

THE PERCEIVED IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CHOICE ON  
NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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by  
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## **Abstract**

### THE PERCEIVED IMPACTS OF SCHOOL CHOICE ON NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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The purpose of this study is to determine the perceived impacts of school choice on North Carolina public school districts through the lens of public school Superintendents. One such perceived impact that arises from school choice is that of declining enrollments resulting in decreased state funding in public school districts due to families choosing alternative options for their education. This mixed-method impact study explores the numerous effects of school choice on public school districts through the lens of the Superintendents who lead the districts. This project may shed light on the growing issue and provide families and education professionals with the information needed to make informed decisions and improve the quality and access of education for all students.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and Context**

Of late, the topic of school choice in K-12 education has become a heated and often highly politicized topic. Traditionally, nearly all students attended a public school near their home within their local public school district. However, over the past few decades, public schools have been in the crosshairs of the media, lawmakers, and an increasingly critical public. Many have claimed that public schools are broken and need major reform (Ravitch, 2013). Currently, there are multiple ways to grade or assess the productivity of public schools' productivity ranging from state report card grades; standardized test scores; discipline and suspension data; student, teacher, and staff surveys; and others. When scores and opinions for a school are high, the choice and enrollment waters are typically smooth. However, public schools have come under fire in the past two or three decades because many of our nation's public schools are, or are perceived to be, failing (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Sometimes with little-to-no input from the students themselves (Reay & Lucey, 2000), parents are faced with a conundrum about the best option for educating their child. An increasingly popular answer is to choose a different school environment. Some key questions that arise from school choice pertain to how an individual's choice can impact their child, their home school, whole communities, and the state or national education system. As discussed later, both positive and negative effects ripple across all these areas from this seemingly personal and individualistic decision.

### **History of School Choice in the United States**

Since the emergence of mainstream public education in the 1800s, most families who participated were relegated to the school closest to their home. As education became mandatory or compulsory, the options for that education came under more scrutiny. The

option to choose was still only available to the more prominent families who had the means to search for, reach, and meet the incoming requirements of the prospective school. The decision to change schools was predominantly based on wealth or class until the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) made it a household topic for a different reason. Forced racial integration following that Supreme Court decision changed the popularity and functional purpose of school choice in the United States.

Since the end of school segregation, school choice has become a highly politicized and divisive subject. Talking points range from freedom and freedom of choice to elitism and segregation. When charter schools became an option in North Carolina in 1997, there was a great deal of racial desegregation. This has recently transitioned to a more homogenous makeup and charter schools filled with mostly White students (Ayscue et al., 2022). The public's opinion is largely based upon the information's source and the deliverer's lean. As any researcher on the topic can see, the information available can reinforce or disprove either agenda based on whether the audience is pro-choice or not. This issue is so complex and controversial because of the case-by-case and deeply personal decisions that have wide-sweeping financial and psychological impacts on entire schools and districts.

Whether the ability to choose is right or wrong is not a question that can be answered simply or possibly at all. The empirical, logical, quantitative, and qualitative data could each lead a researcher to a different conclusion. According to Denessen et al. (2005), up to 17 factors could influence a school change. These range from achievement, access to resources, student makeup (race, religion, ethnicity, culture, etc.), school reputation, perception, and class size. With so many roots in question, the solution is not a single-bladed spade.

## **Research Statement and Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to determine the perceived impacts of school choice on North Carolina Public School districts through the lens of the public school Superintendents of surrounding districts. The plurality of these impacts makes this an expansive topic. Since so many factors influence the benefit or harm to the various components and stakeholders of public education, the approach must be multifaceted. Likewise, there are conflicting data relating to these impacts on the individual areas. For example, one qualitative study may explain that school choice was the best decision for a child, while another has overwhelmingly negative outcomes. For this qualitative portion, I chose to learn the perceptions of these impacts on traditional public school districts through the lens of the Superintendent, the school system's chief executive. The analysis of the accompanying results will tell a story that is up for interpretation to whoever reads it. Qualitative results are highly personal and situational, while quantitative data may not uncover root causes or motives. The combined quantitative and qualitative nature of this mixed-methods impact study should paint a clear picture for the reader or researcher to synthesize their own determinations. Environmental, culture, political views, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic status can influence the decision. Additionally, many parents face limitations regardless of their desire, such as access, cost, and other obstacles.

### **Problem Statement**

Many North Carolina public school systems are declining in enrollment. Especially since the disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic, parents are choosing non-traditional school options, which negatively impact public school districts' access to resources and outcomes. Many of these alternatives to public education have existed for years, some for as long as public education itself. Others, like online academies, were obscure options rarely

chosen or even available to students and families until very recently. One option that has become a leading competitor to traditional public school systems is the charter school (Opeka & Staff, 2022).

### **Types of Choice**

There is no shortage of possibilities for the contemporary parent looking to change school settings. Brianna Flavin (2016) of Rasmussen College wrote there are 13 different types of schools across America. These include traditional public schools, charters, magnets, virtual (both public and private), traditional private schools, boarding schools, language immersion schools, Montessori, Parochial, religious, Reggio Emilia schools, and Waldorf school. The major differences in these types of schools include who pays for them, tax dollars or tuition, the curriculum taught, state or federally mandated or specialized, and to whom they are accountable, state or local school district or themselves. Though traditional public schools are still by far the most popular learning environment in the United States (Irwin et al., 2022) at a rate of more than ten times that of all others combined, there are numerous other options for parents to employ when searching for the best fit to educate their child.

### ***Traditional Public***

Outside the traditional and familiar neighborhood public school that has existed in this country for over 150 years, relatively newer public options have become more popular in certain sects. In public schools, the federal and state governments and local districts provide funding to operate the school. This funding comes with accountability measures, requirements, and other restrictions. The curriculum is mandated by the state governments through the state Department of Instruction and boards of education along with local boards

of education. Students attend a school that is within their district, usually a county or province, zone, or area of the district such as the north, south, etc. If a student wishes to attend another school within the district, they would have to apply to the school district to transfer, usually at their own expense and without provided bus transportation; however, it can still be provided in cases of Exceptional Children needs as stated in the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and other special cases. Students can also apply to transfer to neighboring districts or counties, usually with a small family-paid tuition (Wilde, 2012). Rules vary by state and district regarding the cost and availability of movement. Some districts waive the tuition to promote incoming transfer students, while others charge thousands of dollars to deter students from entering the district, usually because of overcrowding or inadequate staffing.

### *Charters*

Another type of public school is the charter school. Charters are not required to meet accreditation like their traditional public counterparts and are free to the family operating as an institutional hybrid. Parents must apply to enroll, and space is usually limited. These schools are not held to the same accountability standards as traditional public schools and have more flexibility in their curriculum. Magnet schools are similar to charters in their curriculum specialization and free enrollment to parents. The main difference is that magnets are operated by existing school districts or a group of districts. Magnet schools focus on a specific subject or skill and are more exclusive and selective than either traditional or charter schools (Flavin, 2016). Within the larger topic of school choice, it is important to take all options into consideration if we are to understand the impact that choice has upon the larger institution of education. In short, the choice is not simply public versus private.

## ***Private***

When most think of school choice, private or independent schools are the common option that comes to mind. Private schools accept no funding from any government. They charge tuition or fees to cover costs. These may be operated by for-profit or non-profit organizations, religious institutions (Parochial schools, e.g.), or other groups (Flavin, 2016). The school may be founded by a religious group or church-based organization, or it can be a non-faith based secular institution. Since these schools do not accept any governmental funding, they are free of the accountability models found in public schools. Other specialized private schools range from the Montessori program, focusing on exploration and hands-on models, to Reggio Emilia and Waldorf schools with much more specific ideas of early childhood learning and development (Grube & Anderson, 2018).

One of the more controversial topics of private school choice is the voucher system. This entails using government funds to cover partial or full tuition for private school enrollment. For example, the America 2000 program from the early 1990s used Title I funds to cover up to \$2,500 of qualified private school tuition (Dunne, 1991). Opponents of the voucher system argue that these lost funds take away from the public school's ability to meet the needs of students. Proponents cite that taxpayers deserve the right to choose the best educational opportunities for their children. Economists like Milton Friedman (1955), who supported free-market and capitalist systems, believed vouchers stood the best chance of breaking the monopoly that the government held on education (Malin et al., 2019).

## ***Other Forms of Education***

The purpose of education varies greatly depending on the person or group, ranging from the three 'Rs,' preparing for employment and societal contribution and creating critical



and reflective thinkers (Fan & Fielding-Wells, 2016). Similar to the number of perceptions of purpose, there are a wide variety of options for students and families to access education. The option they choose is subject to these perceptions and other factors.

There is a rising number of online academies, especially since the COVID-19 outbreak, which confined most of the world's population to their homes. In fact, since the pandemic, online academies have seen enrollment jump nearly 200% (Lehrer-Small, 2022). These online learning opportunities can come from public schools and traditional in-person learning. The North Carolina Virtual Public School program existed for several years before COVID-19 in conjunction with the state public school system. Virtual charter schools, privately funded school settings, and even homeschooled students using virtual resources attend school online to meet state learning standards.

Other forms of education could be homeschooling by parents or an educator contracted to come to the home. This has historically been for students with disabilities, medical vulnerability, dissatisfaction with traditional public school environments, the student's individual needs, or even high levels of social anxiety (Green & Hoover-Dempsey, 2007). While homeschooling has been around for decades, its popularity is historically low (less than 2% of the student population). Still, in the past few years the numbers have increased through concerns of safety, disputes over curriculum, and political ideologies Wiley (2017). There is little evidence that homeschooling provides the same access or success that traditional education provides the student (Wiley 2017). With the inconclusive results on achievement and overall benefits for the student, it is unclear if this is just another opportunity for parents to segregate their children based on perceptions and social climate (Bridgeforth et al., 2021). Though this study could veer in multiple directions, for the sake of

time and clarity, I focus on public charters and how they impact local school districts since there is direct competition between traditional public and charters. As students migrate to charter schools, they take their state funding allotment to the new school (Epple et al., 2016). Private schools do not receive any state or federal funding, so that comparison, while still a reality, is not relevant to this study.

### **Significance of Issue**

By understanding the reasons and impacts behind families choosing options other than traditional public schools, districts can better structure and, ultimately, serve their students. This increased understanding, followed by reform, should result in an increase in enrollment for public school districts; grow their access to resources, and increase their solvency and effectiveness. If public education is to rebound and survive the slow decline in enrollment, funding, and support it has faced in the past decade, changes must be made. One of the most glaring obstacles is the dwindling enrollment for many North Carolina school districts - nearly 3% in one year's time from 2020-2021 (DeLaRosa et al., 2021). This could be due to many factors, ranging from a smaller/slower birth rate, slowed immigration to the state, or, more concerning, families choosing alternative school options instead of the traditional public school. Specifically, since the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional public school districts in North Carolina have seen a steady decline in enrollment, over 3% lower than pre-pandemic numbers. In contrast, charter schools and other alternative options have seen increases in enrollment, in some areas as much as 19% or more (Opeka & Staff, 2022).

### **Deciding Factors**

As stated, there are a multitude of factors that influence families regarding school choice. Reay and Ball (1998) claimed that even though both parents, if both are in the

picture, are responsible for the decision, they find the mother to be the greater influencer. The authors question whether parents not employed in the education field are qualified to make these life-changing decisions. They acknowledge that a multitude of opinions, biases, facts, and hopefully research, go into the decision. Conversely, the lack of a choice, or the decision to remain in the neighborhood public school, may be due to the absence of informed options.

To no surprise, the political mindset of the parents is a key aspect. Beyond this, another role is the knowledge or information available to the parents. Hassan and Geys (2016) claim that numerous inputs lead to the decision to remain at the neighborhood school or choose another venue. One of the more common-sense reasons for choosing a different school would be the student achievement of the schools in comparison. However, Hassan and Geys (2016) find this is lower than one would think. Of the eight items on their surveyed list, academic achievement was only number four in popularity, beaten out by available technology and communication equipment, ideology, number of students, and ultimately, the school's prestige. However, according to the authors, this is not the case when the parents have a college or university education. In those cases, parents primarily were drawn to schools of higher academic achievement above all other characteristics.

In a British Columbia study, Friesen et al. (2012) found that school report cards had a substantial effect on school choice, predominantly pertaining to school-level achievement. Based on these reports, they also state that parents shape their perception of their child's school. Friesen et al. (2012) believe that these published findings are not only important but that they should be more accessible to the community. These school report cards are controversial, and the authors acknowledged the flaws calling for reporting agencies to make clear distinctions between underperforming schools and those who served disadvantaged

students, as these two are often related. David Garcia (2011) extends this idea by stating that reporting agencies should be careful in communicating these findings. He states that the process appears objective to the untrained eye, but how data are procured and published is not how parents consume the information and use it to make choices. Garcia (2011) says that the data are so complex and often convoluted that they become an impediment to parents instead of a useful tool. He argues that, in this case, parents make an uninformed decision.

Another area determining parents' opinion of school choice hinges on their beliefs about who should control the curriculum. Godwin et al. (2002) found that parents' beliefs regarding curricular control are a telling indicator of their beliefs on school choice. If they thought parents should have control, or at least influence, on the curriculum their children received, they leaned towards vouchers and private schools or even homeschooling. Conversely, if the parents believed that the majority should have control by representative-based and appointed agents through a local, state, or federal government, they were more apt to desire stronger regulation of private schools or even altogether elimination thereof. The authors explained why some parents would be wary of government-controlled education. These worries included government tyranny, oppression of minority groups by forcing assimilation to the majority, and the faithless secularized education that students receive in public schools. Godwin et al. (2002) make the case that the control of education hinges on the belief of the purpose of education. That purpose is to extend the beliefs of the parents or to create citizens who not only believe in the necessity of rights for the individual but also the necessity of civic obligations. This struggle of pluralism is not exclusive to education but is one of its deepest issues.

Alan Wolfe (2003) places the idea of school choice into the following two schools of thought: freedom and equality. He says that even though a small minority of the population pursues school choice, its support hinges greatly on the wording of the survey. If the question poses the topic in the greater realm of freedom of choice, the results are much more favorable. He elaborates that in his findings, Americans place freedom and freedom of choice over equality in almost every facet of life; school choice is no exception. Whether this opinion of freedom impacts the decision of parents to seek other educational environments is unclear. Wolfe claims many other factors lead to school choice that although Americans claim to put liberty and freedom above all else, these values do not always carry over to education. According to Wolfe (2003), not only do Americans not lean towards school choice as expected, they know very little about it. He claims that over 60% cannot explain what a school voucher is, and over 80% know little to nothing about charter schools. While Wolfe acknowledges this ignorance, he says that a large majority of Americans surveyed are in favor of reforming existing schools, especially since over 60% of surveyed parents have children in the school that they attended as students. Since this knowledge is so lost upon most of the population, one must question whether the absence of information is due to the public's apathy or the intentionality of its supporters. After all, the best fishing spot in town doesn't stay that way for long if the secret gets out.

DeAngelis (2018) claims that parents with more access to information and school choices will be more interested in their child's academic setting. Therefore, the prevalence of information inspires the seeking of information. DeAngelis (2018) saw parents use these exit options more frequently as more options were available. School choice has become more prevalent in the past 15 years despite the lack of public familiarity. From 2004-2014, the

number of US charter schools more than doubled (Anzia, 2020). Anzia also claims that if this movement does continue to pick up steam, the critics of school choice will be largely unable to fight back. She cites that teacher unions and other opponents cannot effectively answer the school choice debate with viable policies. Since the trend is increasing and resistance is limited, one would think that school choice may continue to grow in popularity.

One of the more concerning deciding factors, but not uncommon, is parents choosing alternative schools simply because of the racial makeup of the schools in question. Renzulli and Evans (2005) say that White flight can be effectively ruled out as a motivating factor for school change. They claim most parents respond that the choice resulted from the perceived academic quality of the school. These factors include available programs, technology, and teacher quality as contributing factors. The authors claim that White families choose mostly White homogenous schools over those with a more diverse makeup. They state in their findings that there is no definitive data that White families gravitate towards mostly White schools because of their racial composition, but that the findings show the strong connection. Saporito (2003) finds in his study of private, charter, and magnet makeups in Philadelphia that White families tend to choose mostly White populated schools when choosing. In contrast, there was no correlation to a particular racial makeup when non-White families chose a new school.

### **Historical Support for Choice**

Born of racial prejudice and a desire for continued segregation, later justified by figures like Milton Friedman (1951) and others as an answer to political and economic overreach, school choice has become much more complex than a racial decision for most families. While student demographics may play a large role, it is not the sole weight on the

scale. Historically speaking, the small but growing percentage of families that choose to seek options beyond their assigned school are similar in demographics. Many, if not most, are white, Christian, middle to upper-middle class, and have largely conservative political beliefs (Logan, 2018). Of course, there are variants within all these categories, and the criteria themselves are not exclusive, but many commonalities are observable.

Outside these reasons that sway a parent towards another school, autonomy is an ideological factor that plays a huge role in choice. School choice imitates market principles because of an ideological belief in the right to choose and the presupposition of freedom (Robertson & Riel, 2019). The two landmark cases of *Leandro v. The State of North Carolina* (1997, 2004), referred to as Leandro I and II, put the principles of what and how education should be in the hands of the courts, specifically, the Supreme Court. A handful of North Carolina public school districts sued the state for a lack of funding to provide an equal education compared to other districts, especially since they were taxed at a higher rate. To combat this, courts were faced with determining what constituted an equal education and how to fund it equitably. Interestingly, the takeaway phrase from Leandro, that all students are entitled to a “sound basic education,” became a cornerstone argument of both camps within the school choice debate. Public school officials argue that the financial shortfall these plaintiff districts experienced should be the catalyst to improve public school resources and revive the system. Proponents of school choice use Leandro as the rationale for choice because of the perpetuity of those shortfalls (Robertson & Riel, 2019). As we know, a desired outcome or political agenda can influence how the same data set is interpreted by two groups. A deeper dive into literature and research is necessary to help parents, educators, and

legislators obtain a more informed understanding of the motivations, options, and consequences of choice and the consequences of limiting that choice.

### **Positive Impacts of School Choice**

Advocates in favor of increased school choice opportunities cite multiple justifications for their stance. One of the most common talking points for pro-choice supporters is the effect of choice on education as an institution, namely through educational reform (Ladner & Brouillette, 2002). The visible effects of supply and demand economics and positive consequences for the consumer through healthy competition, are easily overlaid to education (Clowes, 2009). If the intent is to truly improve the educational system or any other market, competition is rarely a liability for the consumer (Cohodes & Parham, 2021; Gray, 2012).

An area in which this reform is most strongly felt is improvements to individualized learning, both in access to opportunities of curriculum and programs and a break away from one-size-fits-all to a more student-centered model (DeVos, 2017). Because the school will be more focused on specific student needs, it will most likely be able to better train students for careers and post-graduate options that cater to their individual goals. In the event that a student needs an education plan specifically tuned to meet a learning disability or other need, there is increased flexibility in learning styles, pace, and desired outcomes. This individualized attention greatly benefits families that need it (Robertson & Riel, 2019). This results in greater graduation rates and more success stories once students leave K-12 education and enter the next phase of their lives.

Defenders of choice cite that instances of racial segregation decline due to introducing choice to a community, especially if the charter is “diverse-by-design” (Epple et



al., 2016, p. 22). Traditional schools are largely limited to drawing from the student population in the community the school lies. It is common for residents to reside in homogenous communities, either by choice or by necessity, which can effectively re-segregate some schools or even entire districts. By allowing parents to choose, students are afforded the opportunity to attend the school that fits their needs and goals, not simply the one assigned to their community. This can positively impact racial desegregation along with other demographic identities (socioeconomic, religious, etc.). According to Carlson (2014), there is also a strong potential for less stratification of both racial and socioeconomic status than is seen in traditional public schools.

Some positive effects of school choice reach far beyond the campus or even the student. The surrounding community can feel the effects of school choice over time. As mentioned earlier, the vicious cycle of decline that communities can experience is because of the deterioration of the self-identities of the residents within that community. When the area is unfavorable by surrounding groups, the effects will be felt in the housing, labor, and education markets. Data show that school choice has a positive effect on local housing values and sales (Betts & Loveless, 2005). This may help repair the damage reported by the decline in morale and social identity from a school's decline.

### ***Educational Reform***

The challenge of reforming an established school takes an enormous amount of time and resources, both of which are usually not available to the local government or community. Though transportation costs may be incurred, exercising school choice may be the better option for some. (He & Giuliano, 2018). Pro-choice apologists assert that a well-placed alternative school environment can bring about sweeping reform for an entire district over

time. This would be through painful means, such as declining student enrollment resulting in lower budget and staffing allotments, loss of well-qualified teachers, and a critical public spotlight for the failing school(s) (Dunne, 1991). Over time, however, the market would correct itself through competition. Like life in the wild, in free market enterprise, only the strong survive. Because some private schools can operate on roughly 60% of the budget of a public school due to their ability to hire uncertified teachers and follow fewer accountability measures, there may be a better product at a better value to the community (Jeynes, 2014). Though specific schools or districts may be losers in the short term through overhaul or closure due to their inability to compete for enrollment, the families and students of the community may be the ultimate winners because of an overall improvement in the system in the long term.

### ***Competition***

A key idea in the discussion of school choice is whether education in the United States can or should function as a market like others, such as housing or other economic systems. Caroline Hoxby (2003), an economics professor at Harvard University, believes education in the United States follows the same principles. She states that since no school could possibly offer the full variety of features to meet the needs of all students, school choice is a natural decision. Traditional public school monopoly, as some critics call it, has had a negative impact on the country's student achievement. Abernathy (2005) claims that allowing a market mentality for school choice will either improve the education system or cause more strain on an already broken system, ultimately leading to failure and replacement (Diem et al., 2022). Abernathy (2005) acknowledges the cost of a widespread enactment and acceptance of government-funded school choice and compares it to other government

programs like Social Security and healthcare, stating that the cost should not prevent the discussion. He argues that education is inherently political and that there will never be a separation of the two. An opposing view to the benefits of educational competition is that as schools lose their higher achieving students, whatever those demographics may be, they will adjust and begin to be as selective on enrollment as their competitors (Turner, 2018). This would be disastrous for portions of the population who require more services and assistance to access the curriculum and succeed at, or near, the rate of their peers.

Those who believe education can be improved through market control are content to allow the regulation and decisions to come from parents instead of government bureaucracy and legislation. Like other aspects of the free market, when an organization fails to meet the needs of its customers, patronage will dwindle, and the business is forced to reform or perish. These advocates feel the same principles apply to the institution of education (Ladner & Brouillette, 2002). If a school does not take regular inventory and evolve to meet the needs of the ever-changing student population, a more competitive school will open and better serve the community's students, eventually undercutting that school and forcing its closure (Betts & Loveless, 2005).

### ***Improvements to Individualized Learning***

A major shift in the perceived purpose of education in the post-Leandro climate is from a public good to an individual-serving system (Robertson & Riel, 2019). This transposition further solidifies the pro-choice movement's foundation for opportunities. One aspect of traditional public education, that makes it such a viable option, can also prove to be inadequate in certain situations. The one-size-fits-all model creates greater efficiency and the ability to serve large numbers of students at the same time and location; however, this can

ostracize students who require deviation from the norm, such as those with specialized learning needs, medical obstacles, etc. School choice allows parents the opportunity to shop around and find the location or program that best fits their child's needs (Betts & Loveless, 2005).

The traditional school for which the student is zoned to attend may be lacking in areas that are impactful to the student, such as staffing, funding, or expertise/qualifications. In many instances, parents feel they must choose between the school that is closest and has the easiest accessibility and the school that has the best programs and qualified teachers for their child. Exceptional Children programs, individualized instruction, and other special education offerings may not be as prevalent or as effective in the traditional public school as they can be in a smaller charter or private school. In these cases, parents are forced to make difficult decisions that affect the family in financial and ideological ways (Valant & Larsen, 2020). In addition to increased access to individualized education opportunities families can receive by shopping for other schools, students have more access to various career-building training programs than may be offered at the traditional public school.

Historically, families that opt for other schools typically have students with postsecondary academic aspirations. This is not to say that all private, homeschool, and charter school students enter community or four-year colleges, but there is a much larger percentage than those who directly enter the workforce (Scafidi & Wearne, 2020). A benefit to choice lies in the specialization that a smaller, more personalized school can offer beyond what a public school district can provide.

### ***Graduation Rates and Achievement***

While results vary per state and location, many proponents of school choice claim that those who opt out of traditional public schools will experience higher graduation rates than those who remain in their community schools (Cullins et al., 2005). A 2012 study in Ohio found that the introduction of charter schools to a public school district saw an increase in graduation rates not only for those students who enrolled in the charter but also for those who remained in the traditional public schools (Gray, 2012). This response to the charter, even in the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which made graduation rates fall in some areas, provides promise for supporters of charter schools as well as school choice in general (Gray, 2012).

Student achievement results in relation to school choice and competition are a murkier subject. As with graduation rates, data and results vary based on a myriad of factors. These results can vary from little to no impact beyond the standard deviation (Gray, 2012) to substantial and statistically significant amounts in certain areas (Han & Keefe, 2020). Other studies claimed it is uncertain if the achievement discrepancy is due to the choice mechanism or because of the students and families who opt to utilize it (Betts & Loveless, 2005). In some places, choice is cited as creating up to as much as 29% of a standard deviation. This is notable since the standard deviation for student achievement from other effects between 1995 and 2011 was 8% in elementary and 15% in middle grades. Therefore, statistically speaking, educational freedom had the largest potential impact on student achievement in some studies (Bedrick & Tarnowski, 2021). To be fair, however, the results of school choice are as varied as they are abundant. The results, either supporting or opposing, seem to depend on who is reporting. Powers and Cookson (1999) saw this in the three studies highlighted from the

early to mid-1990s. They cited the omission of data and unbalanced comparisons. They concluded there was not enough data at the time to determine if school choice was beneficial to education. Conversely, Gottlob (2007) claims that school choice promotes fewer high school dropouts while simultaneously lessening the strain on government assistance programs, incarcerations and increasing tax revenue from higher employment. He states that school choice prevents over 5,000 students from dropping out before graduation per year, saving the state of North Carolina up to \$24 million annually (Gottlob, 2007).

Aja Watkins (2018) states that even though competition creates positive results and increased quality in the economic sector, this does not seem to carry over to education. Watkins says parents do not always know best and sometimes make bad decisions when given authority to choose schools. She explains parents making decisions on behalf of their children do not seem to link to the children's best interests academically. She makes an interesting claim that this may be caused by education being more of a public than a private good, thereby rendering economic principles invalid.

Betebenner et al. (2005) saw no increased test scores as a result of school choice in their study of over 27,000 students in a large western school district. They add that there were some minimally positive increases from students in the lowest quartile, but only in math. The authors acknowledge that most parents do not make school choices based on test score accountability measures and do not have definitive findings to suggest what the motivating factors may be. Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2018) found that school choice achievement results in Louisiana were less than ideal. In fact, the authors state that schools saw a marked decline in the areas of math, reading, science, and social studies. While they acknowledge that some locations have seen increases in one or more of these subjects, this

has not happened in Louisiana. They warn that the more school choice is expanded, the worse the gap widens. They find that these impacts are consistent across all subgroups and geographic locations studied. The authors reported an increase in graduation rates in Chicago area schools Cullen et al. (2006) surprisingly found similar student achievement results found in Louisiana. In their studies, lottery winners that were able to enroll in highly sought-after public charters saw no positive impact academically over their high-quality peers. However, they did show self-reported gains in lowered disciplinary problems and arrests to accompany the slightly higher graduation rates. There could be a multitude of reasons for the conflict in data ranging from graduation requirement changes to courses taken, and other variables. Another study from Jabbar et al. (2022), showed that while small, there are benefits to student achievement both in the choice school and surrounding district through competition. Likewise, the authors note that choice itself does not increase achievement, but that choice along with a multitude of other contributing factors, can do so. As anyone interested in the subject can see, the perplexity of the topic of achievement in the school choice debate reaches far beyond black-and-white quantitative data.

### ***Decreased Racial Segregation***

In theory, as well as at first glance, school choice and mobility should decrease racial segregation in schools. Residential segregation is still a factor that has a large impact on the subject, but the ability of students to attend any school available to them should impact demographics. Proponents of school choice, both private and charter, believe that choice and mobility opportunities can balance the population within schools, both financially and racially. This is important, as even balanced residential demographics cannot always create the same results in schools (Logan, 2018). However, data for racial integration and

resegregation vary nearly as much as student achievement based on locations, sources, and situations. The findings of Diem et al. (2022) regarding a Nashville school district cited school choice as both a problem and a solution. Racial and ethnic makeup and the intersection of school choice are often correlational. Whether they are causal is debatable (Diem et al., 2022). As viewed in their study, Black families in St. Louis were not afforded the same options for school transfer as their White neighbors (Diem et al., 2022).

A contributing factor that is often overlooked but vital to this discussion is the wealth and accessibility of resources to the family in question. Regardless of race or ethnicity, if the student requires transportation to their school, either assigned or chosen, and it is not available or provided, it may be a deciding factor in that choice. Frequently, families of color find themselves in this situation, and results can be affected. Unfortunately, as most educators are aware, hardships and inequities do not live in a vacuum. We frequently see categories like financial deprivation, racial discrimination, and academic challenges experienced by the same groups, thus further compounding their hardships as well as skewing the findings for studies such as this one. A study in Arizona saw little to no impact on racial segregation or integration. Still, it cited financial status as a large contributing factor to which families were in a position even to entertain the idea of school choice (Powers et al., 2018). Abernathy (2005) believes that property tax rates and other factors contribute much more to educational segregation than any school choice ever could. He claims that school choice is one of the few ways to break the cycle of segregation and poverty. Though the wealthy will still choose to segregate and enjoy benefits bestowed only to them, at least families of color can at least have a chance to choose a different course. Societal pressure,



transportation, proximity to employment and other resources, etc., cause me to question the probability; regardless, the choice *equally* exists.

School choice may not be able to desegregate communities and schools on its own power successfully, yet fortunately, it can lead to racial integration in other ways not discussed previously. School choice competition can be the catalyst that leads to the improvement of all area schools, eventually making the need for choice a moot point. When all community schools grow in perceived strength and reputation, White parents who use achievement as a justification for choice will have no reason to leave, maintaining and growing racial integration (Billingham & Hunt, 2016). Bradford (2021) believes that “decoupling a child’s address from where they attend school is fundamental.” (p.26). By doing so, an educational experience that otherwise was unavailable becomes a potential ticket for creating meaningful improvement for future generations.

### ***Increased Home Value and Sales***

Another benefit of school choice that is often overlooked is the impact on surrounding property and home values. For example, when high funding vouchers are introduced, the disparity of home prices is reduced. While areas with poorly performing schools saw their property values increase greatly with vouchers and school choice, areas that already had strong schools saw a decline (Danielsen et al., 2015). As areas experience gentrification from increased school choice options, home values are driven up (Billings et al., 2018). The surrounding property, many of which may not even have school-aged children, will see this increase in property value as a benefit. Also, longstanding practices of devaluing properties and denying mortgages in African-American communities and other

low-income or high-minority areas are counteracted when choice brings in White families and subsequently increases property values (Bradford, 2021).

### **Negative Impacts of School Choice**

To be clear, school choice has many positives. However, several of these positives hinge on other factors and balance upon other intentional initiatives to make choice equitable, such as access to information, a better explanation of historically-beneficial priorities, and scaffolding of the importance of higher-than-traditional expectations (Musset, 2012). While there are positives to school choice, there are also detrimental impacts to stakeholders and communities simultaneously. School choice can lead to inequities among various groups of people with classifications ranging from race and ethnicity to socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as damage to public school budgets and allotments, morale and psychological trauma, and a lasting impact on the political makeup of the community. These parental decisions that appear individualistic in nature have a reach far beyond one family, school, or community. The sphere of influence from these actions ripples across all aspects of society and seemingly amplifies the inequities that many underprivileged or underrepresented groups face. It has been a hollow promise for a policy shift that was supposed to save the student and the institution of education. It has distracted families, the larger public, and lawmakers from the deeper social issues that bring about inequalities in not only schools but in all of society (Howe, 2006). Society must be cautious to seek the total destruction of either public or private education for the sake of the other because “nothing is more dangerous than seeking the elimination of the public in the name of the private or, like those totalitarian systems now in the garbage can of history, attempting to abolish the private in the name of the public” (Bronner, 2013, p. 229).

## *Inequities*

Countless philosophers and authors who are critical of capitalism and other market systems declare that whenever there is unfair access to resources or opportunities, there will undoubtedly be inequities and subsequent oppression. Although felt most strongly by the individuals impacted, the system that propagates them reaches far beyond the scope of the individual, community, or even the state or nation. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School in the early 20th century witnessed and abhorred the inequities introduced and perpetuated by capitalism. Now, multiple centuries into the game, the classification of society into chess pieces is easily discernible. The wealthy, White, heterosexual male is King and the most protected piece on the board. The poverty-stricken, non-White, and “othered” groups have been relegated to the front lines as pawns with little hope of escaping an expendable and anonymous existence.

Education, which has the potential to be and should be the great equalizer, has found itself on the side of the problem instead of the solution (Mann, 1848). It is no secret that traditional public education has its flaws and shortcomings. Therein, along with other unscrupulous reasons, school choice became a household discussion for many and a national news headline. Though many educators within public schools see the effects and have strong opinions, this inequity of opportunity and oppression of entire generations of people through the guise of choosing a “better” education for the individual has grown to proportions that make it difficult for many outside the realm of public education to step away far enough to observe completely.

### ***Choice Enrollment***

School choice falls short in the enrollment of students as well. As stated, there are various methods of delivering and facilitating education; traditional public schools accept all students regardless of financial status, race, gender, etc., as long as they meet the attendance and zoning requirements and remain in good behavioral and financial standing. Other environments, like charter, magnet, private, etc., can use countless criteria to determine admission. While there is protection provided by laws like Constitutional Amendments I XIII, XIV, and XV to prevent discrimination by governmental agencies, the waters can become murky at best when schools are owned and operated by private organizations or groups. Choice schools, particularly charters and private schools, are notorious for skimming the best and brightest, along with the wealthiest and Whitest, students from public schools (Jabbar et al., 2022; Howe, 2006). A solution to this problem, according to West (2006), is to create more centralized control of transfers and enrollments. This would prevent schools from inequitably accepting or rejecting students for admission.

When a new school is opened outside the public district's control, an impact is sure to be felt by all stakeholders. One of these schools' biggest advertisements and attractions is their achievement levels and success rates. As stronger students flock to these schools, the claims create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The school can institute an entrance exam or other hurdle for prospective enrollees and become selective during admissions based on this achievement requirement. Therefore, the students who leave the public school to attend the new charter or private school are some of the most academically gifted the school possesses (Betebenner et al., 2005). This transgression is usually shrouded in a statement that by being successful, it forces the public school to become more successful in the name of competition.

Once established, we see little proof that students perform at a higher rate at the charter than they did, or predictably would, at the public school (Betebenner et al., 2005). One of the more damaging aspects, regardless of student success at the new school, is that the students left at the original school were likely not as academically strong before their classmates fled. Therefore the academic comparison is largely unbalanced (Jabbar et al., 2022). Outside of academic growth, students reading and learning below grade level will never compete with the students who left them behind. This creates a well-documented stigma and “othering” perpetuating the cycle (McWilliams, 2017; Jenkins, 2020). Market competition has been shown to not only fail at improving student achievement, but in fact, it destroys the community’s morale and identity by tearing down the identities and self-worth of the people living there (Jenkins, 2020).

One of school choice’s fundamental purposes is to create opportunity in an area with little to none. An example is seen in a 2014 study in Chicago, opportunity for movement and choice was created, but those with the most resources and strongest academics snatched up the vacancies within the most prestigious schools (Phillippo et al., 2021). In addition, the few that did manage to emigrate to more successful and prestigious schools were seen as fugitives by the school to which they originally *belonged* (Phillippo et al., 2021). Unfortunately, few private decisions occur in a vacuum, therefore, what should be a personal and idealistic decision has morphed into a societal one. Students and their families are burdened with undue responsibility for a school, community, or even a larger culture and race when the school choice decision should be about their own future (Phillippo et al., 2021).

### ***Inequity through Opportunity Gaps***

There are cases, as mentioned earlier, where school choice can combat racial segregation in both schools and neighborhoods. Still, there are also many cases that tell a different tale. In fact, it appears that the communities and schools of the United States are resegregating (Grube & Anderson, 2018). White families, who may be more educated or have more access to resources to engage in school choice, are more apt to employ this decision and change schools for a “better” opportunity or pick up and move to another community altogether. While the latter is more about residential resegregation than a school choice issue, the former is a common result of an introduced school choice to an area. A study in North Carolina showed that White families transferred to charter schools much more than to other public schools and that over 25% of their public school classmates were non-White; in contrast, only 18% of their charter school classmates were non-White (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006). Even schools, districts, or states that enact race-based clauses and policies have historically not enacted consequences for failure to comply. Cases in California in which there was a clause to enroll a minimum percentage of White students in a historically African-American charter school were not met for years at a time. Still, the school was reprimanded or closed as a result (Renzulli and Evans, 2005). The alternative scenario of a minority-based minimum clause is far more common and undoubtedly more overlooked. There is increased racial segregation in all forms of school choice; some are more pronounced than others. Private schools typically hold the largest racial segregation while charters have the least, though still considerably more than traditional public schools (Mickelson et al., 2008). Not only do schools and communities appear to be resegregating, but the achievement gaps between the demographics of students are also widening.

Disparities in test scores between White-Black, as well as White-Hispanic, are not only more prevalent in choice-driven charter and non-public schools, but the gaps appear to be increasing (Blatt & Votruba-Drzal, 2021). Furthermore, there was no improvement found in testing achievement data at any point of the charter introduction (first few months/years or over time), and the gap is mediated by, and itself increases, racial segregation (Blatt & Votruba-Drzal, 2021).

### ***Financial Impact***

The larger impacts of individual school choice are felt in multiple places, ranging from segregation, psychological and emotional trauma, relegation to poverty-stricken areas, inequitable access to resources and academic programs, and so on. Another negative consequence of school choice is the impact it has on public school budgets and resulting allotments. Public schools are allotted money from the federal, state, and local governments based on student enrollment. Those working in public schools feel declines in the budget heavily from year to year. Unfortunately, it has been a common theme in many areas in recent decades (Johnson, 2019).

### ***Lost Tuition and Deconstruction of Public School Budgets***

When a student chooses to attend a private school or even a publicly-funded charter that is not a part of the school district, that school loses thousands of dollars in allotted funding for the year. This funding is used for all aspects of the education process, ranging from allotting positions for administration and staff, creating a budget for maintenance and child nutrition, and all the resources that go into the instructional day. Pro-choice critics argue that the money should follow the student; if enrollment declines, so should the budget. However, public school systems saw a sharp decline during and after the COVID-19

pandemic as students turned to homeschooling and virtual academies for health and safety, resulting in the need to reduce staffing. As a result of lost funding, highly qualified teachers' contracts were not renewed, and they were forced to search elsewhere for employment. In most cases, they transferred to another school within the district or state. In places where enrollment declines were widespread, teachers were forced to change counties or states to remain in the teaching profession. Due to the rising number of lost teachers, schools were faced with educating students with underqualified or less-experienced faculty. Referencing the rationales from earlier, as instruction and achievement suffer, parents are more likely to look elsewhere for quality options for their child; the cycle for public education continues downward. Again, what was meant to be a personal and individualized decision has wide-reaching ramifications for school districts and states.

### **Politics of Choice**

School choice, while based on freedom and individuality, is a politically motivated topic. The highly divisive nature of United States politics in the last decade has folded this item into the mix. These choices have become politicized by presidential and legislative candidates in campaigns to win votes (Logan, 2018). Conservative policymakers have hitched their wagon to the pro-choice group, while more liberal legislators have rallied behind public education (Singer, 2021). Political drivers influence the push to privatize or promote school choice. Some of these factors are local or internal, like lobbyist groups, political climate, or publicized incidents like safety failures or other negative events that sway the public or policymakers. External drivers like policy, global models, and other larger trends can also influence a shift like the one seen from traditional public to increased school choice (Malin et al., 2019).



However, there are fiscal and social roots to the political attachments. As a generalization, conservatives historically favor less government overreach, more individualized liberty, and less taxation, all of which lend themselves to pro-school choice. In contrast, more liberal voters are in favor of higher socialist-based services (i.e. more taxes for more quality life), more government oversight and regulation of businesses and organizations, and a relaxation of individual liberty in the name of the greater good, which is supportive of a state-run, monopolistic, education system (Abernathy, 2005; Fusarelli, 2003).

Beyond contemporary partisan politics, there is another political-ideological battle at hand; there is a battle between populism and pluralism (Singer, 2021; Fusarelli, 2003). The populists look out for and defend the greater good of all people and a rebellion against “the 1%” and corporations that lobby Washington to make sweeping legislation. This fight against “the man” is seen as a righteous one on behalf of the common person. On the same ticket, seemingly unrelated, is the strong conviction to maintain the separation of church and state. By doing so, this is the line in the sand against public financial support of schools operated by religiously affiliated organizations such as churches, mosques, synagogues, etc. Pluralists are more interested in a localized, individualistic approach to education. In short, their priority is finding the best education for their children, as other children are not their responsibility or burden. Pluralism is centered on the belief that one group should never gain so much power that it can bend the will of others (Singer, 2021). Along those lines, pro-choice pluralists are not excited about a government entity mandating which school their child attends. Likewise, religious belief is highly personal and individualistic; therefore, pluralists want to extend their beliefs to education so that their children can be raised and trained in the virtues and pillars dictated by their faith. By limiting this access to a faith-

based education, many believe their First Amendment right to freedom of religion is being obstructed.

While some believe these two ideologies can coexist by creating a government-organized choice model (Viteritti, 2010), each passing American election proves to make it more difficult. The ship of political compromise has seemingly long since sailed. What we are left with are two groups, with ever-dwindling independent/moderates in the middle, who have an unwavering and steadfast belief in their ideals; anything less than a passed vote or legislative victory is utter defeat and a society-damaging abuse of power by the other party. Both believe the other ignores empirical and quantifiable data to push their evil agenda (Wiley, 2017). On the contrary, to the objective researcher, relevant data support both ideologies. The challenge in the 21st century is wading through the swamp of supporting evidence on both sides of the debate and determining a clear path that can be used to influence legislation and policy for our students, families, schools, and communities. Unfortunately, policymakers that could instill change regarding charter school choice may feel they cannot make decisions that could be deemed unpopular as they rely on reelection every four years (Ayscue et al., 2022).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions chosen for this study center around impacts, both positive and negative perspectives, as well as possibilities going forward for public schools in North Carolina. Since a great deal of this study is centered on the perceptions of the district Superintendents regarding the impacts from school choice, the questions are worded and warrant a personal and subjective response. However, these responses and the trends from the compilation of data can help us understand common themes that these school executives

witness regarding the impacts of school choice. These questions are analyzed in more detail in Chapter Three.

- How do Superintendents perceive the impacts of School Choice on North Carolina public school districts?
- What is the relationship between school choice and social justice through the lens of the district Superintendents?
- How do traditional public school districts change as a result of charter schools?

### **Introduction to Methodology**

This impact study utilizes a mixed-method approach of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This is appropriate because the impacts of school choice on North Carolina public school districts are multi-faceted and require both lenses for analysis. As the goal is an impact study, to understand that impact truly, both qualitative and quantitative aspects are needed. When participants submitted consent (Appendix A) and were accepted, namely North Carolina public school district Superintendents who have seen impacts in their district from school choice, I researched other quantitative information such as student demographics, achievement, and expenditures. The qualitative portion of the study comes from interviews with these Superintendents, where they were asked to explain what they have experienced in their roles regarding school choice.

### ***Quantitative Aspects***

This study includes quantitative information obtained through searching public records for each district like North Carolina School Report Card grades, both total and percentages, student demographics like race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, along with per pupil expenditure comparisons. There were also some quantitative data obtained through

Superintendent interviews. They were able to shed light on the cost of each student lost to a charter and the consequences of the lowered enrollment.

### ***Qualitative Aspects***

The main qualitative aspect of the study came from interviews of Superintendents in traditional public school districts with a charter school in close proximity that impacts their school system in some way, at least in their perception. Though each participant is asked the same fifteen questions, they are given the opportunity to elaborate or expand as much or as little as they see fit. The participants received the questions in advance and were allowed to refrain from answering or redact a previous answer to ensure their comfort with the study.

Some of the perceptions of these Superintendents varied greatly regarding the base questions. While some quantitative researchers may view qualitative data like survey answers and interview questions as overly subjective and/or biased, a benefit of the qualitative data collected is the insight and experience of the collective group of district executives. A researcher or practitioner who does not hold a Superintendent's position could be given the same quantitative data as these participants, but their perception stands to be much different based on experience and background knowledge. Data like financial allotments, enrollment numbers, and staffing allotments can be interpreted very differently based on years of experience, position held, and other factors.

### **Organization of Study**

This work is broken into five chapters. Chapter One is focused on the issue of school choice itself, both public and non-public. There is a brief introduction to school choice, the types of educational environments that families can access, the problems that I see from the current climate of school choice, and why it is significant to contemporary education and

society. The chapter goes on to outline some positives and negatives of school choice as well as delve into the deciding factors of these choices and the politics of the choice itself. There is then a brief explanation of the methodology and type of study and a rudimentary listing of the research questions.

The next chapter centers on the theoretical framework of the study. There is an exploration of Critical Theory and Social Justice Theory as these theories relate to the study. This section presents a balanced literature review. To achieve this balance, the chapter also examines the areas in which the selected theories do not inform the study and explores these limitations. A section also compares and contrasts the relationship between educational inquiry and the selected theories. Chapter Three outlines this mixed-method impact study. I examined the research questions with greater depth while providing a rationale for the design and selected data sources. This section also discusses ethical issues as well as protocol and procedures for interactions with participants and their rights through the International Review Board (Appendix B).

Chapter Four presents data analyses, including the description of participants, the results of the interviews, and information procured from the Superintendents. Lastly, Chapter Five provides conclusions and recommendations for future research. The study's responses and findings are linked to the literature available on the topic. In this section, I address any gaps, missing information, limitations, or other problems that arose in the process.

## **Conclusion**

As explored above, the decision to change schools for one's child is a deeply personal matter. Still, it can have long-reaching effects on entire communities, states, and even the national education system. While there are positives and negatives to this topic, like many

research opportunities, it has been seen in my research that more harm comes to individuals, existing public school districts, and state education systems than benefit. Whether the justifications to leave the public school system are due to religious belief, disagreements over curriculum creation and ownership, race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, student achievement, safety, or something else entirely, most research leans towards this creating a net negative for the education system and in most cases, the individual student.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

In this journey to discover school choice's impact on education in the United States, we must first understand where school choice resides within the greater construct of theory and framework. Regardless of the rhetoric from those who support or denounce it, the decision to change schools is multifaceted and deeply complex. This chapter lays the historical and theoretical groundwork for the “what” and “why” regarding school choice.

The place theory takes in educational research is vital but perplexing. Many students in education and practitioners are unclear about what is a “good” or “bad” theory. There are countless theories to examine, many of which seem strikingly similar at first glance. As daunting as this may be, Pring (2004) writes that practice cannot happen without a theoretical framework. Moreover, critical analysis cannot exist without this system of interwoven sets of beliefs. Just like reading works from others or having discussions can lead to different perspectives, studying theory through educational research allows the practitioner to see other possibilities and options. While our theoretical framework may guide our actions, unfortunately, it can also lead us away from learning about other theories or paradigms. As Pring (2004) states matter-of-factly, that may be one of the underlying reasons that theory is so unpopular in educational administration. Also, he says the importance of non-quantifiable studies is the focus on the mental life of individual people over the statistical and quantifiable data that are collected from the scientific method. Science has a place in many fields, “‘Man’ is not a subject of science” (Pring, 2004, p. 32). Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) reaffirm that not every theory tested must result in an empirical study. Sometimes qualitative research is meant to uncover new theories and topics. If one only looks for quantitative or empirical data meant to reach a conclusion, opportunities may be lost. The only way for the educational

researcher or practitioner to be capable of performing these studies is to be well-versed in multiple theoretical frameworks and paradigms. It seems that when we focus on different research methods and the contrast between reality and meaning, we fall into a “philosophical trap” of an “ancient dualism between the mind and body” (Pring, 2004, p. 33).

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) outline what they view as the four most commonly used paradigms in educational research: positivism, interpretivism/constructivism, critical paradigm, and pragmatic paradigm. As one would imagine, there are a multitude of ways to study the field of education, the people within it, and the world around them. This short list exemplifies just that. There is a realist, relativist, and critical paradigm listed along with a mixture of all three. Galvan and Galvan (2017) caution someone using others' results (in this case to write their own literature review) to closely analyze if the methodology and methods used strengthens the overall research. As a researcher's findings may be used multiple times for any number of research purposes, it is important that sound paradigms and methodologies be applied.

Kettley (2010) dismantles traditional educational research by saying most researchers use data to validate their research but do not provide an explanation of the theory applied, or why they landed upon the chosen methodology. A researcher needs to further develop their “educational imagination” and “cross-pollinate or transcend paradigms” to create more effective solutions to the problems faced (Kettley, 2010 p. 139). Furthermore, this lazy form of research is dangerous because it is not grounded in solid theory and methodology resulting in inadequately researched policies. After all, the purpose of educational research should be to improve practice and advance the field along with all its stakeholders. While there is a vast amount of literature and research about educational theory, the focus of this examination is



social justice and critical theory's relationship with the topic of school choice.

### **Philosophy and Building Theory**

Philosophy and theory are topics to which most educators give little thought. Practitioners train in various fields and topics, but their focus is in fact, putting such ideas into action within a school setting, a complicated context which often challenges theories. This is a large part of the problem that educators face when they undertake educational research. The divide between their world of practice and the realm of the theoretical poses a cognitive leap to which they've had no warning or scant training (Kettley, 2010). Positivism and realism along with non-static truth is something that most educators struggle to discern. It is this struggle that may cause most practitioners to renounce theory and ideological foundations, sending them towards more action-based and pragmatic approaches. In reality, theory and method are not two sides of the same coin; they are the same function because they together form our interpretations of truth and knowledge (Kettley, 2010). Limiting our interests to only the practical, absent of the theoretical, restricts the researcher's ability to defend the knowledge obtained and undermines the validity of the study (Huisman & Tight, 2021). There is a conspicuous need for specific methodology that will allow us to examine theory as well as practice. The absence of such methodology renders us to a state that Max Weber called "methodological pestilence" (Weber & Oakes, 1975).

### **Study Context**

As with most topics in contemporary American culture, the ideas of critical theories (particularly Critical Race Theory), and Social Justice have become highly polarizing topics due to political banter and misconception. Although political in nature and bound to trigger strong emotions, there is more to each framework than simply a candidate's talking point in a

campaign. The purpose of a critical inquiry or movement is to create societal reform and to improve the quality of life for a portion of the population that is oppressed or even subjugated (Collins & Stockton, 2018). In American school choice, these theories are crucial for understanding the culture, climate, and environments of education systems as well as the motivations for choice and consequences of those choices.

### ***Key Principles and Assumptions***

Critical theory is centered on social justice and societal reform (Rutten, 2021). Critical theory is a reflective analysis and assessment of society, or a problem therein, and a critique or challenge to that systemic problem. When qualitative inquiry uncovers people's life experiences that are unjust, "transformation and liberation" are necessary (St. Pierre, 2017, p. 1). A main goal of critical theory is the analytical inquiry and resulting action to persuade societal change through narratives and experiences (Somekh & Lewin, 2015). A key principle of critical theory is constant assessment and evolution (Salzborn, 2017). Finality is not and should not be attainable in the mind of a critical theorist for constant inquiry and action are the only ways to improve life for *all* people (Kaplan, 2007). Critical research can have benefits even if no action comes from the researcher. Fieldwork and action lead to more immediate and tangible results, but the study itself is good work. The discussions that come from it can have enormous potential for change in the long run, even if the effects take generations to manifest (Swann & Pratt, 2003).

This research has the potential to inform educators and those they serve as they become more aware of the struggles and inequalities that marginalized groups face. This group is what Salzborn (2017) refers to as "the non-identical and ambivalent" and "being inside, and yet always outside" (p. 4). Obviously, the purpose does not stop there; awareness

changes nothing without action. The recognition of internal and external factors is only half of the project. *Practice* is the theory in motion (Renault, 2018). This is where the theory of social justice enters. While critical theory and inquiry are the magnifying glass that exposes the problem to those who can impact the problem, social justice is intended as the battle cry that leads to meaningful action (Wilkerson & Paris, 2001). The course of these actions can take many forms depending on the oppressed group and the structural impact it has within society (Kaplan 2007). Philosophers like Karl Marx believed these actions must be explained and universally enforced if society is to evolve (Renault, 2018). There does not seem to be a clear enough consensus regarding this complex construct in modern society.

Though divisive, the critical aspect may not be critical enough. Wilkerson and Paris (2001) argue that the scope in which thinkers from the past envisioned using a critical lens, has been narrowed to only specific areas and groups of society, reducing its effectiveness and appeal to society. Regardless of opinions on scope, using critical theory and social justice as analytical tools can change the way power is defined and applied in all facets of society (Kaplan, 2003; Rich, 2007). A danger within society, can be the loss of the group's collective identity through assimilation in search of an unrealistically idealistic, democratic, and utopian form of a homogenous and singular public (Kaplan, 2003). A collective mindset that examines and devalues long-standing norms and traditions that uphold inequities within society would be more realistic and beneficial (Thompson, 2016).

### ***Relevant Authors and Works***

The ideas that are central to Critical Theory have stirred in the minds of great thinkers for centuries. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) were forefathers of critique. Rohlf (2020) explains Kant's works, known as *Critiques*,

defined the emergence of critical philosophy. *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (1790) presented syntheses of reason, rationalism, and empiricism. His analysis of the human spirit, morality, and the reaction to the Crisis of the European Enlightenment served as a window to the human psyche that is still influential and practical today. While the specifics of his critical inquiry are irrelevant to this topic, (transcendental deduction and the two-object and two-aspect interpretation), the practice of questioning perceived fact is groundbreaking. Kant's ideas of questioning not just what *is* but what *could be* are crucial for anyone who is interested in 'righting' a social wrong.

Karl Marx, viewed by many as a political and economic revolutionary, was also a brilliant critical theorist. As with Kant's, the target of Marx's critical view of alienation and later his critique of political economy as outlined in *Capital* (1867), are not as important to this topic as the practice of critical inquiry itself. In other words, their use of Critical Theory as a template is more useful to this study than what Kant and Marx were actually critical of. Wolff and Leopold (2020) elaborate that his time in Brussels produced some of the most influential political and economic works ever written, *The Holy Family* (1845), *The German Ideology* (1846) in which he criticizes Max Stirner, a nihilist and transcendentalist, as well as his most famous work, co-written with Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). After his death, Marx's critical inquiry sparked a revolution that would ultimately lead to communism and an ideological standoff with capitalism resulting in a global cold war. Critical Theory and the resulting action by practitioners still stands against taken-for-granted systems and initiatives like capitalism (Swann & Pratt, 2003).

These forerunners are credited with early conception of critical inquiry and thought

(Renault, 2018). Critical theory was first coined from German philosophers in the first half of the twentieth century in the Frankfurt School. While the ideology or theory was first solidified by thinkers like Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, it took a few decades for the idea to make its way into the practice of education. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) was a critical look at the "desublimation" (Marcuse, 1964, p. 56) of society with sexual imagery and manufactured *false needs* to keep the common citizen preoccupied and quell political activism (Farr, 2019). Adorno's most popular works, *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), were focused on society's seemingly inevitable self-destruction through the repetitive rise of fascism (Zuidervaart, 2015). Horkheimer's works, *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (1938); *Dialectic of Reason*, coauthored with Adorno (1947); and *Eclipse of Reason* (1947) are viewed by many as the framework and bedrock foundation of modern critical theory (Berendzen, 2022).

Max Horkheimer (1895 - 1973) intently focused on creating positive social change. He shared many anti-capitalist views from his study of Marx, stating that capitalism leads to an irrational and unrealistic society that ultimately causes human suffering (Berendzen, 2022). It is with Horkheimer that we can draw the closest comparison to the Critical Theory of this study and the original intent of the aforementioned German philosophers. Born into a wealthy German Jewish family, Horkheimer observed and struggled with the ever-widening divide between the upper and lower classes (Berendzen, 2022). Horkheimer's focus on political and economic freedom can still be used as a template for examining contemporary culture.

The struggle of these philosophers with concepts and theories, along with the often ill-received reception of their revolutionary works, laid the groundwork for future authors

and practitioners to use critique and Critical Theory to improve the lives of all walks of people. In the field of education, we use this paradigm, along with others, to examine, identify, and correct the marginalization that individuals, groups, and programs are forced to endure.

### **Impacts of Inequity**

The divergent levels of equality and gaps in opportunity are not new to most in the field of education. These topics have been well-covered by various scholars and news agencies across the nation, especially in recent decades. However, the uncovering of these inequalities creates new sets of data and potential questions. What measurable differences in outcomes occur from these various opportunity gaps? Within the topic of school choice, there are enormous impacts upon student achievement, opportunities, and ultimately, the chosen educational path parents take for their children based upon these inequities, whether perceived or actual. Social Justice relates with educational inquiry because it, along with Critical Theory, seeks out the same goals to investigate, question, and rectify inequities (Choonoo et al., 2020; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Social justice is meant to be a revolutionary and evolutionary process grounded in research and theory, progressing through data collection and analysis, resulting in positive social change (Choonoo et al., 2020).

### **The Scales of (Social) Justice**

To tie the issue of school choice back to the topic of social justice, the future is not an optimistic one. As stated, the two ideologies are so solidly divided and openly immovable that compromise is seemingly impossible. Social justice as a critical action and movement is centered on the improvement and emancipation of all groups who are oppressed (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019). Unfortunately, since both sides have hardened the subject into a political

and ideological one, most within the discussion of school choice are not concerned about marginalized groups. If the marginalized student was the focus, countless research and the Superintendent responses in this study would not cite overwhelming homogenous makeup in the charter schools. A key argument for school choice proponents is the increased opportunities that charters can offer for the disadvantaged. However, the disadvantaged are the very students left behind while students with higher socioeconomic status transfer to alternative environments (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008; Hale, 2022). In short, lawmakers and activists alike have lost sight of what matters, our students. Howe (2006) believes that the only feasible solution is to move from a model where choice is a value or mechanism, to one where choice is a utility to achieve equality. Choice in itself is *not* the issue; however, deciding the best course to increase achievement and ultimate success for students, *is or should be*.

### **The Role of School Choice in Social Justice**

The future role of school choice in the critical topic of social justice is an uncertain one. There are large portions of the population that are negatively impacted by the current school choice model. These include, but are not limited to, people of color, the economically disadvantaged, outsiders of “the norm,” and anyone who is denied equal and equitable access to opportunities. School choice can play a heroic and generational-changing role in making these injustices a thing of the past for many. School choice has the potential to be the epitome of a critical theory-based movement. It is truly unfortunate and frustrating that so many of those who hold the power to change the dialogue around this subject either cannot or will not see the impacts their choices have on so many families. Legislators and others in places of influence could use access to education, by any means deemed necessary and proper, to

scaffold such large portions of society who have been repressed for so long that their own environment works against the possibility of success. Most, if not all, educators echo Horace Mann's (1848) belief that education is the great equalizer for society. It bestows the tools and training to make nearly any goal a reality, whereby the only obstacles that should remain are a personal vision of success and the motivation to achieve it.

### ***Examples of Opportunity Gaps and Inequality***

A critical inquiry of accessibility and opportunities for students across the nation uncovers some profound results. Numerous factors can influence a student's opportunity to succeed. These can include, but are not limited to socio-economic statuses and levels of accessible resources; cultural history and composition; along with racial and ethnic backgrounds (Logan, 2018; Milner, 2012). Also, depending on situations and environments, other characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, and race that cause a student to be unlike their peers can have enormous impacts on the student's educational experience (Johnson, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated some of these inequities and opportunity gaps even further as students who were forced to attend school *remotely* were left to their own devices, literally. To be fair, many students did well with the change and some even thrived, especially if they had the resources at their disposal to meet their own educational needs (Butcher & Burke, 2021). The remaining students who lacked the technology and infrastructure at home to *attend class* and perform remotely struggled to stay on pace with their peers and to make the academic gains they experienced pre-pandemic (Irwin, et al., 2022).

To simply uncover these inequalities is not sufficient; educators and practitioners are



hungry for solutions to the inequity and injustice they have seen their students face. A critical study of these elements is necessary to impart a cultural shift so that the system in question can be reformed. With this in mind, the application of Critical Theory to an examination of causes and effects is crucial if educational reform is to be achieved. Likewise, an analysis based on Social Justice Theory is useful to investigate, uncover, and begin steps for compensation of groups that are being marginalized (Crewe, 2021). Crewe (2021) elaborates that Critical Theory doesn't set out to deny wrongdoings from the past, but that it seeks to create a new narrative for those who are being oppressed or treated unjustly.

Another key point to consider is the distinction between *equity* and *equality*. Equal opportunity is often not what it seems; to reach true equality, we must focus on equal outcomes (Angelle, 2017). For that to happen, steps must be taken to scaffold the disadvantaged and oppressed. The reformative and transformative nature of Social Justice Theory makes those outcomes a possibility (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020). For example, the resources and preparation needed to send a student to college who already has multiple degree-holding family members compared to a first generation college-goer would be very different (Cheng & Peterson, 2022).

**Financial.** It is difficult to escape the reach of money, even in free public education. The socioeconomic status of students, status, wealth, and resources of the community, as well as the budget allocated to the school and district play enormous roles in the success of the school and its students. The relationships among the financial aspects of education - both for its stakeholders and institutions - and education opportunity and outcome are prime focal points of critical studies. The origins of oppression can be shrouded and may take many forms. Although political and authoritarian subjugation is most obvious, the suppression of

entire groups of people based upon socioeconomic status is some of the most common but may still be overlooked as “just the way it is.”

The economics of this subjection can be measured at both the micro- and macro-levels. For the individual, it could be the area of town they are relegated to live by their income and resources, hence, determining the school to which their children are assigned to attend. Thus there is a vicious cycle of poverty begetting poverty, property values plummeting, tax rates following suit, eventually leading to declining funding for the community’s schools and a subpar education for its students. At the macro-level, the importance that local, state, and federal legislative parties place upon public education can be directly measured by the budgets allocated to them. In the words of Joe Biden while he was Vice President in 2018, “Show me your budget, and I’ll tell you what you value.” These words ring true in all aspects of business, personal finance, and education. As budgets and staffing allotments dwindle in most districts, so does student achievement on a wide range. Likewise, it is clear to see why this issue requires the emancipation that comes from Critical Theory. Tying back into the topic of school choice and families opting out of traditional public schools, all these financial dominoes lead to a struggling public school system and a tough decision for some parents.

When speaking of economics, most think of only financial implications. In reality, economics is the study of choice itself. Life is filled with mostly finite resources. These commodities include time, money, energy, etc. (Robbins, 1932). The choices that consumers make are directly linked to their own self-benefit (Smith, 1776). Families make many choices about their lives, ranging from career choice to living environment and so on. Speaking again of accessibility, the options for those choices for some may be limited compared to others for

various reasons (Robbins, 1932; Berlin, 1969). While the individual may be free to choose among finite resources, which Berlin (1969) called positive liberty, there may be restrictions from other parties or factors that limit those choices, which he called negative liberty. The correlation between economics and school choice are two sides of a coin. Traditionally, an impact study would not focus heavily on a theory or paradigm; however, taking a critical approach to the circumstances, backgrounds, perspectives, and potential limitations that lead up to those decisions will lead towards Social Justice through reform (Nikolic et al., 2022).

**Cultural and Racial.** One of the more prevalent uses of Critical Theory of late deals with racial and ethnic oppression (Stovall, 2016). As stated previously, Critical Theory is centered on the identification and emancipation of those who are oppressed (Thompson Dorsey & Roulhac, 2019). Cultural, ethnic, and/or racial discrimination leads to an inequity of access to opportunity. In education, this can have generational implications for families and entire communities. The vicious cycle of feeling trapped in a community or way of life where opportunity may be known to exist but is ambiguously out of reach can be just as crippling as being openly denied. As touched upon earlier, not all oppression manifests itself as physically-shackled subjugation.

Though *Brown v. Board of Education* (1953) was nearly 70 years ago, the idea that there is psychological damage from being *left behind* is a new concept to many parents and school leaders. There is a stigma in being *not them, unworthy, less-than*, and existing as the *other* that cannot be quantified in a board of education report. McWilliams (2017), points out that the unwritten shame that is felt by staff, students, and the community of these *left behind* schools is devastating to their self-identities; belief in their abilities to succeed; their interest towards engagement; and psyche towards life and their future in general. This shift in

mentality and the resulting constructed realities these students experience have a direct impact on the success they achieve. These students become fractured, code-switching one identity within school and another outside of school. These *oppositional identities* cause students to see school as a form of mandated assimilation towards a culture that has shown little concern or benefit to students like them (Noguera, 2009). This ignorance, whether chosen or misinformed, can only be combated with explicit education and an inability to hide. Mills (2022) calls this ignorance an “inverted epistemology” that can only be reversed by laser-focused critique and intentional race-conscious education.

**Gender.** There are two avenues to this subsection regarding gender. The first is the more-traditional binate view of gender: man and woman. There is also the more recently-critiqued perspective of multiple genders. More specifically, the natural identity, societally-reinforced assignment, and the internal and external struggle to come to grips with that identity. Intertwined in both shared environments and other classifications, these groups face similar challenges regarding Social Justice and equity, but the oppression and subjugation that groups experience may be unique to their environment and those around them.

In examination of the first view, great strides have been made in recent decades to level the playing field of opportunity for women; however, there is still a well-documented opportunity gap compared to men. While statistics vary, women earn less than their male counterparts in many occupations across the workforce (U.S. Census, n.d.). Deeply rooted in religious origins and texts, women were viewed for millennia as “less-than” men or even as property. Through tradition and an ever-strengthening patriarchal society, this has continued well into modern times. Since the Women’s Suffrage movement of the early 1900s, critical minds and activists have chipped away at the glass ceiling women face. In the recent past,

women were not expected, or even allowed, to pursue an education. Fortunately, that has become an archaic mentality. However, now we see girls and young women with the unspoken nudge to be relegated to certain fields (e.g., nursing, teaching, etc.) while other fields are still dominated by men (corporate leadership positions, law, etc.). This topic is a perfect example of the progress that Critical Theory has initiated, but also good insight into the work left to be done. Most scenarios, like the plight of women in education and the workforce compared to their male peers, may improve after critique and action, but they persist in many forms. The process is fluid, evolving, and frustratingly unending. The impact that this inequity has upon the matter of school choice is multi-tiered. Along with the struggles that women face, they are also not immune to other factors that could inhibit their future (race, poverty, etc.). The societal expectations and standards to which young women are often held can vary wildly from that of young men, even in the same setting. There are assumptions of courses or academic tracts, extracurricular activities, and even expectations of academic outcomes. All of these factors can influence a parent to choose a school other than the community school where they live, if they have the resources and ability to exercise that choice.

Gender, in another context, brings an entirely different set of challenges. Though students today in many areas have more freedom to openly express their inner identity than in years past, there is still a stigma that rests upon the student that “dresses up as” the opposite gender. Even more heads turn when the student breaks out of a binary classification, to which most peers and even educators struggle to comprehend. Traditionally-binary women struggle with equity and access to opportunities compared to their male counterparts; however, the struggle for the non-binary identity is much more obvious and often more

dangerous (McGinley, 2022). Throughout history, what people don't understand, they fear; what they fear, they fight. This situation is no different. It is not uncommon to hear a parent tell a teacher, or administrator, "I don't want my child to be exposed to *that*." The blatant discrimination of the non-binary, especially in the school setting, can rival what students of color faced during integration in the United States. These students are met with fear, resentment, disgust, misunderstanding, and projected inferiority by their peers, community, and even their own family. In 2016, the House of Representatives in North Carolina created a bill that would prevent a transgender person from using the restroom of the gender which they identify and would restrict them to their biological sex, or gender on their birth certificate (N.C. Gen. Assemb., 2016). This action empowered bigotry and hatred across the state and made the lives of many even more frightening. Fortunately, due to strong protest from citizens, businesses, and state-venue boycotts from large organizations like the National Football League (NFL) and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the bill was repealed shortly after its inception (Berman & Somashekhar, 2016). Critical Inquiry and Social Justice do not need a microscope to uncover the inequities. The stark question pertains to what can be done, and how to proceed. As with most subjects that deal with individuals and perspectives, qualitative inquiry can often be a key to unlocking perceptions. While there is a place in this scenario for quantitative analysis, a huge part of what makes this challenge so tragic are the feelings that permeate from both groups. Critically analyzing the feelings and beliefs of those oppressors through qualitative inquiry and then humanizing the oppressed through dialogue and education is a credible way to rewire the deeply-ingrained set of prejudices that much of society carries. As with other groups, the bullying and harassment this group faces could, and often does, lead to parents searching for another

school as an escape. Though many leave for academic reasons, this group and those like them, would flee their assigned school simply to escape the torment they have endured (Calibuso & Winsler, 2020; Meyer et al., 2016).

**Othering.** Along the same lines, there are other categories of people that do not fit into the “norm” of their environment. While these environments vary drastically, they can be stifling for a student or family who doesn’t fit in. For example, a non-binary student in a rural, southeastern United States school, a Muslim in a Christian community, or a poverty-stricken student in a largely affluent school may face many of the same challenges. When changing schools is an option, any of these students, along with countless other scenarios, would most likely entertain the idea to relieve the strain. In these cases, simply analyzing the quantitative data is not going to tell the story of school choice that is sought after. A deeper dive is needed to truly understand the motivations and convictions that led to the decision to change schools.

Conversely, when students are unable to change schools due to lack of resources, ability, etc., they can suffer from psychological trauma when their peers change schools to avoid them or the challenges the school faces. This stigma of being left behind is devastating to the students’ psyche, personal identity, and motivations. Also, it can be more far-reaching and damage the morale of the school, staff, and community. For example, when more affluent students leave a community school for a private, charter, or other option that is more exclusive than their assigned school, the school left behind becomes “the poor school” or the lesser option. As with lower socioeconomic groups or people of color relegated to a specific part of town or area, the vicious cycle of degraded identity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for every new generation. A critical inquiry and the paradigm of Social Justice, followed by

intentional and deliberate action, is the only way to reverse the years of damage and light a path of emancipation from the plight.

### **Relationship to Educational Inquiry**

Critical Theory and the Social Justice Theory/Paradigm have become almost-seamlessly intertwined with what much of society expects from education. Though expectations and desired outcomes may vary, most parents wish for their children to be inquisitive and knowledge-seeking members of society. More traditional communities and environments still focus on other purposes for education. Education a few decades ago focused on creating orderly citizens that were trained to do a job and contribute to society. In other words, education created workers. Some think we send students to school to *learn* discrete facts measurable by standardized tests. Many educators would argue that the act of learning and the assessment that follows are contrasting goals (Fast, 2016). There are countless ways to view the purpose of education (ASCD, 2012). One commonality agreed upon by most educators and parents is that we want our children to be able to think critically to solve problems (West, 2006). While this is important to most, it is not always seen as the sole purpose of education. In fact, most educators would struggle to provide a singular purpose of education if asked. Most would agree that the aim of education changes as the student progresses (Howe, 2006). For example, there is more training for how to behave and follow societal expectations in the early years rather than the latter. Similarly, students receive more technical career-oriented education as they near adulthood as opposed to early adolescence. It is apparent that the objective of education changes as the process unfolds.

Within this journey, students' minds begin to develop in such a way that critical thought and inquiry become possible. Many practitioners and educational scholars argue that



this is the point at which true education begins. The other goals or purposes are still relevant and made a priority, but at this point students learn to take information at face value rather than the stone-etched gospel. As exciting as this period can be, it can also be the most pivotal. At this point, a rigid educator or system can stifle this critical thought and relegate the student to a curriculum receptacle that only consumes static information and regurgitates it into the format that is deemed appropriate for assessment. In short, a critical mind can be rebooted and reprogrammed to only seek out an A+, instead of seeking understanding and enlightenment (Goodwin et al., 2020; Tannock, 2015; White & Fantone, 2009).

Public education as an entity has not done itself any favors in preventing this disaster. With the quantifiable emphasis on standardized testing, student achievement, school report cards, and graduation rates, society has seemingly lost sight of one of the key purposes of school; to create critical observers and thinkers (ASCD, 2012). Exploring how we know what we know is a product of educational inquiry. Now, more than ever, Critical Theory provides a crucial lens for students who are able to employ it. Constant, unapologetic, and focused critique of the world around them, coupled with a reformative process informed by the Social Justice paradigm, offers a possible way to challenge the injustices that so many in society face (Chunoo et al., 2020).

### ***Critique***

As noted above, Critical Theory and Social Justice Theory share many of the same principles as educational inquiry. At the heart of all these paradigms are the notions of analysis, questioning, deduction, comparison, and, ultimately, action. For most educators, practitioners, and social activists, critical theory without reform serves little purpose to society beyond academia and philosophy. Social reform is necessary to positively change the

lives and opportunities of those affected. When humans and their existence are the focus instead of, as Kant (1785/2021) put it, means to an end, humanity becomes stronger. Kant believed that while individuals are used as means to achieve larger goals, these individuals are the reason the goals were envisioned, so they must not be lost in the process.

Unfortunately, the larger system of education, along with much of society, has relegated people to means instead of purposeful ends. Instead, using Kant's ideas, students and other stakeholders should be the reason for all processes and goals. In other words, we must analyze and study societal problems and injustices because of their impact on the oppressed, not view the victims as a means to the study's end. In layman's terms, we must ask whether the research being done for the sake of research or if action and change are the goal. The causal effect only matters because of the impact it has on the people it harms. This is not to say that people do not need the use of others to achieve their goals, but as Kant made clear, the individual's value and personalized experiences cannot become lost in the process, or we digress as a civilization. We take for granted that social improvement and treating others respectfully and morally are instinctive traits. Regardless of the origin, whether it is a religious foundation or secular as in Kant's idea of reason through procedural humanism as the basis of morality, human treatment is paramount to society.

If educational inquiry is how we know what we know, and the knowledge we obtain is based upon an historical realist ontology, meaning our reality is shaped by our experiences, perspectives, and influenced by power dynamics around us, then the relationship between Critical Theory and educational inquiry is one of questioning and evaluating current systems. After determining who should act upon reform, taking action towards rectifying the identified problems. This interrelationship is so strong that educational inquiry and Critical

Theory can be synonymous to many. However, the differences that exist pertain to the desired result of the study. Educational inquiry's purpose is to create a deeper and more personal understanding of a topic or idea. The learner or researcher is most interested in uncovering their own truth and knowledge as well as understanding the reality of others. While educational inquiry is hugely important to a student's development as well as the betterment and enlightenment of society, the action that comes from this learning, if any, is not tied to the theory itself. Any realization of a problem or injustice comes from that individual's perception of need and what life should look like, and then their own action. Conversely, Critical Theory, which is also an investigation of a topic or system, is more interested in identifying a social problem, determining who will take action towards improving it, and creating a framework or model for further evaluation and continual improvement. To be more concise, educational inquiry is used to learn about the world, while Critical Theory is used to change it.

### **Relationship between School Choice and Theories**

The relationship between contemporary school choice and the theories of Critical Inquiry and Social Justice is like shining a beacon into a darkened space. The theories uncover the culture, climate, physical environment, demographic identities (both individualistic and societal), and the psychological realities felt by the inhabitants of that system. In more succinct terms, Critical Theory in particular, shows the researcher what the educational system is, as well as who the stakeholders are, both physically and metaphysically (Glesne, 2016). Specific to the topic of school choice, Critical Theory can take a quantitative and/or qualitative approach, depending on the questions and inquiries utilized, to analyze the reasons for the decision to choose another school for the student, but

then one course of action is to change the problems or reasons for that employment of choice. The quantitative aspect would be more focused on the hard data of the emigration like lost students, allotments, changes in school achievement, etc. In essence, it tells the *what* of the decision, both before and after. The qualitative data would be more focused on individual perceptions of causation, impacts, and effects, or in short, explain the *why* of the decision (Kornbluh et al., 2021; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995).

As explained previously, the ultimate purpose of Critical Theory is not to simply understand but to reform and emancipate. After the initial inventory of the environment, inquiry of both quantitative and qualitative findings, and unveiling of a systemic problem, the Critical Theory begins its true purpose, action. There are multiple issues that arise from school choice ranging from inequities hinged on race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and so on. Critical Theory grants the practitioner or activist the ability to hone in on the root of a systemic problem and bestows them a framework to address it, in this case, improve the experiences and opportunities of students and communities impacted by migration of students (Al-Sharif, 2020). Critical Theory can also be used to explain the systemic problems that lead parents to employ school choice in the first place. In this case, the qualitative *why* is crucial. The choice to relocate to another school is a deeply intimate decision, rooted in individualistic and political perceptions of reality, feelings, emotions, and an ideological belief of the way things should be.

Critical Theory in the context of school choice is contingent upon the researcher or practitioner's standpoint on the topic and desired outcome for the students and system of education (McLaren & Giarelli, 1995). In other words, Critical Theory gives a clear framework for action. The direction of that action depends upon the ideology of the person or

group taking action. Again, the interpretation of the data or realities revealed in the study are highly subjective. Therefore, different minds and hearts will take different courses of action, even with the same information (Al-Sharif, 2020). This is to say that even a reformative and emancipatory paradigm like Critical Theory or even the more narrowly-focused Social Justice Theory are not destined to reach the same outcome. Due to the highly subjective perceptions of the researcher and stakeholder, its politicalized nature, and the emotions attached, there is no right way to view or act upon the topic of school choice. For the purpose of this study, both general outcomes are explored along with their causes and ramifications.

### ***Race and Ethnicity***

Most public school districts in the nation allow for some form of choice where students attend school regardless of their proximity to their 'home' school. The extent to which this choice is available and accepted varies by state and district. These choices may be inter- or intra-district moves, charter schools, magnet schools, religious or secular private schools. Often, school choice is exercised by parents who are searching for an aspect of education that they believe their home school cannot provide. This may be academically-based, such as specific courses, smaller class sizes, specialized tracks, or name recognition for collegiate acceptance and preparation. There are also other reasons that vary from athletic offerings, club and extracurricular opportunities, and student support that may not be offered in another school, such as counseling, training, or other skill attainment.

While all of these factors are cited regularly, often there are other justifications and elements that rarely are revealed publicly. From its mainstream origins shortly after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision that forced all public schools in the United States to begin the slow and painful process of racial integration, opposing parents and

communities have looked for ways to circumvent the ruling. “Free Market” principles, as cited by economist Milton Friedman (1955), emerged as a way for parents, predominantly White, to avoid integration and maintain the status quo, even if only for their own children. This was widely accepted by state and local governments because of the free market/economic nature of the choice system as well as the era in which it was written, squarely in the “Red Scare” era of anti-communism in the United States. Since then, there have been countless studies, criticisms, and justifications to support both camps. While proponents of choice like Friedman claim that education can be improved through market principles, opponents like Brighouse (2000) claim that education is not a system that should be commodified because the product within is not a product at all, at least in a material sense. He examines this identity conflict, pointing out that education is not directly purchased by parents or students and the outcomes are not completely tied to the process. As an example, he states that some parents believe that because their child attended the school day, year, or career, that the student must have learned or become educated (Brighouse, 2000). While immersion and instruction play enormous roles in students’ growth and learning, this happens at different rates. Likewise, just because a student was *in* the classroom, doesn’t mean learning occurred.

School choice has become a normalized aspect of the educational process and system, but there is merit to analyzing it through a critical lens. As stated above, many parents choose to send their children to other schools for reasons that hold up to analytic criticism, such as academic and athletic offerings, student support, and so on. However, there are a large number of families that employ school choice that do not consider those criteria. By viewing school choice through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Theory

(CWT) we can better understand the justifications that many families feel when exercising school choice and by using those results, can restructure the choice system to serve all students and families more effectively. These data are qualitative in nature, much like the impacts felt from the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision that upheld segregation as long as the facilities and opportunities were “separate but equal.” Many misunderstand the reason for the reversal of this decision when such separation was overturned in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* because of the inequality of services or opportunities resulting in more “separate and unequal” educational opportunities. A further argument for its reversal stemmed from the emerging psychological impact on the colored communities that were seen as *less than*. This othering had far more impact on the individual and community than the unequal facilities or educational opportunity ever could. Chief Justice Warren (1954) stated, “To separate [blacks] from others of similar age and qualifications because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” (p.494). This systematic dismantling of an entire population’s identity and perception of worth, both in self and in society, was generationally catastrophic to families of color.

**Deconstruction and Emancipation.** Proponents such as Friedman in the 1950s as well as conservative groups today, argue that school choice is an individual right and a resistance to governmental overreach and control. However, only a specific group is afforded the opportunity to choose individualism. White families are able to regard themselves as individuals because their culture, Whiteness, through no coincidence, is deemed the societal norm. Therefore, any choice they make, in their mind, is an individually-motivated one

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This option to be a part of the White community or to be an individual, is exclusive to the White community. There is not a moment in a child of color's educational career, or personal/professional life for that matter, where they are given such a choice. Every decision that a person of color makes will be critiqued by the White community as a culture-based decision, representative of an entire group. White families are blessed with the option to take up a mantle or struggle if they are so inclined; families of color wear them like chains from which they cannot be emancipated. It is imperative that this analytic process be based upon the system that is perpetuated, not the individualistic consequences from it. The "unearned advantages" that a White person enjoys pale in comparison to the "direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it" (Applebaum, 2016, p. 10). The only way to achieve this enlightenment is to lift the veil of ignorance from the White community and hone the subsequent understanding into an emancipatory process that can overturn the White supremacist-dominated and self-serving system.

Unfortunately, the remedy requires buy-in of all parties, including the oppressors. It should be stated that White families that employ school choice are not evil, malicious, or inherently White supremacists. However, to those negatively impacted and seemingly hopeless to ever stand on equal ground, it feels systemically nefarious. Though not a problem created by the individual, for schools, communities, and students of color to shed this shame and stigma associated with their abandonment and seclusion and ultimately level the psychological playing field, there must be acknowledgement, self-identification, and change from the individuals within the White community.



### ***Socioeconomic Status and Resources***

Billings et al. (2018) found that families with access to more resources were more willing to choose another school. They found a strong correlation between families that placed a high value on education and those most likely to employ school choice. Their studies on the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2002 showed that failing schools in high-price neighborhoods saw a lower student population density than failing schools in low-price neighborhoods, as families in the former would have more ability to relocate their child's school or move altogether, than the latter. They saw that after school report card scores showed a school to be in decline or failing, surrounding communities with higher performing schools witnessed an increase in property value and new home-buyer income. Income and access to resources have been found to be an influential factor of school choice (Danielsen et al., 2015).

Individual wealth aside, there is more to the topic of school choice regarding economics, more specifically, financial and fiscal economics, not simply the study of choice itself. Looking past its racially-motivated beginnings, socioeconomic status and access to resources play an enormous role in a parent's decision to change schools. Beyond the individual choice, comes the structure of the educational system itself. As one of the most rigid and unwavering systems in society, education tends to best serve patrons and stakeholders that can relate to and have the resources to fit into the packaged product (Pinar & Miller, 1982). In summary, while not a conscious conspiracy, the system of education works best for those who built, control, and most relate to its logos; more specifically, white, middle class, heterosexual males.

In simple terms, lower socioeconomic families without sufficient access to resources

such as transportation are less likely to be able to change schools, even if they are unhappy with their current situation. One example that is seen in many public schools is the need for transportation provided to and from school. In most districts, by choosing to change schools to a location out of the assigned zone, the family is responsible for providing their own transportation. Families with more wealth will have the opportunity to provide that personalized transportation. Families who are poverty-stricken may be unable to afford a vehicle or they work jobs that do not allow time to transport a child to and from school. Thus they are forced to rely on public or school-provided transportation, which may not take the child to their school of choice. This issue of transportation alone is enough to seclude a large portion of the public school population from even entertaining the idea of school choice (Byrne & De Tona, 2019). Unless government entities offset some, if not all, of the costs associated with transportation, the chasm between students of means and those without will continue to make equal access difficult to achieve. Brighthouse (2000) states that solving the dilemma of transportation would eliminate much of the inequity that school choice creates in communities.

As a result, enrollment, budget allotments, and qualification of staffing in community schools that are in lower-income neighborhoods dwindle as families with more wealth and resources flee to more desirable schools. If enough higher income families move to a new area, a vacuum can be created in which property values plummet and desirable businesses catering to higher incomes may relocate. Much like the psychological effect felt by students left behind due to racial or ethnic resegregation, those deemed *poor* students are relegated to a status of inadequacy, otherness, and a feeling of less-than with a dim and uncertain future for any type of personal or financial success.

Again, the individual family's choice to change schools is typically not a malicious or diabolic one, it is merely myopic. More often than not, it is viewed matter-of-factly as an appropriate and justified action to do what is best for their children, which is the motivator for most parents. Parents believe, almost unanimously, that the resulting choice for their child's education is the right one (Rhinesmith, 2017). However, when a large number of individuals choose to change schools, the impacts are compounded. The gap between the *haves* and *have-nots* widens and the system begins to evolve to match the changing environment and demographic (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008; Hale, 2022).

**Deconstruction and Emancipation.** As with other motivating factors like racial and cultural aversion, the solution to the problem of financial inequities is a difficult one that must be focused at the individual level. Unlike issues pertaining to race or ethnicity, few families leave a school because the student demographic is *poor* such as those designated as Title I schools based on percentage of free and reduced lunch students. The economic factors that would cause a family to choose a new school come from the access to resources and programs they would lack because of the differing interest of the community and school population. For example, if a student is interested in pursuing a career in medicine but that is not a common desire of the rest of the student body, the school will be unable to provide higher mathematics courses or other such classes that meet the needs of that student. Therefore, the student may change schools on the basis of class and program offering. In reality, the lack of interest for any specific career exists because most in the community may see it as unattainable for someone in their position with their family history. The culture of the community, especially in some agrarian or industrial areas in which most families lack higher education and are blue collar workers, may be that college or professional careers are

unnecessary to earn a living. The same could be said for college preparatory courses, STEM field training, and other careers that may not be common in that community.

The solution to these issues is multifaceted and deeply complicated. Changing opportunities and access to resources begins with changing the individual and collective psyche of its inhabitants. The *Catch-22* rests in the need for examples of success for young people and families. These examples are uncommon in areas that need them most. Students who came from poverty struggle to become well-educated, and well-compensated professionals like attorneys, doctors, and business leaders typically do not remain in the area of their origin. Unfortunately, for the young people there and much of the community, they are “out of sight and out of mind.” In fact, because the community witnesses these professionals seemingly abandon their homeplace, it in turn reinforces the stigma of being *left behind*.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for any school to meet the needs of every student regarding their prospective career. However, by applying Critical Theory and a subsequent framework of enlightenment for pathways of opportunity, students will learn about, and truly believe, they have options for their future. This cultural shift cannot and will not happen overnight but will compound with every student trajectory that changes. In this cycle of socioeconomic and psychological oppression, the spark is enlightenment and a belief in opportunity. Though based upon gender inequalities, the catch phrase for young women to grow personally and professionally, “if you can see her, you can be her,” checks the same box.

### **A Critical Lens to View School Choice**

As stated earlier and available in countless works of research, the topic of school

choice is complex, ideological, and multidimensional. To uncover some of these motives or justifications, a critical study is needed to understand the subjective realities that those involved perceive and experience. This is far from the path of yesteryear's political and even philosophical thought. Feelings and emotions were seen as the antithesis to logic and reason, the opposite of truth. A key component of modern Critical Theory is the hearing and understanding of the individual's perception of reality and truth (Mussell, 2017). Critical Theory provides researchers the questions to perform the inquiry necessary to uncover these issues. Again, while Critical Theory provides the inquiry to get the process started, the examiner must remember that action and emancipation are the purpose of the study. They must also ask the correct questions to reach a comprehensive conclusion. The angle that the researcher takes is based upon their own biases, perspectives, life experiences, and goals. Often, these are politically motivated and will navigate the study and action accordingly. As Bohman (2005) states however, researchers should take caution that true critical thought includes open analysis of the topic, the subjects, and also the researcher. In fact, some of Critical Theory's biggest opponents are the philosophers and researchers who engage it (Dahms, 2011). Constant inquiry and scrutiny can undermine the epistemology and its accompanying methodology to some. Even with these problems, critical inquiry seems to stand the test of time. Rousseau spoke to the blatant oppression and subjugation of groups in 1775 and that philosophers who analyzed these relationships simply wrote off the hierarchy as natural law, ignoring the origins and effects of the affronts (Rousseau, 1775).

Due to Critical Theory's ever-changing openness to interpretation and situational use (Marinopoulou, 2017) there are multiple ways to exercise Critical Theory to the topic of school choice. However, practitioners and activists have a duty to use it for the improvement

and emancipation of the oppressed and subjugated parties. Seldom are the families that choose to transfer schools the group that is being suppressed, though perceptions and interpretations may vary. Looking at school choice through the critical lens would first mean identifying the group that lacks the same access to opportunities or resources. Next, one would analyze the factors that contribute to the oppression, determining historical and contemporary reasons for their existence. Lastly, the activist would use the framework to determine solutions for alleviating the barriers or oppressive elements which cause the problem. In the case of school choice, this depends heavily on the group that is being affected. The course of action would vary greatly depending on the components that cause the inequities (e.g. financial, racial, etc.). Likewise, there are situations where Critical Theory, and all its subsections, are a suitable course of action; conversely, there are scenarios where alternative methods should be explored.

### ***Befitting Situations***

There are instances where Critical Theory is not a proper fit, like any other epistemology. In short, Critical Theory has merit in instances where the accepted norms and practices do not align with what is deemed moral, equitable, or fair (Bohman, 2005). Conditions where Critical Theory is a fitting paradigm for researchers and practitioners when oppression or injustice is affecting a portion of society while another group enjoys immunity or even benefits from the cycle. Some examples that suit the framework are instances of racial discrimination and segregation, socioeconomic pigeonholing and relegation, cases of injustice on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, and other factors that violate a human's civil liberties. In these cases, Critical Theory and its subgroups (Critical Race Theory, Queer Theory, Critical Feminist Theory, etc.) can be used to identify and investigate

injustice as well as create solutions to promote better treatment and increase opportunities of that specific group. Though much of Critical Theory's origins came from economic disparity and inequality, along with disdain for the system of capitalism, the ideals remain true. To experience social rights and social freedom, protections must be in place to shield the powerless and shout for the voiceless (Caterino & Hanson, 2019). To reiterate, the ultimate purpose of all Critical Theory is to promote change and emancipation from oppression.

### ***Unbefitting Situations***

No aspect of research or action is *one size fits all*. The same can be said for Critical Theory. Though they share inquisitive bases, in situations where research, investigation, and understanding form the sole purpose, Critical Theory is left unfinished. Quantitative research that does not incorporate the individual experience or perspective will rarely meet the need for a critical analysis. This positivist type of predictive type of analysis with a hypothesis in mind before it begins definitely has a seat at the table in research, especially in the science field, however it is not centered around individually or socially constructed truth. Positivism deals in absolutes, not feelings and beliefs (Wildemuth, 1993). This is not to say that quantitative research has no place at all in partnership with Critical Theory, but if the data is not used to promote change and betterment, the relationship stops with the cultivation of the results. In the end, the purpose or goal of the research is the ultimate litmus test for which theory to employ. If knowledge and understanding are the target, none of the critical inquiries are appropriate methods. For example, the subject of two qualitative studies could be centered on the experiences of a group, like transgender students at a university. However, one study like narrative inquiry looks to hear a story and attempt to understand that group or individual's constructed or perceived truth and reality (Wells, 2011). Critical Theory seeks to

uncover an injustice against that group and take steps to emancipate them from that struggle. If the ultimate plan is to end an injustice, promote change, improve the lives of a group, or in any way emancipate a group from oppression, the specific style of Critical Theory is the researcher's optimum vehicle.

## **Conclusion**

Critical Theory has a strong correlation to educational inquiry and to the promotion of all members of society. Through critical inquiry and investigation, researchers and practitioners can inspect which groups within society are not allowed the same liberties, access to opportunities, or are subjugated in some way compared to others. As stated, Critical Theory and all its divisions are not a resolute hammer for every problematic nail in society. However, when a portion of society is being systematically oppressed, the right Critical Theory is an appropriate plan of action.

Pertaining to school choice, Critical Theory can unearth and remedy policies and procedures that are preventing groups of students from reaching their potential by examining their equitability to their peers. Topics that are out of the realm of influence by students but can inhibit their success, like race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc., require action from those with the resources and ability to intervene. Commonly, the individuals that perform the action to uncover and fight an injustice are not a member of the group being oppressed. For example, racial discrimination was finally brought to mainstream attention by White allies who could not stand by and allow the perpetuation of the abuse. Of course, this does not mean that any oppressed group is helpless until a "hero" intervenes, but it is common for an individual from a group which is more in line with the belief of the ruling system to use their voice and sound the alarm for action, as it would carry more weight within said system. In



nearly all cases of injustice and systemic oppression, awareness is the first step. From awareness comes concern, then assessment, investigation, analysis, then ultimately, action. It is this action that creates a better world for ourselves, our families, our students, all of society, and our posterity. As with the vicious cycle of poverty, there is a similar but converse reaction after social justice is sought and obtained, each generation of the group and society sees more opportunity and grows both individually and collectively.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

How do we know what we know? This is a seemingly simple question on the surface. However, upon reflection and pondering, the answer is multipronged. The ways humans interpret or create reality and truth come from various methods. These could be experience and sensory input, interaction with others, studying the research of others, or performing the research ourselves (Baldwin, 2018). As we will see in the Superintendents' responses, perceptions of the same topic can vary wildly. To call any of these *true* or *untrue* is a biased label. The purpose is to survey multiple participants and look for trends in their responses. These trends can help us understand implications to public school districts in North Carolina and give a foundation to suggest future research or action.

This chapter serves to explain the methodological approach and processes taken to reach understanding of the research goal and questions. Also, this section explains the design rationale, research questions, and sources of data and collection used to obtain information. Any ethical conflicts are also outlined in this chapter. Interview protocols, data analysis and procedures, and participant selection are also explained.

#### **Methodological Approach**

The type of evidence sought and analyzed in a study like this is pivotal if we are to truly grasp the gravity and understand the future ramifications. Though there are countless data available, it is important to this study to focus on the specific issues at hand. I am interested in perceived impacts of school choice, particularly as it involves charter schools, on the public school districts within North Carolina. While a great deal of quantitative research and data have been used thus far, a crucial piece to this study is the qualitative input of the school district leaders who have experienced such impacts. Human limitations of

cognition, understanding, and vision of the bigger picture are the reason that methodological pluralism, or multiple research angles, is needed (Baldwin, 2018; Sechrest & Sidani, 1995). Understanding there is a difference in conceptual ideology and the actual study, to truly utilize Critical and Social Justice Theories, this study focuses on the perspectives and stories of individuals in the field (Wolcott, 1995). Though many qualitative and quantitative researchers believe one is more advantageous than the other, it is my belief that both are needed in this study. I make no assertion which is more prudent to educational research or any other study. I am utilizing a mixed-method research approach for this study because knowledge and truth do not live in a vacuum or in isolation, and therefore, more information is necessary to expand understanding of the context than can be determined solely through surveys or other quantitative tools. Since the focus of this study is a problem that begs understanding toward a possible correction, recommendations for change and action should ultimately emerge. To initiate that change, researchers and practitioners must take both an ideological and pragmatic view of the issue using Critical and Social Justice Theories as well as quantitative and qualitative data (Ozturk & Sahin, 2019). The *mix* in mixed-methods is a blend of qualitative and quantitative data collected through various ways (Biggs et al., 2021; Ozturk & Sahin, 2019). The quantitative data are collected from financial allotments and other *hard* data found about the districts/schools. The qualitative data are the interviews with public school district Superintendents.

The qualitative aspect of this research leads to an understanding of the stakeholder's perception of reality and their own truth as it pertains to the topic. Just as quantitative data are ripe for interpretation of meaning on the backend, qualitative data originate from bias and personal experience, forming an individualized reality (Biggs et al., 2021).

### ***Mixed-Method Impact Study***

To shed light upon how those affected by school choice see the issue, individual interviews allow the most comprehensive and direct way to gauge perception of a topic by allowing explanation within a specific context (Tuckman & Harper, 2012). For this study, public school district Superintendents participated in an individual interview virtually via Google Meet or ZOOM. The sessions were recorded and downloaded in a secure drive only accessible to me and will be deleted entirely after the conclusion of the study. As stated previously, other information was obtained through the interviews regarding enrollments, financial and employee allotments, as well as some public information about each district through websites such as North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). This allowed the Superintendent to provide context for their positions on this topic as well as triangulating data obtained through document review and web searches for public information. In short, the quantitative data provided the *what*, the qualitative provided the *why*.

### **Research Questions**

To focus this study, I developed specific research questions that would guide my methodology. These questions point the study towards the impacts felt from school choice, particularly as it involved charter schools, on North Carolina public schools but are broad enough that new ideas and truths can be discerned through the interviews. Charter schools tend to be the most common option for parents seeking school choice as they are public schools that do not require pricey tuition or adhere to specific religious beliefs and dogmas. Charter schools exist in a wider number of our North Carolina public school districts, thus offering a richer field of study. In addition charter schools are considered public schools thus

taking the allocations for enrollment allotted by the state funding system for schools. These schools are not eligible for receiving school vouchers so any state funding they receive comes directly from the resources allocated to a public school district.

For the first question, I restated the overarching quandary: what are the perceived impacts of school choice on North Carolina public school districts through the lens of the public school Superintendent? These answers could be deemed positive or negative, depending on the responder's disposition and experiences. Next, what is the relationship between school choice and social justice through the lens of the public school Superintendent? This question seeks to uncover how charter school choice, specifically, affects student equity and fairness. Lastly, how do traditional public schools change as a result of the presence of charter schools in their district? This question analyzes the specific changes that public school districts may enact as a result of a neighboring charter school. Examples of these changes could be policies, procedures, curriculum, marketing, etc. put in place by Superintendents or other authorities. If the funding impact is significant due to more students choosing the charter school, there may be an impact on the number of teachers, administrators and staff as well as the number of courses or programs offered.

### **Design Rationale**

In a study like this, where so many forms of *cause* create widespread *effect*, the method(s) through which data are obtained is vital to the results, which may drive later action. This research topic is larger than simply school choice as it pertains to charter schools; it is not even the effects felt by that choice. The problem is deeper and originates in the causes that lead to the impacts. To study the bigger issue, multiple methodologies may be required. This study used qualitative responses from interviews and input from those in the

field as well as literature based on work from other researchers, public data from public school districts including financial and enrollment numbers available through web searches as well as the experiences and observations of myself and other educators. The compilation of these findings will hopefully help better understand this crucial topic in today's public education systems.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

Data sources include the following: interviews with public school district Superintendents from districts in close proximity to charter schools that may affect their operations by pulling students or teachers from their district schools; and web searches and document review of public information regarding these districts. Selected district Superintendents engaged in individual interviews virtually via Google Meet or ZOOM, depending on schedule availability and preferred platform of the interviewee, using a script of standardized questions. There are no prior personal or professional relationships between myself and the participants. I solicited input from Superintendents for whom I have never worked through email solicitation. My sample is therefore not one of convenience but represents a broad representation across the state. I sent my solicitation through email to all 64 public school district Superintendents whose county or district physically housed a charter school. Of those 64 invitations, I received seven confirmations to participate. These seven districts and their Superintendents then became the subjects of my study.

I also compared district NC Report Card Data with their charter counterparts. These sources offered a triangulation of the information provided in the interviews as well as establishing greater context. There were instances where Superintendents requested that a director or other Central Office staff member follow-up with me about more precise numbers

and data that they cited but did not have on hand at the moment. There were rare cases where these employees elaborated on the Superintendent's request. These responses included the total number and names of charter schools to which they send payments, the specific number of students that live within their district that would otherwise enroll in their district but elect to attend a charter school, and specific financial allotment changes over a short period of time.

### **Participants and Selection**

The participants in this study are all North Carolina public school district Superintendents. Of the 100 counties in North Carolina, 64 of them have a charter school within or near their district. I sent an email to all 64 of those public school Superintendents to solicit their participation in this study. After two rounds of requests, I received confirmation from seven Superintendents, making my sample size just under 11% of the total population. I interviewed all seven Superintendents that responded and agreed to participate in the study. All had a charter school in their area, if not their district. These Superintendents met the following requirements: must be currently employed by one of the 115 public school districts in the state and have a charter school either physically within their district or close enough to impact their district either in enrollment or some other factor. Those currently in districts not impacted by charter schools were not considered, even if the Superintendent had previous experience in a district that was impacted. There were two Superintendents that responded who met this criterion but were not included in the study due to the lack of charter school proximity in their current district.

The open nature of the sampling represents my desired subgroups (Baldwin, 2018). All Superintendents who chose to participate were included if they met the criteria previously

outlined. In addition to my email solicitations, I used referrals from other Superintendents as well as a request from my own Superintendent, though he is not in the study due to my professional proximity.

### **Ethical Issues**

Although I am a former public school teacher, school administrator, and currently a central office director with opinions and subjectivity therein, I am aware of no ethical issues that would damage the integrity of this research. I carefully examined my own biases to better understand them and prevent their impact on my conclusions. I avoided selection bias in my pool of subjects by reaching out to all 64 school district Superintendents whose district housed a charter school and accepted the seven Superintendents who responded to my solicitation (Malone et al., 2014). My set of 15 open-ended questions for the participants were scripted to prevent information bias by offering the same opportunity for response from all participants (Toews et al., 2017; Vaidyanathan, 2022). My disclosure of all accumulated responses was unaltered and transparent to avert publication bias (Vaidyanathan, 2022). I also explained throughout the presentation of results when there were outliers to some questions that emerged, as they invariably would. These are presented fairly and clearly to prevent publication bias as well (Malone et al., 2014).

I stand to neither gain nor lose anything professionally from this research project. Again, even though my district is moderately impacted by a local charter school, I did not include my own district Superintendent in the study to avoid any conflict of interest within my own employment sphere. I have not and have no plans to apply for any position within any of the districts involved in this study. I have no personal or professional connection to the Superintendents who were interviewed.



### ***Interview Protocol***

Interviewees were asked some general questions (see Appendix C) about their district regarding enrollment, staffing and funding, as well as some geographic information. These questions revealed data easily available through public records but it allowed me to triangulate the data and set the context for the interview. It also allowed the participant to discuss any historical trends in the data. A complete list of the interview questions is found in Appendix C.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained to the interviewee that their participation in the study was completely voluntary and could be stopped at any time with no penalty. All but one interview took less than 60 minutes, and all were at a pace with which the interviewee appeared comfortable. The one interview over 60 minutes was at the direction of the participant due to the elaborate explanations and side stories provided as part of their responses. I did not speed up the interview or attempt to stop any participant from talking. The variations in interview time were a result of how elaborative each participant responded.

### **Procedures and Data Analysis**

All participants received the survey questions more than a week in advance and were interviewed via Google Meet or ZOOM, depending on their preference. Interviews were recorded for the coding process later. Normal coding procedures were utilized in the analysis. I used a web-based software program called Delve (Twenty to Nine LLC, 2023) to dissect and code my recorded interview responses. I used color-classification within the software as well as summative statements to categorize the responses. I used these coding strategies to

highlight sequences, similarities/differences, and frequency to observe trends in responses. I used a mixed approach of deductive and inductive coding during the process, meaning I started with some baseline codes I hypothesized would be relevant based on my literature review as well as creating new codes based on patterns in responses. For example, a deductive code was *student achievement* since I had a couple questions related to the topic. An inductive code was *political*, as I did not have a question directly aimed at political influence but I hypothesized it may be included based on the literature review. Nearly all of the participants' volunteered responses and viewpoints based upon local, state, federal, or party politics relating to school choice.

### **Conclusion**

There are countless studies available explaining what effects various forms of educational environments and opportunities have upon student achievement, graduation rates, community impact, etc. Therefore it is important to analyze these perceived impacts on North Carolina public school districts when a charter school particularly offers a different form of educational opportunity to district students. Along with a substantial literature review, the methodology and interview protocols chosen for this study were crucial in an attempt to understand the way Superintendents perceived these impacts. It was important to me to have a representative sample, questions and processes that were as unbiased as possible, and to fairly and transparently publish the findings.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The responses from the interviews of the Superintendents covered a wide range of perceptions and patterns. While many, if not most, of the participants shared a similar view on many of the questions, there were some outliers who did not share the same sentiments. The contrasting views as well as the detailed explanations and personal experiences given during the interviews make these responses applicable and viable. This chapter will outline the qualitative results of the interviews as well as any quantitative similarities.

### **Introduction**

The qualitative portion of this study utilized the interview responses from seven North Carolina public school Superintendents. The purpose of this study was to determine the impacts of school choice, specifically charter schools, on public school districts in North Carolina as perceived by the Superintendents of the surrounding areas. The fifteen questions asked of the Superintendents shed light on what they believed to be the benefits and drawbacks of having a charter school in close proximity to or within their district. As with all perceptions and qualitative responses, the interviewees' past experiences and ideological beliefs played a huge role in their perceptions of the topic (Biggs et al., 2021). These responses uncover trends and patterns that future policy and decision-makers can use to improve the conditions and opportunities for all students. While anecdotal in nature, the analysis of multiple responses from different sources leads to more reliable and viable conclusions.

Some quantitative data were analyzed to better understand the differences and similarities in the traditional public and charter schools. School Report Card Grades were compared to view academic success and areas of improvement between the two

environments. I also researched per pupil spending to compare which setting was the most cost effective or at minimum, the cheapest.

The qualitative responses of these Superintendents helps us understand the *why* and the *how* regarding the impact of these charter schools on their districts and communities. None of these participants operate in a vacuum. They bring their own biases and prejudices. Much like the quantitative data previously mentioned, their responses can be a signal flare to a larger issue that others are not aware exists. Qualitative responses do not paint a holistic picture. While I care a great deal about these results and responses, I am more interested in how this impact study can be used to better future opportunities and achievement for students to come; learning from our successes and failures. The question then centers on what is best for the majority of students - district or charter schools? To do this, I believe we need empirical data as well as the professional perceptions of these veteran district leaders.

### **District Data**

The Superintendents included in the study represent seven traditional public school districts in North Carolina. To illustrate a clear comparison between the traditional public districts and charters, some preliminary data were needed. The districts surveyed ranged from four to 38 schools. All of the districts contained at least one charter school within their boundaries, with one district housing five in total. These traditional districts varied in physical size, population, and included both county and city school districts.

Some of the public data were compiled from the North Carolina School Report Cards website published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Schools are graded on their report card with a grade of an A, B, C, D, or F. A small number of schools were given no grade because they were approved under the North Carolina

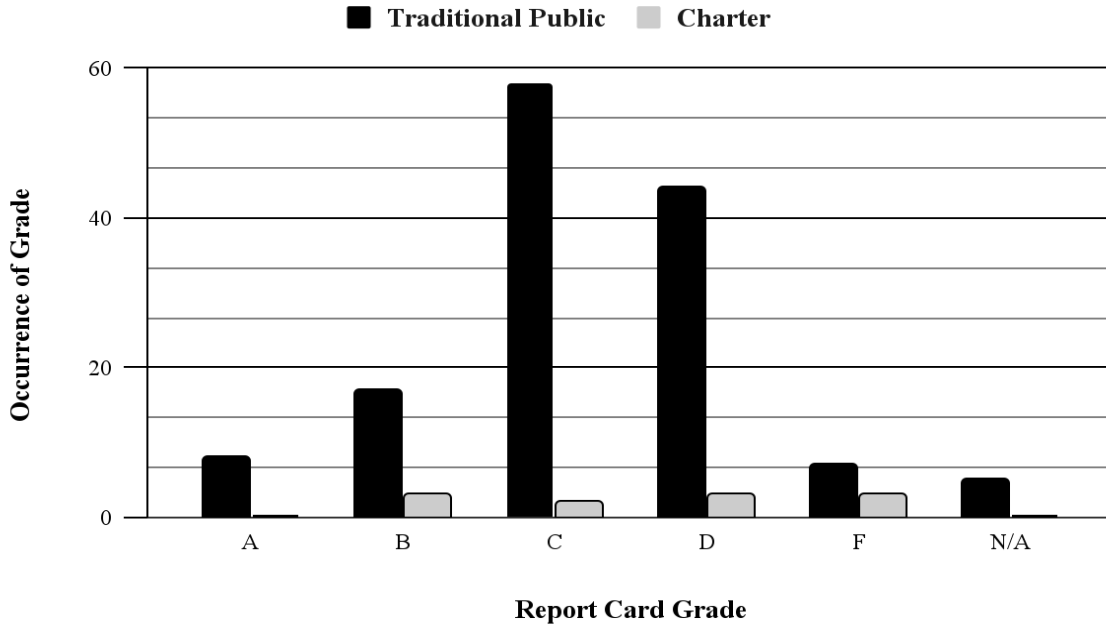
Alternative Schools' Accountability Model (ASAM) meaning they are deemed alternative schools within their district (NCDPI, 2023). These schools house students who are suspended or expelled from a traditional school within the district or have some other special circumstance that warrants their removal from the general education environment (NCDPI, 2023).

### ***School Report Card Grades***

In a comparison of school report card grades between the traditional publics and the charters, I found that there was a higher number of A and B schools in the traditional setting versus the charter schools. Of the 139 total traditional public schools, a total of 25 were graded as A schools. In comparison, the charter schools surveyed had no A schools in their total of 11. Traditional public schools had 17 B schools, 58 C schools, 44 D schools, and seven schools graded at F, or failing. There were also five alternative schools that did not receive a grade. Conversely, the charters had three B schools, no C schools, three D and three F schools. There were no alternative charter schools (NCDPI, 2023). Figure 1 below illustrates the total number of each grade per school environment.

**Figure 1**

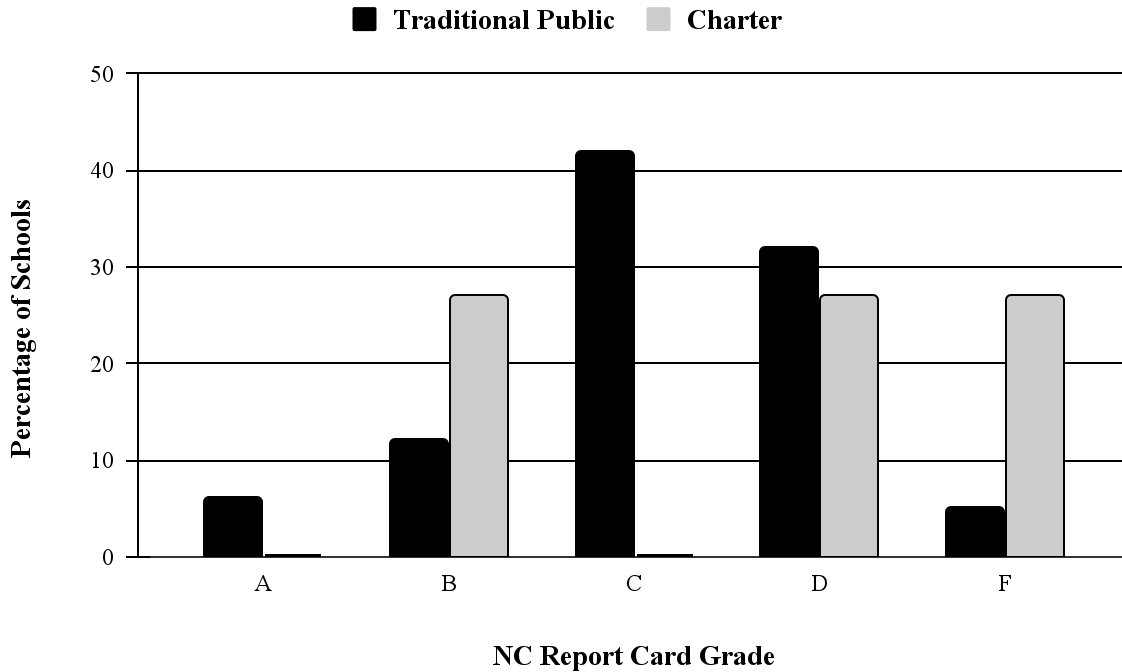
*NC Report Card Grades (Total by Grade)*



Another way to compare the two sets of schools is by calculating the percentage of the total schools at each grade level. This gives a more accurate representation of where they stand within the schools they operate. Figure 2 below illustrates how each system compared as a percentage of their school totals. As stated, the charter schools had no grade A schools compared to the 6% of traditional public schools. Many of these A schools were Early College High Schools that frequently boast higher achievement and exceptionally high graduation rates (NCDPI, 2023). While a low number of schools sampled, charters had a much higher percentage of B schools than traditional publics, totaling three of the 11 for 27% whereas traditional districts had 17 B schools of the 139 equivalent to only 12% of their schools. Traditional public schools had a grade of C in 42% of schools while charters had no C schools. Grade D made up 32% of traditional public schools and 27% of charters. Lastly, traditional publics saw 5% of their schools graded as F while charters had 27% as failing.

**Figure 2**

*NC Report Card Grades (Percentage of Schools)*



The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction classifies any school that is below a C, as underperforming and in need of comprehensive or targeted support to improve. The percentage of schools labeled as D and F totaled 37% for traditional public and 54% for charters. This data in particular begins to answer the question of whether one type of education is more successful than the other. Over half of the charter schools in these seven districts are deemed underperforming and in need of improvement by NCDPI.

***Per Pupil Expenditure***

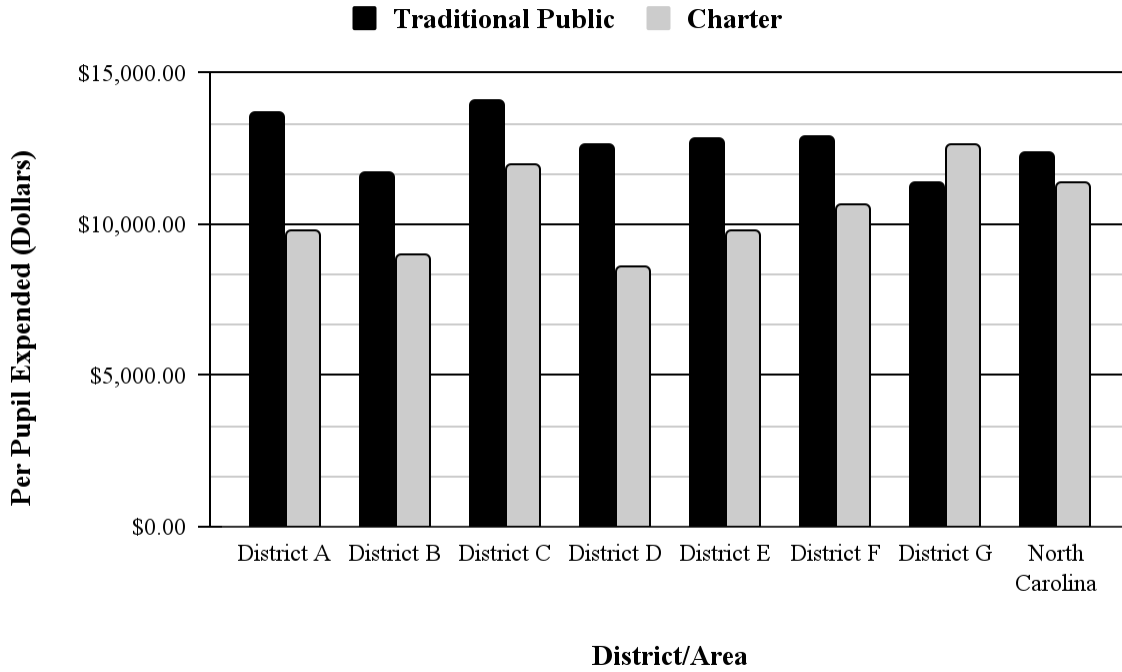
Comparisons between the two groups financially were difficult to view as much of the charter school finance system is not required to be published like traditional public schools. However, one area that a comparison could be made was in per pupil expenditures (PPE). As seen below in Figure 3, there was a noticeable trend in lower per pupil spending in

the charter school setting than in traditional public schools (NCDPI, 2023). Traditional public districts spent more per student ranging from \$11,374 to \$14,088. In comparison, charters spent much less but saw a much wider range of spending. The charter schools' expenditures spanned from \$8,548 to \$12,586. There was one exception found within the published data. This district is the lone holder of more than one charter. One of its charters skews the results for the chart boasting a PPE of over \$20,000, while the remaining totals are under \$11,000. Without this outlier, this district likely follows the trend of traditional public schools spending more per pupil than charter schools. Comparing these data to the North Carolina state average, traditional public districts spend \$12,316 while charters spend \$11,322 on each student per year (NCDPI, 2023). These data shows that it is most likely cheaper to educate children in the charter setting than in the traditional public school on the whole. There could be a multitude of reasons for this, ranging from special needs programs and resources, larger and more extensive facilities, and increased staff compared to the charter schools.



**Figure 3**

*Per Pupil Expenditure*



***Student Demographics***

Frequently in the relevant literature as well as the accompanying Superintendent interviews, racial and ethnic demographics are mentioned (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Byrne & Tona, 2019; Hale, 2022; Mickelson et al., 2008). One of the commonalities referenced is the unbalanced number of White students who attend charter schools compared to the local traditional public schools. The surveyed districts follow this trend with the exception of one outlier. The charter schools averaged greater than 20% more White students than the traditional public schools in close proximity. The collective averages of racial makeup within the traditional public schools were 62% White, 10% Black/African-American, and 21% Hispanic. This is compared to 83% White, 7% Black/African-American, and 5% Hispanic in the charter schools, respectively. As mentioned, there is one outlier to this trend. One of the

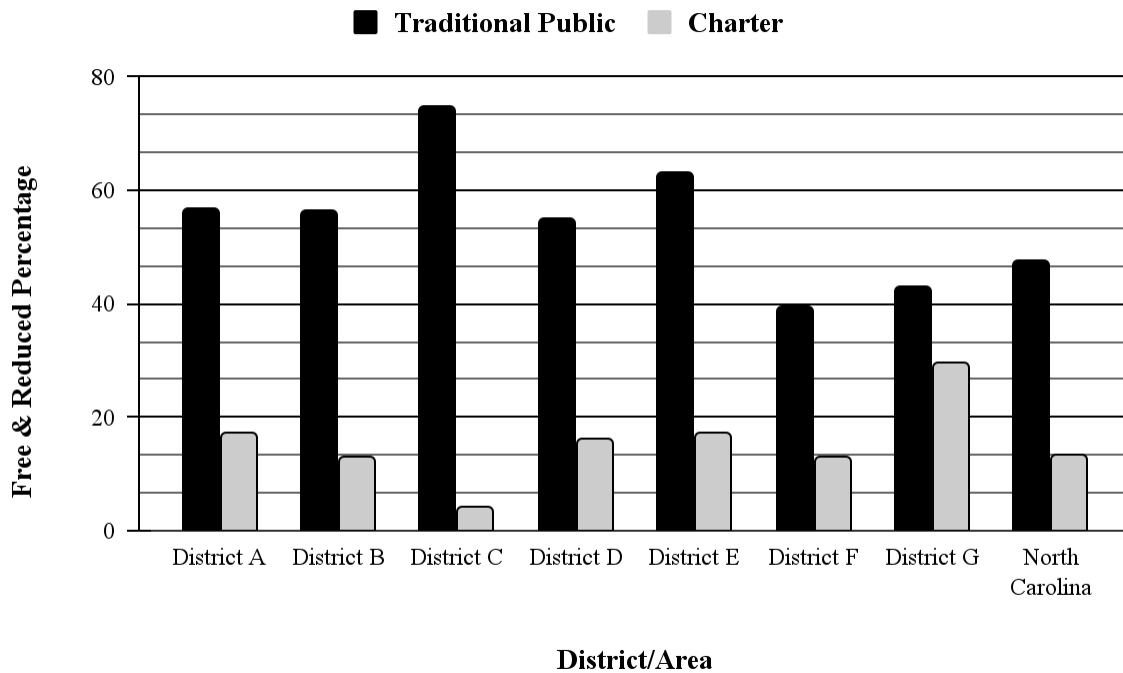
charter schools in the district housing five charters has a very different composition than the others. In this school, 89% are Black/African-American, 4% White, and 5% Hispanic. This skews the data trend a few percentage points. Without that school used in the calculation, the charters' population is 87% White (Great Schools, 2023; Niche, 2023). Therefore, with the exception of that outlier school, the common occurrence of charter schools being predominantly White, or at least *Whiter* than their traditional public counterparts, holds true.

### ***Socioeconomic Status / Economically Disadvantaged***

Another area where there is typically a large disparity between charter schools and traditional public schools is the amount of economically disadvantaged students. A common theme in research is that charter schools tend to have more affluent and less economically disadvantaged students (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Brighthouse, 2000; Byrne & Tona, 2019, McWilliams, 2017). Again, this study holds true with the exception of the same outlier charter school. Data from NCDPI, as viewed in Figure 4 below, shows traditional public schools have a much higher Free & Reduced Lunch percentage than their charter school competition. The average of economically disadvantaged students gauged by Free & Reduced Lunch programs is 55% in traditional publics and 13% in the surveyed charters. The North Carolina averages for Free & Reduced Lunch vary slightly from the districts studied with the NC traditional public district average at 47% and 14% for charters. This is another area which the charter schools studied have a distinct advantage on the playing field against their competitors in the traditional public setting.

**Figure 4**

*Free & Reduced Lunch Percentages*



## Participants

The participants in this study are all North Carolina public school district Superintendents. The participants and their districts are kept anonymous. There is a sampling of both male and female as well as varied years of experience, though understandably, most Superintendents reach the position later in their careers. All seven of the Superintendents that chose to participate have over five years of experience in the superintendency. The interviews of these Superintendents were performed via Google Meet or ZOOM and recorded to ensure accuracy of the coded information. The dialogue and exchange was conversational and very informal. Some of the participants spoke very candidly about their views and perceptions, especially about aspects that upset or frustrated them. Overall, it

appeared that the candidates answered questions truthfully and gave their heartfelt perceptions, free from the threat of discrimination or persecution. The candidates mostly were comfortable with their responses, though there were a couple that requested to have them redacted before the interview even ended. I waited a few days before coding the data and no one reached out to alter or omit a response after the interview ended although that opportunity was offered.

As stated previously, there are 64 counties in North Carolina that contain at least one charter school within their borders. It would be ideal for the sample (11%) to be larger and more representative of the state, which may present a threat to the validity of this study if viewed as not having sufficient power to extrapolate the results. However, as an exploratory investigation, the results of this study may influence future larger and more decisive studies. These Superintendents represent districts located in the Piedmont (six) and the Western regions of North Carolina. There were no responses from the eastern part of the state. For reference, as of 2023, there were 11 charter schools in the western region of North Carolina, 25 in the eastern region, and 28 in the Central/Piedmont region. Since there are more charter schools in the central region of the state, the majority of my responses came from the regions most impacted by the presence of charter schools.

### **Interview Results**

The 15 interview questions that were asked of the seven Superintendents were uniform, presented equally, and sent to the candidates a few days ahead of the scheduled interview (though only four of the seven told me they had reviewed them beforehand due to their busy schedule). These questions, listed in Appendix C, began with asking about their professional background, district information or identity, as well as number and proximity of

the charter schools affecting their district. I felt this was relevant to understand the participant's background in education and get a feel of what is important to them. The questioning transitioned to more impactful topics such as how many students the district has lost recently to charter schools, the impacts of that (financial, staffing, etc.), and why they perceive students would leave their district to enroll in this charter school. Next, I asked them about staffing movements as a result of the charters and what the motivating factors for these resignations might be, in their opinion. The answers to these questions helped me understand their perception of school choice as a benefit or harm to their district and education as a whole without overtly asking. I asked the participants what role student and staff safety, or at least the perception of safety, played in these moves. With these topics in the forefront of their minds, they were asked to compare advantages their public school districts hold to the competing charter schools, and vice versa. We touched on achievement topics like changes in graduation rates, standardized testing, and Exceptional Children and other special subset opportunities.

The Superintendents' answers here shed light on what was important to them about student achievement. For example, some skimmed over standardized achievement like test scores and school report cards, while some really dove deep into the data to see trends or patterns. Touching on the aspect of social justice, I asked about trends in racial segregation or integration, "choice enrollment" or "cream skimming" higher achieving students, and accessibility inequities due to socioeconomic status. This was one of the most polarizing questions I asked. Most of the participants answered these questions very passionately and expressed frustrations about inequities and differences in accountability. Lastly, candidates were asked if there was any topic not addressed that they would like to talk about. Most had

input that was not in the list of questions. It was common for the Superintendent to carry the conversation past the listed questions and explore the political aspect of the public school versus “everyone else” issue, or again, their perception of it. The last formal question asked them if they were comfortable with the process, their answers, and for me to proceed with the study. No answers were redacted at this point; however, two candidates requested that I strike their response moments after saying them, claiming it was an emotional or unfair reaction.

Before analyzing the responses, it is important to reiterate that these answers are the perceptions of these individual Superintendents. Many of their opinions and realities vary based upon their locations, backgrounds, demographics, and other factors. The purpose of this study is not to simply study these individuals, but to connect trends and patterns based on their experiences to extrapolate implications regarding school choice for everyone in the state of North Carolina. I am confident that this sample is indicative of most districts in the state based upon the informal conversations I’ve had with school staff, ranging from classified employees to central office administration and school board members across multiple districts in my own career. However, as is common knowledge, the only way to know all 115 district Superintendent’s beliefs and perceptions is to interview all 115 of them.

The findings are discussed in two ways. First, to present the responses in a way that is comparable and clear, I categorize most questions’ responses as *supportive* or *opposed* to the charter school based on what they have experienced. Next, because this is not the sole purpose of this study, I examine the underlying reasons why the participants answered how they did, if possible. This is because I am interested in the *why* regarding the participants’ responses as well as the implications these perceived truths may have in the future for public school districts in North Carolina. Then, the study ties these responses back into the three

overarching research questions for the study. What are the perceived impacts of school choice upon public school districts in North Carolina? What is the relationship between school choice and social justice through the lens of the district Superintendents? Lastly, how do traditional public school districts change as a result of charter schools? Some themes emerged from these responses and their comparison to the overarching research questions. These themes included student enrollment and staffing, perceived advantages and disadvantages of traditional public versus charter schools, political motivations and influence, racial segregation or integration, perceptions of safety, choice enrollments and skimming, as well as traditional public school district marketing and evolution.

### ***Enrollment and Staffing***

When the seven public school district Superintendents were asked about their enrollment and staffing changes as a result of a charter school in close proximity to their district, all seven of the interviewees claimed that it had little to no effect on enrollment or staffing in their schools. A common answer was that a large number of students were lost when the charter school opened for the first time, but as the months or years passed, those students returned to their public district for various reasons. Most stated that their charter competition was actually declining in enrollment instead of remaining a viable threat to their own district. One Superintendent referred me to their Finance Director to reference specific dollar amounts that were paid monthly to the charters impacting their district. The Superintendent referenced a request to the local County Commissioners to cover this lost allotment, which he said they accepted. The Finance Director later informed me that the amount was more than \$100,000 for the upcoming year.

Another common theme was that parents pulled students out of their district to attend the charter school because it was *sold* to them as something it was not. One participant responded, “They sell it as a classical education. Then when they get to third grade, and they take a test and realize they're way behind (district name), they switch back over. Another claimed parents were led to believe that the public district was becoming too politically liberal or “woke” and that the charter was the more traditional and conservative choice. One Superintendent stated race was the primary reason he saw White students leave the district for the charter school, “...race here, it has everything to do with race. The vast majority of those who leave us are leaving one particular community that is a majority African American community.” While safety, race and student demographics, and sports offerings were mentioned, the most common answer cited by the Superintendents pertained to having an alternative option from their local public school district, the promise of higher achievement, and misinformation given to the parent, both in the form of negative information about the local public school district and/or promises of a better environment at the charter school.

With the perceived rationale why parents chose to leave the local public school district illustrated, we turn to understanding *why* the Superintendents felt these were the real reasons. It is no secret that most, if not all, Superintendents believe their district is the best choice and fit for nearly every student that lives in their community. Since the answers are so varied, and mostly equal, we can deduce that there are a multitude of reasons why a family might choose to leave for a charter school. It was a common tone in the answers from all Superintendents that any area where a family believed that the charter would be a better option was not the actual case. According to the Superintendents, most parents were misinformed or misled. “They think they’re buying this wonderful setting they hear about,



then they find out that it's not wonderful for everyone" said one Superintendent. Another said, "They leave us when they are really young, like Kindergarten or so, but then they come back after third grade when they realize how far behind they are." In fact, it was rare to find a scenario or topic where Superintendents claimed they were *losing* to charters. It appears that all responders think charter schools entice most of their students because they are simply not the local public school, not because of something in which they are superior. One respondent said, "You know, I think there's anticipation of something different there; and just like with any school choice decision, someone makes an album of the believers that there's a right education environment for every child and that's just not true." In just this first set of questions, we see how poorly the Superintendents who are interviewed feel about the viability and effectiveness of their charter competition.

Another answer regarding student enrollment came in the form of financial repercussions associated with students leaving the district to join the charter school. The financial impacts of these moves ranged from a few thousand dollars per student per year, to hundreds of thousands of dollars in total taken out of the budget/allotment. These figures varied based on the district and their local allotment formula.

Though the financial impact may vary from district to district, one topic that every Superintendent agreed upon was the impact to staffing allotments. In short, when a school loses enrolled students, they lose paid staffing positions. This was their greatest concern with potential declining enrollments because it could lead to cutting positions, creating combination classes, losing entire programs like Career & Technical Education (CTE) and Advanced Placement (AP) / International Baccalaureate (IB) that entice students to the school or district. It is important to understand that enrollment not only determines per pupil

expenditure but allotted positions as well. In smaller districts, in particular, this loss of position allotment may result in the loss of entire programs, thus creating a disadvantage for all students. In some cases, the district could fund these lost positions with local funds, if they have them in budgets approved by County Commissioners along with approval of their own Board of Education.

Responses regarding staffing loss by choice not allotment were unanimous that the only staff the local public school district lost to the charter system were those who were not performing up to their standards or expectations. These staff members chose to leave their district jobs to pursue positions in a charter school. In these cases, the allotments were not affected, and the district could hire replacements. One participant claimed “They are the staff we were planning to work out the door anyway, so it’s not a big loss, really.” All seven Superintendents claimed that losing staffing was not a concern or even on their radar as an issue. The entire group claimed that the main reason a staff member would leave their district was to seek out a position (focused on teachers) that lacked accountability (testing) that the public district faced and had “easier” or more homogenous students. This set of answers exhibits that the selected Superintendents believe their district to be so superior to the charter that a teacher would only leave if they could not perform to expectations or if they were running to an “easier” demographic or environment. This *why* continues to unveil the public school Superintendents’ belief that North Carolina charter schools are no match for traditional public school districts, at least their own anyway.

### ***Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages***

When participants were asked which of the two school choices (charter versus district) held the greater advantage in the competition for students and effectiveness, the

responses were overwhelmingly in favor of the local traditional public school district. Not surprisingly, every Superintendent claimed that their district was the better choice for course offerings, and all but one mentioned that the charter school lacked the resources to meet students' needs in the way that the local traditional school could. "We have more options, we have things that we have a more organized system, and we're continuing to move to that needle" one stated. Nearly half of the participants referenced their staff again, claiming that their teachers were more talented and better trained than their charter counterparts. When asked about staffing, one participant stated, "I have a wider pool of people to choose from as far as hiring ... I know I have better quality people. So that's what I bring. I also bring diversity, for some is attractive for others is not." Another Superintendent boasted, "Yeah, I'm not afraid of the competition of charter schools, because we outperform the charters we always have. We got better people, better systems." All of them elaborated that charter school teachers do not have to be licensed by the North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI) like their own staff. This means that the teachers in charter schools may lack the necessary credentials held by all district teachers. With this lack of certification, there is also the lack of 15 credit hours of training required for recertification every five years. It should be noted that these observations are general and should not be applied to all charter schools or all teachers who work in charter schools. However, such perceptions further reiterated that, in their view, the education in their traditional public school district was "head-and-shoulders" ahead of the charter option. One Superintendent specifically claimed that an advantage over the charter school was the district's history and tradition, both in academics, locations/facilities, and sports. Sports was mentioned by a Superintendent as something that

prevented the charter school from true competition because they would never be “big enough to field the teams we have.”

Analyzing the *why*, we see overwhelming disdain of these seven Superintendents towards the charter schools in their districts. This is a common theme and an understandable one. Most public school Superintendents have spent their career in the traditional public system. They have built their professional lives around the structure of the traditional public school system and believe they are “fighting the good fight.” While I understand the participant's answers regarding advantages of traditional public over charter schools, it is possible that the Superintendents’ *why* has gotten in the way of their objectivity; or maybe they are unaware of the advantages that the charter school does hold. Even the couple Superintendents who responded that they “liked the competition” because it made their district better, could find no intrinsic advantage for the charter school beyond the lack of state and federal accountability.

In contrast, the only cited advantage that this group of Superintendents referenced (two of the seven) for the charter school over their district was that the charter school was not faced with the same accountability model as the public school district. One of the participants likened the difference to their district “fighting blindfolded with both hands tied behind our back” while the charter had little to no accountability for student achievement, recruitment, offerings, teacher licensure, etc..

Another advantage that was gleaned from a different question pertained to how Exceptional Children (EC), special needs, and other vulnerable populations were served in comparison between the two school environments. Six of the seven Superintendents cited cases in which EC students left the district to enroll in the charter and were either turned

away immediately or cast out from the school a few days into the academic year because the charter school “didn’t have the resources to accommodate them.” One Superintendent chose to shy away from the question saying “I don’t know what they do there. I only know what we do for our special needs population. So, I can’t speak to that.” This was a portion of the interview that got two of the other Superintendents visibly upset and frustrated. Again, those remaining six who chose to address the question referenced the lack of accountability and inequality between the two school environments and went on to say that the most vulnerable students with the greatest needs were the ones that paid the ultimate price for the choices of those more fortunate. One Superintendent exclaimed, “Is it really school choice when only certain students can make the choice?” Since most charter schools provide no transportation for students as well as no breakfast or lunch programs, many students in traditional public schools who rely upon these services are unable to choose like their more-advantaged peers.

Upon further inspection of the Superintendents' *why*, I am drawn to their background and their rise to this executive position. It is difficult to see how the charter school can compete at all with the traditional public school district. For EC or other vulnerable students whose needs cannot be met in the charter school, the coin seems to be one-sided for these districts. Whether this is an unintended side effect of the smaller and lesser funded charter system or exclusion by design is unclear. However, when prompted, the majority (five of six) perceived it to be a form of segregation based upon student demographic and ability. The seventh participant again claimed “I’ve never really looked into that piece of it. We’ve got to, you know, we just deal with our own situation.” Upon inspection, I found this to be a peculiar answer for this particular participant. In other areas of the interview, both before and after, this participant had no problem speaking their mind about their perceptions and beliefs

about inequalities, impacts, and comparisons. So, with that in mind, as difficult as it is for me to believe that a public school system Superintendent has “never really looked at that piece,” I have to take the answer at face value.

### ***Graduation Rates***

All seven Superintendents were asked about their graduation rate trends in relation to the opening, operation, or closing of a charter school in their area. The answer was unanimously that it had no impact upon their current graduation rate, trends of rates in the past, or the projecting/upcoming four-year cohort. In fact, most participants laughed at the question when it was asked, claiming it was the farthest from their concerns. One added, “...if you hadn't asked me, I don't think I've ever been asked that question or even thought that that was the impact as far as the kids leaving impacted our graduation results.” All claimed rising graduation rates as they came out of the COVID-19 shutdown with its subsequent impact on the education system. Most claimed they are already approaching pre-COVID percentages. All these responses quickly turned from being a resulting impact from charter schools question to boasting about how well their district had rebounded from the pandemic lockdown and school closures. As with previous responses, the *why* here is the pride that these Superintendents feel in their work, their district, and their service to their students. As the interviews progressed past the halfway point of questions, it was apparent to me that most, if not all, the Superintendents held a great deal of resentment towards the charter schools for their lack of similar accountability, but rarely felt threatened by them as a competitive entity.

### ***Politics and Privatization***

This topic or code is one that emerged without being prompted by a self-described question. Every responder mentioned this topic in some form. Some were openly critical of a political party or ideology and others were very subtle in their remarks. A common theme, either overt or shrouded in ambiguity, was that school choice, both charter and private, were a predominantly Conservative or Republican priority. Some described it as a negative feature while others skated around the motivations behind it. Four of the seven candidates spoke negatively about the trend towards, and the possibility of, the privatization of public education in North Carolina, and the United States as a whole. One Superintendent, who is apparently very passionate about this portion of the study, claimed that traditional public education is being used as “a scapegoat” for “everything that’s wrong in the country” and the “failing of society” due to a “lack of accountability.” He cited that traditional public education is “the most regulated business there is maybe short of healthcare, and the charter schools have benefited from that philosophical basis.”

Another participant believed his local charter school was being “opened by the people who cheer the Republican Party.” He went on to say the school owners intended to go back to “traditional” education, and they would go back to “basics,” meaning “desks would be in rows, and we’re going to teach them.” His response to this statement was, “and that’s great; I hope they do that and stay committed to it. Parents will hate it and the kids will be right back in my district.” The same Superintendent also believed that the privatization of education was not being carried out with the interests of students, families, or even the future economy and society. He believed “it’s all about money.”

Two of the Superintendents were openly critical of some contemporary House and Senate bills that would provide vouchers to private schools, using taxpayer dollars. One of them used the topic as a segway to express his disgust in the Republican “theft” of taxpayer money to fund a school “that gets to write their own curriculum, set their own graduation requirements, and do whatever they want.” When I asked him whether he was referring to charter or private schools, he quickly responded, “It’s about to be both!” His response referenced the recent General Assembly decision to provide vouchers for private schools (Hui, 2023). Another responded unfavorably about the private school voucher program saying, “I’m really rallying against the private school vouchers right now. Because I believe, regardless of what your religion is, you really don’t want all the religions in the world to get public dollars and be able to indoctrinate the children.”

Some of the more subtle answers (two of seven) regarding political influence and privatization dealt with local funding from the county commissioners that their school districts received. One Superintendent went almost line-by-line over the changes and cuts to his local budget based upon enrollments, loss of funding, and charter impacts. He expressed that it was a constant balancing act trying to stay on his county commissioners’ “good side” and not ask for more than they will agree to fund. He alluded to the fact that he wants to spend a great deal more money than he is ever budgeted, claiming that the commissioners refuse to raise taxes. A central theme surrounding the political or privatization aspect that upset all of the Superintendents is that state and local taxpayer money is used to fund an education system that has less than, if any, accountability than their traditional public school counterparts. Some were obviously more vocal and adamant about specific parts of the issue, but even the more subtle responses told the same *why*. All the Superintendents, regardless of



their political affiliation or district demographic, strongly desired equality in where the money goes pertaining to education. Some were openly negative about the Conservative or Republican Party and some avoided the partisan topic altogether. However, it was a unanimous belief (either candidly or allusively) that the current political landscape has become overly divisive as evident in the changes to charter and private funding that will only benefit the few, while concurrently not acting in the best interest of students, families, or communities while simultaneously siphoning funds from the traditional public systems. One Superintendent stated in summary that this kind of "blatant disregard for the wellbeing" of all people to benefit and fill the pockets of the few "would have never flown decades ago. It shows just how far we've fallen."

These interviews addressed the political nature of choice and the Superintendency in various degrees. Some political aspects that may be overlooked by the general public are prominent to school district leaders due to their overt ramifications. The polarization of student populations due to socioeconomic status, race, student achievement, etc. greatly shape their schools' demographics and identities. It is important to understand the Superintendent's role and the political nature of their position when attempting to understand the decisions or choices they make. While the Superintendency is not a politically-appointed position, the candidate is approved by a Board of Education and is appointed by the public vote. The executive chosen by that politically-tied group often shares many of the same priorities and values.

### ***Racial Segregation***

A common theme that is broached when discussing any type of school choice, is racial segregation and/or integration. One of my fifteen formal questions asks if these district

leaders have witnessed racial segregation as a result of a charter school in their area. Four of the seven emphatically answered yes to the question, stating that it is an unwritten but universally understood purpose of school choice; to seek out a homogenous environment to attend. Granted, that could mean a multitude of classifications, race, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, extracurricular or athletic opportunities, etc.. One simply said they had seen evidence of it but could not speak to it as a definite in all charter school areas. They believed it was “correlational but not sure about causation.” The other participant that agreed stated, “Yes, but I would struggle to quantify a connection.” They listed a number of a specific ethnic group in the district and that an overwhelming number of that population is centered at the local traditional public school. The White population that lives there is fractured between the charter and their local traditional public school. They cited, “I don’t know the specific enrollment in the charter school, but its majority White. You get what I mean?” The one Superintendent who declined to answer the question stated, “I feel like I don’t answer an area like that because, I, I don’t know. I know there’s been some accusations...but I, uh, I don’t know. I just know the accusations.”

The four Superintendents that strongly agreed with the connection between charter school and racial re-segregation referenced the demographic and racial makeups of their district schools and the charter school(s). Three of the four used the word “absolutely” to describe whether the charter school resulted in racial segregation. One of the Superintendents went so far as to say “Absolutely, charters are all White.” He continued to state the exception was the charter school “that is opened to serve as an alternative school for the black and brown kids you don’t want to deal with so you can ship them out of your traditional school, and you call it a charter to cover it up.” A different participant strongly agreed that charter

schools were resulting in resegregation but amended the statement by saying "...charter schools allow people to self-select and sort themselves by race and economic status, and so charter and private schools are allowing people to, you know, self-segregate and resegregate." This leader added that an almost all-White charter in the district that is housed in a predominantly Hispanic community doesn't screen or deny non-White students, but "...they don't provide meals...they don't provide Spanish language interpretive services and are not very welcoming of Hispanic families...so they've created this little niche of middle to upper class white kids with highly educated parents." In that statement, the Superintendent alludes to the fact that a disproportionate number of lower socioeconomic status students are typically those of color and require the services described. By not offering those, they have essentially made it a more expensive school to attend, thereby limiting access to those without the resources to bridge the gap. Without ever addressing race or ethnicity, the school has used wealth and access to resources to racially segregate. The responder does not say whether the creation of this "little niche" was intentional or a result of another set of factors. Another interviewee that agreed strongly started the answer to the question with "Oh, absolutely! I mean, that to me, is all it is. I mean, it's a resegregation of schools. ...why the state level NAACP hasn't launched some kind of campaign or something or, you know, some lawsuit...I don't know." This Superintendent was emphatic that this was an intentional, malicious, and pervasive movement that was being carried out right under the noses of the communities in which the schools existed. "...To me, this is the civil rights movement of our time. I mean, this is absolutely our 1960s civil rights movement right here and people are just sitting back and letting it happen." The participant continued to say how "sinister" it is to use a "disguise like parent's rights or school choice to reverse *Brown v. Board of Education* right

under everyone's nose." As they continued with the answer, I asked them what they saw as the end result of this process. Their response was "...and you know, in 10 years, diverse communities are going to be left with, you know, Black and brown students without the money to properly educate them; and to me, quite frankly, that's the plan. That's the way it's headed." The charter school's influence on racial segregation is one of the more disheartening aspects of the topic. Six of the seven participants answered in agreement, of some kind, with one declining to answer.

After analyzing the responses, we dive into the *why* again to determine the rationale for the answers given. School district Superintendents are typically hyper-focused on inequities of access and opportunity. As a result, one of the common areas that contributes to inequity and the need for social justice, is racial discrimination, marginalization, oppression, and/or segregation. It appears that Superintendents understand that these issues create a barrier of inaccessibility to a large portion of their school district, violating some students' access to a (free) sound, basic education. I think most would agree that no district Superintendent takes the position to only serve and educate a portion of the district. This question, like some of the others, shares so many similar perceptions and responses that I must believe there is a trend or pattern. It is also important to note that the six who agreed, regardless of their ability to connect their experience to all charter schools, recounted personal experiences with the issue and vivid details. Some were more emotionally charged than others, some included other aspects like socioeconomic status or unclear intent, but the stories all ended similarly; White students attending a charter and the non-White students being *left behind*. This portion of the responses, along with some others, help answer one of

the overarching research questions for this study, “What is the relationship between school choice and social justice through the lens of the district Superintendents?”

### *Perceived Safety*

When asked, all seven participants confirmed that they believe that the public perceives their school district is safe. Some cited specifics to substantiate their response, like funding spent to improve security features, School Resource Officers (SRO), or training for emergencies and active shooters. Others used the low number of violent incidents in their district to support that safety is commonplace. A couple of the participants even cited surveys distributed among their communities inquiring about the perception of safety and communicated positive results. However, as one Superintendent pointed out, the perception of safety and actually *being* safe are not the same concept. They said how much money they spent last year as a district to upgrade security locks, cameras, and other features, but then they rattled off a handful of ways to me that the district was still vulnerable. My response was, “no matter how much you spend or how hard you try, there’s always something isn’t there?” They concurred, “Yep, and the public only has to hear about it for you to be negligent and unsafe for their kids.”

A secondary part to the safety perception question asked if they knew of students or staff that transferred away to a charter school (or any other school) because the perception of the district was unsafe, either security, violence, drug trafficking, other criminal activity, etc.. All seven Superintendents responded that they could not think of one instance a student or staff member cited leaving the district on the grounds of safety. A couple responded, in summary, that it may have happened, but they were not aware.

One participant elaborated on the topic, without prompting, that charter schools and the “Conservatives” who support them spread misinformation about the lack of safety in public schools so that they can scare people over to their door. When I said that I assume they had witnessed that in their district, the Superintendent responded, “Unfortunately, yes, but thankfully it was a few years ago. It hasn’t been much of an issue lately.”

Exploration of this question’s *why* is rather simple. School safety has been a hot-button issue for nearly 25 years; since the school shooting at Columbine High School, Colorado in 1999, followed by a disturbing trend of such shootings across the country. Districts across the state, and nation, have spent millions of dollars to preemptively intercept the tragedy from happening to their students and community. However, if history is any indicator, preparation and good intentions are not a preventative measure as we see this type of school violence multiple times per year in the United States. I believe that school leadership has been trained to exude confidence in their safety preparations and precautions for the sake of their students, staff, and communities. I would compare it to the Duck and Cover campaign of the Cold War; although widely acknowledged as being ineffective and that a student desk or a newspaper could not halt an atomic blast, it gave a sense of preparedness and of hope, so it was worth the effort. I imagine most adults, including school and district leaders, know that stopping all active school shooters, gang violence, drug trafficking, or other “unsafe” activity is nearly impossible, regardless of the school environment. Such acts of violence are not isolated in public school districts, as seen in Nashville, Tennessee, in just the past year.

### *Choice Enrollment*

One of the more controversial topics related to charter schools' coexistence with traditional public schools is whether there is evidence that charter schools "skim" the more successful or higher-academic achievers from surrounding traditional public schools at a disproportionate rate than other students. Surprisingly to me, this was one of the questions with the most evenly-distributed responses. Of the seven participants, three strongly agreed, two simply agreed, and the remaining two answered with a similar version of "probably, but I don't have any evidence."

One of the three participants who responded strongly to the question simply answered "That's all they do. 100%, yep." Another said, "Absolutely, that's their game." The third agreed, "Oh, absolutely. That's their whole purpose is to skim off the top; the most successful kids." Siphoning off the "best and brightest" from a school has much larger impacts than just losing their test scores or presence. By cherry-picking the "high flyers," a charter school or other institution can drastically change the demographics, access to resources and wealth, and cultural identity of an entire school or district. When higher-achieving students, who are typically students with access to more resources, leave a school the school-wide achievement will lower and the students that are left behind will be more expensive to educate/serve. Much of the allotment used was the unused portion from students who required less services and resources. For example, if a student is worth \$7,000 in state funding but only requires \$4,000 to be successful, the remaining \$3,000 can be used to serve a student who requires more services; above and beyond the allotted \$7,000.

The two who simply agreed stated, "Yes, of course. You can see it in their student body." However, they then continued on to say that it is unclear if this "skimming" is

intentional or a focus, but they are confident that it does happen. The other added, “Oh, I would (feel like charters skim). I would think you’d have to figure that out somehow. I’m not sure how to do that. You might be able to uncover it.” Even though both answered that they at least agree it takes place, only one confirmed witnessing it personally and neither confirmed it could be proven or intentional.

Though starting the answer in a similar direction to the others, the last two participants were not solid on this answer. One responded, “Yeah, I imagine they do, but I don’t know for sure.” The last participant said, “Sure, I mean do they skim off? Yeah, probably they do get a lot of those students, but not all of them.” It is intriguing that both of the uncertain answers begin with a soft agreement, but then backpedal into uncertainty.

Even though all seven responses were technically a version of agreement that charter schools skim higher-achieving students from the surrounding traditional public schools, only three of the seven were assertive with a fourth adding “Yes, of course” but including an observation of it in their student body. It is uncertain if these seven variations of agreement can constitute a pattern or trend to confirm this as a factor for impact on the neighboring traditional public school district. I found it interesting that one of the more commonly publicized and accepted facets of the conflicting relationship between charter schools and traditional public districts is one of the response sets with the most diverse and inconclusive results. I question whether the *why* is because of a true uncertainty on their part or a hesitancy to admit it for fear of appearance or pushback. What creates uncertainty on my part, is that some of those who avoided showing decisiveness on this question, showed assertiveness on other controversial questions. Conversely, the responses could also be taken at face value and just as valid as any of the others. For the sake of classification and tracing patterns and



trends, I intend to broaden the lens of classification for this question to simply “agree” or “disagree.” Though some of the agreeing answers were shaky, none of the seven participants denied the occurrence of skimming the strongest students from traditional public schools to charter schools to boost achievement data.

### ***Marketing and District Evolution***

When participating district leaders were asked how their school system has marketed themselves to the public to compete with charter schools and other forms of education (virtual, private, homeschool, etc.), there was a wide range of responses. One of the participants named a couple mediums of marketing in their district, social media and local radio, but then expressed that they knew it was insufficient and too inconsistent to make a large impact in their enrollment or public image. Many of the options the Superintendent threw out as possibilities for the future were ones cited by the other participants in their answers.

The most common forms of marketing for districts are using social media posts, and advertising by traditional methods (billboards, television commercials, etc.) and publishing online videos to be used as advertisements on popular websites and social media sites. Nearly all the participants used social media postings and/or traditional advertising in their districts. Three of the seven districts reported utilizing a relationship with local news media, either in the form of recurring stories/interviews or advertisements through the channel or site. One of the more surprising responses to me, which I anticipated to be higher, was that only two of the seven districts have launched branding campaigns to create a unified message or image for the district. I personally know of numerous districts who have paid advertising firms to help create a branding push with the intent of telling their own story instead of other outlets

telling it for them. The lowest of the responses (one of seven) was traditional over-the-air radio and the district website. While all of these districts have an official website, only one Superintendent cited it as a method of marketing the district.

The concept of marketing a public school system is uncharted territory to many districts across the state and country. Throughout the earlier history of public schooling, most school systems have not had to market themselves because there was very little viable competition. Today, traditional public schools face challengers from all fronts. Charter schools and private schools (both religious and secular) constantly attract students and families that can offer programs and models largely unavailable to the traditional district. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, homeschooling and virtual schools (both public and private) have become very popular. According to some of the Superintendents in this study, the popularity of homeschooling and virtual schools seem to be waning, with students returning back to the traditional public schools they attended pre-pandemic. In fact, many of the interviewees say they are approaching the enrollment numbers they had in 2019 before the pandemic. One participant stated, “We had a feeling that the options people chose around the time of COVID were temporary, we hoped they were anyway. Thankfully, people are coming back because we’ve marketed what we offer that others can’t match (CTE, STEM, AP, etc.).”

I noticed in my coding that questions in which the Superintendent had the opportunity to brag on their district and their staff produced the most detailed and abundant answers. This is obvious when comparing these answers to the previous question about choice enrollment at the charter school nearby. The *why* for this set of answers is simple for me to answer; Superintendents and other school administrators are hardwired to *talk up* their students, staff,

and district. While school districts may be struggling to wade through these uncharted waters of marketing, branding, and advertising, educational leaders have *talked this game* for decades.

One of the responses to this question stated that “We haven't done it well, that obviously, that's why I'm, I mean, I'm really thinking about marketing,” seems like a brutally honest answer. However, after some investigation, this district is also performing four of the seven answers listed (website, radio, social media, and online videos). In typical leader-fashion, the Superintendent is not satisfied and wants to do more to help the district succeed.

This subset of responses are crucial in answering one of this study's research questions, “How, if any, do traditional public schools change as a result of charter schools?” The competition created by more accessible and practical options than in years past (charters, private, virtual, homeschool, etc.), have forced districts to evolve. Much like the private sector, competition can be a benefit to everyone, especially the consumer, in this case the student and family. This section inspects some of the negative aspects our Superintendents cited as well as that available in academic literature in the conclusion section of this study.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusions**

In conclusion, this mixed-method study was a combination of sources related to the topic of school choice, specifically charter schools, and their impact on public school districts in North Carolina. The quantitative aspect looks at School Report Cards, student demographics, and district per pupil spending. The qualitative piece consisted of virtual interviews of seven North Carolina public school district Superintendents. These district leaders were all asked the same fifteen questions, with various follow-up questions based on their responses, and participants were allowed to elaborate as much or as little as they were comfortable. Candidates were kept anonymous and their responses could be withdrawn at any time at their request. While the information and qualitative accounts are valuable and rich, the purpose of this study is to understand trends or patterns so that policies or procedures can be changed to best serve all students, families, and communities of North Carolina. It was my hope that this study would have an actual impact on future decisions concerning the relationship between district and charter schools. I am an educator, a practitioner, and a leader. My goal is not on research for the sake of research or even for publishing; it is improving the system for those who need it and making us all better.

### **Introduction**

The following serves as the summation to this study. This final section connects the earlier literature review and conceptual framework as well as the quantitative district information, and qualitative data collected from the Superintendent interviews. It serves as the most crucial part of the study; the synthesis of information. In summation, the literature review is revisited to compare and contrast what other researchers have said to what I learned from my interviews. I revisit the conceptual framework and use it as the lens to examine the

findings from the qualitative research collected from the Superintendents. Lastly, this section addresses any limitations of the study, implications for stakeholders and audiences, and provides recommendations for future research.

### **Analysis and Literature Links**

Earlier in this study, I included an extensive literature review. This section included topics ranging from social justice, critical theory, inequity, examples of opportunity gaps like socioeconomic status, financial barriers, cultural and racial differences, impacts of gender and “othering” as well as the relationship of this topic to educational inquiry. This section compares, contrasts, and harmonizes the topic, the existing literature, and my research. While the interview questions did not address all aspects of the literature review or conceptual/theoretical framework, all of the interview participants had answers that aligned with various aspects of the literature review. A prime example is the inductive theme of politics that emerged from the responses. While not a question I asked, nearly all of the Superintendents cited political influence and motivation as a cause of school choice, either on the *micro-* or *macro-level*.

### ***Social Justice***

One of the key areas that pushed me to focus on this topic of school choice and impact on North Carolina public school districts, was the sheer amount of inequity that is inherent with the aftermath of a parent’s decision. While I make no claims that parents are making these highly-personal choices with malicious intent towards their communities or public education as a whole, the ramifications for *nearly all* are put in my motion by a *few*. I advocate that the charter system snowball rolling down the hill, getting larger and more damaging, creates the detrimental impacts felt by the majority, but without parents and

guardians deciding to withdraw and enroll, there is no charter school. The lines laid down in the literature review regarding the importance of social justice and the role it plays in school choice show strong correlation to the answers given by the Superintendents in the interviews for multiple questions. Throughout many of the Superintendent's answers I frequently heard the words, "unfair," "not right," and "wrong." Overall, the answers these district leaders gave were highly critical of the charter system. As stated earlier in this study, critical analysis is pointless without action; social justice sparks that action through knowledge, awareness, and unrest.

The districts surveyed revealed various differences between charter schools and traditional public that were not beneficial to some students and communities. While a difficult comparison due to the difference in number of schools, a larger percentage of charter schools are graded at D or F than traditional public schools. Unless the charter targets a specific demographic, which is something a traditional public could never get away with doing, this study shows they are mostly White and have a much lower rate of Free & Reduced Lunch than their traditional public counterparts. The trend holds true with 10 of the 11 charters analyzed. The outlier is one that targets the Black/African-American community.

When asked if school choice results in increased racial segregation, six of the seven agreed, with four of them strongly agreeing while the seventh declined to answer. They said reforming the school choice model would eliminate this resegregation and effectively scaffold an entire population to a higher opportunity of achievement by keeping mostly White, higher SES, and higher-achieving students in the local public schools, bolstering the school and community. Most of the Superintendents either explicitly stated or alluded to choice as being the problem that impedes people of color who cannot utilize school choice

like their fellow families. Howe (2006) agreed and went on to state that choice should not be the mechanism that hinders anyone; it should provide access for everyone.

Five of the seven Superintendents interviewed believed the charter schools employed choice enrollment, citing examples and experience, while the remaining two agreed but stated they had no proof. They gave answers like, “it appears to me that all the students are high-flyers,” and “I think they do (take the higher achievers), but they don’t test over there so I don’t know for sure.” It is important to remember that these district leaders’ life and professional experiences, biases, as well as ideologies impact how they view their own reality and ultimately answer these uniform questions, sometimes so differently (Biggs et al., 2021). This skimming of the most capable and highest achieving students off the top while the remaining students are *left behind* (McWilliams, 2017), damages the rest of the school and community, resulting in the epitome of social justice’s purpose; to be the voice and the fist for those who have neither (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020). When those with resources, high academic achievers, and other desirable demographics leave the school, the students that remain can feel *less than* their peers who chose another environment. This psychological demolition can leave students and entire communities with a lowered sense of self-worth, value, as well as lowered morale (Hale, 2022).

### ***Politics, Privatization, and Access to Resources***

Per pupil spending is one area where charter schools seemingly have an advantage over traditional public schools as they spend far less per student; some beating their home district by nearly \$5,000 per student. At face value this seems like a distinct positive. Upon closer inspection, and analysis of Superintendent responses, these charters spend less money per student because they offer less opportunities and provide less resources, contributing to

the lower cost. As some of the Superintendents stated, some of the more expensive students to educate are the very ones that some charters turn away (special needs, EC, English-learners, etc.).

The assertion from Singer (2021) that school choice has become an overwhelmingly Conservative or Republican agenda item is echoed by most of the participants in the Superintendent interviews. Similar to the literature section about the politics surrounding school choice, district executives interviewed concurred that the topic has become increasingly divisive and polarizing. The Superintendents' responses were riddled with political perceptions and biases. Although the support of political ideology and composition of school choice or its denouncement was not one of my fifteen interview questions, nearly all of them cited political motivations. This is yet another correlation between the themes in the literature review that carried over to the qualitative research.

Privatizing traditional public education is a hot-button topic across the nation. Similar to support for school choice options, it is also a politically-charged one. The main way that proponents of decentralizing or privatizing traditional public education drum up support is through the act of spotlighting failures where they exist and extrapolating hopelessness and disaster for the American public, even though it is rarely true. The *reformers* (Ravitch, 2011) who seek to privatize traditional public education leave out the fact that their multimillion-dollar businesses stand to expand even further their wealth and power at the expense of the taxpayer and the future of the disadvantaged. Nearly all the Superintendents interviewed brought up the topic of political influence and privatization, though it was not a formal question. All of them spoke negatively about decentralization and the use of taxpayer dollars for an education that was not for all students but for all the money.



Another aspect of choice that got all seven of the Superintendent responders fired up was the issue that the charter school is not held to the same accountability standards as their neighboring traditional public school systems. This seems to create an uneven playing field in which the charter schools have more freedom with less responsibility to show results. The Superintendents lamented the unfairness of having their schools rated by the state while charter schools could choose to avoid such ratings.

When a family has more access to wealth or resources, school choice becomes a much more real option (Billings et al., 2018). This does not guarantee that a family will choose to transfer, but it does open avenues that do not exist for some of their classmates. The reasons or justifications for student transfer are cited throughout this study, race, socioeconomic status, sports, achievement, facilities, etc. However, the literature and district data confirm, as do the perceptions of the participants interviewed, while increased socioeconomic status may help open the door for the student or family to leave their traditional public school, the school in which they choose to enroll is going to be more likely White majority than the one from which they transfer. A major difficulty of this study is that none of these subtopics or headings exist in a vacuum. The choice is contingent upon and impacts a multitude of these themes. As discussed previously in Chapter 1, there are a host of deciding factors ranging from demographics, achievement, location, and other factors. A more in-depth and far reaching study may be necessary to fully explore these factors in the future to finally inform not only parents but educators about the choices they make.

### **Revisiting the Conceptual / Theoretical Framework**

Earlier in this study, I referenced relevant authors like Kant, Marx, and Horkheimer to lay a basic foundation for critical inquiry and theory. The process begins with knowing one's

self well enough to be capable of synthesizing the abstract, the *real*, and the possible (Kant, 1790). Once a grasp of these concepts is reached, the true purpose of critical inquiry and theory emerges; questioning not just what *is*, but what *could be* with the right action (Kant, 1790). Horkheimer was a forefather of political and economic liberation. Horkheimer's desire to close the wealth gap and improve the lives of all people, not just the wealthy, creating positive and lasting social change, is a model that still resonates with those who want to make a difference in the world (Berendzen, 2022). Critical inquiry or theory emerged frequently through the responses of the school Superintendents. Rarely did a participant discuss a problem with the current charter school choice model without questioning what could be done or even offering active solutions to improve someone's opportunities. When the negative impacts affect a traditional public school district or even singular school, someone pays the price for a choice they did not or potentially could not make. This line of reasoning followed by its logical questioning tends to support the basic tenets of critical inquiry. The Superintendents repeatedly engaged in these lines of thinking thus supporting the inclusion of this theory into the framework of my study.

Regardless of how positively many of the Superintendents attempted to make their district appear, the responses showed some consistent and problematic trends. The Superintendents repeatedly raised the following in their responses: political divide within their communities; racial re-segregation; choice enrollment viewed as *theft* of the highest achievers; public perception of safety and effectiveness of traditional public schools; the plethora of options that families have beyond district schools; and the lack of state/federal accountability for all schools. With those in mind, many of the leaders spoke with critical thought and solutions to those issues. In short, the effect that school choice has on the non-

chooser and the traditional public system as a whole is evidence that social justice theory is a necessary lens through which to view such issues. Even more important, to address the problems listed above and the countless more not uncovered but potentially present, educators must use critical inquiry and theory to continually improve educational opportunities for current and future students, families, and communities.

### **Addressing the Gaps**

This mixed-method approach gives the reader and researcher an opportunity for a broader representation of the topics listed and of the school choice debate. By choosing traditional public school Superintendents, I was able to offer a unique perspective from leaders who view all aspects in that realm under their supervision. Superintendents get all the data, all the problems, and are expected to have all the solutions. Between the breadth and depth of my literature review, the Report Card, demographic, and socioeconomic research, along with the perspectives of these district Superintendents, this study offers a broader view of issues that have become narrowed by the political divide. These findings may trigger further research by someone else or it may lead to positive change somewhere in our state. It was my goal to make this an impact study so it might benefit others as they wrestle with similar choices.

### **Limitations**

A major limitation of this study was the small number of Superintendents that agreed to participate in the interviews. As stated previously, of the 64 counties with a charter school in close proximity only seven, slightly under 11%, chose to take part in my study. I did not refuse any current Superintendent who agreed to participate if they met the criterion of a charter within or in close proximity to their district. I declined to include two Superintendents

who volunteered to participate based on their past experiences with charter competition but who did not meet the proximity rule. In other words, they no longer had charter schools within or in close proximity to their districts thus their responses would have been based on past experiences or biases that would not have been current. While my sample is justified and broad enough for my purpose, an increased number of participants would also potentially increase the validity and reliability of this study. I am content with the response rate to my invitation because I solicited participation from all 64 of those counties via email, twice (three weeks apart). No one declined with any rationale for doing so. It was more of a matter of not responding at all to the invitation.

Another limitation, as with any qualitative study, is I cannot be certain that the participants answered all questions as fully and truthfully as they could have given the sensitive nature of some of the questions. As I have no past work or personal relationships with any of the participants, I have no shared prior experiences. I relied on their word that the data I gleaned offered true representation of their perceptions and reality. Since participation was voluntary, remained anonymous, and all participants appeared to be so passionate during the interviews, they likely spoke from the heart.

### **Implications**

Based on the findings in this study, it appears that the negative impacts and consequences of charter school choice in North Carolina may outweigh the positives. The implications for students and families of color, lower socioeconomic status, etc., that do not fit the mold for the typical choice student seem not to be ideal for achieving an equitable education for diverse student populations. From the perspectives of the Superintendents interviewed, the only groups that charter schools may benefit are those who are White,

middle-class or higher socioeconomically, as well as above-average in student achievement. Charter schools in their districts tended to fit this demographic profile thus creating more homogeneous and less diverse student bodies. Seemingly, the remainder of the total student population within their districts, those with fewer home advantages, and less opportunities will not only be more challenged in utilizing choice, they will suffer the consequences of their classmates' decisions to transfer as a decline in staffing, funding, course offerings, etc. results from loss of funding based on enrollment. Such a decline in district resources lost to charter schools will result in increasing an already existing opportunity gap among our students who have no choice but to remain in their assigned district school.

Even after expressing these concerns through the interviews, none of the traditional public district Superintendents appeared concerned about their neighboring charter schools *beating* them. They showed little concern for their enrollment trends, achievement data, or their future in the competition to keep students in their schools. Most of them stated in one form or another, “they can’t compete with us.” Even given the loss of revenue siphoned off when students enroll in charters, the numbers of students served by districts remain high enough to off balance these losses so far.

To fully explore the results of this study and whom they affect, the three main research questions from the start of the study are answered using literature review materials, district quantitative data, participant responses, and synthesized results.

### ***How do Traditional Public Schools Change as a Result of Charter Schools?***

The answer to this first research question appears to be an overwhelming *yes*, as districts have changed and continue to change as a result of charter schools. All seven Superintendents confirmed this in their interviews. They listed a plethora of ways they have

in the past and continue to evolve to compete for student enrollment to ensure viability. In decades past, traditional public schools didn't need advertising, marketing, or even analysis of school/district improvement; it was understood that they were the only option. Now, with the abundance of choices for education, the traditional public school system must evolve or become obsolete. School districts are working harder to offer more diversified course offerings, improvements to individualized learning, and any other aspect that may appeal to the local community. This should not be considered a negative outcome for district schools. Regardless of the competition offered by choice, there is still the need for schools to evolve to fit the changing needs of their communities.

***What is the relationship between school choice and social justice through the lens of the district Superintendents?***

According to the Superintendents interviewed for this study, school choice creates scenarios that call for the tenets of social justice and critical theories to be considered as there are impacts upon much of the population already experiencing economic and social challenges. In their eyes, school choice may be beneficial to only a small portion of the population, as demonstrated by the demographics of the student population served. Such inequity creates stratification by natural means, negatively impacting the system and their stakeholders who cannot participate in the decisions of which school to attend due to socioeconomic factors or other restrictions. The Superintendents interviewed all mentioned a group or groups in one answer or another that suffered at the hands of this choice system. In short, school choice may create a system lacking the tenets of social justice by actually restricting the choice by less fortunate families, who, in essence, have no choice due to their circumstances. They simply are not able to provide the necessary transportation or attend the

informational meetings or even consider the commitment necessary to ensure their child's inclusion in a charter school.

***What are the Perceived Impacts of School Choice on North Carolina Public School Districts?***

The perceived impacts of school choice on North Carolina public school districts through the eyes of these seven district Superintendents appeared to be less positive than what is popularly portrayed by the proponents of charter schools. Only one of the participants said they welcomed the competition and harbored no ill will towards them, stating "I'm comfortable partnering with a charter if it means more opportunities for our students." The participant went on to add, "However, I am not comfortable working with them if they don't play by the same rules or if they don't serve their students." The other six were less tolerant, citing multiple instances where they believe charters fall short and are harmful to their district.

Referencing the financial impact felt by charter school choice on their budget, one participant stated, "We lose over \$7,000 every time a kid chooses to leave us and go to a charter school. If we lose 150 students, do the math. Even though we don't have to teach that kid now, we still have to keep the same number of lights on, same heat and air, and the same overhead." Another added, "When they take that student, they take the money that goes with them. The problem is that the kid that leaves probably doesn't need much intensive support or tutoring, but the kids that are left do. We need that other kid's allotment money to bridge the gap, and now it's gone so we have to eat that." These sentiments were echoed by the other five participants, but specific dollar amounts were not referenced.

When students leave the traditional public school setting, staff allotments often leave with them as staff funding is contingent upon student enrollment. When asked about staffing, one participant said, "...it's hard to serve kids when we keep losing staff. We've got all these class size restrictions, especially in elementary. You get combo classes and cut support staff. It's just academically not good for kids." Another Superintendent added, "You lose kids so you gotta cut staff, but you don't want to lose them altogether so you try to move them to another school. Sometimes they don't want to go, so they may leave anyway. It's just tough." Another participant said, "...we try to absorb budget and staff cuts as much as we can locally. Sometimes we just can't work it. I hate to lose staff because it always hurts the kids; turns into a snowball of problems." The interconnectedness of choice and funding can create a cascade of negative effects for students.

Students in a lower socioeconomic status are rarely able to attend charter schools due to the lack of provided transportation, lack of school meal programs, etc. As stated previously, the students who help fund the entirety of the district but use less of the resources negatively impact these less fortunate students by taking away funding that could be used to supplement their needs. These more disadvantaged students often do not receive the supplies, support, or other resources that need to have an equitable opportunity to achieve. A Superintendent stated, "When we lose our wealthy students and families, we lose resources, support, involvement like volunteers and tutors, etc. You know, the whole school suffers. You can become Title I just by losing a few good families, it hurts." The participant went on to add, "... the poorer kids usually have more needs, you know? They need extra support than the rich kids that ran off. Since we lost that funding per student, it's hard to pay for that



help.” It is clear that lower-socioeconomic status students are negatively impacted by the choice of others.

Students of color were found to feel *left-behind* or otherwise inferior when their White counterparts elected to transfer to a charter school or other environment. One Superintendent said these choices turn the traditional public school system into “a second class school system.” Another participant said “Our Black and Hispanic students rarely get afforded the same decision (to choose a charter or non-Traditional Public) and pay for somebody else’s choice.” Other Superintendents made passing summarizations about negative impacts but did not elaborate on effects they had seen personally.

Unbalanced expectations or requirements in student achievement and accountability models are also perceived as a major problem with charter school choice. This topic was particularly upsetting to one participant who claimed, “How dare you hand them (a charter school) all this money that I had counted on in my budget and then tell them it doesn’t matter what comes from it. All the money, no accountability. It’s ridiculous.” He added, “Their students don’t get a fraction of what we can give them. They’re just pandering to the parents.” Another stated, “They go to these schools because they think it’ll be better for their child. My perception is that it’s almost always not true.” All of the participants believed their district, along with traditional public schools in general, were more capable of serving students and producing achievement results and growth. All agreed that if accountability models were equal, this would be obvious. One Superintendent said, “Everyone whines about what’s fair. I’ll tell you what’s unfair. They aren’t held to the fire when they fail (to meet the needs of) these kids.” They added, “We’re (traditional public schools) the most regulated industry in the world, maybe healthcare. If charters had to play on the same field I do they’d

fold in a week.” All the participants agreed, some more emphatically than others, that there was an enormous difference between how charter schools and traditional public districts accountability measures, with traditional publics drawing the shorter straw.

Compounding achievement and accountability disparities, charter schools are able to turn away students based on an inability to serve their needs. These students could be Exceptional Children (EC) with academic, physical, emotional, or psychological needs that the traditional public system is required to serve. One Superintendent claimed, “Families with special needs students can be refused or not served. Either way, they aren’t going to be successful over there (charter school).” Another stated, “As soon as they show any signs of special needs or costs, they ship them back to us. They don’t even try to help them.” A participant also said, “They claim they can serve kids better because they are all the things we (traditional public schools) aren’t, then they turn them away. That’s not really healthy, you know? What a terrible message to send to a family or student.” All participants stated that charters entice families to enroll based on special instruction and aspects counter to the traditional public school, but then they turn away or choose to not serve the students who need the services the most.

When asked if they believed charter schools skimmed the higher-achieving students from traditional public districts, all agreed that it was common with various amounts of evidence. One participant responded, “That’s all they do. That’s their game. They take our students, keep the high flyers then send back the ones they don’t want.” Another added, “Of course they do. You’re going to be successful when you don’t offer transportation. You weed out the students who aren’t typically successful.” These higher-achieving students do not always equate to higher scores for the charter schools because of differences in curricula and

how they *teach to the test*. Most charters may not use the same North Carolina Teaching Standards that traditional public systems use, setting up a gap between the curriculum and the assessment and lowering student achievement data.

Much like the disparities in special-needs and EC students, this process negatively impacts the traditional public school by leaving behind the students who require more resources and service to be successful. To compound the problem further, funding that would have assisted in these services that may have otherwise been extra, left with the higher-achieving student. The interconnectedness of funding, achievement, unbalanced equity, and resources paints a negative picture regarding the impacts that school choice has for traditional public school districts. When students have less access to resources, funding, qualified staff, and there are opportunity gaps from inequities, achievement suffers (Anzia, 2020; Betts & Loveless, 2005).

It is necessary to remember that while extremely relevant to the topic, the perspectives and responses of these Superintendents also contain biases for non-traditional public schools. There are over 200 charter schools in North Carolina. While the responses from these participants were similar, it is erroneous to assume every Superintendent in the state would agree. As stated before, this is a small sample, albeit one that might be viewed as representative. Also, as Superintendents are in charge of so many aspects of the school system and what it needs, they can lose sight of who *owns* the child. Parents are the stewards of their children and should be in charge of their growth and wellbeing. It is important to point out that while both parties *want what's best* for the student, the idea of *best* can look very different. Both Superintendents and parents are biased in their views, so a common ground will only come through communication and compromise.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

As an expansion on the limitations and scope of this study, further research could focus on increasing the participation percentage as well as the regions of the state, or country, covered. Another possibility for reducing limitations is to include other district leaders (not only Superintendents) like school board members, chief financial officers, human resource directors, etc. to increase the breadth and depth of the study. The answers gleaned from these school personnel, especially the directors in central office, would most likely be more *in the weeds* than the Superintendent's responses.

Another recommendation for future research would be to conduct a similar study but from the vantage point of the charter system. Interview multiple charter school leaders and ask similar questions. Do they perceive the negative impacts that these Superintendents did? Why do they believe the participants answered so negatively? I omitted the charter position from this study because I wanted to focus on the traditional public district Superintendent's perception, but I do believe the charter study has merit and potential to add to the discussion.

All the Superintendents agreed that charter schools could be a positive for communities, but that reform and a more balanced accountability model is needed. I would propose that a district, or the General Assembly, look at either increasing the accountability measures for charter schools (enrollment restrictions, mandating transportation and meal programs, increased testing accountability, etc.) or lessening these measures for traditional publics to the current status of charters. Another option, and one that I would advocate for, is to meet in the middle between the two current models; lessening traditional public schools' accountability measures and increasing the mandated services for charters.

In closing, I hope that this study, as well as any future research, informs the choices of decision makers, both legislative and parental. My goal is to improve the opportunities and achievements of our students so communities can thrive as a result of a strong and comprehensive education. Studies like this one that shed light on the disparities between traditional public and charter models are useful to create positive change for all the students and families in North Carolina.

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## Appendix A

### Superintendent Interview Consent Form



#### Information to Consider about this Research

##### Impacts of School Choice on North Carolina Public School Districts

Principal Investigator: Matt Tedder

Department: Educational Leadership; Ed.D

Contact Information:

Matt Tedder

[tedderm@appstate.edu](mailto:tedderm@appstate.edu)

Dr. Barbara Howard, faculty advisor

[howardbb@appstate.edu](mailto:howardbb@appstate.edu)

As a North Carolina public school superintendent, you are invited to participate in a research study about how school choice impacts North Carolina public school districts. This is a mixed-methods impact study with both quantitative and qualitative data.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be invited to a one-on-one virtual meeting (ZOOM, Google Meet, etc.) and asked to answer interview questions about what you've seen and experienced in your district as a superintendent. In an attempt to be respectful of your time, your total time commitment to this study will take around 30 minutes and should not exceed 60 minutes. However, there is no time limit.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer any interview questions for any reason. You may also choose to have your responses omitted from the study, even after the interview. There are no benefits or risks associated with the study to you as a participant. There is also no compensation associated with participation.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Matt Tedder or Dr. Barbara Howard. You may also contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) directly at (828)262-4060 and [irb@appstate.edu](mailto:irb@appstate.edu).

The Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has determined that this study is exempt from IRB oversight.

*I agree to participate in the study.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

### International Review Board Approval Letter

Date: 4-6-2023

**IRB #:** HS-23-229  
**Title:** Impacts of School Choice on North Carolina Public School Districts  
**Creation Date:** 2-10-2023  
**End Date:**  
**Status:** Approved  
**Principal Investigator:** Matthew Tedder  
**Review Board:** Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board  
**Sponsor:**

#### Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	<span style="color: red;">Exempt</span>
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#### Key Study Contacts

<b>Member</b>	Matthew Tedder	<b>Role</b>	Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	tedderm@appstate.edu
<b>Member</b>	Matthew Tedder	<b>Role</b>	Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b>	tedderm@appstate.edu
<b>Member</b>	Barbara Howard	<b>Role</b>	Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	howardbb@appstate.edu
<b>Member</b>	Kimberly Money	<b>Role</b>	Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	moneykd@appstate.edu
<b>Member</b>	William Gummerson	<b>Role</b>	Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	gummersonwm@appstate.edu

## **Appendix C**

### **Superintendent Interview Questions**

Hello, thank you for participating in this study about the impacts of school choice on North Carolina public school districts. I will mostly focus on charter schools for these questions. It is my intention for these answers to be conversational and not in a rigid format. Feel free to add any information to your answer that you see fit.

If you feel at any time that you are not comfortable answering a question or that you wish to terminate your participation, please let me know and all your records will be destroyed.

1. Please tell me some background information about yourself like education, work experience, and anything else you feel that is pertinent to this study.
2. Please tell me about the charter schools near you that impact your school district?
3. Is the number of students you lose to charters each year a growing concern?
4. Why do you think those students choose to leave your public school district for this alternative option?
5. What advantages do you have within your district that makes your system more appealing than the charter/private school?
6. When you lose a student to a charter school, or even to another district, what financial repercussions do you see associated with the loss?
7. Do you frequently lose staff members to these other schools? If so, what seems to be the motivating factor for your employees to change schools?

8. Does the public perceive your school district as being safe? Do you think safety is a reason for student transfer? Do you think you have lost staff members because of safety concerns?
9. Have you seen an impact on your graduation rates as a result of these other schools?
10. Have you seen any change in racial segregation or integration as a result of these charters?
11. Do you think your most vulnerable population like Exceptional Children, and other special needs are better served in your district or in the charter/private school?
12. Do you feel these other schools practice “choice enrollment,” meaning they skim off your higher achieving students?
13. How has your district marketed itself as a result of these alternative options?
14. Is there anything else you find relevant to the study that was not asked? Do you have any questions about the study?
15. Do you still feel comfortable with the study? May I proceed with your data?

Thank you for your time and willingness to help me in this impact study. Please remember, you may choose to withdraw from any part, or the whole study at any time, even though you have completed the interview. I have provided you with my contact information if you need to get in touch with me. Thank you again for your participation.

## Vita

Matt Tedder is a native of Asheboro, North Carolina, where he lived for the first 20+ years of his life. After attending the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in History with a secondary teaching license, Matt began his educational career in Davie County, North Carolina. During his teaching career of more than ten years, he taught middle and high school, coached multiple sports, assumed a multitude of leadership positions, and obtained a Master's in Middle Grades Education (2013) along with a Graduate Certificate in School Administration (2017), both from Appalachian State University. Later, while serving as an assistant principal at an elementary school in Burlington, North Carolina and then at a high school in Stokes County, North Carolina, Matt earned his Education Specialist (Ed.S) degree (2019), also from Appalachian State University. While in this high school assistant principal position, Matt began on his journey towards a Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) which was completed in the fall of 2023 while serving as the Director of Transportation for Stokes County Schools. Matt is passionate about administration and school leadership and continues to work towards his ultimate professional goal of becoming a Superintendent for a North Carolina school district.