and Self-Determination Theory. These theories support the charter school movement because of the choice, autonomy, and internal motivation that drive students, parents, and staff at the charter school. The chapter concludes with an implication of the findings of this successful urban charter school and how to apply those strategies in traditional public schools. The summary of the literature provided several viewpoints on how charter schools work and the various components of these schools. Each component was explored and viewed in relation to being accessible and implemented in traditional public schools.

**History of Charter Schools**

Budd (1998) began the charter school movement by suggesting teachers be given the freedom to be innovative, creative, and untraditional in the way they taught children. The method or curriculum focus would become the charter for that school, and it was suggested that teachers lacked this freedom in traditional public schools, which drove classroom instruction and encouraged students as learners.

Shanker (1988) suggested that entire school districts be placed under charter law. Similarly, teachers should be free to teach children in innovative and creative ways, which would lead to more student learning and foster a desire for students to attend school. In Shanker’s report, engagement leads to student commitment of learning. Charter schools could also help
minimize achievement gaps with students of different backgrounds and socio-economic levels since charter schools did not follow traditional public school regulations.

The first charter school was opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992 (Nathan, 1996). Philadelphia was also one of the first cities to initiate charter school models of schools-within-schools. Many of the schools-within-schools offered teachers more autonomy and creativity to teach (What is a Charter School). The schools-within-schools also offered choice of curriculum to students.

A charter school is a public school that is funded partially by federal dollars and by the chartering board or organization. Charter schools operate under regulations or rules designed by the chartering board or organization instead of under district regulations. A charter is a written statement of rules and regulations agreed upon by the chartering board or organization. The regulations are established as a guide for the school to follow. A school is held accountable by measures ensuring the charter is successfully implemented. The charter’s regulations are reviewed regularly by the chartering board or organization and can be abolished if regulations are not satisfied. There are guidelines detailed for all areas of the charter school, including finance, curriculum, and personnel matters (Charter School, 2015).

According to Witt (1999), the public wanted and needed radical change for public education. This change was the catalyst for the reform movement of charter schools. Charter schools were based on the premises of innovation and autonomy (Bettinger, 2005). Autonomy was provided to schools in all areas of the curriculum and the charter. Since charter schools were granted freedom from many traditional public school requirements, parent and student interest in charter schools significantly increased. Innovative teaching was a major component of the first charter schools and continues to be an attractive component of charter schools.
Innovation and creativity were driving forces behind the creation of charter schools. With the lure of autonomy, creativity, and innovative practices of charter schools, achievement results were expected to be positive and superior to results earned in traditional public schools.

Charter schools are run by a variety of organizations, including non-profit and for-profit. Charter schools are publicly funded schools which are managed like small businesses that are free from many district and state laws. Charter schools are held to the same accountability standards as traditional public schools but have more autonomy in achieving the same accountability standards as traditional public schools (Budde, 1996).

Charter schools are free from district regulations and have few, if any, zoning limitations because they are designated by district per state zoning requirements. Therefore, students attend charter schools by the choice of their parents or guardians rather than by assignment from a school district. Due to their lack of zoning, charter schools are usually funded in a manner that is distinct from how traditional schools are funded. However, nearly all charter schools receive public dollars from the federal government. Each dollar allocated per pupil goes to the charter school for that student. As public schools, charter schools are prohibited from charging tuition (What is a Charter School, n.d.). Although charter schools receive public federal assistance, they rely on the chartering organization to subsidize other costs needed by the school.

According to Collins (2000), charter schools have lower enrollment numbers than traditional public schools with over half of charter schools enrolling less than 200 students. Since charter schools are funded by federal monies as well as funds by the chartering organization, building maintenance can be an issue. Some charter schools have been created in buildings that are not traditional school buildings because operational costs are less expensive and those buildings are available. Charter schools tend to lack diversity within the school, which
means a majority of these students are African-American and Latino.

Charter schools have been popular in some urban areas because of the option of choice offered. Charter schools seem to improve education and better serve some students because charter schools allow more choice. Researchers believe that choice offered in education spurs competition in schools. Schools in high poverty areas do not have competition and struggle with issues beyond the scope of academics (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). The idea of the charter school was based on the concept of public schools getting results through autonomy and accountability established by state and federal law. Charter schools have established themselves as an alternative to educate today’s public school students and to achieve positive outcomes.

The first law allowing the establishment of charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Charter school legislation had been passed in 42 states and the District of Columbia as of the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. Charter school legislation has not been passed in the following states: Alabama, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia. Despite legislative approval in Mississippi and Washington, no charter schools were operational in these states in 2013 (Charter School, 2015).

The charter school movement is not limited to the United States. Currently, there are over 6,000 charter schools operating in 42 states (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2015). A minimum of 14 other countries have researched and implemented educational programs similar to charter schools.

**Charter School Types**

There are many different types of charter schools across the country. There are state charters, local education agency (LEA), conversion, and start up charter schools, including one
organization, or part of a network group that is administered by a management organization. Most management organizations are non-profit and are designated charter management organizations (CMO). Some for-profit organizations run charter schools that are called education management organizations (Brewer and Hentschke, 2009).

A State charter school is operated and managed by the state agency. This type of charter school is not as common as other types due to the lack of involvement of state agencies. The Local Education Agency (LEA) charter school is a school operated by the local education agency, and the school operates under terms set by the LEA. A Conversion Charter School is an existing traditional public school that has been converted to a charter school. After a school has been converted to charter school status, it is operated by the charter organization. The school is also governed by the state and local education agencies as a third party contract. A Start-Up charter is operated by the chartering organization, which could be a business or state organization. This type of charter school is operated by charter rules and regulations implemented by the organization. Although the school is operated by charter rules and regulations, it also abides by federal and local policies (Nathan, 2006).

Nearly 60% of charter schools operate as independent schools. Most of the charter schools are operated by charter management organizations, but there is a small portion that operated under education management organizations. Many types of charter schools exist because of public demand for educational success. As shown below in Table 2.1, the number of charter schools has increased in the United States as enrollment has increased.
Table 2.1.

Charter Schools by State and Enrollment Numbers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>No. of Charter Schools</th>
<th>No. of Students Enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>86,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>190,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>36,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7,583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>82,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>23,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5,297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>13,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
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<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>Michigan</td>
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<td>Minnesota</td>
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<td>Mississippi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
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<td>Nevada</td>
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<td>4,500</td>
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<td>New Hampshire</td>
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<td>New Jersey</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>65</td>
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<td>Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>South Carolina</td>
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<td>Tennessee</td>
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<td>Texas</td>
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<td>Utah</td>
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<td>Wyoming</td>
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<td>110</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,632</strong></td>
<td><strong>963,724</strong></td>
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</table>

Charter School Enrollment Process

Charter schools have become popular due to low performance results from traditional public schools, the No Child Left Behind program, and other parent concerns regarding traditional public schools. Since charter schools are public schools, they must allow open enrollment for any child in the state. Charter schools must follow all anti-discrimination laws that public schools must follow in regard to enrollment procedures. Most charter schools have limited capacity, so they primarily utilize some form of lottery-based enrollment (Center for Education Reform, 2009). Tennessee law stipulates that there are a few provisions available to students if seats are filled. Once seats become filled, enrollment preference favors students that attended a traditional public school that converted to a charter school, all students residing in the area that the charter school is located in and are not going to the public school, or students enrolled in a Pre-K program operated by the same authorizing body or partner organization. Additionally, the law gives preference to siblings of students enrolled in the charter school and children of teachers at the school.

Public charter schools enroll a variety of students, and have enrolled an increasing number of students with disabilities throughout the United States. Charter schools provide services to a growing number of students in various disability categories (Hawkins-Pammer, 2000). According to a four-year report on the state of charter schools by the United States Department of Education (2000), charter schools served a slightly lower percentage of students with disabilities than those served by traditional public schools.

According to Estras and Roch (2012), charter schools enroll 3% fewer students with disabilities than public schools in states where charter schools were implemented. However, the percentage of students with disabilities in charter schools varied considerably from state-to-state.
In some states, more students were enrolled in charter schools than their traditional counterparts.

Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield (1996) reported that there is a high percentage of minority students enrolled in charter schools. According to Nathan (2006), charter school enrollment in the United States indicated a higher percentage of higher minority students than in traditional public schools. Data in Table 2.2, shown below, indicates the percentage of minorities in charter schools compared to traditional public schools. The data also shows that the majority of students in charter schools are minority students. Since charter schools are popular and have fewer admission guidelines, those guidelines must be monitored by the charter organization to ensure equal opportunity is provided to all students.

Table 2.2

<table>
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<th>Public Secondary</th>
<th>Charter Secondary</th>
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</table>


Accountability

Accountability is a significant component of charter school viability. Charter schools are reviewed in a 3-5 year cycle in which the authorizing body evaluates progress by addressing accountability standards designated in the charter. Charter schools do not have to follow standard
district policy, thus organizing boards evaluate their own progress and performance to improve the quality and satisfaction of their schools (Hess, 2004).

Three structures govern charter school operations-a board of trustees, an authorizer, and state government. The board of trustees is the committee that governs the school and makes decisions in regard to the charter. They help develop policy and ensure the school is on target to meet goals and objectives of the charter. The board could consist of trustees, parents, and community members, and monitors issues such as staff performance, student attendance, parent satisfaction, discipline, and test scores (Eckes, Plucker, and Benton, 2004).

Authorizers are established by state law to monitor performance, approve new charter schools, and evaluate school performance. The responsibilities of the authorizers vary depending on state legislation, but the authorizers work to ensure public demand and regulations are upheld (Hess, 2004). Authorizers intervene if schools fail to meet their education and financial responsibilities, as well as evaluate different phases of the charter such as the approval, oversight, and renewal phase (Lin, 2009). Charter schools tend to be more accountable to the public than traditional public schools if they do not accomplish their objectives.

In some states, legislation called for oversight mechanisms to manage charter schools at the state level. These mechanisms were implemented to manage and hear appeals of authorizers. Although charter schools do not have the same requirements as traditional public schools, they are still monitored by established criterion by the authorizing body (Hess, 2004). Before the contract is signed for the charter school, it details the specific criterion that must be upheld to keep the charter. The academic and operational standards are implemented to allow the school to continue to operate. Operational accountability includes both financial management and legal compliance. Academic accountability is established by the authorizer and is varies among most
charter schools. If a charter school does not meet both the academic and operational standards, it could be in jeopardy of having its charter revoked or non-renewed.

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) 2000 at Stanford University stated that authorizing bodies for charter schools were in a crisis because of schools not meeting their charter responsibilities. The challenge for lawmakers is to create a specific set of regulations for charter schools that span different states and laws. If there are issues with the school and these schools do not meet the regulations for the charter, the authorizers’ goal is to be able to intervene and assist before the school is closed. That process is complicated because the criterion to close charter schools varies from state to state. There are 41 states that have charter school legislation and 40 of these 41 states have specific legislation for authorizers to make decisions, to intervene in schools. There are three general categories for these decisions which include failure to meet educational goals, failure to meet fiscal responsibilities, and failure to meet other charter guidelines as stated in the original charter. Although there are three general categories for authorizers to intervene, financial mismanagement tends to be grounds for intervening in any state or situation.

According to Eckes, Plucker, and Benton (2004), 194 charters were revoked in the fall of 2002. This happened in 32 states across the United States. The charters were revoked due to failure to meet contract conditions as outlined in the charters. Charter schools were examined by the authorizing body and failed to meet criterion to remain open.

Before a charter can be revoked, authorizers must allow the school an opportunity to correct deficiencies. The school is provided specific guidelines, along with timelines to correct the issues. Authorizers collaborate with school officials to correct issues in a timely manner, but try to permit schools choice in the process. Authorizers uphold autonomy by allowing choice
when alleviating school issues. Unless there are serious safety issues, most states place charter schools on probation prior to revoking a charter. The decision to place a school on probation is made by the state board of education, the local school board or the authorizing body, depending on which entity authorized the school (Hess, 2004).

Charter schools that cannot correct the deficiencies after being placed on probation may have their charter revoked. The authorizing body revokes charters with written notice of the specific details of issues in need of remediation. The leaders of the school may choose to have a hearing with the authorizers in front of the state board of education or an appropriate court (Eckes, Plucker, and Benton, 2004).

**Funding**

Funding for charter schools is derived from many sources. Local and state entities provide a limited amount of funding. The majority of the funding comes from the authorizing body or organization. State and federal funding can be unpredictable for charter schools because these schools do not receive the same amount of funds as traditional public schools in a local district (Nathan, 1996).

Charter schools receive funding from the federal government mostly in the form of grants through a competitive grants program. If states do not have specific laws for charter schools, they can receive funding directly from the federal government, but this does not happen frequently. President Barack Obama instituted a grant program for states that wanted to be creative and innovative to increase student achievement. Race to the Top funding was a federal grant designed to assist states with innovative and creative options to support student achievement (Nathan, 2004).

The U.S. Education Department’s Charter Schools Program moved from $145 million in

Despite the local, state, and federal funding, most charter schools are financially challenged. However, there are exceptions. Most charter schools do not report all funding sources so it is difficult to fully account for all funding sources. Charter schools do not have to open their records to the public since many of them are authorized by businesses (Nathan, 2004).

For most states, however, charter schools have the autonomy and freedom to explore avenues that traditional schools do not but charter schools do not have financial resources to fully support them. Technically, they are funded on a per-pupil basis whereas, their district counterparts the same funding plus district allocations. The exact amount that each charter school receives varies per district and may even differ from charter to charter within a single district. Most expenses are satisfied from the charter school operating budget with a certain amount coming from the federal government. Expenses such as building cost, upkeep, and other operating costs are all funneled through the new start-up schools that are not housed in district-owned buildings. Typically, this money is generated from their per pupil operating budget and subsequently results in charter schools receiving less public funding for activities such as teacher salaries and instruction (Nathan, 2006).

With federal support being earmarked to state departments of education, there have been grants available to charter schools, but amounts per grant have varied widely. The local community’s ability to take advantage of existing grant opportunities by gathering the necessary resources to fund their schools have become crucial. Since charter schools are applying for grants, inequities in who receives and does not receive funding has become problematic. In a
sense, charter school reform has led to the increased privatization of public education as charter school communities in affluent locales mobilize to write grant proposals to finance their educational programs (Wohlstetter, Wenning, and Briggs 1995).

Charter school laws in several states grant schools more autonomy to raise private funds to pay for their public schools. Although existing charter legislation in selected states forbids private schools from applying for charter status, private donors are still encouraged to provide funding or other assistance to either the establishment or operation of charter school. Therefore, some charter schools are free from district regulations regarding private fundraising for public schools. Without additional sources of federal funding, charter schools are left to secure funding for their new and innovative programs. Some schools have the parent-teacher organizations as support for social and cultural capital, but other schools are not in a similar position. Charter schools must be resourceful with funding sources since most of their funds are allocated from the state legislature. The issue of sustainability of the school could be difficult in less affluent neighborhoods or in networks that do not have large capital sources (Nathan, 2004).

In theory, state funding should be awarded on a per pupil basis to each charter school or public school, but in practice, charter school funding varies among districts and states. Since the funding from the government varies, fundraising opportunities must be viable at all times to offer the educational opportunities to support the charter (Nathan, 1996).

Charter schools are subsidized by local and state funding at a limited level. Most charters receive the majority of their funding from the authorizing body of the charter (Nathan, 2004). Due to numerous laws governing money, public funding from state and federal bodies could be unpredictable. Many states provide significantly lower funding to charter schools than traditional public schools. Payments could be delayed to charter schools, which could create
deficits in some schools. Deficits in some schools could create lack of programs or materials to support the charter choices.

According to Common Core Data (2009), district charter public schools receive approximately $5,600.00 per pupil. The traditional district public schools receive approximately $8,400.00 for operating expenses. A study conducted by the Legislative Office of Educational Oversight in Ohio reported that the per pupil dollars for charter schools were about 9% less than local traditional public schools. Approximately 16% of the charter schools’ budgets were designated for operating costs, which led to a reduction in the instructional budget (Center for Education Reform, 2009).

According to the States Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools 2004, charter schools were included in the fund allotment of the local school system. The local school districts were required to treat charter schools as a regular local traditional school system in the district in regard to money. The charter school should receive money for all programs to be fully operational like a traditional public school. Charter schools were expected to receive the remaining funds from the organizing body and donors of the school.

Several critics of charter schools argued that money is being taken from traditional public schools to go to charter schools, which subsequently leads to budget deficits. Consequently, this led to a lack of resources for students in public schools. Similarly, the lack of the appropriate allotment of monies from the federal government hinders the growth and viability of charters. Proponents agree that lack of funding impacts student achievement and hinders the resourcefulness of charter schools.

Most charter schools are managed by non-profit organizations, but there are some schools that are managed by for-profit systems known as Educational management organizations.
EMOs design charter schools to take over exiting public schools in urban areas. There are also virtual charter school operated by non-profit organizations. Virtual charter schools have not been in existence as long as other charter schools but they are on the rise. Researchers have discovered that virtual charters accommodate diverse learning styles (Cavanaugh, 2009). Virtual charter schools have increased from 13 in 2003-2004 to 50 in 2008-2009.

**School Choice**

As a part of school reform, school choice has become a viable option for parents who are dissatisfied with public education and want alternatives for their children. Parent choice is considered to be at the forefront of school reform (Smith and Wohsletter, 2009). An associated poll indicated that more than 60% of respondents believe that parents should have the opportunity to have the right to choose schools for their children. Public education continues to be scrutinized and debated in an attempt to seek improvements within the present structure. Research shows that failing test scores, rising dropout rates, and decreasing literacy levels are all major concerns among parents and education leaders. Thus, Americans lost faith in the public school system, which prompted the steady decline in confidence over the past 20 years (Loveless, 2004). For this reason, school choice is becoming increasingly popular.

School choice gives parents the right to choose a school for their children, regardless of where they live. The choice of school for parents in today’s society is sometimes controversial and political. Parents have public and private options which are manifested in many forms (Nathan, 2004).

Parents could choose to send their child to private school with a government-funded voucher. This choice of private school often prompts intense debate between political figures and community about public versus private education. Public school choice gives parents the right to
transfer students to other schools that are performing better academically within the same school district. This choice is also fueled by major debate from political figures and the community, and is designated to remove students from underperforming schools instead of addressing the underline problem of low achievement (Loveless, 2004).

Florida's McKay Scholarship Program praised charter schools for giving parents a choice in educating their students with disabilities (Epstein, 2001)). More than 8,000 public education students with disabilities were offered scholarships to attend private schools in 2000 and 2001. Advocates of charter schools praised the fact that parents were offered choice, but were concerned that some parents attempted to take advantage of school choice. Opponents of charter schools fear that not all parents can take advantage of school choice because of various factors. So, while charter schools provide choice, autonomy, and innovative practices, family access to charters remains a concern.

Some critics of charter schools were concerned that not all families had the capabilities to make informed decisions about leaving their zoned district school. If families could not make that decision, the issue of equity among students in poverty could be (Fuller, Elmore, and Orfield. 1996). Proponents of school choice leveraged accountability as a byproduct of charter schools while opponents found that school choice did not solve the underlying issue of underperforming schools in certain neighborhoods (Henig, 1997). Essentially, no one believes that allowing schools to fail will help the educational system. While accountability and choice increased, the underlying problem was not addressed or solved.

Critics of school choice argue that choice will cause the system to fail the children and families who do not have the resources to leave an underperforming school. This could foster resentment in those families and have long term negative effects for those children (Cookson,
Type of School Choice

According to Cookson (1994), there are numerous types of school choice. They are:

- **Intra-district choice**: Parents have option to select schools within district zoning limits other than zone school.

- **Charter schools**: Publicly funded schools that are operated by private or public organizations. Charter schools have regulations established by the chartering organization and local educational agencies.

- **Magnet schools**: Public schools located within a school district that gives parents school choice. There is typically a lottery-based enrollment process and a particular curricular focus.

- **Voucher plans**: Federal government funds provided to families to allow school choice to a private school.

Charter schools have existed in the United States for over 20 years and have experienced remarkable growth over the past several years. Researchers believe this is partly due to families and children, particularly families of low-income students, seeking opportunities beyond their traditional public schools because of dissatisfaction with traditional public schools (Berends, 2015).

Economic theorists have opined that choice in education leads to improved outcomes. Students with choice have improved outcomes because choice leads to a better fit for individual needs (Friedman, 1955). School choice is also thought to spur educational competition for schools to perform academically and have a more culturally relevant environment. If schools have academic competition, it is believed that standardized test scores increase along with
learning.

School choice assumes all families have the ability to take advantage of school options. Research suggests that families in low socioeconomic areas may not have access to those options due to a variety of factors. Some factors include having access to the information, language barriers, transportation needs, and other family ills that work against societal norms (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996).

Early charter school advocates were inspired by the ability of school choice to disrupt the boundary lines of district-zoned schools. It was believed that traditional public schools bind students to racially segregated and income-based school zones. Charter school choice differed from other district zoned school choice, such as magnet school choice, because admission decisions were lottery-based which eliminated other distractions from the process. Charter school enrollment provided families with choice, which led to increased academic achievement for some schools (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996).

While school choice advocates praised the autonomy and innovative culture of charter school choice, opponents had doubts about the authenticity of the choices that were available regarding the choice of schools and programs offered in charter schools. Critics also indicated that charter school choice accentuates racial segregation in schools because minority populations have larger enrollment numbers, which does not solve the problem of inequality and segregation in neighborhoods (Cookson, 1994).

It is believed that parents and students choose charter schools for several reasons. One major reason would be the dissatisfaction with traditional public schools (Collins, 2000). Parents and students are attracted to charter schools because these schools offer innovative teaching strategies, smaller class environments, choice curriculums, and high standards for achievement.
Charter schools offer choice in geographical areas that traditional public schools may not. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2015), charter schools have become a source of hope in an economy of failing educational systems for some students in many urban areas. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 introduced the notion of school choice into federal law. The law stated that any student enrolled in a public school identified as a failing school could transfer to a better-performing traditional public or charter school (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). In an effort to promote school choice, the United States federal government granted $1.3 million in grants to three education organizations. These organizations were tasked with disseminating information about school choice provisions in the law. NCLB (2002) stated that school choice was available to families, but did not stipulate the logistics of how it was to be accomplished. As of fall 2002, research indicated that few students took advantage of the school choice option. Federal officials attribute the lack of participation to the thought that high-performing schools had few available spots for more students and urban districts have no alternatives for students in low-performing schools (Chubb and Moe, 1999). The percentage of public charter schools in the United States drastically increased from school year 2000 to 2013, from 1,500 to 6,100. Additionally, the percentage of traditional public schools that were converted to charters increased from 1.7 to 6.2% (U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). There has been continual growth in more recent years with approximately 3 million students enrolled in charter schools, an increase from approximately 1.8 million five years ago. Charter schools currently represent approximately 6% of public school enrollment. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (2016), California, Florida, and Texas have the highest charter school enrollment. In addition to increasing in number, charter schools have
generally increased in enrollment size over time (Charter School, 2015).

Demographic characteristics of charter schools changed from 1999 to 2013. There has been a substantial increase in the number of black students enrolled. In large urban cities, as well as nationally, the demographic composition has shifted to serving larger populations of minority students. In some areas, a larger population of low-income students were enrolled in charter schools compared to traditional public (Chudowsky, N. & Ginsburg, A. 2012).

**Autonomy in Charter Schools**

Autonomy is one of the most distinctive and discussed features of charter schools compared to traditional public schools (Gawlik 2016). Researchers believe that allowing school personnel to have the freedom or autonomy over various facets of school life lead to desired results. Autonomy is granted to charter schools in areas such as finances, curriculum, personnel, behavior, scheduling, and instruction (Hasel and Herdman, 2000). Autonomy is granted to administrators and teachers to lead to an improved learning environment to fit the needs of all students.

Budde (1988) suggested that education in charter schools would provide teachers more creative input of the curriculum and inspire students to take more responsibility for learning. Chubb and Moe (1990) stated the key to effective public education rests with teachers and students having autonomy to create a particular style of learning. Autonomy was found to raise the level of teacher creativity which increased student learning and motivated students to participate in the classroom environment.

Gawlik (2016) stated that autonomy in school leadership also contributed to the success of charter schools. The amount of autonomy given to charter school administrators differs according to state and district policies, as well as the type of charter school. Principals in start-
up charters had more autonomy than in conversion charters. Principal autonomy also depended on state policies on teacher unionization in hiring and firing practices (Adamowski, Therriault & Cavanna, 2007).

Principal autonomy led to improved learning environments because increases in student performance as evidenced by teacher monitoring tools was noted. Principals believed they were better instructional leaders and took the time to mentor and heavily monitor teacher instructional practices, which was often not the case in traditional public school. Principals also observed that teacher evaluations carried more of a consequence in the charter school than traditional public school. This enabled principals and administrators to intervene early in areas that needed improvement or specific instructional support. In some traditional public school districts, improvement plans or specific instructional support could not be implemented until at least six weeks into the school year. In the charter schools, teachers received intervention earlier, which led to teachers being better supported in all areas. The dismissal of teachers could happen quicker in some charter districts versus traditional public schools. The dismissal of teachers happened as a last resort, but was allowed to happen when and if the principal agreed.

Pay scales were similar to those in traditional public school districts in the surrounding areas. The charter board approved a maximum pay increase based on the annual budget. Raises and pay step increases for pay were negotiated prior to contract approval and were included in these budgets.

Charter school activists hope that the combination of autonomy and funding contributes to better learning environments which lead to higher student achievement (Buckley & Fisher, 2003).
**Charters in Urban Areas**

Over half of the public charter schools in the United States are located in urban cities, while only 16% of these schools are located in rural areas of the country (Johnson and Silvernail, 2014). According to CREDO’s 2013 National Charter School Study, urban charter schools have better results while serving students with disadvantages. This can be ascertained by comparing the average academic growth on a standard assessment, such as Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment (TCAP) of disadvantaged African-American and Hispanic students in charters and traditional public schools. Across all urban regions, African-American students in poverty receive the equivalent of 59 days of additional learning in math and 44 days of additional learning in reading compared to their peers in traditional public school. Hispanic students in poverty experience the equivalent of 48 days of additional learning in math and 25 days of additional learning in reading in charter schools relative to their peers in traditional public school (Details from the Dashboard: Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools and Students, 2014). Charter school research indicates that elementary and middle schools have demonstrated positive progress in both reading and math when compared to traditional public schools (Betts and Tang, 2011). It was determined that there was no significant positive result at the high school level, but the results vary depending on location. It was also reported that urban charter schools outperformed traditional suburban schools at the middle school level. Although the research has shown that there are positive and negative studies about charter school progress, it appears charter schools better serve elementary and middle schools.

Research on charter schools has indicated positive and negative results, but the overall effectiveness of charter schools at all levels remain uncertain. Since the inception of charter schools in the 1990s, researchers have tried to gather a body of evidence to support data at the
elementary, middle, and high school level, but data is limited. Researchers have done several studies to investigate the effectiveness of the curriculum and other opportunities in charter schools but the data is inconclusive. Numerous reports exist that compare charter schools to traditional public schools.

Urban charter schools seem to have more meaningful effect than suburban or traditional public schools. Data was gathered and compared between urban charters and traditional public schools of the same level, and the charter school students had a higher net gain of improvement (Chudowsky and Ginsburg, 2012). Students that are high-poverty or economically disadvantaged have experienced the highest positive gain when compared to other groups of students in charter schools (Betts and Tang, 2011). Minority students in high-poverty areas also experienced a high level of positive gains when compared to traditional public school on the end of the year summative assessment (Chudowsky and Ginsburg, 2012). Studies show that minority students showed more of a positive gain when compared to students in traditional public school. However, if there was not a positive gain, these students performed similar to that of students in a traditional public school.

Although there was a significant positive gain shown for all minority students, the effect for black students in high-poverty areas was the greatest gain. The achievement for black students in high-poverty areas was significantly higher than other populations of 4th grade students and 8th grade students for overall achievement.

Minority students have shown large positive gains in charter schools, but other subgroups have also demonstrated progress. Students that receive special education services and English Language Learners in high-poverty areas have also modeled great gains in academic success at charter schools when compared to peers in traditional public schools (Details from the
Dashboard: Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools and Students, 2014). Figures in Table 2.3, shown below, represent the growth seen in the African-American and Hispanic student populations by subgroup in charter schools. Figures in Table 2.4 and 2.5, also shown below, represent the increase in academic achievement with minority subgroups in middle schools.

Table 2.3

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Table 2.4

Subgroup Reading Achievement in Traditional and Charter Schools for grade 8.

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<td>African American Hispanic</td>
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<td>Asian/Pacific Islander Students</td>
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<td>English Language Learners</td>
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Table 2.5

Subgroup Math Achievement in Traditional and Charter Schools for grade 8.

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Although the academic achievement for subgroups increased, critics of public charter schools feared racial segregation occurred as an offset of charter school success (Chubb and Moe, 1990). The increase in racial segregation was a concern of the critics of charter schools early in the conception of charter schools. It was believed that charter schools would yield educational competition and innovation. However, some charter school critics argue that these schools have prompted racial segregation. Proponents of the charter school movement believed that families from high-poverty neighborhoods would have choice in school selection and not be bound by school attendance zones with charter schools. Frankenburg et al. (2017) suggested that the charter school option created a more racially segregated environment than the traditional public school.

UCLA’s Civil Rights study found higher levels of black or minority students enrolled in charter schools than traditional public schools. Unlike the establishment of magnet schools,
which were developed to integrate students from different neighborhoods in the same school, charter schools were not developed to integrate because their enrollment decisions are strictly open (Nathan, 2006).

Frakenburg et al. (2017) proposed that there were several reasons for the racially segregated charter schools. These reasons were location of the school, lack of transportation, and housing segregation of the family. Some parents choose to transport students to school, but there are numerous parents that cannot afford to transport students, leaving students to attend traditional public schools. Thus, neighborhood boundaries still matter in school choice.

**Charter School Performance**

In theory, a successful charter school fosters short-term and long-term positive changes, such as student mastery of standards and the development of students into productive citizens.

Charter school performance has been measured in studies of varying types with varying outcomes. Studies have typically focused on the short-term measurement of student success on standardized assessments. Charter schools have been measured in relation to their traditional public school counterparts that students would have attended if they were not enrolled in charter schools. Thus, researchers concluded that successful charter schools are based on the fact of students being more successful on standardized assessments compared to traditional public school counterparts (Gleason, 2016).

Charter school results are mixed with some studies showing small positive outcomes and other studies showing no positive outcome (Berends, 2015). Results were dependent on the location of the school, data collected, and data collection methods. Studies that use lottery-based schools have shown more positive results in greater academic achievement than traditional public schools, with much of this data derived from urban charter schools.
Hoxby (2009) examined 3rd grade students in charter schools compared to those in traditional public schools. Math and reading scores were higher for students in the charter schools than those in traditional public schools.

Dobbie and Fryer (2011) studied a charter school in Harlem and determined that students who attended the school achieved and performed at a higher rate on state assessments than students in traditional public schools. The results of that assessment indicated that students at the charter school outperformed students at local traditional public schools with similar demographics as the charter school.

Clark, Gleason, Silverstein, & Tuttle (2011) studied 36 charter schools in 15 states and found no significant effects in the subject areas of math and reading achievement. Furgeson et al (2012) examined 22 charter management organizations (CMOs) and found no significant overall effects of charter school performance on student achievement in math. At the organizational level, 11 CMOs had significant positive effects, seven had significant negative effects, and four had no significant effects.

Researchers comparing charter schools with traditional public schools using non-random experimental methods have noted mixed results for the achievement of charter schools on student achievement (Booker, Gill, Simmer, & Sass, 2009). Studies of this type most commonly show that students in charter schools and those in traditional public schools perform at similar levels. Zimmer et al (2009) examined charter schools in seven states and found no statistically significant overall charter school effects.

The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University conducted two non-random charter school studies in 2009 and 2013. Each study compared the academic performance of students at charter schools and traditional public schools (CREDO,
The results of the first study were controversial due to the methodology and the interpretation of the results. The second CREDO study included the 16 states that were part of the original study, as well as 11 additional states, such as Florida (CREDO, 2013). The expansion of the sample states significantly improved the reliability of the findings and strengthened the credibility of the research. The findings of the second study showed improvements in math and reading since the 2009 study. Charter schools in the 27 states had slightly larger gains in reading and similar gains in math than the traditional public schools. Math gains were essentially insignificant. In the schools included in both the 2009 and the 2013 studies: Blacks, Hispanics, low SES students, English language learners (ELL), and special education students all improved in both reading and math. Hispanic students performed well in reading, low SES students performed well in math, and ELLs performed well in both reading and math. Because the new cohort of schools served a larger portion of students in poverty and Hispanic students than in 2009, these results were significant. The studies revealed that achievement in charter schools for urban areas was enhanced. Many times, school reform could be the greatest need in urban areas. Charter schools have a wide range of effects on student achievement. While some studies find a positive but small effect of charter school achievement compared to traditional public schools, some studies show no impact.

During the 2015-2016 school year, more than 400 new public charter schools opened (Gawlik, 2016). An estimated 250,000 additional students attended public charter schools in the 2015-2016 school year compared to the previous year. With the addition of new public charter schools and students, there are now more than 6,800 charter public schools enrolling an estimated 2.9 million students throughout the country. Enrollment in charter public schools has grown exponentially in the past 15 years. The estimated 9% growth in public charter school
enrollment from 2014 to 2015 demonstrates continued parental demand for high-quality educational options.

**Theoretical Framework**

Traditionally, school choice has not been a top priority in the United States for policymakers. Most students attend the traditional public school in their neighborhood. For many students, the only school choice available is tied to the residential location of the family (Frankenburg et al., 2017).

Friedman (1955) suggested that giving families more school choice would lead to school competition. Subsequently, this would foster change. This type of reasoning became known as the market theory of school choice.

Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory identifies five basic needs that each person seeks to satisfy. These needs are survival, freedom, power, belonging, and fun. Sullo (2007) stated that choice theory is "a biological theory that suggests we are born with specific needs that we are genetically instructed to satisfy" (p. 8). The five needs are sometimes expanded to include other needs closely related to the five. For example, survival may be expanded to include safety and security, as well as psychological survival/nourishment. Power may be framed as competence, both actual and perceived, thus impacting self-efficacy, self-esteem, and peer perceptions. Freedom is usually associated with choice and that choice must be authentic (Brooks & Young, 2011). People only control their own behavior; no other behavior can be controlled by that person. Behavior is the only characteristic that can be controlled by that individual. Human beings seek momentary satisfaction. Teachers believe in stimulus response theory, which states that human beings react to stimuli and provide a response which drives behavior. Human beings are capable of providing information for others to make conscious decisions. An important
element of choice theory is that each person acts intentionally to satisfy these needs. Therefore, every act is intentional, and every act is motivated to meet one or more of the five needs. According to Frankenburg et al, (2017), choice is also important for parents. If parents have choice, they tend to make decisions that best fit the child and family situation. If obstacles such as transportation and lack of knowledge are removed, parents usually select the best school for their child based on academic qualities. Parents are who have choices about their child’s education tend to be more involved in their child’s education. This is a component of Glasser’s choice theory that stems from the need to be engaged in choices, which leads to autonomy in those choices.

Choice Theory is an attempt at describing personal freedom for one’s decision making. It seeks to find ways of relating to others in a positive manner while internally motivating each person to achieve his/her best life. Human beings need options to satisfy their personal needs. If people have options, personal needs are satisfied, which makes people happier with life. This creates a world in which they are internally motivated to fulfill their ideas (Glasser, 1997).

Charter schools have been an important choice option for many students, especially in urban areas. Many parents who believe zoned traditional public school is not the best option have chosen charter schools. Choice Theory argues that the traditional way of educating children is coercive and divisive. This approach is ineffective, and students often opt out of school by the time they are in high school. Students opt out of high school because they are not satisfied with the world of “school” and how things are done. Schools are composed of rewards and punishment, which are two components of coercion (Frankenburg et al, 2017).

If schools offered more viable choices to satisfy the four basic needs of human beings, students would value the experience and stay. Students should be provided choices in projects,
subjects, classes, and other areas in their day to really be interested in the school world and make it a place of interest. Charter schools, by nature, tend to offer more choices and creative areas which parents and students enjoy.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is also closely related to Glasser’s Choice Theory. SDT specifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000). SDT explained how intrinsic motivation can be nurtured in learning contexts by creating conducive classroom environments. It proposes that humans are naturally motivated to engage in activities that are self-chosen, not imposed. Such experiences of autonomy and choice are associated with self-determined actions that are functional (Glasser, 1997). Choice has been proven for student motivation and other self-driven tendencies.

In a self-determined theory classroom setting, several factors come together and influence students’ motivation. Students experiencing autonomy in projects and other areas display positive academic outcomes, enhanced creativity, greater enjoyment and effort, positive emotions and motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000). In the context of educational setting, the autonomy experience of motivation extended by a teacher to his/her students through classroom dynamics is identified as teacher autonomy support. However, if teachers embed autonomy support in their teaching styles, students are likely to develop intrinsic motivation for better academic performance.

Thus, choice, autonomy, and internal motivation remain essential elements of long-standing and successful charter school programs. Because school choice disrupts a common reliance upon neighborhood school zones (which often means that patterns of residential segregation are replicated in school populations), it provides a mechanism for attracting a student body from a much larger, and often more diverse, geographic area.
Impact and Implications

The impact of urban charters shows a positive effect on students. The longer students stay enrolled in charter schools, the larger the annual benefit of charter attendance becomes. These trends are strong enough that by the time a student spends four or more years enrolled in an urban charter school, it is expected that their annual academic growth will be 108 days greater in math and 72 days greater in reading per year than their peers in traditional public schools. Thus, it is not unreasonable to expect many urban charter sectors to continue to improve in quality (Details from the Dashboard: Estimated Number of Public Charter Schools and Students, 2014).

Charter schools may improve academic achievement in several ways. First, they may increase the performance of the students who choose these schools by providing more effective learning environments than traditional public schools do. Charter schools might achieve this goal by hiring more effective teachers, by using resources more efficiently, or by attracting a more motivated set of students who provide positive spillover benefits to other students. Additionally, even if charter schools are no more effective than traditional public schools for the typical student, they might benefit some students by providing alternative educational environments and programs. Students at risk of failure in traditional school settings, for example, might do better in charter schools because those schools offer smaller, more intimate environments, specialized curricula, or targeted support services (Bifulco & Ladd, 2004).

Charter schools are producing higher achievement gains in math relative to their district-run counterparts in most grade levels, particularly in middle school, and gains in reading that are similar to district-run schools in reading (Clark, Gleason, Siverburg & Tuttle, 2011).

Summary

This chapter presented the literature on the successful components of charter schools.
The components of successful charter schools were detailed, and the theoretical framework of this study was indicated. Choice Theory and Self-Determination Theory research provided the theoretical foundation for this study, which sought to explain internal motivation, the idea of choice and how that affects people, and the idea of autonomy.

These characteristics and ideas were explored in an attempt to identify the characteristics that make a charter school successful in an urban area in Southeast Tennessee. The researcher hopes to share the results of this study with traditional public schools in an effort of sharing valuable strategies to support increased student achievement and parent support.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the characteristics of a successful charter middle school in an urban area. The researcher scrutinized specific criterion that contributed to the success of the school regarding teaching and leading practices, school choice, and overall school practices. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Study of Charter Schools (Nelson et. al, 2000), charter schools enrolled more students that were considered low-income and received free or reduced lunch than traditional public schools across the United States. That revealed that low-income students took advantage of the choice that charter schools afforded, and suggested that low-income families wanted an alternative to traditional public schools. According to the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Services, (Bifulco and Ladd, 2004), charter middle schools in urban areas were more effective than traditional public middle schools in improving test scores on state assessments. A need exists to explore characteristics that contribute to the success of urban charter middle schools.

Research Question

This qualitative research study was designed to answer the following research question:

- What are the characteristics that make a successful urban charter middle school?

Qualitative Research

This was a qualitative research study utilizing several methods to develop a better understanding of the characteristics that contribute to the success of an urban charter middle school. This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews and observations.

Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) stated that qualitative research is used to gain insight into a stated issue in society. Qualitative research reports information to explain or further
research into that issue. The researcher is able to use questioning or other methods to uncover trends or patterns that lead to conclusions. This researcher utilized a case study format focused on positive characteristics of an urban charter middle school to develop understanding of the school culture. The case study format was implemented because it provided the researcher multiple perceptions into the characteristics that make a school successful. The case study was informed by administrators, teachers, and students to gain an overall picture of the school environment.

Through the case study design, individual interviews and observations were used to collect data. Interviews were transcribed and scripted to analyze trends and patterns of data. Data from observations were also transcribed and coded by the researcher for easy interpretation. Conclusions were made and shared with stakeholders at the end of the study.

Research Approach

The research approach was a grounded qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews and observations. Noble and Mitchell (2016) explained grounded theory as a research method used to analyze and examine data through formal processes. Inductive processes are utilized to gather information and uncover relationships of data in a systematic manner. The inductive process begins with broad data and is examined to focus upon specific theory or relational processes. Grounded theory stipulates that the data collection and analysis occur simultaneously. Categories and codes are developed through the data, which leads to theory.

Research Participants and Setting

The urban middle charter school is a single-gender (all-girls) school opened in 2009. After beginning with a 9th grade class, the charter school leaders realized many of the girls lacked foundational skills, so a middle school was added. The charter middle/high school is
located in an urban city with approximately 350 students enrolled. The charter school is Title I, with a student population consisting of Hispanic, Asian, African American, and Caucasian children. Although this research will focus on the middle school, the school continues to enroll high school students.

The population of this study consisted of administrators, teachers, and students in an urban charter middle school. A convenience sampling of participants was selected in the urban middle school to gather a variety of perceptions of the school community. The principal, assistant principal, and guidance counselor were also included in the population. The sample in this study was selected to ensure the data was representative of diverse perceptions of the school. Staff, faculty, and students were selected in a random fashion that ensured ethical considerations were upheld by the school staff. The total population consisted of 11 people from varying ages to varying levels of knowledge about the school. Table 3.1, shown below outlines the characteristics of the participants of each group.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Teachers (n=5)</th>
<th>Administrators and Counselor (n=3)</th>
<th>Students (n=3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study design is predicated upon observations and semi-structured interviews conducted with students, staff, and faculty of the research school. The semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to ask a specific set of questions with room to expand/clarify
information in conversations if needed. The observation notes were gathered in classrooms, hallways, the school front office, and library to determine effective teaching practices utilized in the building.

To conduct a study exploring the characteristics surrounding successful school practices and student outcomes, a non-experimental qualitative study was used to investigate these relationships within the selected urban charter middle school. Interview guides were utilized to address various facets of school life. The purpose of the questions for each group of participants was to target their perceptions on successful schools. The goal was to collect enough information to gather evidence to determine trends and patterns of successful schools and translate that information into useful strategies that can be utilized in any school.

Through the case study design, individual interviews and observations were used to collect data. Interviews were transcribed and scripted to analyze trends and patterns of data. Data from observations were also transcribed and coded by the researcher for easy interpretation. Conclusions were made and shared with stakeholders at the end of the study.

**Data Collection**

This qualitative research was grounded in semi-structured interviews and observations in various locations in the school with 11 participants. The participants consisted of teachers, students, and administrators. The observation locations included school hallways, classrooms, front office, and the library. Observation field notes were collected by the researcher and analyzed for patterns and trends. These notes were scripted and coded to ensure anonymity of the participants and integrity to the validity of the study. The researcher recorded the interviews and took notes to ensure accuracy of the information. The recordings were transcribed and analyzed for patterns and trends.
A letter was provided to the school’s chartering board to gain permission for the study. Teachers and students were provided information about the study through newsletters, email communication, and word of mouth by the school. There were consent forms conferred to participants to inform them of the study. Ethical considerations included anonymity for all participants and data obtained.

School faculty and students were interviewed throughout the case study. The interviews consisted of an interview guide that included questions relevant to the school and the processes within the school. All participants were randomly selected by the school to acquire various perspectives. The interviews were held at various times, lasting approximately 7-13 minutes per interview. Classroom and school observations were conducted during the case study period. Observations occurred in classrooms, front office, hallways, and the school library. The researcher conducted observations during unobtrusive times throughout the school day. The observations were designed to gain insight into the everyday processes that contribute to the success of the charter middle school.

**Data Analysis**

According to Macclure (2013), the coding process is one that enables the researcher access into the understandings of the data by analyzing patterns and trends. The researcher utilized a peer researcher to conduct the initial Open Coding process to gather data and assign codes or labels. The data were analyzed to identify the trends and patterns to draw conclusions about the subject. After the Open Coding process was complete, the data were analyzed using the Axial coding process codes, or labels to themes that emerged from the research as important or recurring. Through the Axial Coding process, labels were attached to the data and connections were made to identify 12 initial themes that emerged from the data. Those 12 initial
themes were then synthesized into eight final themes to explore the data by the primary researcher. The eight final themes were determined.

The researcher utilized member checks to ensure the accuracy and validity of information. The researcher summarized each interview to ensure accuracy for each participant. The researcher also utilized the assistance of a 13-year educational professional who specializes in peer research. This peer researcher completed an initial coding process of reviewing the data and coding the emerging trends and patterns. The primary researcher also completed the initial process. After the initial coding process was completed, the primary researcher took the initial themes and synthesized them into the final themes. Data triangulation was also utilized to ensure dependability and credibility of the research.

**Limitations**

A research study of this magnitude cannot possibly account for all factors associated with this topic due to the nature of the qualitative study. This study was limited because it could not examine every factor affecting the success of a charter middle school within the specified time frame. The participants may not have been completely honest during various times of the study, and the study was limited to the perceptions of the stakeholders and interviewer. This study also examined data from a single year, and data may fluctuate on a yearly basis.

**Ethical Considerations**

Permission was granted by the charter school board and school administration to conduct the research study. The founding board member was provided a consent form to conduct the study. Before any data was collected, Carson-Newman’s IRB granted permission to the researcher to conduct the study. Prior to any data collection, participants signed informed consent forms to participate in the study. The informed consent alerted participants to remember
that they were volunteers in the study with no monetary incentives. Participants were also notified that interviews would be recorded and transcribed, but all names would remain private to ensure anonymity and confidential. Participants were also advised that all transcriptions, recordings, and field notes would be password protected and locked away at the primary researcher’s residence for seven years. After that time frame, the data would be destroyed. Participants were also informed that the school’s name would not be shared and they would be assigned pseudonyms throughout the study in order to remain anonymous.

Summary

The goal of this research study was to explore the characteristics that contributed to the success of an urban charter middle school. A grounded theory qualitative research design was chosen because it enabled the researcher to gain data by exploring a natural school environment through semi-structured interviews and observations. Emerging categories or themes were developed through an inductive process to analyze the data. The researcher was allowed full access and witnessed educational environments that promoted student success in various ways. The case study enabled the researcher to make assumptions and capture perspectives of various participants, which developed possible trends in the data. The data collected provided the researcher with information that substantiated conclusions, which were shared with school and district stakeholders.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The purpose of this Grounded Theory case study was to examine and identify the characteristics of a highly effective charter middle school in an urban area. The researcher gained approval from the charter school board to conduct the study, and participants were randomly selected by the school staff. The population of the study consisted of a diverse sampling of the school community, which included students, teachers, and administrators. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, classroom visits, and observations of the school environment to determine effective teaching and social practices utilized in the school.

School Demographics

The single-gender charter middle school opened in 2009 with a 9th grade class scheduled to graduate prior to the charter renewal five years later. After starting with 9th grade, the charter school realized it was difficult to launch a high school when many of the girls lacked academic foundational skills. The charter board and school faculty realized they should begin with middle school grade levels to instill those skills. Parents were notified that the high school expansion was going to be delayed and plans were made to institute the middle school the following year. The charter middle/high school is located in an urban city with approximately 350 students enrolled. The charter school is Title I with a student population consisting of Hispanic, Asian, African-American, and Caucasian children. Although this research focused on the middle school, the school continues to enroll high school students.

Participant Characteristics

School observations consisted of visits to classrooms and other general areas within the building. The interviews consisted of a sample of 11 students, teachers, and administrators. The interviews included three students from various grades, five teachers who taught different subjects, one school counselor, and two administrators. The three students that were interviewed
had attended the school from 1-4 years. The school faculty had various years of experience, ranging from 1-6 years. Both administrators had been at the school for six years with various experience.

**Research Question**

The researcher examined data related to the following research question:

- What are the characteristics that make a successful urban charter middle school?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The researcher utilized a seven-question interview related to best practices of effective charter schools. An interview question guide was provided for students and faculty. The interview questions were aimed at identifying school characteristics that foster success from different perspectives. Interview questions were structured to allow participants to reflect upon personal experiences at the charter school. The observations were designed to afford the researcher opportunities to spend time with different groups of faculty at the school to glean data. The interview guides included questions to elicit participants’ views on the differentiating characteristics of the school. There were questions that asked participants about the school culture and the characteristics that were most valued in the school. Other questions asked participants about stakeholder engagement and the corresponding process of stakeholder engagement.

The researcher collected data at the school. Interviews were conducted in an office that was located in an unobtrusive area of the school. The school staff randomly chose student and faculty participants, who were interviewed in a room, one-by-one for the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 7-13 minutes and they started with the students. The interviews
were analyzed by scripted notes, recorded, and then transcribed. The observations were analyzed by collecting field notes.

The following sections address the three different areas of the research process and state the questions with the responses.

**Student Response Data**

Students were interviewed separately. Three student participants had a different background and experience in the school. Each interview lasted approximately 7-13 minutes. The classroom observation was conducted in a 6th grade ELA class and the general observations were conducted in the hallways during class change, as well as in the front office and library. There was a specific set of questions for students and a different set of questions for school faculty.

**Interview Question 1.** Why did you choose to attend or stay at this school? Two of the three (66.7%) of the student participants mentioned they were attracted to the school because it was a single-gender status school with a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) focus. They suggested that an all-girls school made the school feel as though it fostered a family atmosphere.

Small class sizes, positive teacher/student relationships, and personalization of learning for each student were mentioned as reasons they continued to attend the charter school. All three of the students stated that they felt like teachers knew them as people instead of just students, due to small class sizes (between 18-22 students per class). One student participant stated that “Our classes are small enough where teachers really get to know us as people and they give each of us what we need. It’s not a one-size-fits-all like it is in public school.” Another student participant remarked that the teacher stayed with her at school until 7:00p.m., until her parents came to get
her. She said that it takes a great person to do something like that. It was stated that teachers eat lunch with students frequently and go over and beyond the call of duty.

**Interview Question 2.** What makes this school different from other schools? Two of the three (66.7%) of student participants indicated that the opportunities were better at the charter school. Given the school’s STEM focus, both students stipulated that they feel like more opportunities are offered, which included more field trips based on real-world situations and how to be better prepared for college experiences.

All student participants talked about the high expectations from the teachers and administration. One student stated that the expectations are really high. She said that “They make you go over and beyond which makes this school a lot harder than regular public school.” Another student said that “We have a sisterhood type of bond. This school has a different feel since it’s all girls. We look out for each other in a way that we didn’t in public school.” Another student stated that “We just do things differently here. We do regular work but we put that work into projects and focus on how it applies to the real world.”

**Interview Question 3.** What is the atmosphere of the school and the classroom? All of the student participants responded that the atmosphere in the school resembled a family. One student stated that “This school just feels like a family. The students are like the children, the teachers are like the siblings because we feel so close to them and administration is like our parents because they ultimately tell us all what to do.” Another student said that “Our administrators push us to be the best that you can be at all times. That’s just something they expect from us every day. They know we are not perfect, but they expect us to be the best. Another student commented that teachers and administrators have very high expectations, so the culture of the school reflects that by being focused on the work. “We have work that we must do
to be prepared for college and life, and they make sure we get it done.” Several students commented on the high expectations of the faculty. These students indicated that they appreciated these expectations, but also suggested that traditional public schools did not have these expectations. One student noted that she did not feel prepared prior to attending the charter school and did not feel challenged through her educational career.

**Interview Question 4.** What is the relationship between the school staff and students? All student participants said that it was a family atmosphere most of the time. One student stated that they knew teachers and administrators loved and supported them. Another student said that administrators could be hard sometimes, but it was because they cared for them and students knew it. This student also said that she felt like she could go to her teachers and administrators with any type of situation and they could help her solve it. Another student said that “teachers eat lunch with us to get to know us and stay late if they have to.” She also detailed the following example: “One time, my mom was late picking me up from practice and my teacher stayed with me and didn’t complain. My mom didn’t show up until 7:00p.m., so I know it takes a great person to do that.” Another student stated, “it’s not all roses around here with every teacher. We get mad at them sometimes, but we get over it.”

**Interview Question 5.** What is the relationship between students at this school? One student participant stated that they “had their ups and downs, but there is less drama since we all are going through the same thing being a single-gender school.” All the students said that they are very supportive of each other. “Sometimes we might not see eye-to-eye on something, but we tend to make up very quickly.” Another student detailed that “We all come from different backgrounds and are different but it’s fun to hear about our differences. If there were boys, there
would be a much wider range of things to get to know and appreciate.” This student noted that she missed the interaction with boys in the school.

*Interview Question 6.* What would you say to new families about this school? Two of the three (66.7%) of the student participants commented on the benefits of being in a small school. They generally saw size as leading to less drama, fewer distractions, and a generally safer environment. Both students commented that their families felt like they were in a safer environment and they liked the smaller school because teachers and the school assisted them with more resources. An 8th grade student stated that she would tell new families that “This school is a great place to be because they push you to be the best. They have high expectations which might make you mad sometimes, but it helps you be successful in the end.” Another student remarked that “You have to be prepared to be pushed out of your comfort zone. I was shy when I started, but now I am not because the teachers worked with me to push me to be great!” All student participants mentioned the high expectations and the prestige of the school because they were pushed to be the best. Another student stated that, “The school is a STEM school which means work is a project most of the time which makes it fun.”

*Interview Question 7.* What would you say is the biggest difference between the charter school and traditional public school? All student participants indicated that expectations were the biggest difference between traditional public schools and the charter school, notably academic and behavioral expectations. Each of these students suggested that they felt like traditional public schools did not take as much time to ensure individual needs were met in order to address the academic and behavioral needs of each student. Two of three students discussed the family-feel of the school as being a crucial component of charter schools. One student responded that, “Most charter schools are smaller than traditional public school, which means
that our needs are met quicker and our teachers really give us what we need to be prepared for life. This school is hard, but it’s worth it.”

Student participant responses were initially coded by a peer researcher. Categories were highlighted and labeled that reoccurred throughout interviews and observations. Those categories were given themes and color-coded to see how often the label appeared. The primary researcher did the same process as the peer researcher to ensure accuracy of the data. Color-coded themes were synthesized into the final themes. Table 4.1 represents the participants’ responses and how they were synthesized into final themes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Participants’ Responses</th>
<th>Final Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Student 1    | More focused curriculum, family-oriented, high expectations of students and work, teachers stay late when they don’t have to, parents’ choice to send her, all-girls school empowers, smaller class size, individual needs met | STEM focused  
Positive student-teacher relationships  
High expectations  
Single-gender  
Small class size  
Personalization of learning  
Parents’ choice |
| Student 2    | All-girls make it less drama, teachers eat lunch and do other things with girls, forced to come out of shell of being shy, charter school pushes harder, provides one-on-one help, high expectations of girls and work, trust teachers and administrators, smaller class size | Single gender  
Positive student-teacher relationships  
High expectations  
Personalization of learning  
Small class size |
| Student 3    | School gives more opportunities, do a lot of projects, sisterhood, teachers and administrators are like family, faculty pushes you hard to achieve, safer environment, really help you understand the work by helping one-on-one, family feels good about school | More opportunities  
STEM Focus  
Single gender  
Positive student-teacher relationships  
High expectations  
Personalization of learning  
Parents’ choice |
Faculty Response Data

According to research conducted by Nieto (2005), most teachers teach because there is a “calling” on their life to be of service to the public good. Most teachers do not enter the field of education because of the autonomy or the accountability they want for their classrooms or students, although that contributes to reasons teachers stay in the profession. The faculty response data offers insight regarding the characteristics that motivate school faculty to continue to engage in charter school work.

As this researcher sat with the staff and faculty at this school and interviewed them one-by-one, participants conveyed great passion about their work, which was demonstrated in their voice and word choices. The researcher discovered the themes that applied to student data also applied to faculty data. As stated previously, the faculty had teaching experience ranging from 1-6 years and taught different subject areas. Administrators have been at the school for six years and have various teaching and leadership backgrounds.

Interview Question 1. Why did you choose to work or continue to work at this school?

All of the faculty participants’ answers were predicted upon the intentional decision to be part of something different. Three out of five teachers (60%) stated that the school offered more practical and real-world application experiences. The STEM focus was mentioned as a way that increased the connection between school and the real-world. Most responses referenced high expectations for students and teachers, which contributed to the school’s success and the ability to empower its population with opportunities for the future. Most faculty participants mentioned the family feel of the school, as well as the desire to see change in their student’s lives. Some teachers reported that they stay because they have more autonomy than in traditional public school, which makes school more interesting for their students. One teacher stated that, “Having
the autonomy to teach what works best for students was very appealing. It allowed me to incorporate more of my personal teaching style.”

**Interview Question 2.** What makes this school different than other schools? Most faculty participants noted that they provide additional opportunities not regularly available in public schools to their students, such as trips they would not ordinarily take, in-depth prep for state assessments and homework, and wrap-around services for families, which can include medical and/or social resources. Four out of five faculty members (80%) stated that they are allowed more autonomy than public school teachers on how to teach the curriculum. They remarked that they have to follow the same pacing guide and cover the same standards as traditional public schools, but they have more choice in how to master the standard. One faculty member stated that “Along with autonomy comes more accountability. We have more autonomy to teach in different ways, but we also have more accountability because we can be closed or shut down if we don’t have the scores.” Another faculty member stated that “The high expectations for teachers, students, and parents make this school different. I’ve taught at a traditional public school and the expectations were not as high as they are here. Our administrators push us to do what’s best for kids every day.”

**Interview Question 3.** What is the atmosphere of the school and in your classroom? When faculty members were asked to describe the culture of the school, four out of five (80%) talked about great relationships with students. Most of these faculty members opined that students trust teachers, which makes the job easier. Several teachers noted open and honest communication exists with parents. They feel like they have the relationships with parents that foster honesty. One teacher stated, “I’m just real with my parents. I feel like they want the best for their child, or they wouldn’t be at this school, so it allows me a sort of honor and privilege to
be as honest as I possibly can to make a difference in that student’s life.” Another teacher remarked that his classroom had a very relaxed atmosphere because he gets to know his students personally. Most teachers suggested that the school was a high-stakes environment with high expectations for everyone. Most teachers said they appreciated the honesty and high expectations to achieve the level of success they experienced with students. One teacher detailed that “This type of environment is not for everyone because it is a lot of work and it is not a regular 8-3 job with summers off. Our administration pushes us to be the best and they do this by doing what’s best for students.” Another teacher responded that, “Administrators support teachers, but they are brutally honest. This can hurt some people’s feelings, but when you realize they are only doing what’s best for students, you are fine with it.” All teachers mentioned that the school’s atmosphere was filled with high expectations.

**Interview Question 4.** How do you engage parents and other stakeholders in the school or classroom? Six of seven (85.7%) faculty members, including administrators, opined that engaging families meant that they provided families with the services needed. One faculty member said, “It’s not uncommon for a parent to get a phone call to ask how they are doing.” This faculty member subsequently said, “That one time we had a struggling family and we knew they had just been evicted, so a few teachers got together to buy coats and other items for the children. We provide the things our kids need.” Another faculty member commented information is provided on social media outlets to inform parents of information. One teacher explained that board members and new prospective families have a chance to tour the school weekly. He said that the students are accustomed to having visitors in the building because it is a common occurrence. Another faculty member relayed that the school offers parent education
classes. “We educate our parents on things such as homework and any other skills needed. We try to be resources to our families.”

**Interview Question 5.** What are the three most valued characteristics in this school that contribute to its success? All of the faculty responses emphasized commitment to students, understanding teacher instructional practices, and the commitment to high expectations for everyone. All faculty members stated that students were at the foundational core for all school practices. Students and educators were aware of high expectations for all stakeholders. Several teachers detailed that administrators were committed to enhancing their professional expertise. Expectations from administrators were viewed as high, but attainable. Most teachers noted that weekly or monthly professional development meetings were held in their particular areas of practice. Administrators remarked that teachers are on the front lines with students and are the backbone of the school. If the instructional practice is not where it should be in the classroom, teachers would be provided developmental practices to ensure teacher strategies improve. Data would be utilized to measure progress of teacher and student practice. Teachers and administrators commented on the use of data and the daily discourse that must occur for the students to have effective instruction. One faculty member stated that, “It is the high expectations that drive the success of students from all levels in this school.”

**Interview Question 6.** How would you describe this school to new families? Three of five faculty members (60%) stated they would tell new families about the school’s investment to their child. They would state their mission to educate the whole child and prepare each child for college. One faculty member said that she would tell new families that the school is another support service to them, regardless of the need. Faculty members also indicated they would inform new families about the high expectations for students. Another faculty member stated
that “We don’t have assigned parent hours that must be completed, but the expectation is that we see our parents in the building. We want them to know what’s going on with their student and ask questions if they don’t understand. The high expectations are for everyone in the building.”

Another faculty member said, “the school is a relationship builder and we want to be a family with them. We want them to trust us with their children and know we are committed to do our best for their child. We want to be the total package for our families when it comes to educating students.”

**Interview Question 7.** Why do students and parents choose to attend this school? One faculty member stated that, “students know that we provide specialized and individualized attention to our students. We figure out how to build on their strengths to teach new concepts and traditional public schools might not be able to do this because of district mandates.”

Another faculty member noted that students are seen as people instead of proficiency measures. He declared that, “Students are expected to produce at high levels, but we provide instruction at high levels to get our desired outcomes. Parents and students see this level of education, even if it is hard work. I think they appreciate that.” An administrator commented that parents recognize the care and attention their child receives at school. They provide and service the whole child to ensure all needs are met. The administrator also expressed that, “High expectations are communicated through everything we do at school. Students and parents see it in teachers and administrators and they respect the work that is being put into their child. It makes a difference to a family when they see that much attention is being paid to their child. We are committed to exposing our students to life-experiences and success.”

Faculty participant responses were initially coded by a peer researcher in the same manner as the student participant responses. Categories that recurred were highlighted and
labeled that reoccurred throughout interviews and observations. Those categories were given themes and color-coded to see how often the label appeared. The primary researcher did the same process as the peer researcher to ensure accuracy of the data. Color-coded themes were synthesized into the final themes. Table 4.2 represents the participants’ responses and how they were synthesized into final themes.
### Table 4.2

**Faculty Participant Responses and Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participants’ Responses</th>
<th>Final Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty 1</td>
<td>Empowering young women, STEM, accountability and autonomy for educating girls, phenomenal relationships with students, serious about education, involves family a lot, holds girls accountable, high rigor, individualize for each student, school mission, admin can be intense because of accountability, stressful environment at times</td>
<td>Stem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accountability</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive student-teacher relationships</td>
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<td>Parent choice</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Personalization of learning</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stressful environment at times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty 2</td>
<td>Believes in school mission, autonomy to teach the way they want to make standards stick, positive relationships, push girls to be the best, high expectations for everyone, involves families, determination to succeed, individualize for students strengths and weaknesses, give parents choices</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive student-teacher relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personalization of learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parent choice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty 3</td>
<td>Believes in school mission, autonomy to teach, positive school culture, engage families in all things, STEM focus, prepares students for college and life, teachers go over and beyond, More opportunities for students, can be stressful environment</td>
<td>Autonomy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive student-teacher relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>STEM focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stressful environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty 4</td>
<td>High expectations for everybody, consistency in everything, accountability for everyone, teachers go over and beyond, know students personally, differentiation in professional development, families have choice with the school, open communication with families, admin support for</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty 5</td>
<td>Believes in school mission, feels like influencing student lives, provide wrap around services for students, high expectations for everyone, educate parents and students, dedicated to students, belief that all students can succeed, more opportunities for all students, open communication with families</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Parent choice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>STEM focus</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Open communication</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Faculty 6 | High expectations, believe in school mission and students, autonomy and high accountability, will do whatever it takes to educate girls, single gender status focuses girls and curriculum, educate families and provide wrap around services, students and teachers care about each other, dedication to data and improving teacher craft, pushes students to do their best | High expectations |
|          | Autonomy |
|          | Accountability |
|          | Single-gender |
|          | STEM focus |
|          | Positive student-teacher relationships |
|          | Dedication to data |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty 7 Believes in school mission, autonomy for teachers to do what’s best for students, dedicated to improving teacher craft to improve test scores for students, provide all services parents need to give families choices, single gender status enables students to bond, accountability is for everyone, students love teachers which enable teachers to know them personally, smaller class size</th>
<th>Believes in school mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Improving teacher</td>
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<td>Parent choice</td>
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<td>Single-gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
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<td>Positive student-teacher relationships</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Smaller class size</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Learning Environment Data

According to Alston, Brooks, Bryan and Townsend (2017), a positive school environment involves several components, such as students feeling safe, stakeholder awareness of expectations, positive student-teacher relationships, and open dialogue between students and teachers. Other components are defined in the literature, but this section details the strategies implemented by this charter school.

The researcher arrived at the school in time to hear the morning announcements and witnessed the first-class change. Two students started the announcement with the morning routine, which consisted of the pledge and the standard of student success. The announcements ended with the principal handing out monetary prizes for high achievement on a high-stakes assessment. The school office was decorated with a mural of student writing and pictures of high-achieving women. A plaque immediately outside the school offices designated members of the 25 Club, which consists of students that have earned at least a 25 on the ACT. The school subsidizes student registration for the ACT, as well as ACT test prep courses. Two additional
students were added to the list the morning of the observation, and the principal announced those names. Although the researcher conducted this study with the charter middle school, there was a high school added three years ago. After the announcements, the first bell rang and students entered the hallway. As students walked through the hallways, two students stopped to ask the principal a question. The meeting was very informal, and students proceeded to class once the question was answered, seemingly reassured by the principal. This was an indicator of a warm and family-oriented environment.

Banners from various colleges and universities were displayed on the walls of common areas and classrooms. The mission, vision, and standards of success were also located on the walls. As part of the daily routine, the standards of success were stated during morning announcements. As the researcher walked into the classroom observation, a student approached and detailed the objective and topic of the lesson. The teacher welcomed the researcher into class and encouraged questions during the visit. Students were working in groups, and each student had a laptop, which is not a typical practice in traditional public schools. As the researcher walked around the classroom and asked questions of students, there was a relaxed feel among students and the teacher. Students were allowed to speak freely, where each student takes a turn method, which means students are not required to raise their hands. Each student’s opinion was heard by the class and acknowledged in some form by students or teachers. The class dialogue was structured in a conversation format as the class discussed the topic.

The researcher asked questions about the lesson, the teacher, and the atmosphere of the class, and each student responded with comments such as, “my teacher is here to help us learn and she does it in a relaxed way.” “She helps us with our projects but we have to be responsible enough to complete the work.” “I like this class because I can say my thoughts and not be
laughed at if my thinking is wrong.” “I like the technology because it allows me to be independent in the learning process.”

Coding

According to MacClure (2013), the coding process is one that enables the researcher access into the understandings of the data by analyzing patterns and trends. The researcher utilized a peer researcher to conduct the initial Open Coding process to gather data and assign labels. The labels were highlighted throughout the research as reoccurring data. The data were analyzed to identify the trends and patterns to draw conclusions about the charter school characteristics that contribute to its’ success. The primary researcher conducted the initial coding process, as well as an added layer of accuracy. After the Open Coding process was complete, the data were analyzed by coding the highlighted labels into categories. Through the Axial Coding process, the highlighted categories were written and connections were made to identify 12 initial themes that emerged from the data. Those 12 initial themes were then synthesized into eight final themes, which allowed the primary researcher to explore the data. The eight final themes for the data are: single-gender status, high expectations, family-oriented/relationships, more opportunities than traditional public school, personalization for students, accountability, autonomy, and parental choice. Although these were the major themes across interviews and observations, all interviews and observations did not address every theme. The eight final themes were categorized into three topics: (1) student response data, (2) faculty response data, and (3) learning environment data. Each topic explores the participants’ responses to each question and how it relates to the themes.
Member Checks

Member checks were used at the end of the interview process as the researcher clarified the information with each interviewee. After each interview, the researcher summarized each interview to ensure participant accuracy. The researcher also utilized the assistance of an educational professional that worked in a middle school for 13 years and earned her Master’s and Education Specialist degrees as a peer researcher. She completed a qualitative analysis of how middle school students acquire mathematical skills in urban environments. This education professional was utilized to validate the information acquired in the interviews and observations with her experience. The peer researcher was utilized to validate the data for accuracy and trustworthiness.

Results

There were eight final themes that emerged from the data as representative of the interviews and classroom observations.

Summary

This study was composed of a Grounded Theory research process consisting of a series of semi-structured interviews and observations that led to the investigation of the following question: What are the characteristics that make a successful urban charter middle school? The interview questions were designed to gain insight into the experience of each participant to garner the thoughts allowed the research question to be answered. A cross-section of the charter school community was sampled to obtain viewpoints from different stakeholders of the community.

Two sets of interview guides, one for students and one for school faculty, were used for the research. Each question was open-ended and provided flexibility for clarification and/or to
expand information. The student interview questions centered upon the two major themes, which include the motivation to attend or stay at the charter school and the culture of the school. The school faculty interview questions were based on three similar themes, which include motivation to teach or stay at a charter school, differences between charter and traditional public schools, and characteristics that contribute to the schools’ success.

The research data were organized into three categories: student response data, school faculty response data, and the learning environment. Eight themes emerged via these categories; single-gender status, high expectations, family-oriented atmosphere, more opportunities, personalization for students, accountability, autonomy, and parental choices. Students felt the small class environment, single gender status of the school, and positive relationships with school staff contributed to its success. Students expressed the belief that single gender status also contributed to the family-oriented feel in the school. Students seemed to respect school faculty and noted that high academic and behavior expectations were stated by all stakeholders. The high expectations were considered preparation and motivation for students, as well as a deterrent for students that did not fit the profile of the charter school.

School faculty interviews revealed that the staff chose to teach at the charter school because they believed in the vision and mission of the school. Faculty deemed high expectations of the students and staff contributed to the schools’ success and the lives of the students. The faculty reported that teachers had a family-like relationship with students, and they were willing to go over and beyond the call of duty for students. Faculty also reported that the biggest difference between charter schools and traditional public schools was that teachers in charter schools had more autonomy to teach, but autonomy was tied to accountability. The faculty commented that the three most valuable characteristics that contribute to the school’s success
were centered around student commitment, high expectations for students, and ensuring teachers are prepared instructional leaders. Each faculty member detailed high expectations drive these processes, which lead to the school’s success.

When the researcher observed the school’s learning environment, it was clearly a place that focused on preparing students for college. Banners from various colleges and universities adorned the walls, and class interactions were relaxed and respectful. Class interactions also seemed to be predicated upon high expectations. School rituals and routines highlighted student accomplishments, and the school atmosphere prompted a relaxed learning environment.
Chapter 5: FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The fifth chapter is divided into five sections in order to address the research for this study. The first section summarizes the research. The second section of this paper details the findings of the research and the relationship to existing literature. The third section notes conclusions of this study, while the fourth section addresses possible limitations with the study. The fifth section suggests possible recommendations for future research to determine effective characteristics of urban charter middle schools.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this grounded qualitative research study was to determine characteristics that contribute to the success of an urban charter middle school. The study examined data from 11 semi-structured interviews with three students, five teachers, one school counselor, and two administrators at the charter school. Observations were conducted in the schools’ hallways, classrooms, front office, and library. The urban charter middle school is an all-girls school with a STEM focus. Students noted the STEM focus as a primary characteristic that contributes to the school’s success.

According to the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO, 2015) charter schools have experienced exponential growth within urban populations. The gains are significantly higher in reading and math for African-American students, Hispanic students, students with disabilities, and low-income students. Although data exists that supports the academic gains of charter schools in urban areas, the characteristics that contribute to that success are not identified in much of the current research. The analysis of data from this study provided detailed information to determine the practices that contribute to the effectiveness of an urban charter middle school.
Research Question

The researcher conducted this grounded qualitative research study to determine perspectives related to the following research question:

What are the characteristics that make a successful urban charter middle school?

Findings

The research question was answered through 11 semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and general observations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All of the data gathered were initially coded by a peer researcher. Subsequently, several categories or themes emerged. The peer researcher coded themes by highlighting and labeling similarly themed phrases or words in student and faculty interviews, as well as in observations. The primary researcher then synthesized the original themes into eight final themes by color-coding and tallying the frequency of similar responses in the data. The final eight themes were representative of the data gathered through interviews and observations. The interviews contained information from students and faculty of the school to ascertain a comprehensive view of different perspectives. The observations were conducted in classrooms, hallways, and the library. Detailed field notes were taken during the observations to represent the data gathered by the researcher. The following is a summary of the findings related to the eight themes that emerged from the interviews, field notes, and classroom observations.

Single-Gender Status

The participants were asked what made their school different, and several students and faculty participants pinpointed the single-gender status. Numerous students identified that being an all-girls school contributed to the school’s family atmosphere because all students were dealing with similar situations. Subsequently, this prompted a sisterhood-type bond that fostered positive peer relationships.
Several faculty participants identified single-gender status as a contributing factor of the schools’ success because it allowed the teachers to foster an empowering and open environment where students were able to express themselves freely. Single-sex educational programs create an environment that enables female students to feel that they can express themselves more frequently and freely. This type of environment easily pushes students to develop higher-order thinking skills (Cyr, 2007).

**High Expectations**

Every participant identified high expectations as a contributing factor of the school’s success in at least one area. Two of the three (67%) student participants identified high expectations as the reason their school was different from traditional public schools. They spoke about high expectations from teachers and administrators. These expectations helped students to realize their potential and better prepared them for college. One of the student participants stated that high expectations of her prompted her to remain at the charter school.

Faculty members answered numerous questions by stating that high expectations were the norm in the school. Faculty members clarified that teachers, students, parents, and administrators were all held to high expectations. Three (60%) faculty participants stipulated the school’s culture was identified as being composed of high expectations, which were embraced by all stakeholders. The school environment dictated those expectations for all school activities. Three (60%) faculty participants identified high expectations as the reason they continued to work at the school. Those participants stated that the school could be a stressful environment at times because the expectations were so high, but they appreciated the honesty and drive to make the students better.
All faculty participants referenced high expectations as one of the most valued characteristics in the school. One participant shared that the expectations were high to ensure the students were being challenged. Three participants detailed that high expectations prompted their teaching practice to develop and pushed them to be better based on their student data. All the participants noted that high expectations were evident and noteworthy because they are part of the school process and one of the biggest contributing factors to the school’s success.

**Positive Relationships**

Students learn better when they have positive relationships with their teacher (Dorman, Aldridge, & Fraser, 2006). Having a positive relationship with school staff means students feel valued and cared for in the school setting. Marzano (2003) stated that value and care leads students to perform better and curbs discipline issues. Consequences and rules are ignored if students do not have positive relationships or at least respect the teacher, which is more important at the elementary and middle school level. Students open themselves up as learners when they feel they can be vulnerable at school. When students have adults that care about them at school, student learning is enhanced (Larrivee, 2000).

When asked about the atmosphere or culture of the school, all participants indicated that there were positive relationships between students and faculty. All student participants recalled at least one positive incident when a faculty member demonstrated behaviors or actions that fostered student trust. One student participant shared how a teacher stayed at school with her until late in the evening even though this was not necessary. One student participant related how a teacher ate lunch with her on multiple occasions to check on her physical wellness and academic progress. Another student participant detailed that administrators talk to students in a
respectful and caring manner, and also stated that the school served as an extended family for the students.

All student and faculty participants said that positive relationships among all stakeholders make this school unique. Three out of the five (60%) faculty member participants suggested that positive relationships with students enables them to help students via more rigorous instruction. All faculty participants remarked that positive relationships characterize classroom instruction. One faculty participant stated that he wanted his students to be aware of his passions. Subsequently, he could learn students’ passions and make learning more fun. Another faculty member discussed how she dedicated her time to the school to empower young girls to demonstrate how positive peer relationships can impact their lives. Both administrators mentioned encouraging positive relationships between teachers and students. Each commented that the relationships developed in school were essential if students were to be pushed to their highest potential.

**Opportunities**

Nine participants commented that the opportunities offered at the charter school were better than the opportunities offered at a traditional public school. All student participants stated that the opportunities, such as field trips, guest speakers, and other things related to the STEM focus. In like manner, eight out of the 11 (72%) stated that the school offered more real-world opportunities that challenged the students’ thinking. One faculty participant stated the opportunities were not solely aligned with a standard, but were also aligned with a project which demonstrated the real-world application. Two of three (66.7%) student participants stated they would tell new families about the opportunities and it is what makes the school different.
All faculty participants commented that the opportunities offered at the school entailed services for parents, as well as STEM-related opportunities such as field trips and projects. The faculty referred to opportunities being the “extra” layer of support offered to students and families, whereas the student participants referred to opportunities as field trips and projects. The faculty participants discussed that they provide services to families that go beyond academics. They provide needed opportunities to engage families, such as help with homework or providing English classes.

The STEM curriculum offers opportunities for teachers to integrate science, technology, engineering, and math into the traditional curriculum. It presents ways for teachers to connect traditional standards into real-world applications by having students construct and complete projects or tasks. STEM started as an effort to accelerate learning while increasing rigor and depth of learning (Meyrick, 2011). Researchers discovered that students were more motivated to attend school because the STEM focus added an element of hands-on learning, which students stated connected the learning to standards more efficiently.

STEM activities also allowed teachers to integrate subjects to provide a practical way to problem-solve. In schools that offer STEM activities, students are given real-world projects and they construct ideas and applications to solve those projects. Students problem-solve through ideas presented in the projects by using a combination of educational practices utilized in the classroom, such cooperative learning, problem-solving design models, and subject integration models (Mahoney, 2010). The educational practices utilized with STEM opportunities can also be used with any type of learning. Those educational practices and real-world application attract families and students because of the authentic application to life. STEM learning has been
linked to attracting minority and low-income families because STEM opportunities provide student engagement, hands-on learning, technology, and critical thinking skills (Meyrick, 2011).

**Student Personalization**

Nine of 11 (81.8%) participants detailed school individualization of instruction to meet student’s academic needs. One student participant related the fact that she was shy when she started at the school, but her teacher took a personal interest in her and pushed her out of her comfort zone to enable her to take more risks. Another student participant remarked that she was two grade levels behind when she started at the school, but teachers worked with her to help her reach grade level.

Two faculty participants mentioned the differentiation utilized in the classrooms to get students to grade level. Faculty participants reported that students are tested at the beginning of the year to find a baseline, and data is gathered from the test to guide instruction. Testing occurs in incremental stages to ensure instructional practices are addressing individual needs. One faculty member recalled a parent expressing appreciation for differentiated instruction. The parent subsequently relayed that this type of instruction did not occur in the traditional public school.

Administrators noted that instructional practices were implemented to ensure all student needs were being met. Administrators also recounted that students with similar needs were grouped to ensure deficits were strengthened, and noted the importance of teachers utilizing differentiation to ensure the whole child was being taught.

**Accountability**

Accountability has had a negative connotation for the last two decades (Gill, 2017). It has meant that teachers or schools have a high-stakes assessment attached to their name and
there are major consequences. Outcome-based accountability of high-stakes testing has been the major way accountability has been deemed necessary for most educators, but research indicates that there must be more viable alternatives. Accountability should be interpreted to mean that everyone in one setting has high standards of success and is committed to a common goal (Gill and Lerner, 2017). If schools and teachers would use accountability in this fashion to ensure transparency and high standards of success, schools would be successful.

Four (80%) faculty participants of this study reflected on the high accountability demand in the charter school. Participants stipulated that they have to teach the same standards and take the same state assessments as traditional public schools, but have more autonomy and accountability because their school can be closed if they do not make adequate growth on state assessments. Thus, accountability is enhanced. Three of five (60%) teachers also suggested that accountability sometimes creates a stressful environment. Faculty subsequently mentioned that all stakeholders are held to the same standards of accountability, which creates an environment that thrives on professionalism and professional development.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is one of the cornerstones of charter schools (Finnigan, 2007). It is said that charter schools are based on a trade-off with public schools- increased autonomy with higher accountability. Although most charter schools have some level of autonomy, research suggests that not many charter schools have high levels of autonomy because of factors such as state laws, authorizers, or management organizations. Research has not found a correlation between school-level autonomy and success.

Three of five (60%) faculty participants responded that they were given more autonomy than offered in traditional public schools. They remarked that increased autonomy allowed them
to teach standards in more meaningful and different ways, however these teachers also opined they could still reach students if they were not afforded autonomy. One faculty participant remarked that the increased autonomy allowed him to individualize for his students in a manner not practicable in traditional public school. Another faculty participant stated that the autonomy led to more meaningful teaching and students understanding more of the information. Another faculty participant said that increased autonomy promoted increased accountability, and suggested that accountability and autonomy were connected in charter schools. She commented that charter schools have increased autonomy to allow standards to be taught differently than in a traditional public school, but one must realize that the stakes are higher for accountability, so that has to be considered when thinking about working at a charter school. This participant remarked that she liked the environment of transparency, autonomy, and accountability, but stated that it creates a certain stress that might not be good for every teacher.

Both administrator participants proposed that increased autonomy led to increased accountability and enabled the school to differentiate learning, which helped promote student success.

Parental Choice

Many critics and opponents of charter schools report that there are no significant increases in test data, but parents are significantly happier with their child’s education in charter schools (Richwine, 2010). Charter schools offer opportunity to families that would not have opportunity in low-income and underperforming schools. Glasser (1998) noted that when people have choice in activities or other sections of their life, they tend to be more motivated and engaged, as in Choice Theory. When parents have a choice in their child’s education, they tend
to be more engaged. For many low-income and minority students, charter schools represent the opportunity of choice.

When student participants were asked why they attended the school, two of three (66.7%) remarked that it was a choice for their family. They commented that their parents were not satisfied with their zone school so they wanted to try something different. When faculty participants were asked about what makes their school different and why families chose to stay, three of five (60%) faculty participants remarked that the school gave and continues to give families choice in their child’s education. These faculty participants opined that parents are more involved in their child’s education because they were afforded choice.

**Conclusions of the Findings**

The conclusions of this qualitative study established a more accurate view of the characteristics that contribute to the success of this urban charter middle school. Those characteristics were single-gender status, high expectations of everyone in the school, positive relationships between faculty and students, having more opportunities than traditional public school, personalizing the learning for students and attending to their individual needs, accountability for teachers and students, autonomy for faculty, and parents having a choice in their child’s education. These eight characteristics were evident throughout student and faculty interviews and observations. Participant’s answers were anonymous, and all participants indicated that positive relationships and high expectations differentiate the school. Most of the faculty remarked that high expectations and positive relationships created the atmosphere of the school. This researcher ascertained that all of these characteristics could be easily represented in several schools, and it is hoped that more traditional public schools implement these characteristics and subsequently benefit.
Limitations

The sampling of school community participants represented a limitation since only 11 people were interviewed, which is not representative of the entire school population. The population was a limitation because the participants were selected by school staff, although random sampling was utilized. This study was limited because it could not examine every factor affecting the success of a charter middle school within the specified time frame. This study also examined data from a single year and data may fluctuate on a yearly basis.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order to fully understand the success of urban middle charter schools, more research must be conducted. This researcher recommends that additional research encompass an extensive timeframe to include more participants from the school. The participants could include different stakeholders, such as parents, board members, and community members. The research could incorporate more in-depth interview process with students and staff with a larger sample size. This would provide more detailed information to develop trends. Further research could include a look at state test scores and compare those to traditional public schools with similar demographics in the same region to ascertain if the eight characteristics identified in this study correlate with positive test scores.

The effectiveness of charter schools regarding student achievement has received mixed reviews throughout academia. Some research indicates there is no significant difference regarding students’ achievement in charter schools and traditional public schools (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1999). Some research noted charter schools were more effective than traditional public schools (Hoxby, 2002). Other research has stipulated that charter schools are more effective in urban settings that serve disadvantaged populations (Abdulkadiroglu, et al., 2011).
This researcher suggests more research be conducted to ascertain characteristics that correlate with positive test scores and share those with traditional middle schools and other charter schools.

**Summary**

The conclusions of this study resulted in a more detailed understanding of the characteristics that led to the success of an urban charter school. There must be additional effort dedicated to the research of characteristics that allow charter schools to assist traditional public schools in successful strategies to engage all students. It is the hope of this researcher that the successful characteristics identified in this charter school be shared with other schools. Since there is mixed literature on the effectiveness of charter schools, it is hoped that this data is added to that body of literature.
References


(454599)


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Appendix A

Permission to Conduct Study
December 6, 2017

Head of School

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Mr. [Redacted],

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at the [Redacted]. I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education -Educational Leadership program at Carson Newman University in Jefferson City, TN, and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled The Successful Characteristics of an Urban Charter Middle School. This study is based solely on the great things happening at [Redacted].

I hope that the school administration will allow me to recruit six teachers, two parents, two students, and two administrators from the school to anonymously complete a series of interviews along with school observations (copy enclosed). Interested parties, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to be signed (copy enclosed).

If approval is granted, student participants will be interviewed during a time of day suggested by the school administrators to eliminate class disruption. The interview process should take no longer than 10 minutes per child. Administrators, teachers, and parents would also be interviewed during a time deemed appropriate by school administrators to reduce intrusion of the school day. Each interview is designed to take no more than 10 minutes per person. The interview results will be pooled for the dissertation project and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. No costs will be incurred by either your school or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have through email or phone. You may contact me at my email address: dcherrye@hotmail.com.

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Alternatively, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution’s letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this interview/study at your institution.

Sincerely,
Cherrye Robertson

Approved by: [Redacted] [Redacted] [Redacted] 2/22/18
Print your name and title here Signature Date

We are to inspire hope in each girl, positively change the trajectory of their lives and empower them to possess infinite choices in their future.
December 6, 2017

Mrs. [Redacted]
Head of School

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Mrs. [Redacted],

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study at [Redacted] School. I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education - Educational Leadership program at Carson Newman University in Jefferson City, TN, and am in the process of writing my dissertation. The study is entitled The Successful Characteristics of an Urban Charter Middle School. This study is based solely on the great things happening at [Redacted].

I hope that the school administration will allow me to recruit six teachers, two parents, two students, and two administrators from the school to anonymously complete a series of interviews along with school observations (copy enclosed). Interested parties, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to be signed (copy enclosed).

If approval is granted, student participants will be interviewed during a time of day suggested by the school administrators to eliminate class disruption. The interview process should take no longer than 10 minutes per child. Administrators, teachers, and parents would also be interviewed during a time deemed appropriate by school administrators to reduce intrusion of the school day. Each interview is designed to take no more than 10 minutes per person. The interview results will be pooled for the dissertation project and individual results of this study will remain absolutely confidential and anonymous. No costs will be incurred by either your school or the individual participants.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have through email or phone. You may contact me at my email address: [Redacted].

If you agree, kindly sign below and return the signed form in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. Alternatively, kindly submit a signed letter of permission on your institution’s letterhead acknowledging your consent and permission for me to conduct this interview/study at your institution.

Sincerely,

Cherrye Robertson

[Redacted]
[Redacted]

Print your name and title here

Signature

Date

2/22/18
Appendix B

Informed Consent
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Carson Newman University

My name is Cherrye Robertson and I am a doctoral student requesting permission to conduct a case study at your school—CGLA.

Introduction
- You are being asked to be in a research study of [insert general statement about study].
- You were selected as a possible participant because [explain how subject was identified, include any exclusionary criteria].
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study
- The purpose of the study is [explain research question and purpose in lay language].
- Ultimately, this research may be [published as part of a book on..., presented as a paper, etc.].

Description of the Study Procedures
- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: [explain procedures and tasks; identify any procedures that are experimental; describe length of time for participation, frequency and duration of procedures; etc.]
* [If applicable, explain any alternative procedures or courses of treatment available to the subject.]

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study
- The study has the following risks. First, [explain first risk, including the likelihood of the risk]. Second, [explain second risk, including the likelihood of the risk]. Third, …
- [If there are no foreseeable risks, state as such] There are no reasonable foreseeable (or expected) risks. There may be unknown risks.

Benefits of Being in the Study
- The benefits of participation are [explain benefits of participation that will be gained by the participants and/or other. If a benefit is not likely to occur to each participant do not include].
- [If there are no expected benefits, state as such.]

Confidentiality [choose one of the following]
- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. [If audio or video tape recordings are made, explain specifically who will have access to them, if they will be used for educational purposes, and when they will be erased/destroyed and indicate how they will be destroyed or erased.] We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.
- Your identity will be disclosed in the material that is published. However, you will be given the opportunity to review and approve any material that is published about you [Additional Waiver of Confidentiality must be included; see Forms/Informed Consent section of website].

**Payments**
- You will receive the following payment/reimbursement: [explain amount of payment or other reimbursement information (e.g., class points, tokens, donations, etc.), as well as when payment and/or reimbursement will occur and in what cases payment will not occur if any. If there will be no payment, state this.]

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**
- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study or Smith College. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely from the interview at any point during the process; additionally, you have the right to request that the interviewer not use any of your interview material.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**
- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, [name] at [email] or by telephone at [phone number]. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators, you may contact Phil Peake, Co-chair of the Smith College Institutional Review Board at (413) 585-3914.
- If you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you can report them to the Phil Peake at the number above. Alternatively, concerns can be reported by completing a Participant Complaint Form, which can found on the IRB website at http://www.smith.edu/irb/

**Consent**
- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

Subject's Name (print): ________________________________

Subject's Signature: __________________________ Date: ________________

Investigator’s Signature: __________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix C

Interview Guide for Students
Interview Guide

Parents and Students

1. Why did you choose to attend or send your child to this school?

2. What makes this school different from other schools?

3. Describe the atmosphere or culture of this school or the classroom.

4. Describe the relationship between the school staff and students at this school.

5. Describe the relationship between the students at this school.

6. What would you say to new families about this school?
Appendix D

Interview Guide for School Staff
Interview Guide

School Staff

7. Why did you choose to work or stay at this school?

8. What makes this school different from other schools?

9. Describe the atmosphere or culture of this school.

10. How do you engage parents and other stakeholders in the school or classroom?

11. What are the three most valued characteristics in this school that contribute to it’s success? Please elaborate on your response.

12. How would you describe your school to new families?

13. Why do students and parents choose to be at this school?