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Much of the research surrounding charter schools has focused on examining the achievement of students in charter schools and exploring the impact of charter schools specifically in urban areas. More charter schools have opened in recent years in rural areas, however, there is limited research surrounding the impact of these charter schools in rural areas. This study was designed to better understand how rural traditional public-schools have been impacted by the increased presence of, and competition from, charter schools in their communities, and to examine how those rural traditional public-schools have responded to this increased competition. In addition, I studied how the rural communities surrounding these traditional public-schools have been impacted the presence of charter schools in their community.

In this qualitative case study, I researched the impacts of charter schools on rural traditional public-schools, the responses of rural traditional public-schools and the impact on their communities. I conducted semi-structured interviews with principals in a school feeder pattern in a rural school district in central North Carolina that has seen an increased number of charter school options arrive in their community. I also conduced semi-structured interviews with small-business owners who were tied into both the rural public-schools and the community through their small businesses, and conducted focus groups with parents from all four schools that operate in the community in which this study was located.

I found that rural traditional public-schools have seen numerous impacts from the increased number of charter schools in their communities, and schools and school leaders are increasingly aware of these impacts and are working to mitigate them through increased programs and new practices within their buildings, including through the use of marketing practices and increased offerings for students and parents within their school community. I also found that rural communities are being divided as a result of the increased options for school choice, as parents who see themselves as loyal to their rural traditional public-schools feel betrayed or abandoned by parents who elect to enroll their children in charter schools, and as a result, tensions and divisions have emerged in the community.

THE IMPACT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS ON RURAL TRADITIONAL PUBLIC-

SCHOOLS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

by

Bruce Carroll

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APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Bruce Carroll, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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50-60 pages of my papers! Even though you are younger than me, I have looked up to

you in your academic endeavors and now we will both be Dr. Carroll.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When the first charter school law in the United States of America was passed in

Minnesota in 1991, a sense of excitement was evident in certain circles about the

potential impact that this new type of public-school could have on education in

American society. In other circles, concern and questions were palpable, as some were

concerned that the impact of this new type of public-school would be negative. As with

most other ideas and avenues of change that are determined by law, the debate

surrounding charter schools quickly became political. Traditionally, more conservative

politicians have been in favor of charter schools while liberal politicians are more

hawkish on the idea. Since 1991, all four presidents, two Republican and two

Democrat have taken an overall positive stance on the charter school movement.

When Bill Clinton became President of the United States in January 1993, two

states had passed charter school laws: California and Minnesota. During his time as

president, the nation's first charter school opened in Minnesota. Speaking after his

presidency on charter schools, Clinton remarked:

> The idea behind charter schools is that not all kids are the same—they have
> different needs; they have different environments—but there is a certain
> common level of education that all kids need, no matter how different they are,
> and that it would be a good thing to allow schools to be developed which had a
> clear mission, which could reach out to kids who wanted to be a part of that
> mission, who could achieve educational excellence for children who otherwise
> might be left behind... (Clinton, 2000)

George W. Bush was also a proponent of charter schools and the notion of choice for

parents. Speaking to PBS Frontline during his 2000 presidential campaign, Bush

advocated not just for charter schools, but for parents to have the ability to make choices

for their child's education, stating:

> And so what I have said is, as opposed to subsidizing failure, we ought to free the
> parent to make a different choice. It could be a public-school. It could be a charter
> school. It could be a tutorial. It could be anything other than the status quo. (Bush,
> 2000)

During his presidency, Bush pushed to increase funding for charter schools (DPC, 2008).

Barack Obama became President of the United States in January 2009. While

serving as president, Race to the Top became one of his signature education reforms.

Race to the Top was a federal funding program that financially incentivized states who

were leading the way on educational reforms, either in the past or through plans for future

implementation. One of the ways states could procure additional Race to the Top dollars

was by promising to expand charter schools (Nagel, 2009). Obama saw charter schools

as a pathway to increasing student achievement, and issued a proclamation during

National Charter School Week in 2012 stating his vision for charter schools:

> Whether created by parents and teachers or community and civic leaders, charter
> schools serve as incubators of innovation in neighborhoods across our country.
> These institutions give educators the freedom to cultivate new teaching models
> and develop creative methods to meet students' needs. This unique flexibility is
> matched by strong accountability and high standards, so underperforming
> charter schools can be closed, while those that consistently help students
> succeed can serve as models of reform for other public-schools. In an economy
> where knowledge is our most valuable asset, a good education is no longer just a
> pathway to opportunity -- it is an imperative. Our children only get one chance

at an education, and charter schools demonstrate what is possible when States, communities, teachers, parents, and students work together. (Obama, 2012)

Current U.S. President Donald Trump, has been probably the most outspoken presidential proponent of the school choice and charter school movement of our last four presidents. During his 2017 Address to Congress, he made the following statement:

To achieve the future [we envision], we must enrich the mind--and the souls--of every American child. Education is the civil rights issue of our time. I am calling upon Members of both parties to pass an education bill that funds school choice for disadvantaged youth, including millions of African-American and Latino children. These families should be free to choose the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school that is right for them. (Trump, 2016)

President Trump appointed as Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, an individual many see as being strongly in favor of the privatization of public-schools. Her appointment stoked the fears of many that she was an anti-public-school Secretary of Education. While that sentiment will only be told in the pages of history, it is certain that the current President and his administration are strong proponents of school choice and specifically the charter school movement.

Each of the last four Presidents have been strong proponents of charter schools and school choice. Each had varying reasons for their support, but all viewed charter schools as a way forward in advancing educational opportunity in the United States. Despite the support of the last four Presidents, there are still those who are skeptical about the widespread benefits of the charter school movement. Moreover, the evidence related to charter school effectiveness is mixed and often inconclusive. There are also plenty of individuals and experts who believe that charter schools represent an important

future for our nation. Regardless of intention and views on the charter school movement, the support and growth of the school choice movement, and specifically charter schools, has made a dramatic impact on the education landscape in this nation. More specifically, public-schools have been impacted by the opening and subsequent increase of charter schools. In this dissertation, I examine the extent of that impact, specifically focusing on one rural community.

Problem Statement/Researcher Perspective

Since their inception, charter schools have drawn mixed reviews from education and policy experts, as well as parents looking for the best option for their children's education. The ongoing controversy and questions surrounding the charter school movement have driven a number of significant research projects as researchers attempt to understand the significance and impact of the increasing numbers of charter schools in the United States of America.

Charter school proponents believe that charter schools are helping more students to be academically successful because they are able to choose the school that best fits their needs. They also believe that charter schools are an appropriate venue and option to ensure that all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status or residency, receive a free and appropriate public education. Proponents also see charter schools as an opportunity to try new instructional techniques that ideally can be taken back to traditional public-schools and increase the quality of the product provided in those schools.

Individuals who are opposed to charter schools, in part because they fear they may be a path toward the privatization of public education, feel differently. These individuals question whether or not students who attend charter schools receive the same quality of education as students who attend traditional public-schools. They also wonder if charter schools are playing a role in the re-segregation of our schools. Critics of charter schools believe that the increase in the number of charter schools in the United States is slowly decimating public-schools by taking away students and thus taking away their funding from public-schools.

As with many other education reforms, many of the decisions being made about public and charter schools, especially at the state level in terms of specific legislation that impacts schools, are being made by individuals with limited knowledge or experience when it comes to education. As a result, there are often decisions that are made that have significant, intended and unintended, consequences on public and charter schools. Take, for example, the case of North Carolina in 2011. The North Carolina Legislature passed a law in 2011 that lifted the parameters that had previously prevented charter schools from serving specific subgroups of students (i.e. academically gifted, same-gender schools, etc.). Did lawmakers realize their decision impacted public-schools by allowing charter schools to offer specific programs that many public-schools, especially in rural areas cannot offer? Do lawmakers realize that by allowing charter schools flexibility in scheduling, and not requiring them to follow the same calendar laws as public-schools in the state (i.e. earlier start dates, earlier finish dates) they are creating an uneven playing field in terms of the competition and choice offered to parents who are exploring school

choice options for their children? As I was conducting pilot studies for this research

project, those concerns were mentioned to me frequently by principals in rural school

districts who felt charter schools created an uneven playing field in their communities.

As a public-school educator, I approach charter schools with caution. Though I

see myself as an advocate for traditional public-schools, and believe in the mission and

purpose of public-schools and their role in our society, I believe there is room for charter

schools, along with other forms of school choice, in the venue of available public-school

options for our students. There are times when a specific school, whether it is a

traditional public-school or a charter school, may not be the best fit or option for a

student. More specifically, not all students' needs are met in all types of schools. When

parents have choice, they are able to explore schools in order to find the best fit for their

children. The existence of local public-schools of choice can be particularly

advantageous if parents do not have the means to move their family in order to live in a

specific school district, or if students have a specific need or preference that cannot be

served by the traditional public-school.

During my years as a principal and assistant principal, I saw parents move their

children in and out of schools on many occasions. Parents, exercising their right to

choose, withdrew their students from my school so their child could enroll in one of the

many charter schools that were in operation within a 25-mile radius of the schools I

served in. These parents were drawn in by the allure of the programs and "perks" that

these charter schools offered: smaller class size, supposed increased rigor, a focus on

math and science, etc. A majority of the students who left my schools ended up re-

enrolling, in most cases within the first few months. When I asked one parent why she decided to re-enroll her children back in my school, she gave me two specific reasons: her children missed the relationships and friendships they had established, and found that the charter school did not live up to the stated expectations.

Additionally, as a principal and a former assistant principal, I often wondered specifically why parents chose to remove their children from my school. While I have seen about ten students that I am aware of leave my schools for charter schools in my six years as an administrator, I have also seen parents withdraw their students to be homeschooled or to enroll their student in a private school. In some instances, I have the opportunity to speak to parents about their decision to withdraw, while in other cases I do not have that opportunity and am left wondering why, and often ask myself "if I knew their reasons why, could I have made changes that would have encouraged them to stay in the traditional public-school system?" I have also engaged in similar conversations with my colleagues, and know that they often wonder the same thing when they see students withdraw from their schools.

The combination of my personal experiences, the experiences of my colleagues, and the recent debate surrounding the school choice movement has led me to investigate the relationship between charter schools and traditional public-schools. We don't currently know enough about the growing impact of charter schools on the nearby traditional public-schools, especially in rural areas where the charter school movement is seeing new growth. In addition, there has been little to no research conducted on the impact that these charter schools have made on rural communities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the impact that charter schools have had on rural public-schools and their surrounding community. Recent research has examined the academic achievement of students who enroll in charter schools (Berends, et al., 2010; Berends, 2015; Bettinger, 2004; Betts & Tang, 2014; Carnoy, et al., 2005; CREDO, 2013; Clark, et al., 2015; Gleason, et al., 2010; Henig, 2008; Zimmer, et al., 2012), the reasons why parents choose charter schools for their children (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000; Reilly, 2000; Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan, 2007; Weeden, 2002), and their satisfaction with their choice (Akey, et al., 2008; Carey, et al., 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000; Riley, 2000; Teske, et al., 2008). Additionally, there has been some research that examines how schools market themselves in the era of increased competition (Cucchiara, 2008; DiMartino & Jessen, 2018; Eckes, 2007; Lubienski, 2007; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016) as well as research that demonstrates the impact that charter schools are making on segregation in both charter and traditional public-schools (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Frankenberg, et al., 2010; Frankenberg, et al., 2017; Garcia, 2008a; Garcia, 2008b; Rapp & Eckes, 2007; Renzulli, 2006; Ritter, et al., 2010; Ritter, et al.; 2016; Rotberg, 2014; Stein, 2015). There has also been some research on how public-schools have been impacted by the presence of charter schools in their area (Bettinger, 2005; Bilfulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, et al., 2008; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Holmes, et al., 2003; Hoxby, 2000, 2001; Imberman, 2010; Ni, 2009; Sass, 2006; Winters, 2010). However, there has been minimal research to date on how and why traditional public-schools are specifically

responding to that competition (Buddin & Zimmer, 2005). This study is designed to investigate that impact, as well as the impact on the surrounding community.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How has the presence of charter schools impacted public-schools in a rural setting?

2. How have public-schools responded to the presence of charter schools in their community?

3. How has the presence of charter schools impacted the community surrounding public-schools?

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions I established for this study, I conducted a case study on the impact charter schools have made in one rural North Carolina community. The first step I took was to conduct interviews with the four principals in the rural community in which my study is situated. I examined the trends that existed in how they have seen charter schools impact their schools, and how they have responded as a result. I also conducted interviews with four prominent community members: two small business owners, one of which also serves as the president of the local high school athletic booster club, a member of the county school board, and the editor of the local newspaper. I examined their perspectives on how charter schools have impacted both the public-schools and the surrounding community. I also conducted focus groups with parents from the local public-schools (two elementary schools, one middle school and

one high school), again examining how charter schools have impacted their community and the public-schools within their community. I spoke with fourteen parents for this study, and in total interviewed twenty-two different participants.

Background Context

In order to gain an understanding of the impact that charter schools have made on public-schools and rural public-schools specifically, I felt it was important to first examine what specifically makes a school a charter school. I also explored the history of the charter school movement to understand the background and context of charter schools in the broader domain of public-schools. In the second chapter, I explore more fully the research surrounding charter schools.

What Makes a School a Charter School?

Charter schools were established as one part of the larger movement towards school choice in the United States. According to the Education Commission of the States:

> Charter schools are semi-autonomous public-schools that receive public funds. They operate under a written contract with a state, district or other entity (referred to as an authorizer or sponsor). This contract — or charter — details how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be expected to achieve, and how success will be measured. Many charter schools are exempt from a variety of laws and regulations affecting other public-schools if they continue to meet the terms of their charters. (Wixom, 2018)

The route to establishing a charter school varies from state to state. In some states, local school boards have the right to authorize the establishment and operation of a charter school, while in other states that right is left to the state board of education or another

entity at the state level. In some states, a combination of local and state level agencies play a role in the operation of a charter school. In North Carolina, applications to establish and operate a charter school are made to the North Carolina Charter School Advisory Board, which operates under the auspices of the North Carolina State Board of Education. Organizations apply for a charter to operate a charter school in North Carolina to the Charter School Advisory Board, who makes a recommendation to the State Board of Education to approve, delay, or revoke a school's charter.

Many people view charter schools as alternative schools that do not have to comply with the same standards, including those related to testing and curriculum, as traditional public-schools. While that is partially true, there is still some regulation from the state level over charter schools, even as the extent of that regulation varies by state. While charter schools operate without many of the requirements of traditional public-schools, Vergari (2007) found that most charter schools are still required to follow established state policies regarding both academic performance standards and even testing. In North Carolina, charter schools still participate in state testing, and receive letter grades and growth measures just like their traditional public-school counterparts. However, charter schools are provided more autonomy than public-schools. For example, in North Carolina, only half of a charter schools' teachers are required to be certified, licensed teachers. Charter schools can utilize a more flexible school-year calendar; however, they are bound by the same regulations for instructional hours (1025 hours) in a school year as their traditional public-school counterparts.

Vergari (1999) describes two primary reasons for charters schools, "producing (a) increased responsiveness to the demands of parents, students and teachers, and (b) greater opportunities for innovation in school management and pedagogy" (p. 390). One of the primary ideas that drove the charter school movement, in addition to increasing options for parents, was the idea that charter schools could provide a venue to test out new and innovative instructional and management strategies that could then be used to transform traditional public-schools. According to Preston, et al. (2008), innovative practices in charter schools are innovative if the public-schools in the areas are not utilizing those instructional practices.

Charter schools were also established to be a school choice option for families, especially those who live in low-income areas where the available traditional public-schools were often low performing. Chingos (2013) writes that the school choice movement was designed "to expand the education options available to families who lack the financial means to move to a neighborhood with high-quality public-schools or to pay private-school tuition" (p. 46). Vergari (1999) echoes that view, writing that "charter schools are also aimed at providing low-income families with the types of educational options that have largely been available only to wealthy families able to afford the tuition expenses of private schools" (p. 391).

History of the Charter School Movement in the United States

In 1988, Shanker and Fliegel described charter schools as "a vehicle by which local school districts might grant groups of teachers the authority to run schools that differed from the cookie-cutter models too often promoted by centralized bureaucracies"

(as cited in Henig, 2008, p. 45). As the idea of charter schools began to take hold, state legislatures soon took up the issue, passing laws that would allow for their establishment. The first state to pass a law addressing charter schools was Minnesota in 1991. After Minnesota passed this law, the nation saw a rapid growth in the number of charter schools and the number of states that had charter laws. In 1992, there was one open charter school and two states had laws involving charter schools. By 2006, "the number of states was up to forty, the number of schools just under 4,000, and the number of students to somewhere around 1.1 million" (Henig, 2008, p. 47). Since 2006, the number of students enrolled in charter schools has almost tripled and there has been a 50% increase in the number of charter schools currently operating in the United States. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2017), there were an estimated 3.1 million students enrolled in charter schools during the 2016-2017 school year, with more than 6900 charter schools currently in operation in 44 states and Washington, D.C.

History of the Charter School Movement in North Carolina

Charter schools were first approved in North Carolina in 1996. On June 21, 1996, Article 14A of House Bill 955 authorized a "system of charter schools to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, pupils, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently of existing schools." The law stated that this system of charter schools was intended to do the following:

1. Improve student learning
2. Expand academic opportunities for students, especially those at risk of failure or those who excel academically

3. Implement innovative instructional methods
4. Provide parents with more choices in public education

The law also established the Charter School Advisory Board for the State of North

Carolina, as well as the North Carolina Office of Charter Schools, which is located within

the Department of Public Instruction (Charter School Act, 1996). The number of charter

schools in North Carolina was initially capped at 100 (Schultz, 2016).

After the Charter School Act was passed, twenty-seven charter schools opened for

students during the 1997-1998 school year and by 2001, there were 100 charter school in

operation, thus meeting the initial cap of 100 that was established by the Charter School

Act of 1996 (Shultz, 2016). In 2011, North Carolina Senate Bill 8 lifted the cap that

restricted the number of charter schools in North Carolina (Public-schools First). Once

the cap was lifted, the State Board of Education began to approve charter schools at a

rapid pace. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2017) reported that in the

2016-2017 school year there were approximately 168 charter schools in operation in

North Carolina serving just under 92,000 students. By the end of the 2018 calendar year,

there were 184 charter schools operating in North Carolina, serving over 109,000

students, which represents 7.3% of the state's total average daily membership (Machado,

2018). In addition, there were more than 20 charter schools in the planning or ready-to

open stages, and the state received 35 charter school applications in 2018.

In addition, in its 2014 budget, the North Carolina General Assembly required the

State Board of Education to approve the opening of two virtual charter schools effective

in the 2015-2016 school year for a four-year pilot program (Ovaska-Few, 2014). In

August of 2015, these two virtual charter schools opened and began to serve students in grades Kindergarten to Twelfth Grade. In 2018, despite both virtual charter schools receiving a letter grade of D from the state and failing to meet expected student growth, the state legislature voted to extend the charters of the virtual schools through 2023 (Hui, 2018). However, in 2019, the North Carolina governor vetoed a bill from the North Carolina legislature that would have allowed the virtual charter schools to raise their enrollment caps by twenty percent a year (Hui, 2019).

There has been tremendous change in the numbers and regulation status of charter schools in recent years, especially in North Carolina. As the number of charter schools in rural areas increase, there is an increasing need for additional research on the impact that charter schools have made on rural public-schools, as well as the surrounding community. In the next section, I will examine the theoretical lens for my study, which will help to put this dissertation in a broader context, not just in terms of community impact, but also within the wider scope of the existing literature on the subject.

Theoretical Framework

While I will examine in considerable detail the current literature and research surrounding charter schools and traditional public-schools in chapter two, in this section I look at the theories that have been used to study charter schools. The relationship between schools and democracy is especially important in understanding of impact of school choice programs, as is the role of the schools in serving the public.

One lens that has been used in similar studies is the theory of competitive effects. Ni (2008) explains that one of the important and unresolved issues surrounding charter

schools is "whether charter competition increases the efficiency of traditional public-schools and thereby benefits the vast majority of students who remain in the public-school system" (p. 571). The ultimate question that researchers are hoping to answer through this lens is whether or not students in traditional public-schools are benefiting from the competition that is caused by the presence of charter schools in their area. In examining the current research surrounding charter schools, it is increasingly difficult to draw a conclusion one way or another relating to this question, as evidence is mixed with regards to the academic impact of charter schools as well as the presence of innovation in those charter schools.

Other researchers used the productivity lens to examine the impact of charter schools on traditional public-schools. Hoxby (2003) writes that the idea behind productivity and school choice "is that choice would give schools greater incentives to be productive because less productive schools would lose students to more productive schools" (p. 288). Hoxby argues that examining school choice through the productivity lens could potentially help to determine whether or not school choice will "benefit all children" (p. 288). Viewing charter schools through the productivity lens also proves difficult as productivity is an elusive variable that is difficult to define and research is limited in this area.

In other research that I examined, the lens of market and institutional theories was used (Berends, et al., 2010; Berends, 2015). The market-theory supposes that:

> as school choice undercuts bureaucratic political control of public education, it
> provides educators in schools of choice the opportunity and motivation to

experiment with new organizational and instructional strategies for improving student achievement. (p. 306)

The researchers also present an alternative theory, Institutional Theory, which involve "ritual classifications that define the actions of schools, teachers and students" (p. 307). Ritual classifications, according to the authors, include the use of certified teachers, specific amounts of instructional time and the use of specific curricular programs, among others. This theory argues that even charter schools will eventually regress to the mean and will eventually partake in the aforementioned ritual classifications.

The public choice theory has also been used to examine why parents elect to make a choice for their child's education (Bast and Wallberg, 2004). Public choice theory supposes that parents are ultimately better choosers than the government in selecting a school for their children. Buckley and Schneider (2006) examined parent satisfaction with their choice to send their children to a charter school through the lens of the market theory. In examining satisfaction from the market standpoint, parent satisfaction should be high because they were able to make the education choice for their children.

Stein (2105) and Frankenberg, et al. (2017) examined the question of school choice, charter schools and segregation in Pennsylvania through the lens of the theory of school choice. Based on Friedman's work in the 1950s, the theory of school choice assumes that allowing families more schooling options to choose from would incentivize competition from other schools and thus student achievement for all students would improve.

In examining the theoretical frameworks used by other researchers, the lenses of market and institutional theories and choice theory, both public choice or school choice that includes private options, most influenced that direction and analysis in my study. As I examined the theoretical research, the existing literature and the results of my study, elements of all of these theoretical frameworks emerged throughout the course of my research. As more options become available to stakeholders throughout the community, educators who work in all available schooling options (traditional public, private, or charter) are forced to examine their practices and products to ensure they are offering the best possible product to their stakeholders. In addition, the ability and power of parents to make a choice with regards to their child's education emerged throughout my research, as did the belief that parents were not always satisfied with the choice they made for their children.

Significance of the Study

As a public-school educator, I believe that public-schools are the bedrock of our democracy, and ensuring all students receive a quality education helps to ensure the future of our nation. I also recognize that a one-size-fits-all education is no longer adequate and that there are plenty of viable of educational options for parents to choose from, including charter-schools, private schools, and homeschools. The presence of choice and competition is not inherently negative; increased competition should drive the available products to improve, in this case more choices could result in improved traditional schools. However, in education, as in much of society, quantity does not inherently parallel quality. While choice and completion can be good, it is vital that

consumers are well-informed about choices and that the consequences of choice programs – both intended and unintended – are fully explored.

With each passing year, especially now as a school principal, I have seen more and more parents (and students) considering and ultimately enrolling their children in charter schools. Public-schools have been impacted by the loss of students and resulting loss of funding that corresponds with those withdrawals. As the number of charter schools in North Carolina has increased substantially, the impact of charter schools on other areas within traditional public-schools has also increased. With the rising number of charter schools in North Carolina, more and more charter schools have opened in, or are more accessible to, rural parts of the state. Many of these rural public-schools have already faced dwindling populations and decreased funding, and now they are being faced with the prospect of losing more students and teachers to the charter schools that are opening near their schools. With the loss of students comes loss of jobs, since funding in public-schools is directly tied in with student population, and also potentially the loss of community morale, particularly when the traditional public-school was historically the center of most rural communities.

The stories of what has happened in several North Carolina communities' help to illustrate the significance of my dissertation study. In Pamlico County, North Carolina, Pamlico County Schools (PCS) Superintendent Wanda Dawson fought the expansion of the local charter school, Arapahoe Charter School's high school program. Before expansion, Arapahoe served eighteen percent of the 1300 students in Pamlico County. If

the expansion occurred, PCS feared the system would lose a third of their students. As

Dawson told WUNC:

> We are the tipping point. At what point are you going to realize how devastating
> this is for a public-school system? When you start chipping away at the funding
> and start taking the kids away, at some point you've got to say: What do I cut
> out?

In Pamlico County Schools, losing additional students meant they would be forced to cut

the only counselor in the middle school, end the high school marching band, and end the

middle school sports program (Dewitt, 2013).

In Cabarrus County, North Carolina, the school boards of Cabarrus County

Schools (CCS) and Kannapolis City Schools (KCS) disagreed regarding CCS's support

of the pending approval of a new statewide virtual charter school that would be based in

Cabarrus County. The KCS School Board voted to join a lawsuit that would contest the

decision to allow the virtual charter school to be based in Cabarrus County. Citing the

potential loss of funding, and the fact that the money would be directed towards a for-

profit entity, KCS School Board Chair Danita Rickard stated: "That's your tax money.

It's morally and principally not good for the state of North Carolina for taxpayers to

finance a for-profit entity that's in direct competition of what we're trying to do" (Pacek,

para. 17, 2012).

Rural schools and school districts throughout the nation are facing similar issues.

In Greensboro, Georgia, the growth of Lake Oconee Academy has made a significant

impact on the enrollment in the rural school district, Greene County Schools. Since

2007, the local school district has seen a 500 student drop in their total enrollment

numbers. In addition to significant staff and budget cuts, the school board, in February 2018, made the tough decision to close two of the five majority-black public-schools in the district (Felton, 2018).

While there has been a significant increase in the number of students withdrawing from their zoned traditional public-school to enroll in a charter school, school administrators have also seen those students return to public-schools, often in the middle of the school year. When this happens, in a majority of cases, schools do not receive funding for those students when they return. Allocations for per pupil funding (PPE) are determined within the first twenty days of school. When a charter school enrolls a student from a local education agency (LEA), they receive that students PPE allotments. The amount of funding that each school, district, and charter school receives is determined after the twentieth day of school and must be paid to the appropriate agency within the first thirty days of school. Consequently, if a student originally enrolled in a charter school in August but the family decides in October to withdraw and re-enroll their child in their local public-school, the public-school does not receive the PPE funding for the student, but they are still expected to provide him or her with all of the same services and resources as a student who has been enrolled from day one or day twenty.

In New Hanover County, North Carolina in 2017, school administrators saw 84 students return during the school year from charter schools, 44 of whom came from one specific charter school (Bellamy, 2017). Because those students re-enrolled after the twentieth day of school, New Hanover County Schools (NHCS) lost out on approximately $500,000 in funding, according to NHCS Superintendent Tim Markley.

While the 2016-2017 school year was an anomaly in terms of the number of students returning to the public-schools from one specific school (46), the numbers are significant, and show the financial impact that occurs when students return to public-schools mid-year.

Perhaps most telling in terms of the significance of my study is the fact that many small communities are tight-knit, and ties to the local schools, especially high schools run deep. Parents and community members take pride in the public-schools in their community. When parents make the choice to send their students to schools other than the local public-schools, those decisions can send shockwaves through a community, especially the smaller, tight-knit communities that exist in the rural areas of North Carolina.

In a report on the potential impact charter schools could have on rural America, Kominiak (2017) writes that in many cases, families in rural areas are "fiercely loyal to their public-schools" and that in some communities the local public-schools is "the brick-and-mortar lynchpin that holds the community together" (para. 6). Mark Jones of Rice University said the following: "without the independent [public] school districts, many of these communities would not exist, so anything that's seen as adversely affecting them is seen as bad for the community" (Jones, 2017 as cited in Kominiak, para. 7).

In a final example of why this study is so significant, parents in Greene County, Georgia saw the impact that the local charter school was making on their public-schools and school district and decided to fight back. One parent saw that very few traditional public-school parents attended school board meetings so she set up a Facebook page to

engage parents in the movement to resist the local charter school. The page currently has 300 members and is actively working to prevent the charter school from taking resources and students from the public-schools, and, just as importantly, prevent the re-segregation of the local public-schools (Felton, 2018). This is testament to the fact that passions can run high when it comes to educational competition in small districts, leading to potential polarization and ill-will.

As charters schools are growing significantly in rural areas, when historically they have been more common in urban settings, it is important to understand the impact that these charter schools have on rural public-schools and the surrounding community. In addition, it is important to determine how public-schools can respond effectively to the presence of charter schools in their community so that all students are well served.

Summary and Overview

In this chapter, I began with an introduction to the topic, followed by a discussion of the problems that motivate my research. I continued with an overview of the charter school movement, including an exploration into what makes a charter school distinct from traditional public-schools, and an examination of the history of charter schools in the state of North Carolina. I concluded with a discussion of the significance of the study.

Chapter two serves as an overview of the current literature that has been conducted on charter schools and the impact of charter schools on rural public-schools and the surrounding community.

In chapter three, I described the methodology that I used to conduct this research. I began with a description of two pilot studies that I conducted prior to beginning this research study. The two pilot studies impacted both the direction of my study and also helped me to refine the processes that I used in this study. I then discuss the basic research elements of my study, including research questions, setting, participants, and data collection and analysis. I also discuss any potential biases or positionality issues that arose in my study and the strategies I employed to ensure trustworthiness.

I discussed my findings in chapters four and five and shared conclusions and answered my research questions in chapter six.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

For this literature review, I examined the research surrounding the topic of charter schools, including charter school achievement, parental choice, parent satisfaction, marketing, and the response of public-schools to the presence of charter schools in their area. This review provides the foundation for my research on the impact of charter schools in a rural community.

I began with a survey of research that has been conducted on the performance of charter schools and the achievement of students enrolled in charter schools. In order to gain a more complete understanding of how charter schools have impacted rural public-schools, it is important to first understand how charter schools are performing when compared with traditional public-schools. Second, I examine why parents decide to make a choice when it comes to the schooling option for their children. Third, I explore the current research that discusses how schools market themselves in the era of increased school choice and competition. Finally, I discuss how traditional public-schools have been impacted by the presence of charter schools in their area, including the impact that charter schools have made on segregation in public and charter schools.

Examining Charter School Achievement

The charter school movement is controversial. Ever since the nation's first charter law passed in Minnesota in 1991, the charter school movement has been a much

criticized and much celebrated arm of the school choice movement (Berends, 2015). One

of the major questions surrounding charter schools is whether or not students who attend

charter schools perform better than their traditional public-school counterparts. In order

to gain an understanding of how charter schools have impacted rural public-schools and

their surrounding community, we must first understand the data surrounding charter

schools in general in order to have a more complete sense of their impact.

In this section, I examine the current research regarding charter school

achievement. In addition to providing an overview of the existing literature on charter

school achievement, I dig in deeply and examine charter school achievement broken

down, including by subject, subgroups, location, and levels.

Overview of Achievement Data

The existing literature on charter school achievement presents mixed results.

Berends (2015) sums this up well when he said the answer to the question of whether or

not charter schools have increased student achievement is: "it depends" (p. 168). Two

large-scale studies of charter school achievement were conducted in 2013 and 2014, and

the results of those studies provide the most comprehensive analysis of overall charter

school achievement to date. The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (2013)

study examined charter school achievement in twenty-seven states, building on their

previous research from a 2009 study that examined charter school achievement in sixteen

states. Overall, the researchers found that in the sixteen states that were examined in

2009, charter schools in those states had either maintained or slightly increased their

student achievement in 2013. The study also noted that almost ten percent of the schools

studied in 2009 had closed by 2013 because they were labeled as low-performing. The comprehensive 2013 study showed that overall, students in charter schools were making slow, steady progress in both math and reading, but that there were still a significant number of charter schools that performed substantially worse than traditional public-schools.

Betts and Tang (2014) found similar results when they took a comprehensive approach at examining the existing literature on charter schools and student achievement at a national level. They found that some charter schools performed better than their traditional public-school counterparts, while other charter schools performed the same or worse. Additional studies that examined achievement of students enrolled in charter schools compared to those students enrolled in traditional public-schools drew similar conclusions to the previously mentioned comprehensive studies, finding that charter schools made limited gains in terms of academic achievement, and many charter schools performed comparably to their traditional public-school counterparts. The studies examined pre-existing student achievement data from national or state-level assessments (Berends, et al., 2010; Berends, 2015; Bettinger, 2004; Carnoy, et al., 2005; Clark, et al., 2015; Gleason, et al., 2010; Henig, 2008; Zimmer, et al., 2012).

Given the mixed results from much of the broad research, and in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the current research on charter school achievement, I examine the literature broken down by various topics. I first examine how charter schools perform by subject (math and reading), next by level (elementary, middle and high), then by subgroup, and finally by location.

Examining Charter School Achievement by Subject

Much like the broader literature surrounding charter school achievement, the research that examined specific gains in terms of math and reading also found mixed results. Davis and Raymond (2012) examined student achievement of students enrolled in charter schools in fifteen states, New York City and Washington, DC, using a fixed-effects study and virtual control records based on demographic factors and found that student achievement impacts were negative for math, but there was some room for limited optimism for reading. Betts and Tang (2014) found statistically significant gains for students in almost all grade levels in math, and while they found gains in reading, those gains were not statistically significant. Other studies (Nicotera, et al., as cited in Berends, 2011) found that when students were enrolled in a charter school for more than one year, they experienced more achievement gains than their counterparts in traditional public-schools in both math and reading. Other studies found negative impacts for both math and reading for students enrolled in charter schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2004, as cited in Henig, 2008; Clark, et al., 2015).

In a nationwide study on charter school effectiveness focusing on twenty-seven states, The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (2013) found that overall, 25% of charter schools performed better than traditional public-school in their geographic area in math, and charter schools performed better than 29% of traditional public-schools in reading. Conversely, 31% of charter schools performed worse than the traditional public-schools in their geographic area in math, and 19% of charter schools performed worse than their traditional public-school counterparts in reading. Davis and Raymond (2012)

also found similar trends: a majority of charter schools are on par with their local traditional public-schools in both math and reading, regardless of how high or how low those schools perform. Henig (2008) notes that in many cases, charter schools, much like their traditional public-school counterparts, have trouble making academic gains due to the skill gaps students bring with them when they enroll in charter schools.

Examining Charter School Achievement by Level

In examining the literature on charter school achievement by school level, I found that generally speaking, students in elementary and middle charter schools performed better than those in high school and/or multi-level charter schools (CREDO, 2013). Betts and Tang (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of existing literature on student achievement in charter schools, and found that elementary and middle schools performed better than traditional public-schools in their areas in math, and that while results were positive for charter schools in reading, the results were not statistically significant (a change from their 2011 study). However, in Los Angeles, an examination of student-level data of student achievement on the Stanford 9 achievement test found that elementary charter school students were on par with their traditional public-school peers in both reading and math, while in San Diego, charter school students were falling behind their traditional public-school peers in both subjects (Zimmer & Buddin, 2006). In a longitudinal study of student-level data, Zimmer, et al. (2012) found trends that suggest positive impacts for elementary school charters in Denver and Ohio and positive impacts in math and reading for all levels of charters in Chicago and Texas.

In terms of the secondary school level, Boston area middle school students attending charters saw significant gains in both math and reading compared to the achievement levels of students when they entered their charter schools (Abdulkadioglu, 2011). This study was conducted by examining pre-existing student achievement data that was available in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System database. Gleason, et al. (2010), in a study comparing student achievement of students who were admitted to charter schools compared to students who applied to a charter school but were not admitted, did not find any significant impact on student achievement in middle school charters. Zimmer and Buddin (2006) found that secondary (middle and high school) students in charter schools in Los Angeles scored slightly higher in reading than their traditional public-school peers, and slightly lower in math. Secondary charter school students in San Diego showed reverse trends, scoring slightly lower than their traditional public-school peers in reading and slightly higher in math.

Looking specifically at high schools, Betts and Tang (2014) found that students at high school charter schools performed about as well as those in the local traditional public-schools, but that there was a wide variation in results across the schools they studied. Boston area charter high schools saw modest gains in math, and small but insignificant gains in reading (Abdulkadioglu, 2011). Examining college readiness in charter schools in Los Angeles, Adzima (2017) found in a study using both Smarter Balanced Assessments and Advanced Placement data that charter school graduates are better prepared for college than their traditional public-school counterparts in both math and reading.

Examining Charter School Achievement by Subgroup

One of the original purposes of the school choice movement and charter schools in particular was to provide school choice options for families whose neighborhood schools were low-performing and who might not otherwise be able to pay private school tuition (Chingos, 2013). In that context, it is important to examine charter school achievement by subgroup to determine if charter schools are making a positive impact on all subgroups, and in particular groups of students who have historically underperformed and been underserved in traditional public-schools.

The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (2013) found that compared to 2009, charter schools were serving higher numbers of economically disadvantaged students in 2013. Multiple studies that examined pre-existing student-level achievement and demographic data found that students who were identified as economically disadvantaged or who qualified for free and/or reduced lunch made positive and often significant gains in both reading and math (CREDO, 2013; Clark, et al., 2015; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Gleason, et al., 2010). One comprehensive study (Betts & Tang, 2014) found that economically disadvantaged students in charter schools perform at least as well as their traditional public-school counterparts.

Researchers have disaggregated charter school data by a range of subgroups, including by race, ethnicity, and students with disabilities. Overall, the impact of charter schools on achievement for Black students was positive. Studies found that Black students in general outperformed their peers in traditional public-schools, especially Black students in poverty (Betts & Tang, 2014; Davis & Raymond, 2012). The CREDO

(2013) study drew similar conclusions, but found more specifically that Black students who were not in poverty achieved about the same as their traditional public-school peers. Both Betts and Tang (2014) and the CREDO (2013) study found that Hispanic students in general perform about the same compared to their traditional public-school peers. Breaking it down even further, the CREDO study found positive impacts for Hispanic students in poverty and who were English-language learners, but negative impacts for Hispanic students who were not living in poverty, and mixed results for Hispanic students who were not English-language learners. Looking at English-language learners as a whole, Betts and Tang (2014) found that those students performed comparably to their traditional public-school peers, if not slightly better, while the CREDO (2013) study found positive impacts for that subgroup. Students with disabilities also performed at least as well compared to their peers in traditional public-schools (Betts & Tang, 2014; CREDO, 2013). The CREDO (2013) study also found positive and significant impacts in math for students with disabilities.

In the examination of the research, there were two subgroups in charter schools that realized a negative impact on their academic achievement: White and Asian students (Betts & Tang, 2014; CREDO, 2013; Davis & Raymond, 2012). In addition, one study specifically found negative impacts on achievement in charter schools that served fewer numbers of students who were identified as economically disadvantaged (Clark, et al., 2015).

Examining Charter School Achievement by Location

As previously mentioned, when looking at overall charter school achievement, the results are mixed. However, when researchers looked at charter schools in specific locations, some distinct trends begin to emerge. Multiple studies noted that charter school achievement is often higher in urban areas compared to non-urban areas (Angrist, et al., 2013; Betts & Tang, 2014; Clark, et al., 2015), but that trend is not exclusive, as research in urban districts in California showed mixed and slightly more negative results for charter schools (Betts & Tang, 2014; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006). Students in urban charter schools in Massachusetts also regularly showed more significant gains compared to their counterparts in traditional public-schools (Angrist, et al., 2013; Betts & Tang, 2014). Angrist, et al. (2013) found that academic performance in non-urban charter schools either remained the same or decreased, though those students often entered those charter schools performing at a higher academic level compared to students in urban charter schools.

The research also found that charter school achievement varied significantly when charter schools in various parts of the country were examined. Betts and Tang (2014) attribute those differences, in part, to the different policies affecting charter schools from one location to the next. Charter schools in Boston, Chicago, Delaware, Denver, Milwaukee, and New York City showed significant academic gains across certain grade levels (Abdulkadioglu, 2011; Berends, 2015; Betts & Tang, 2014; Zimmer, et al., 2012), while charter schools in California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas showed mixed or

negative results for student achievement across grade levels (Betts & Tang, 2014;

Zimmer, et al., 2012).

Charter School Achievement in North Carolina

Because this study is situated in North Carolina, it is important to examine

specifically how students in charter schools in North Carolina perform compared to their

peers in traditional public-schools. In this section, I examine current research that has

been conducted related to charter school performance in the state of North Carolina.

Bifulco and Ladd (2006) studied students who entered traditional public-schools

between the years of 1996-2000 and followed them until they completed eighth grade or

the end of the 2001-2002 school year. In studying students who moved from traditional

public-schools into charter schools, the researchers found that students made smaller

annual gains according to the North Carolina End-of-Grade Test of Math and Reading

while they were enrolled in charter schools as compared to the time they were enrolled in

traditional public-schools.

The CREDO study mentioned above examined, in part, the performance of

fourth-grade students on the NAEP Examination for charter and traditional public-school

students in North Carolina, among other states. In North Carolina, the CREDO (2013)

study found that on average, fourth grade students in North Carolina charter schools in

reading gained twenty-two days of instruction compared to their peers in traditional

public-schools. In math, the study found that charter school students lost on average

seven days of instruction compared to their peers in traditional public-schools.

As part of their 2017 strategic plan, the North Carolina State Board of Education examined charter school and traditional public-school achievement from the 2014-2015 school year to the 2016-2017 year (the plan will continue to do so through the 2019-2020 school year). In terms of achievement, the State Board of Education found that charter schools were performing lower than traditional public-schools in all three major categories: percentage of students performing at or above the college and career-readiness standard (33.7% of charter school students were college and career-ready compared to 49.2% of traditional public-school students), percentage of students who are performing at or above their grade level proficiency standard (58.4% of charter school students were on-grade level compared to 59.2% of traditional public-school students), and the percentage of schools meeting or exceeded expected growth (70.1% of charter schools met or exceeded growth compared to 73.7% of traditional public-schools) (State Board of Education Strategic Plan, 2017).

Ultimately, the data I examined in this literature review demonstrates that overall, on average charter schools are performing no better and no worse than traditional public-schools in their area. While there are examples of charter schools that are outperforming their traditional public-school counterparts, there are also examples of charter schools that are underperforming their traditional public-school counterparts. Given that there is little data to show that charter schools are consistently stronger than traditional public-schools, it is worth exploring why parents are making the decision to send their children to charter schools as opposed to traditional public-schools

The School Choice Movement: Why Parents Send their Children to Charter Schools

In order to understand the impact charter schools have had on public-schools, it is important to have background information about why parents choose to enroll their students in charter schools in the first place. In the following section, I examine the literature on parent choice, specifically looking at choice involving charter schools. In examining this literature, it is evident that parents choose to send their children to charter schools for a variety of reasons. One of the main reasons that parents examine their choice options is because of their frustration with their experiences in previous schools. A majority of current charter school parents have had previous experience in public-schools. In a study of charter school parents in Alberta, Canada (O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000), researchers found that more than two-thirds of charter school parents had previous experiences in traditional public-schools. Many of the parents who begin looking at school choice options did so because they were frustrated with the education their child was getting. Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, and Branch (2007) examined the relationship between the quality of a school and parental decision making. They found that poor academic performance in public-schools made a positive impact on the growth and popularity of charter schools. Similarly, Adzima (2014), by examining the waitlists of students waiting to enroll in charter schools in Pennsylvania, found that there was a relationship between an increase in the number of students on wait lists for charter schools and the decrease in student achievement in public-schools. In a series of interviews of parents of children with disabilities, Finn, Caldwell and Raub (2006) found

that parents sought charter schools because they felt public-schools were not meeting their child's needs.

It is clear that dissatisfaction with public-schools is a significant factor in causing parents to explore and ultimately choose other options for their child's education. But once parents decide they are frustrated with their child's current experiences or that they want to seek an alternative for their child, what do they look for in a school and how do they go about conducting their search?

When parents begin actively looking for educational options for their children, the quality of the school is typically a high priority for parents. However, finding and discerning what makes a quality school is often easier said than done, and not all parents have access to the same information. In the following section, I examine the literature that surrounds these major themes relating to parent choice.

Factors Influencing Parental Choice

In a majority of the research I reviewed, strong academics or school quality was often cited as a high priority for parents in seeking school options for their children. Numerous studies that surveyed parents who were either in the process of choosing a school choice option for their children or who had recently made that decision found that academics or some other version of school quality was most often cited as a priority for parents or the primary reason they chose to look for another option for their child's education (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000; Reilly, 2000; Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan, 2007; Weeden, 2002). For example, Teske, Fitzpatrick and Kaplan (2007) conducted a survey-based study with approximately 800

low-income parents (income less than $50,000/year) in Milwaukee, Washington, DC and Denver. Forty-five percent of parents surveyed by the researchers cited "some aspect of academic quality" when discussing why they were looking for another educational option for their child.

In surveys related to their educational decision making, while many parents indicated the quality of the school was of high importance to them when looking for the best school for their children, other factors also played a role in their research and eventual school choice. Class size and specific instructional strategies or teaching methods were also cited as reasons why parents sought alternatives (O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000; Weheir & Tedin, 2002). In a series of interviews with parents who had made the choice to enroll their children in a charter school, Villavicencio (2013) concluded that parents who were looking for more diverse experiences for their children placed a higher priority on that factor than on student achievement. Adzima (2014) found that parents often looked for schools that valued parental input and involvement.

Bosetti and Pyryt (2007), in a mixed-methods study of almost 2000 parents in Alberta, Canada, found that while quality academics was an important factor in parental decision-making, it weighed equal with other factors, such as:

> proximity to home, safety, the needs and schedule of other siblings, and the ability of parents to supplement or enrich their children's education with activities outside the school setting–rendered a particular school the best choice for the family. (p. 106)

Do Parents Understand What Makes a School "Good"?

While parents in previously mentioned studies (Bast & Walberg, 2004; Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000; Reilly, 2000; Teske, Fitzpatrick & Kaplan, 2007; Weeden, 2002) stated that the academic quality of a school was an important factor in choosing the right school, research also suggests that determining what makes a school high quality can be difficult.

In making decisions that impact their child's education, many parents rely more on word-of-mouth and networking than specific data regarding school quality. Teske, et al. (2007) and Villavicencio (2013) found that many parents pick schools to consider based on the recommendations from individuals in their social network. In addition to making decisions based on networking and connections, parents do not always examine all of the school options around them before deciding. Villavicencio (2013) found that while some parents conducted exhaustive research, many parents only filled out applications and/or did not examine all of the charter schools that were available to them in their area.

Weiher and Tedin (2002) surveyed more than 1000 charter school households in Texas and found that when it came time to enroll their children, a majority of the parents they surveyed picked charter schools that had significantly worse performance on state testing than the public-schools their children had previously attended, and that race was often a factor in the decisions that these households made. I will discuss one reason for this, the marketing of charter schools in more detail later in this literature review, but is important to briefly mention here. Hanushek, et al. (2007) found that parent choice is

influenced in part by how charter school leaders market their schools as being different or better than public-schools, even if their academic performance is the same or worse than geographically similar traditional public-schools. While charter schools may state they are better than public-schools when it comes to academic performance, or more innovative in terms of educational practices, parents do not always have access to accurate data to verify those claims themselves. Buckley and Schneider (2009) found that in general, parents do not have access to much reliable information about the quality of schools.

In examining the research about how and why school quality can be hard to discern, a specific trend began to emerge from the research concerning a lack of equity in decision making. The evidence was so overwhelming in this area that I decided to dedicate an entire subsection to that specific research.

A Lack of Equity in Parental Choice

While school quality can be hard to discern for many, researchers note that school quality was especially hard to discern for low-income and minority families. When examining the politics behind the school choice movement, Vergari (2007) noted two specific areas of concern relating to school choice: "concerns about equity in school choices available to families" and ongoing "debates about the will and capacity of parents to make wise choices for their children" (p. 27). Hanushek, et al. (2007) cite as the basis for their research a frequently made assertion that "parents, and particularly low-income parents, are likely to be poor consumers of quality — perhaps because of informational problems, lack of attention, [or] lack of experience" (p. 839). In their research, the

authors found limited information that could support or debunk the assertion they cited as the basis for their study. They did find that parents do cite the quality of academics in a charter school as a reason for removing their students from that school.

Bosetti and Pyryt (2007) found that lower-income families do not have the same means to advocate for their children, nor do they necessarily have the skills to discern what entails a quality school, as compared to more affluent families. In addition, many low-income parents may not even research all of the available options available to them and their children. Teske, et al. (2013) found in a survey of charter school parents that among low- and moderate-income parents, very few take into consideration more than four school options for their children, and approximately half of those parents only look at two options for their students and typically only apply to one school. In addition, because of the impact of word-of-mouth advertising and networking, Villavicencio (2013) wrote that parents who have more "social capital" have access to more and better school choices for their children (p. 17). Schneider, et al. (2000, as cited in McGinn and Ben-Porath, 2014) argue that

> formal networks (such as advertisements or newspaper reports) are frequently the main source of information for poor and minority parents as they try to make decisions regarding their children's schooling. Schneider et al. explain that while poor, minority parents may have strong connections with close family members and friends, they lack quick access to a wider range of people and institutions, and therefore they may have a more difficult time gathering accurate details about local schools through informal means. (pp. 180-181)

The lack of access and information about charter school performance is a limiting factor in helping parents, especially low-income parents, make the best decisions for their children when it comes to school choice.

What Goes Unsaid: Parents Searching for the Best "Fit"

While many parents told researchers that academics influenced the school choice decision they made for their student, actions speak louder than words. There is evidence that at least some parents seek out school choice options to escape diversity in their traditional public-schools. Based on surveys conducted in the Washington, D.C. area, Buckley and Schneider (2009) concluded that "parents *say* that the academic aspects of schools are most important to them in choosing and evaluating schools" (p. 115, author's emphasis). The authors placed emphasis on the word "say" because they found that in the privacy of their own homes, "parents are consistently more interested in race than they ever will admit to when talking to someone who is interviewing them" (p. 116). Adzima (2014) found that parents rarely considered for their children charter schools that had high free and reduced lunch rates and that parents seemed to be looking for schools that closely resembled those that middle-class children attend.

Parent Satisfaction with Charter Schools

Once parents have made a choice to send their children to a charter school, are they satisfied with that choice? The research that I reviewed indicates that overall parents report satisfaction with the experiences of their children in charter school, but they also acknowledge areas for improvement.

In research (primarily surveys) conducted with parents whose children were currently enrolled in charter schools, parents rated their child's experiences positively (Akey, et al., 2008; Carey, et al., 2000; Lange & Lehr, 2000; O'Reilly & Bosetti, 2000; Riley, 2000; Teske, et al., 2008;). Similarly, in research conducted with parents of students with disabilities in 16 Minnesota charter schools, Lange and Lehr (2000) found that parents were "overwhelmingly" satisfied with the education and services their child was receiving.

Many parents were highly satisfied with their child's charter school in general and also when compared to the education they were previously receiving in the public-school. In their analysis of a survey conducted with parents whose children had enrolled in one of 17 charter schools in California, Wohlstetter, Nayfack and Mora-Flores (2008) found that 70% of the parents gave their child's charter school an A. When specifically asked what most pleased them, parents from various schools noted that the "academic program [at the charter school] was better than that at the public-school their children attended prior to the charter school" (p. 79). Buckley and Schneider (2009) also found that in a survey of D.C. area charter schools, "charter parents on average evaluate their child's school more highly than their counterparts in the traditional public-schools in D.C." (p. 185). As a further support of their evidence, they suggested that "the type of parents who are dissatisfied enough to change their child's school tend to be tougher critics of the new schools as well" (p. 190). Saatcioglu, Bajaj, and Schumacher (2011) also concluded that "the average parent…is highly satisfied with his or her child's school" (p. 449).

While overall parents were satisfied with the charter schools they had enrolled their children in, no school is perfect. In the research that I reviewed for this literature review, parents mentioned a variety of areas in which they would like to see improvement in charter schools. In Alberta, Canada, parents surveyed by O'Reilly and Bosetti (2000) reported frustrations with transportation and a lack of extracurricular activities. Wohlstetter, et al. (2008) found that parents most-often mentioned facilities as an area for improvement, but also mentioned school nutrition, physical education, and requirements of parental involvement as areas of concern. Buckley and Schneider (2009) found that while parents were overall satisfied and more satisfied in most areas than parents in D.C. area traditional public-schools, they were no more satisfied than parents of D.C. area public-schools when it came to discipline in their child's charter school.

Marketing of Schools

As competition for school enrollment has increased over the years, schools, public, private, and charter alike have found an increased need to use marketing practices in order to better communicate to stakeholders the benefits and features of their schools as opposed to an alternative. For this section, I examined the existing literature about how school leaders market their schools to potential students and their families.

According to DiMartino and Jessen (2018), "branding and marketing have become keys to building public and political buy-in to educational models, institutions, and, in many cases, educational policies themselves" (p. 4). According to the authors, the term "edvertising – the combined practice of marketing, branding, and advertising in education – began to take center stage in public education" (p. 4). As DiMartino and

Jessen conducted their study across the educational landscape, looking at variations of traditional public-schools and charter schools, they found three broad themes that emerged from their research. First, in the traditional public-school districts that were practicing edvertising efforts, the amount of time and money invested in these practices varied greatly, not just from district to district but also within schools in the same district. The second broad theme was that compared to traditional public-schools, charters schools, especially those run by private companies, or education management organizations, are leading the way when it comes to investing in marketing practices. They also found that "public districts are not devoting the same institutional resources to edvertising" (p. 149). The third theme that emerged from their research was a series of ethical quandaries surrounding edvertising practices. Those ethical quandaries included the shifting of time and money to edvertising practices, the use of teachers for marketing and branding purposes, and concerns surrounding truth in edvertising and a potential loss of transparency.

In addition, the authors raised concerns about edvertising practices focusing on "low-income communities of color" (p. 152). The authors noted that the community plays a vital role in community members enrolling in specific schools, and as research in the previous section indicates, word of mouth is powerful in parents choosing to enroll their children in a specific school. The authors raised the following questions:

> What if the trusted community member is on the payroll of a CMO? What if the grassroots community building in the form of community fairs, movie nights, and ice cream socials is actually a part of a coordinated advertising campaign in the guise of community outreach?

The authors also raised concerns about marketing practices targeting specific groups of students, often the "better" students. The authors shared the concern that "the marketing message is targeted with the intended outcome of gaining elite consumers, which serves cyclically to reinforce the prestige of the organization itself" (p. 154). Finally, DiMartino and Jessen (2018) noted an ethical concern that organizations placed a higher value on the edvertising than they did on the education itself.

Other studies drew similar conclusions. Eckes and Trotter (2007) examined how eight prominent charter schools recruited students and found that schools utilized recruitment practices that encouraged the development of academically strong schools in communities where such schools were rare or did not exist. In a study that examined promotional materials utilized in ten Michigan schools and associations (4 public, 4 private, 2 charter), Lubienski (2007) found that increased competition and marketing in education is creating schools that utilize marketing strategies to recruit higher achieving students instead of cultivating educational opportunities for more underprivileged students.

Cucchiara (2008) examined the rebranding initiative of urban tradition public schools in center-city Philadelphia, which had a goal to re-engage middle-class families in urban schools to help reverse white-flight, but found "the *ways* the initiative seeks to achieve these goals, particularly its emphasis on marketing and its targeting of resources and opportunities to already advantaged areas have troubling implications for equity" (p. 176). In a study that examined the web-based marketing practices of 55 charter schools,

Wilson and Carlsen (2016) concluded that school websites highlight what sets individual schools apart in such a way that results in establishing more segregated schools.

Impact of Charter Schools on Traditional Public-Schools

As a foundation for my study, I also examined the literature surrounding how traditional public-schools have been impacted by the presence of traditional public-schools in their area and how traditional public-school leaders have responded to the competition from charter schools. As with the research that examined the achievement of students who attend charter schools, the research on how charter schools have impacted public-schools is mixed as well. A majority of the research is focused on the academic impact that charter schools made on traditional public-schools in their area. In two early studies, Hoxby (2000, 2001) found that competition from charter schools resulted in significant test score increases for students in public-schools where there was competition from charter schools.

Other research has been conducted more recently. In studies that examined the impacts of charter schools on students who remained in public-schools, Bettinger (2005) found that the effect on public-schools was minimal. Holmes et al. (2003) found that the impact on public-schools as a result of competition from charter schools was positive. Both studies examined student achievement data at the school level in order to draw their conclusions. Ni (2008) also studied the impact of charter schools on traditional public-schools in Michigan, examining school-level student achievement data over the course of eleven years. Ni found that overall competition from charter schools had a negative impact on the public-schools. More specifically, when looking short term, the results

were negative but insignificant. However, the long-term effects trended negative as well and was much more significant.

Other studies examined student-specific data in order to determine the impact that charter schools had on traditional public-schools in terms of academic achievement. Some of the research (Booker, et al., 2008; Sass, 2006) found that public-school showed gains in their test scores as a result of that competition, while other researchers (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005) found the difference in achievement scores to be statistically insignificant. Imberman (2010) examined the impact of charter schools on the traditional public-schools in a large urban school district in the southwestern region of the United States. Imberman examined the impact on both test scores in math and reading, as well as the impact on student behavior and attendance. Imberman found that the presence of charter schools had a negative impact on student achievement in math and reading, however found a positive impact on student behavior in middle and high schools. He also found no impact on student attendance data for the public-schools. Winters (2010) examined the impact of charter schools on public-school achievement in New York City. He found that students in the public-schools that were comparatively losing more students to charter schools either showed slight or no gains in math and reading when they remained in their traditional public-schools.

Buddin and Zimmer (2005) also used surveys to examine the impact that charter schools had on public-schools, specifically from the perspective of principals of public-schools whom they surveyed. Overall, principals surveyed did not feel much pressure at all to improve the product of their traditional public-school due to the increased

competition from charter schools in their area. However, this study is not 14 years old, and much has changed in the educational landscape surrounding charter schools since then, making a community impact study like mine particularly valuable.

Segregation and Charter Schools

As I examined the impact that charter schools have had on public-schools, as well as other literature surrounding charter schools, the issue of segregation and the impact that charter schools have made on the segregation of schools was a frequently cited concern by researchers. This was also an issue or concern that has been repeatedly cited by policymakers examining the impact charter schools. In North Carolina specifically, there is concern in this area due to the increase in the number of charter schools in the state.

Current research suggests that the increased number of options available today has led to increased segregation in schools, especially charter schools, for both black and white students as well as for students of varying socioeconomic classes. In this section I examine the literature on segregation and charter schools broadly, and then look specifically at the impact in North Carolina.

In a majority of studies examining the racial composition of charter schools compared to traditional public-schools, researchers found that students were entering charter schools that were more segregated than either the traditional public-schools they were withdrawing from or the traditional public-schools in their area. In a nationwide study of the racial composition and segregation in charter schools, Frankenberg and Lee (2003) found that in many states, while there is a range of diversity in charter schools

from highly integrated to highly segregated, many charter schools were more segregated

than traditional public-schools in the same areas. The study also found that black

students are educated in charter schools that are extremely segregated. The study found

that "the average black charter school student attends a school that is 73% black and only

14 percent white" (p. 17). There were also many instances of white students being

educated in charter schools that are almost exclusively white. In fact, the study found

that

> Eighty-three percent of white charter school students are in majority white
> schools About one-fifth (22%) of all white charter school students nationwide are
> in schools that have a student body that is more than 90% white, a rather high
> percentage due to the fact that the majority of students in charter schools are
> minority students. (p. 17)

Frankenberg and Lee found that "regardless of white share of the entire charter school

enrollment, black students in charter schools experience high levels of racial isolation and

are exposed to very low percentages of white students" (p. 36). They concluded that

"there is little evidence from [their] analysis that the existence of charter schools helps to

foster more integrative environments, especially for minority students" (p. 46).

In a study from the Civil Rights Project that spanned forty states and Washington,

D.C. and examined enrollment data of public and charter schools, Frankenberg, et al.

(2010) found that charter schools contain more widespread segregation by both race and

class than traditional public-schools. The researchers also noted than many charter

schools were established in urban locations where the traditional public-schools are also

likely to enroll disproportionate numbers of minority students. The authors also found

that much of the data surrounding the enrollment of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds was incomplete, as less than twenty-five percent of the charter schools studied provided that data. The researchers concluded that while there are individual examples of charter schools that are extremely diverse, they do not represent the broader scope of charter schools.

In another nationwide study, Rapp and Eckes (2007) examined student diversity data in 32 states that had charter school enrollment numbers greater than 1000 as of the 2002-2003 school year. They found that charter schools enrolled more minority students than traditional public-schools. After completing a research review of existing literature on school choice in the United States, Rotberg (2014) concluded that there was a "strong link between school choice programs and an increase in student segregation by race, ethnicity and income" (p. 28).

A number of other state-level studies drew similar conclusions. Three different studies that examined that impact of charter schools and segregation in Arizona found evidence of increased segregation in Arizona charter schools. In a study of enrollment data (race, ethnicity, gender, grade level) of Arizona public and charter schools in both urban and rural areas from 1994-1997, Cobb and Glass (1999) found that almost fifty percent of the charter schools showed indications of substantial segregation. In addition, charter schools in Arizona had, on average, a twenty percent higher enrollment of white students as compared to traditional public-schools in Arizona. The authors were also concerned by the fact that the charter schools that did have proportionally higher minority

enrollment were primarily schools that often did not lead to college enrollment (vocational schools and schools for students who had been suspended).

In two different studies examining charter schools and segregation, Garcia (2008) found similar patterns of increased segregation in charter schools in Arizona. In a study that examined academic and racial segregation of Arizona charter schools by examining the enrollment patterns of students who withdrew from traditional public-schools, Garcia (2008a) found that while charter schools at the elementary and middle school level had about the same levels of academic integration as traditional public-schools, parents most often chose to enroll their children in charter schools that were more racially segregated than the traditional public-schools they were leaving. In a separate study that examined that choices of students who left traditional public-schools to enroll in charter schools, Garcia (2008b) found that elementary school students enrolled in charter schools that were more segregated than the traditional public-schools they left, and that high school students enrolled in charter schools that were as segregated or more integrated than the traditional public-schools they left. Garcia concluded that the enrollment trends could mostly be attributed to elements of self-isolation among minority students as opposed to white flight.

Stein (2015) studied school choice and racial sorting in Indianapolis charter schools by examining student demographic data of fifteen charter schools in Indianapolis that utilized a specific testing service for their fall and spring testing. Stein found that there was less diversity in Indianapolis charter schools than the traditional public-schools from which those students were enrolling. More specifically, while there was diversity in

the number of students enrolling in charter schools, those students were often self-selecting, and enrolling in schools with more students of their own race or ethnicity, especially for white students. In a study focusing on the decisions of students in Pennsylvania who chose to enroll in a charter schools, Frankenberg, et al. (2017) found that Black and Latino students tended to enroll in charter schools with lower numbers of white students, while white students had a tendency to enroll in charter schools with higher numbers of white students.

Citing studies in North Carolina and Texas that also examined charter school enrollment patterns, Carnoy, et al. (2005) found that "students tend to attend charter schools that are more racially homogenous than their regular public-schools" (p. 97). The concern surrounding charter schools and segregation was the focus of a 2015 lawsuit against the state of Minnesota. In an article about the lawsuit, the authors noted that the prosecuting attorneys "blame[d] charters for heightening segregation in Minneapolis and St. Paul schools" (Raghavendran & Webster, 2015, para. 6).

In contrast to the studies that I just cited, and contributing to the pattern of charter school data often being inconclusive, other studies that were conducted found the criticism that charter schools increase segregation to be unfounded. Renzulli (2006) found that when comparing the enrollment of students in charter schools to those in traditional public-schools in the areas that the charter schools physically operate in, black students attended charter schools most often when the traditional public-schools in which they enroll from are also similarly segregated. Ritter, et al. (2010), in their response to *Choice without Equity* by Frankenberg, et al. (2010) argued that one of the primary reasons that charter schools are

seeing segregated populations is due to the fact that the traditional public-schools that students are withdrawing from are already segregated schools, and that parents are just seeking more attractive schooling options for their children. In an examination of the impact of school choice and integration of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, Ritter, et al. (2016) studied student data (gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status), in Little Rock, AR traditional public and charter schools from 2004-2010. The authors found that charter schools were less likely to be "hyper-segregated" as compared to the surrounding traditional public-schools. In addition, they found that while very few students were leaving traditional public-schools for charter schools, those that did were more likely to be minority students.

Looking more specifically at charter schools in North Carolina, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) examined students who entered third grade between 1996-2000, and followed them until the eighth grade, or 2001-2002 school year. Bifulco and Ladd found that charter schools were more segregated than the traditional-public-schools in the same district, and that families (both black and white) chose charter schools that enrolled higher numbers of students who shared their racial and socioeconomic identities, as opposed to those who didn't. Frankenberg, et al., (2010) found that while a higher percentage of white students enrolled in charter schools in North Carolina than black students, black and Latino students were enrolled in schools that were more segregated as compared to their peers who were enrolled in traditional public-schools. The study also found that white students were more likely to enroll in charter schools that isolated them from minority students as compared to their traditional public-school peers.

Conclusion

In summary, the current literature surrounding charter schools shows that overall, charter schools perform no better and no worse than their traditional public-school counterparts. In addition, the academic achievement impact on traditional public-schools that have lost students to charter schools in their area have been minimal as well. However, there are gaps in the literature that exist regarding understanding how traditional public-schools are responding to the increased competition from charter schools in their area.

A majority of the studies that have been conducted about the impact of charter schools on traditional public-schools have been quantitative in nature – they are focused on the statistical impact of charter schools on traditional public-schools, namely the academic achievement impact. Because my study will be qualitative in nature, I am hopeful that the study will fill an important gap in the literature – helping researchers and policy-makers understand why and how charter schools have impacted traditional public-schools. The quantitative studies provide important statistical information about the impact; however, my study will help readers to understand on a micro level the nature of the impact charter schools have made on traditional public-schools in one rural area.

In addition, my research will help to tell the story of stakeholders who have experienced the impact of increased competition from charter schools. Many of our policy makers are focused on the numbers – how the charter schools will (or hopefully will) improve student achievement. However, it's important to understand how these new charter school policies will impact the people in the communities they are affecting.

As of this writing, I was only able to find one study that examined how a community has been impacted by the opening of a charter school in the area (Potterton, 2018), and that study was not situated in a rural context and also had open enrollment polices, which created more movement between schools and school districts in general. In small, rural communities (and in urban communities as well) where school enrollment is determined by geographic location, schools and school events like athletics can help unify a community and give community members a common identity. When competition comes to town in the form of charter schools, this can potentially fracture communities, causing parents to take sides in which schools they support. My research will also help to allow policy makers and educators to understand the impact that is made on a community when a charter school opens or expands into a community.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

I designed this study to investigate the impact that the presence, opening, and/or growth of charter schools has on the schools in a rural community in North Carolina, as well as the impact on the community itself. In this chapter, I discuss the processes and procedures that I used in this research study, as well as how I used two pilot studies to shape the methodology for my dissertation research. I begin with a discussion of pilot studies I conducted before diving into the methods I used while conducting this study.

Pilot Study

As an educator in the public-school setting, I have long been interested in charter schools and their impact on students, parents, teachers and on traditional public-schools as a whole. I knew that I was interested in conducting a study relating to charter schools for my dissertation, however I also knew I wanted to go beyond studying student achievement in charter schools, as this topic has been widely studied, and as I already discussed, with mixed results. As I began to think further about the direction of this study, I was initially drawn to investigate the reasons that parents chose charter schools as the educational opportunity for their children instead of traditional public-schools, especially when research suggests that overall, charter schools perform no better and no worse than traditional public-schools (Berends, et al., 2010; Berends, 2015; Bettinger,

2004; Betts & Tang, 2014; Carnoy, et al., 2005; Clark, et al., 2015; CREDO, 2014;

Gleason, et al., 2010; Henig, 2008; Zimmer, et al., 2012).

While I was in the very beginning stages of my research on the topic mentioned

above, I decided to conduct several interviews to explore perceptions of charter school

impact. I developed drafts of the interview questions I planned to use as part of my study

and conducted two pilot interviews. Those interviews were with stakeholders in a rural

community that had been impacted by the growth of two charter schools in their

community. I conducted interviews with the principal of the middle school, and a parent

who has children in the elementary, middle, and high schools in the same community.

The pilot interviews yielded rich information, specifically in that both stakeholders

shared how their schools had responded and even improved because of the increased

competition from the charter schools. However, they both also mentioned tensions in the

small community that existed between those who had made the choice to send their

children to the charter schools and those who had remained loyal to the traditional public-

schools in the community.

As I reflected on my experiences with these pilot interviews and the information

that I discovered in those interviews, I was intrigued by the tensions they alluded to, and

decided to adjust the course of my study to focus on how charter schools have impacted

traditional public-schools in rural areas and the community that those schools serve. I

also decided to specifically focus my study in the community where I conducted my first

pilot study. As I continued to work to design my research study, I conducted a second

pilot study to ensure the interview protocol I planned to use with principals was aligned

with the new direction of my study. I also used the principal interview questions as the foundation for the questions I used when conducting focus groups and additional interviews with community members. To complete the second pilot study, I decided to interview two local high school principals. The schools that both of these principals' lead have been impacted by one specific charter school, one of the same charter schools that has also impacted the schools in which my study is situated.

Both principals shared in-depth both the impact that the presence of charter schools has had on their schools and the specific changes that they have made as a result. In addition, they discussed their perspectives on why they believe students are leaving their traditional public high schools, and why they nonetheless think their schools are better options for most kids.

Both principals stated that in their conversations with parents and students who had left or were choosing to leave their school for the local charter school, very few, if any, mentioned academic reasons as their primary reason for transferring to the charter schools. Both said that reasons such as dismissal every Friday at noon, athletics, and the opportunity for a fresh start were the reasons parents most often gave for choosing the charter school. Both principals mentioned that they had lost around 5-10% of their student body to charter schools over a period of time.

While I was conducting these preliminary interviews, I noticed growing discussion in the local newspapers about the choice and charter school debate in the small community where I conducted this study. Both the principal and the parent I interviewed mentioned how an article in the weekly newspaper by a charter school student ignited a

debate and drove a wedge in their community because community members thought the newspaper was taking a pro-charter school stance by publishing this piece. In the interviews I conducted with these two principals, both mentioned how their local newspaper (a different one), allowed a student from the city school system, the county school system and the local charter school to write a piece about the merits of their schools as a means to support education. In this case, the student representative from the charter school wrote about their flexible calendar, how students take exams before winter break, and are out of school by Memorial Day. They also wrote about the merits of their noon release on Fridays, and how they get Chick-fil-a, etc. for lunch on a daily basis.

Both principals expressed frustration with that article for a couple of reasons. First, traditional public-schools are bound by the state's calendar laws and charter schools are not. The article was written as if all schools had a choice or flexibility in when school begins and ends for the year and when exams are given, which is not accurate; both principals believed that information was misleading. Second, one of their more significant concerns about the local charter school is that their structure, while appealing to all, is not accessible for all students and families. For example, not all parents have the means to pick-up or provide supervision for their children every Friday at noon. Finally, they expressed concerns that the article made very little, if any, mention of the academic merits of the charter school, which they expressed seem contradictory to the purpose of schools, which is to educate all students.

Conducting these initial interviews as part of a pilot of my ultimate dissertation research confirmed for me that my research topic is timely and that principal interviews

would provide important data for my dissertation. The pilot study also confirmed for me that in addition to the principal interviews, I may be able to gain powerful data and insight from other members of the community such as parents, small business owners, school board members, and the local newspaper editor. Building on the pilot studies I conducted, I designed a qualitative study to address the impact of charter schools on a small, rural community.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided my study:

1. How has the presence of charter schools impacted traditional public-schools in a rural setting?

2. How have traditional public-schools responded to the presence of charter schools in their community?

3. How has the presence of charter schools impacted the community surrounding traditional public-schools?

I used the elements of a qualitative case study in order to investigate these questions.

Description of Qualitative Research

The basic premise of qualitative research is that it focuses on humans in their natural context. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) write that qualitative researchers are "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning the attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). Because qualitative research is focused on humans and their understanding of their experiences

and context, by nature a majority of the data collection in qualitative research involves

human interactions. Lichtman (2013) defines qualitative research as:

> A way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets
> information obtained from humans using his or her eyes and ears as filters. It
> often involves interviews and/or observations of humans in natural, online, or
> social settings. (p. 7)

While qualitative studies vary in terms of specifics methods and focus, there are often

key characteristics that a majority of qualitative studies contain. Merriam and Tisdell

identify four key characteristics of qualitative research:

1. Focus on Meaning and Understanding: Qualitative research focuses on how
   people make sense of their own experiences, construct their world and give
   meaning to their lives.
2. Researcher as Primary Instrument: The primary means of collecting information
   in qualitative research is the researcher, who collects and then analyzes the data
   that has been collected.
3. An Inductive Process: Researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or
   theories rather than deductively testing hypothesis as in positivist research.
4. Rich Description: Qualitative research includes rich descriptions of contexts,
   people, situations, and activities. (pp. 15-18)

Qualitative researchers focus on a specific topic related to human experience and

understanding. In the next section I will outline the specific design of my qualitative

research. In the design and analysis of my research, I include key characteristics of

qualitative research.

Research Design

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the impact that charter

schools have had on a small rural school district in North Carolina. In order to determine

this impact, I used a qualitative case study as the design of my research. Merriam and

Tisdell (2016) define a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded

system" (p. 37). Researchers employ qualitative case studies to examine a specific

phenomenon within a specific context. Stake (2010) suggests that case studies are aimed

at "understanding one thing well" (p. 27). In order to explore and define the specific

phenomenon being explored in a case, researchers collect a range of data. Creswell

(2013) provides a detailed description of a case study, writing that:

> case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a
> bounded system (a *case)* or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through
> detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g.
> observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports, and
> reports a *case description* and case-based themes. (p. 97, author's emphasis)

As Creswell describes, qualitative case studies by nature involve examining a

phenomenon in a bounded system or location. In the case of this study, I examined

traditional public-schools and their surrounding community in the feeder pattern of a

rural school district in central North Carolina. Stake (2005) argues that qualitative case

studies focus on key issues that are ripe for quality information to be gleaned from the

study. Ideally, the data derived from a case study in a bounded location can be applied to

a broader societal context. In the case of this study, I hope that the information I gained

from my study in this small rural district of North Carolina – which represents the case of

a broader phenomenon – can be broadened to help educators and policy makers

understand the implications of charter schools and school choice in rural communities

and schools throughout the nation.

The purpose of my study was to examine the impact that charter schools have made on the traditional public-schools in a rural location, as well as their impact on a rural community. As previously stated, researchers conducting qualitative case studies use observations, interviews, audio-visual materials, documents, and reports in order to gather and record information. In this study, I used interviews and focus groups to answer my research questions.

I focused on two main issues in my data collection: the impact of charter schools on the traditional public-schools and the rural community more broadly. In order to gain an understanding of the impact of charter schools on the schools in the South Lake (a pseudonym) feeder pattern, I used interviews and focus groups. I conducted interviews with each of the four principals of the schools within the South Lake feeder pattern. I designed the interview protocol so I could gain an understanding of how the presence of charter schools has impacted traditional public-schools and how public-school leaders have responded to the competition from charter schools. In addition, I conducted focus group with parents who have students in the traditional public-schools. The goal of these focus groups was to hear from stakeholders in the South Lake feeder pattern and discern from their perspective the impact that the charter schools have had on the traditional public-schools where their child attends school. In addition, I explored why parents chose traditional public-schools for their children as opposed to the charter schools in the area.

In addition to the previously mentioned focus group with parents, I also conducted a set of interviews with key members of the Threshers community (a

pseudonym for the community I describe below), including the editor of the local

newspaper, two small-business owners, and a school board member. The goal of these

interviews was to gain a perspective of how prominent community members view the

presence of charter schools in their community, and their perspective on their impact.

Setting

The setting for my study was Lake County, and specifically the small town of

Threshers, located in the southern end of the county. I picked Lake County and the town

of Threshers for the study because the schools in this community have been significantly

impacted by the presence of charter schools, especially in recent years. I used

pseudonyms for the schools and the community to protect the identity of my participants

throughout the study.

Lake County is located in the central piedmont of North Carolina. Lake County is

considered a rural county and there is little racial and ethnic diversity in the county itself;

as a result, there is minimal diversity in the county school system. However, located

within the county are two larger cities that are much more diverse; those cities run their

own school systems, which are more diverse than Lake County Schools.

In the 2010 census, Lake County had a total population of just over 160,000.

Lake County is geographically one of the largest counties in North Carolina, covering a

total of 553.2 square miles. As of that census, the county was approximately 81% White,

9% Black and 7% Hispanic. The median household income was $45,678 and just under

16% of the population lived under the poverty line. In terms of education, 83.3% of the

population in the county has at least a high school diploma and just over 17% of the population had at least a Bachelor's degree (www.censusreporter.org).

In the 2010 census, Threshers had a total population of around 1700, and the town itself covered approximately two square miles in the southern end of Lake County. The population was approximately 97% white, and the median household income was just over $35,000, with about 20% of the population living below the poverty line. Just under 79% of the citizens in Threshers have a high school diploma, while just under 10% have a Bachelor's degree or higher (www.censusreporter.org).

Lake County Schools consists of thirty-six schools serving just over 19,000 students at the end of the 2018-2019 school year. Schools in Lake County are grouped into feeder patterns, with two to three elementary schools feeding into one middle school and one high school. There are also three choice high schools and a separate-setting school for students with disabilities. One of the high schools is an early college that works in partnership with Lake County Community College. The second high school of choice is a STEM academy that also works in partnership with Lake County Community College. The third high school of choice serves at-risk students. All four of these schools are traditional public-schools and are part of Lake County Schools. These schools also serve students from the two city school systems that are located in Lake County.

The South Lake County feeder pattern contains four schools: two elementary schools, a middle school, and a high school. The South Lake feeder pattern is reflective of the population in Threshers and the surrounding area. It is also the smallest feeder

pattern in Lake County. At the end of the 2018-2019 school year, Threshers Elementary had 350 students enrolled in grades K-5. Gold Mountain Elementary, which is also a part of the South Lake County feeder pattern, had just under 250 students enrolled in grades K-5. South Lake Middle School and South Lake High School share a building, including a gymnasium, cafeteria and media center, but are run as two distinct schools. South Lake Middle School served approximately 280 students at the end of the 2018-2019 school year in grades 6-8, while South Lake High School served around 350 students in grades 9-12.

Lake County also has five private schools that are educational options for students in the county. During the 2018-2019 school year, there were also approximately 1500 students who were being homeschool in Lake County.

When I began my research, there were no charter schools located in Lake County. However, a charter school was approved and opened its doors to students in Kindergarten through Fourth grade in the fall of 2018. There are also multiple charter schools in the larger cities to the north of Lake County that enroll some students from Lake County Schools. In the southern end of Lake County, near Threshers, two charter schools are in operation within thirty minutes of Threshers. Neither of these charter schools are located in Lake County, but both schools recruit and serve students who live in Lake County. Both of those schools have drawn large numbers of students from the South Lake feeder pattern.

One charter school, located approximately twenty miles to the east of Threshers, is Mountain Charter Academy. MCA serves students in grades 5-12, with plans to add a

full elementary school in the coming years. The school has a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) focus. MCA provides transportation from one location in the town of Threshers on a daily basis. The second charter school, White Rock Day School (WRDS), is also located approximately twenty miles to the southwest of Threshers. WRDS serve students in grades 6-12 and prides itself on its academic rigor. The 2017-2018 school year was the first year that WRDS served students in grades 6-8 after opening initially as a high school.

Participants

I used to data collection techniques in this study that involve individuals from Lake County: interviews and focus groups. In this section, I explain how I selected participants for my study. The first group of participants was the principals of the four traditional public-schools that make-up the South Lake feeder pattern. The principals knew first-hand the impact that the charter schools have made on their schools and they were able to communicate and describe that impact, as well as discuss how they are responding to the presence of charter schools.

The second group of participants for this study was parents of students currently enrolled in the South Lake feeder pattern schools. I met with four different groups of parents (fourteen parents in total) in the four feeder pattern schools that served on the school's parent advisory council. The purpose of the focus group was to gain an understanding of their perspective that the presence of charter schools has made on their community and their schools. I describe the participants of these groups in more detail in the next chapter.

The final group of participants for my study was community members. I interviewed four prominent members of the community: the editor of the local newspaper, a member of the school board who has ties to the South Lake feeder pattern, and two small business owners. I purposefully selected these people because of their positions in the community. I reached out to these two small business owners and invited them to participate in an interview with me to discuss the impact that the charter schools have had on the local traditional public-schools and especially the impact that has been made on their community. These small business owners were selected because of their involvement in the local schools, their prominence in the community, and their passion for their support of the South Lake feeder pattern schools.

One of the reasons I chose to focus on the community impact, and why I included the newspaper editor along with small business owners in my study, was because of my experiences conducting my first set of pilot interviews. During the first pilot interviews, I spoke with the principal of South Lake Middle School and a parent who has children at Threshers Elementary, South Lake Middle, and South Lake High Schools. Both stakeholders mentioned an instance where the editor of the newspaper allowed a student intern who attended one of the local charter schools to publish a piece about what was going on at one of the local charter schools. The short piece caused an uproar in the community, people accused the newspaper editor of supporting a school that was not a part of the community, when in fact she was just supporting her intern and giving her a voice. In addition, the principal of South Lake Middle School spoke about how the school was partnering with local businesses to place signs in front of their buildings

offering support to South Lake Middle and High Schools. The perspective of these community members was a valuable and informative part of my study. I interviewed the principal of the middle school again during the data collection phase of my research to seek additional information on the impact of charter schools on her school and her views of their impact on the surrounding community.

Data Collection

I used two different data collection techniques in this study. The first was 8 semi-structured interviews with the principals of the South Lake feeder pattern schools and prominent community members, as outlined above. The second technique was four focus groups, one each involving parents from each feeder pattern in the South Lake community.

I interviewed individual participants for approximately one hour using a semi-structured interview approach. I used my prepared questions but also allowed the conversation driven by the responses of the participants. Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) describe the research interview as "an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest" (p. 23). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) support the notion of the interview as a conversation, emphasizing the need to "listen to what your participant has to share, which in turn enables you to better follow avenues of inquiry that will yield potentially rich contributions" (p. 126). I developed and refined my interview questions through the course of conducting two different sets of pilot interviews (see Appendix A). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), one way to ensure that you will get quality data from an interview is confirming that you are asking

good questions; one way to ensure you ask good questions is through the use of pilot interviews. These pilot interviews not only helped me to refine my interview questions, but also helped me to narrow my focus in this dissertation. My initial pilot interview questions were more focused on charter schools and why they were pulling students from the traditional public-schools. However, during the first set of pilot interviews with both the principal and the parent, I began to see a powerful picture emerge on the impact these charter schools were having on the community and how the traditional public-schools were working to overcome the initial impact that the charter schools had made on them. Once the interviews concluded, I transcribed and coded the interviews.

The four focus groups each also lasted around an hour. Parker and Tritter (2007) described focus groups as "a type of group interview where…people are encouraged to discuss specific topics in order that underlying issues (norms, beliefs, values) common to the lives of all participants might be uncovered" (p. 24). I utilized the same questions for the focus groups as the principal participants (Appendix A) but also allowed the conversation to develop naturally, while ensuring the group remained on topic. This practice is supported by Parker and Tritter (2007) who advocate in focus groups that the researcher "plays the role of 'facilitator' or 'moderator'... of [a] group discuss *between participants*, not between her/himself and the participants" (p. 26, author's emphasis). Once the focus groups were completed, I had them transcribed for later analysis.

Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews and focus groups, I used a service to assist with transcription. Once the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, I reviewed them

for accuracy (listening to the tapes while reading the transcripts) and coded them first for key words and ideas. After identifying key words and idea, I grouped codes into categories and began to develop themes from categories that emerged from participant responses. After identifying key themes, I began to outline the structure of the two data chapters. In the first data chapter (chapter 4), I focus on the impact that charter schools had on traditional public-schools. In the second data chapter (chapter 5), I focus on the impact charter schools had on the rural community. I also sought out clarification from principals or other participants and sought additional details as needed in order to ensure accuracy of the information I present in this research.

Positionality

In order to conduct the research outlined below effectively, I reflected on the potential biases that I brought to this study. I discuss these biases in this section. A majority of my biases centered around my role as a public-school educator. Being up front about this role can help readers to understand my position as part of this research.

When I decided to adjust the focus of my research based on my experiences with the first pilot interviews, I knew I wanted to focus my research within the community where I conducted my pilot interviews. The schools where I focused my research are a part of the school district in which I currently serve as a principal, though I work in a different feeder pattern. Much like many of the other schools in the district, the school in which I currently serve has also been impacted by the presence of charter schools in the area. Additionally, as an advocate of public education and current school leader in public education, I am aware daily of the impact that charter schools can have on traditional

public-schools. While impartiality is important, I am also aware that my own

experiences working in traditional public-schools that have been impacted by the

presence and competition from charter schools and served as a relevant voice in the

discussion of my findings. As I conducted my research and analyzed my findings, I

maintained awareness at all times of these biases and tried to bracket them, where

necessary, as I listened to my participants and reported my findings.

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2016) recommends that qualitative researchers use at least two

strategies in a research project to ensure trustworthiness. In order to ensure

trustworthiness in my study, I utilized three primary strategies: multiple data sources,

member checks/respondent validation, and peer debriefing.

I collected my data using two different methods: interviews and focus groups.

The use of multiple methods of data collection helps to ensure that findings are cross-

references, similar to triangulation (though that typically involves three sources of data).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that triangulation helps to maximize the credibility of a

study. As part of looking across multiple sources, I explored whether my preliminary

analyses and findings were consistent across data sources and how information from one

source of data complemented, extended, and even challenged data from other sources.

Second, I used what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) have termed member

checks/respondent validation. In order to conduct respondent validation, I followed-up

with participants as needed to ensure that I gained accurate information from the

interviews and was interpreting their responses with fidelity. For example, many

participants indicated that both the middle and the high schools changed policies relating to athletics as a response to the increased competition from charter schools in terms of athletic competition and recruiting of student-athletes (at the high school level). As I analyzed my data, it was evident the change in policy and practice that occurred at the middle school level, but the response at the high-school level was unclear, so I reached out to the principal of both the middle and the high school for clarification and found that, in fact, the high school had not made any changes in policy or practice to respond to that particular area of impact.

The final strategy for ensuring trustworthiness that I used was peer debriefing (Creswell, 2016). Peer debriefing, or using a peer reviewer to examine and provide feedback, questions, and suggestions on my interpretations and the results of my study helps to enhance trustworthiness because a peer who is familiar with the topic I am studying can help me to examine my results and push back or challenge my assumptions and conclusions as necessary. For this study, I used a colleague of mine who is conducting a similar study to review and push back on my findings to ensure accuracy. This colleague helped me to see that within my research, participants may share facts that were hearsay, or based on commonly accepted knowledge that was not always accurate. For example, since participants shared specific numbers about the numbers of students leaving or how much money was lost, my colleague encouraged me to add into chapter five the sections that shared the specific data figures. Those specific figures included the numbers of students who withdrew from the traditional public-schools to enroll in a charter school, the number of students who enrolled in traditional public-schools from a

public school, the number of teaching positions lost and the amount of funding lost per student. Additionally, I incorporated the following steps: I interviewed participants in a location of their choice, was transparent with participants about the purpose of my study, and I kept confidential the names and other identifying factors of my participants in order to gain the most accurate data from participants.

In addition to trustworthiness, I also ensured that I followed ethical procedures in conducting this research. I informed all the participants of the goals of the study, my protocol, and what they could expect with this research, and their rights (including the fact that they could drop out of the study at any time with no consequence) following human subjects protocol as required by the University of North Carolina Greensboro.

Limitations

One limitation of my study was that I only talked to a small sample of people who live in Threshers. While this is typical in qualitative research, their perspectives are not representative of all voices in the community. Furthermore, the strategies I use to select participants may have shaped the data that I collected. For example, the parents who serve on the advisory council (who I interviewed in focus groups) are invested in their traditional public-schools and a majority were pro-traditional public-schools. The views that these participants shared may not be an accurate representation of the views of the community as a whole, and indeed, because of their roles they may represent outliers on either side of the school choice debate in the community. In addition, the information, specifically numbers and figures that participants shared were not always completely

accurate, and I had to fact-check participant responses at times to ensure that I was sharing the appropriate information.

Reporting of Findings

I divide my findings from this study into two chapters. In the first chapter, chapter five, I discuss the impact of charter schools on rural traditional public-schools and how those rural traditional public-schools have responded to that impact. The second chapter, chapter six, I explore how rural communities have been impacted by the presence of charter schools in and around their communities, and comment on other factors relating to charter schools that participants shared with me during the course of my interviews and focus groups. Reponses from principals, community members and parents are embedded throughout both data chapters.

CHAPTER IV

IMPACT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS ON RURAL TRADITIONAL PUBLIC-SCHOOLS

The purpose of my study was two-fold: to investigate how the presence, opening, and/or growth of charter schools has affected traditional public-schools in a rural community in North Carolina, as well as how they have affected the broader community. In this chapter, I examine the impact that the presence of charter schools has had on rural traditional public-schools and how those rural traditional public-schools have responded to the growing competition. In chapter 5, I examine the impact that the increased presence of charter schools has had on the communities surrounding the rural traditional public-schools.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the participants in my study. I then examine their perspectives and beliefs in terms of the impact charter schools have had on their rural traditional public-schools. After introducing the participants, I organize the chapter by the following topics:

1. Why parents and students leave rural traditional public-schools

2. Why parents and students stay in rural traditional public-schools

3. Impact on rural traditional public-schools

4. Response of rural traditional public-schools

Introduction of Participants

In total, I spoke with twenty-two different individuals, all of whom had a connection to the rural traditional public-schools in the South Lake community. I interviewed the principals of all four traditional public-schools in the community and conducted focus groups with members of their parent advisory councils. Within those groups, two parents were represented in the high school focus group, three parents were represented in the middle school focus group, six parents were in one elementary focus group, and three parents were represented in the other elementary focus group, for a total of fourteen parent participants. Of the four principals, the middle school principal was the only administrator who was a native of the South Lake area. The principal attended Threshers Elementary, South Lake Middle, and graduated from South Lake High School, and served in the role of assistant principal at South Lake Middle before being named principal. The other three principals were not from the South Lake feeder pattern, but did have roots in Lake County. Of the four community participants, three of the four attended South Lake feeder pattern schools and graduated from South Lake High School. The fourth participant, the local newspaper editor, had roots in the community as their children graduated from South Lake High School. The members of the focus groups were a mix of traditional public-school parents. A majority of the participants also graduated from South Lake High School, but in each focus group there were at least one parent who had relocated to the South Lake area at some point during their child's educational journeys. In addition, I also conducted interviews with a member of the Lake

County School Board who is also a resident of the South Lake feeder pattern, two small business owners, and the editor of the local newspaper.

Why Parents and Students Leave Rural Traditional Public-schools

Before examining the specific impacts that the increased presence of charter schools in rural areas had on the rural traditional public-schools in those areas, understanding why parents and students are making the decision to leave rural traditional public-schools for charter schools and/or are making the decision to stay enrolled in rural traditional public-schools will help to frame how rural traditional schools have been impacted and subsequently responded to the increased competition from charter schools.

I identified eight primary factors that impact parents and students in making the decision to leave rural traditional public-schools for charter schools in the area. Those factors are listed below:

1. Lack of Accurate Information

2. Marketing Practices of Charter Schools and the Appeal of Something New

3. Reactionary Decisions

4. Social Influences

5. Middle School Transition

6. Parents Seeking Better for their Child

7. Athletics

8. Community Impact

I discuss each factor in more detail below, and at the end of this section, I will also identify some additional issues that were highlighted that did not fall into one of the eight categories.

When discussing why parents chose to withdraw their student from a rural traditional public-school and enroll them in a charter school, there was one factor reason above all that helped to frame their responses. A majority of participants supported the idea that parents need to seek out what's best for their own children, and many acknowledged that traditional public-schools may not be the best option for all students. After describing her love for the community and explaining her "firm belief in community" and how the South Lake schools prepared her children to graduate with honors from one of the state's top research universities, the local newspaper editor put it this way:

> If you're interested or concerned enough with your child's education, you'll find a way to work in what they need. Do I think parents have a right to choose whatever schools is great for that, you know, a right fit? I believe in that very much. Each child is different and should be allowed to explore their potential.

These participants, all of whom are staunch supporters of their community and the traditional public-schools in their community also recognized that parents do have the right to choose, despite the impact that made on their school and community. One small business owner, who was also the high school athletic booster club president, said this about a parent's right to choose: "I'm not opposed to school choice. I know there are some kids that need a different environment." The local newspaper editor also shared a

similar viewpoint: "Do I think parents have a right to choose whatever school is great for [their kid], you know, a right fit. I believe in that very much."

Lack of Accurate Information

One of the first factors that emerged in examining why parents and students made the decision to leave rural traditional public-schools for charter schools centered around a lack of accurate information. While there may be differences between charter schools and rural traditional public-schools in terms of course offerings, different testing expectations, etc., many parents seemed to make the decision to leave based on information that wasn't accurate. Three of the four area principals indicated they had seen parents who decided to leave based on problematic information. The middle school principal framed it in this way:

> This is part of what being in a low socioeconomic area is like. I don't have a lot of parents that are college educated and so they maybe are not as informed about some of their decisions. When it's presented as a charter school, it seems elite to them and they want to provide the best opportunity possible for their kid. So, when they get into this, it feels prestigious.

Both elementary principals shared that parents often withdraw their students because they don't know any better and think the charter schools will be a completely different school experience – for example, their students will not have to take standardized tests, or they will get out of Common Core – but those things are still happening to a degree in charter schools. Reflecting on conversations they have had with parents who were considering leaving, one of the elementary school principals shared: "Some of the others [are] looking at the freedom of curriculum and…I think they saw charter [schools] as a way to get out

of common core." The other elementary school principal shared they had similar

conversations:

> I think that what I hear parents say is the appeal is that they want their child to
> have more choice. They say choice, not as far as choosing which school, but like
> classes and not being as stressed about testing. Like I don't think they understand
> that there's still stuff happening at these other schools [charter schools]. [They
> are] very similar to here, but they just, they think it's going to be a completely
> different experience.

For many parents, the lack of accurate information leads them to make choices that may

not accurately reflect what is happening at the charter schools.

Marketing Practices of Charter Schools and the Appeal of Something New

The second factor that played a role in influencing parents and students to enroll

in a charter school was the marketing practices that were employed by charter schools.

Participants felt like charter schools were presented to prospective parents as an

opportunity for students to have a better chance of going to college. As one parent on the

middle school focus group shared:

> Academically…they think they can get a better education at the charter schools.
> [Charter schools] will say, '100% of our students get accepted to college.' Of
> course they do. But a lot of our students get accepted to college, too, if they want
> to go. It's just not all of our students want to go college, And I think that hurts us.

Charter school leaders utilized their marketing practices to not just create a vision of

college-readiness for students who enrolled in their school, but also to highlight the

various opportunities that their school had, including STEM-focused clubs and

curriculum and high levels of academic rigor. One charter school has incentives that

traditional public-schools did not or could not offer, including early releases each Friday

and lunches that were catered in from local restaurants such as Chick-fil-A. These

incentives, which traditional public-schools cannot offer due to instructional time and

school nutrition requirements, often played a significant role in seemingly influencing

some families to enroll their children in the charter school.

One of the results of the marketing efforts of the charter schools in the community

was the appeal of something new for members of the community, alongside what some of

them perceived as exclusivity or prestige. This sentiment was echoed especially by

members of both elementary school focus groups. Participants shared that there was a

romanticism around the idea of something new, a new schooling option near their

community. One parent from an elementary school focus group who was heavily

involved in the local booster club for youth athletics in the community, speaking on the

appeal of charter schools for some families in his community stated:

> Do you want to live in a new house or do you want to live in the old house? Do
> you want to go to the old school or do you want to go to the new school? There's
> a lot of excitement about the newness of something.

Another parent shared that the newness and appeal of the charter schools was something

that had become a hot topic not just in their community but in surrounding rural

communities as well. One of the elementary school parents shared that not only was the

appeal of something new a factor, but also the appeal of the new facilities the charter

schools were housed in. This parent is also a coach at the high school, and shared his

experiences with the appeal of something new:

> You walk into their facilities and they're getting new gymnasiums and all these new facilities and everything [is] being built for them, and we can't, our boosters won't even help us buy uniforms for the ball teams because they're trying to build buildings so that our ball teams can function properly… The last two years I've actually had to go in and tape uniforms on my kids in JV basketball because they're falling off of them, and they're dry rotting if you pull on them. I've taken them to my mom a hundred times to have them sewed up, and we don't have the funds, we don't get it unless we raise the money ourselves.

Reactionary Decisions

Participants also shared that there were situations in which parents made the decision to withdraw their students from rural traditional public-schools and enroll them in charter schools due to issues their children were having in the public-schools. In some cases, those issues related to social influences and apprehension about the education their children would receive at the middle or high school level, which I discuss in detail in the following two sections. In other instances, parents were perceived as running away from their problem, or the problems their children were facing by enrolling them in a charter school. Participants I interviewed had first-hand experiences with other parents who were upset with a particular school, teacher or issue their student was facing and who consequently withdrew their students from the traditional public-schools in the community and enrolled them in a charter school. One elementary school principal shared that parents would "get upset and leave over silly things, things that had nothing to do with the quality of education [at the traditional public-school] but the quality of their education was impacted when they take their kids to charter schools." One parent from an elementary school focus group shared that people were leaving because they didn't

like something or didn't like public-school and thought the charter schools were going to be better. This parent was speaking from real life experience, explaining:

> Even though my [child] stayed with me today because they were devastated by something that happened yesterday. And they said, 'I don't want to go to school here anymore,' because, you know, it's just... they got cut from [an athletic team], and they were the only one who was on the [team]this year that got cut. They will probably not be afforded the opportunity to go to a charter school, just because... I mean, it's going to build character, and they have had some time to reflect today, and you don't get to just jump ship in real life. You know, 'I don't like my job, so I'm just going to go over there.'

A parent in the middle school focus group shared a similar view: "here it's like if you get upset with the teacher, you get upset with the students…'we're going to charter school.'"

Social Influences

Many parents elect to enroll their students in a charter school due to what they see as problematic social influences their children are facing. This phenomenon manifested itself in two different ways. For some families, they left traditional public-schools in order to get a fresh start for their children, some of whom needed to get away from their current peer groups, negative social influences, or bullying in the rural traditional public-school. Others sought a new option because their children had been having discipline issues in the traditional public-schools and they were hoping a fresh start in a charter school would mean their children wouldn't get into as much trouble there.

For other families, the social influences that impacted their decision to enroll their children in a charter school centered around following their friends who were already attending a charter school. One of the parents in the elementary focus group who has a student attending one of the elementary schools in the South Lake community also has a

middle school aged child attending one of the charter schools. She shared that she feels she contributes to the issues surrounding charter schools: "I feel like I'm part of that problem, my child goes to that school so the resources follow her to that school, therefore it's taking resources out of this school system." However, she also shared that she allowed her daughter to make the choice to attend the charter school because she felt like it was a better social fit for her, especially when so many of her friends went to school there. Another parent in one of the elementary school focus groups recognized that "if you are hanging out with a group of eight people and four of those people go to a charter school, you are left sort of feeling like 'well dang I'm missing out!'"

Middle School Transition

Participants across all three levels acknowledged that in the South Lake community, the middle school had felt the biggest impact in terms of losing students to the charter schools. This has changed in the last few years as initially, the primary charter school options in close proximity were for high school students, but as the local charter schools have begun offering middle school programs, the middle school has seen a number of students leaving the rural traditional public-schools during the transition to middle school from fifth to sixth grade. As one elementary school parent stated: "I think it's the middle school here, where most of them are jumping ship." In addition, many parents are enrolling their children in charter schools not just in fourth and fifth grade with an eye on middle school, but also in first and second grade, in order to go ahead and get their students enrolled earlier to guarantee a spot when they get to the middle school

level. When asked about when they are seeing parents enroll their children in charter schools, one parent from an elementary focus group shared:

> It doesn't start in 5th grade, a lot of them start looking earlier. I've heard people in kindergarten say, 'oh yeah, I'm sending my kid to [names a charter school] or 'I'm going to send my kid to [names a charter school]". I've heard it in kindergarten, first, and second grade.

Parents Seeking Better for their Child

The most prevalent reason participants cited as why parents were making the decision to enroll their students in a charter school centered around the idea of parents seeking something better for their children, a better or different option or working to secure a better future for their children. It is probably not surprising, given marketing, that parents perceive the charter schools to be more prestigious or exclusive, which often correlates with their sense of fit.

Better options. Many parents enroll their students in the charter schools because they feel as if it is a better option for their child and they think the education they will receive at the charter school will be better than what they could receive in the traditional public-schools. As one middle school parent shared,

> I think through the students that go there, those students I'm hearing from their parents [say] in front of their students how their academics are just so above South Lake. And you've got a better shot to get into college if you go to [a charter school].

In middle and high school, parents were making the choice because they thought the middle and high charter school programs offered more course and programming

opportunities (I discuss this issue in more depth in later sections on the traditional public-schools' response to charter schools). The viewpoint of many focus group members was that the traditional public-schools have seen a number of advanced level students leaving their schools for the charter schools because many parents feel their children will be more challenged academically at the charter school. As one elementary school parent shared: "There's the perception that my kids' academically gifted, I'm going to send them, at the end of the day you're going to do what's best for your child no matter what."

Better future. Another reason for selecting charter schools is the belief they will better prepare students for college or give students a better chance of getting into college and securing a scholarship. Participants throughout the community felt this was a significant misconception, as a majority of them were graduates of South Lake High School themselves and all had attended college and were successful in their careers. As one South Lake middle school parent said, "I went to college, got a good job. I mean my whole family did… it's not impossible, but that they make it seem like, you just have a better shot if you go there. And that's not true." The South Lake Middle School principal, who is also graduate of the South Lake schools put it best: "in a room full of South Lake graduates, we feel like we did okay" and the board of education member who was also a graduate of South Lake High School took issue with that sentiment as well, citing her success in business as well as the fact that many of her friends who graduated from South Lake attended top tier universities throughout North Carolina and beyond.

Athletics

One of the more controversial reasons participants stated they were seeing students leaving rural traditional public-schools for charter schools was related to athletic influences. In the area of athletics, two primary trends were cited and they tended to overlap with each other. Many student-athletes were leaving traditional public-schools for charter schools in order to have the opportunity to play on a more competitive team (I discuss the impact of dwindling numbers of students in rural traditional public-schools in a later section) and many student-athletes felt like they would have an opportunity to be noticed for an athletic scholarship playing on a more competitive team. According to many participants, there was an underlying reason that many student-athletes were leaving for athletic reasons – the charter schools were recruiting them. One member of an elementary school focus group who also coaches multiple sports at South Lake High School said that all of their players reported that they were being called at home and being recruited to play for the charter school. The middle and high school principal and parent members of focus groups reported that they were aware of situations in which their student athletes were being recruited by the charter schools. As one middle school parent shared, "I have seen some of the recruiting…my child plays baseball and he goes to a trainer, and I know the trainer is the baseball coach at a charter school, and he tries to recruit." One member of the elementary school focus group who is also a high school coach shared: "they're recruiting and they're constantly calling our guys, were constantly losing one or two players."

Community Impact

The final factor influencing why parents enroll their students in charter schools as opposed to rural traditional schools relates to impacts from the community. South Lake is a small tight-knit community, and while for many that is a strength (as I discuss in the next section), for some the size of the community is a reason why parents enroll their students in a charter school. South Lake is a small community, and there are few job options, and therefore minimal reasons for people to stay in the community for jobs and, now that there are other options for their child's education, for some parents there is a lack of motivation to have their students remain the community for their education. As one of the elementary school principals explained:

> Well, we're small. I mean, the biggest thing here is we're small. There are no jobs in this community. There are no jobs. There's nothing like really keeping people here. I talked to one parent that did leave and now they're thinking about moving closer to that charter school, just because it's a 30-minute drive for them now. So, it's even impacting the community that we're losing people and it's making us smaller as is.

In addition, there is also a historical stigma that has surrounded the community, which in turn impacts the rural traditional public-school's ability to keep students enrolled, and which affects the surrounding community as a whole. The town has long had a reputation as being racist and closed-minded; this perception is fueled by a lack of diversity in the population. Members of the elementary school focus group explained it in this way: "[Thresher] has always had a stigma around it too, whether it's racism or whatever. It's always had that stigma around it." Another member confirmed, saying: "I grew up in [neighboring county] and I knew about it [the racism]." There is also a stigma

among some members of the community about South Lake Middle and High Schools.

The board member reported hearing a parent say, in response to a new Lake County

board policy regarding enrollment, "I'm not sending my kid to South Lake, I will

homeschool him before they have to go to South Lake." I emailed them, "Why? They

don't answer me. Because there's no answer."

Why Parents and Students Stay in Rural Traditional Public-Schools

While South Lake schools have been impacted by parents deciding to enroll their

children in a charter school, a majority of members of the community have elected for

various reasons to keep their students enrolled in their community traditional public-

schools, at least for now. In talking with participants, three primary reasons emerged as

to why parents either never considered enrolling their children in a charter school or

considered making that choice but ultimately decided to stay:

1. Presence of Accurate Information

2. Transportation

3. Community Impacts

In addition, there have been quite a few students who initially enrolled in the charter

schools who then returned to the rural traditional public-schools, especially after their

illusions about what the charter school would be like were disrupted. I discuss this issue

in a final sub-section of this section.

Presence of Accurate Information

As discussed in the previous section, many parents decide to enroll their students

in a charter school based on limited or inaccurate information. Principals in the South

Lake feeder pattern all tried to meet with parents who may have been toying with the

decision to enroll their children in a charter school. When engaged in those

conversations, principals tried to share accurate information with the parents and while

still respecting the parents' right to choose, help parents to understand that there may not

be that many differences between the rural traditional public-schools and the charter

schools. As one elementary school principal shared:

> Some of the others [are] looking at the freedom of curriculum and when you sit
> down now and explain that North Carolina is not following common core
> anymore, they're like, 'oh, I didn't even know that.' I think they saw charter
> [schools] as a way to get out of common core. And once you sit down and explain
> that, they're like, 'oh, okay, I see that now.'

In addition, the same principal said that when you explain how charter schools are

funded, they kind of see it as a slap in the face" and decide to stay in the community

schools. The middle school principal also reported having similar conversations:

> Maybe [local charter school] sounds really appealing because they're branded to
> say you're going to get into college, you're going to be college ready, but is that
> just because they're giving them more work? And have that conversation with
> them. Like it's more, it's not always better. Let's look at the quality of what they're
> doing.

Transportation

Another factor that participants felt kept parents enrolled in the traditional public-

schools in their community was transportation. All of the charter schools that are

impacting their community are twenty to thirty minutes from the community center and

only one of those schools provides transportation to and from school. The one school

that does provide transportation provides it from a common location in the community, but parents must provide or arrange transportation to that location.

One of the elementary school principals shared that based on conversations with parents and knowledge of her community, that if the other two charter schools provided transportation, she would have lost significantly more students to the charter schools. Many of the participants in the two elementary school focus groups attributed the lack of transportation as an unintentional asset for the rural traditional public-schools to the socioeconomic status of many of the members of the South Lake community. As one participant put it: "if there were more options for them to get to these locations, it would be a lot worse than it is… just because they can't get them there, I think it's one of the things that keeps them here." One of the elementary school principals shared regarding a family in the county who had decided to return to the traditional public-schools:

> They went to the charter school. They wanted something different, and saw that it was really a lot of what they had had before. So, when they were having to make transportation arrangements, they just decided it wasn't worth it, so they came back into their home feeder school.

Community Impacts

Overwhelmingly, the most significant reason that participants felt like parents chose to keep their students enrolled in the traditional public-school was the impact of and on the community. Many participants cited the family and community atmosphere that was present in the South Lake community and a significant strength that, despite the limitations that their size can have on the school (limited course offerings, small schools, etc.), the strengths that a small school and community can offer far outweighed those

potential negatives. One small business owner, who is also the president of the high

school athletic booster club told me "we love our school, we love our kids, we love our

educators" and the community works to support them in whatever way possible. The

editor of the local newspaper echoed that sentiment when she shared that many of the

athletic facilities had been improved or were in the process of being improved because of

the support of the community.

The middle school principal stated that at South Lake Middle School, "your

student will be known and seen – they won't be a face in the crowd." The high school

principal cited the individualized attention that students receive at the high school as one

of their signature strengths. Two of the parents at one of the elementary schools, through

tears, shared personal stories as to how their children had been positively impacted by the

personal attention and support they received at the elementary school. One of those

parents, who had just enrolled her child in one of the local elementary schools from a

private Christian school stated:

> I wouldn't trade anything for this school right here. They have done tremendous
> for my kid. My kid has come up six reading levels just this year…you have
> thoughts about public-school – I went to public-school. I knew how bad it was
> when I was there [a different community]. That was completely different than
> down here. I wouldn't trade anything for down here.

The other parent shared the difference in her child's education from when they were

enrolled in a neighboring and much larger school district compared to the education they

had received since enrolling in one of the South Lake feeder pattern elementary schools.

Both students have made tremendous growth since enrolling in the elementary school.

One child is reading above grade level and the other child who was multiple grade levels

behind when they enrolled in the school is now only one grade level behind in their

reading levels. Concluding her story, she shared that she "didn't know if you would get

that kind of one-on-one family kind of environment [in a charter school], like you would

here, because this school is like a family."

Students Returning to Traditional Public-schools

While many parents ultimately decide to keep their children enrolled in the

traditional public-schools in their community, some parents initially choose to enroll their

children in a charter school and after a period of time make the decision to re-enroll their

children back in the traditional public-schools. In speaking with participants about the

experiences of people in their community they were familiar with, two primary reasons

emerged as to why parents ultimately decided to re-enroll their students in the traditional

public-schools: social influences and finding expectations didn't meet reality.

Social influences. In speaking with both elementary school principals, they cited

students who had returned to their schools because of these social influences. The middle

school principal cited a recent example of a high school student who returned because

they had difficulty adjusting socially. The middle school principal explained:

> There is a student that just came back to the high school and they actually, that
> family called me, which is part of this being hometown. They are not coming.
> They messaged me on Facebook and we messaged back and forth and they said, I
> really think that [child name] needs to come back to the high school, the work that
> she's getting, like she's keeping up, but it's just so much that she doesn't get to be a
> kid. She's not happy. She hates it. She just wants to be able to do some of this
> other stuff like church and all that. She just wants to be a regular high school kid.

One of the elementary school principals shared conversations they had with middle school families who also decided to return to the traditional public-school because they did not feel a sense of community at the charter school:

> I've talked to a couple parents that had kids here that went to a charter school at the Middle School and they came back because they said they felt they didn't have that sense of community. They did not have that.

The middle school principal also reported students from one family returning to the middle school because after the first quarter because they found that the charter school environment was not a socially appropriate environment for them:

> They hated it. The kids did not enjoy it. They reported a lot of social interactions and a lot of things just about the social environment that were not positive for them. They weren't fitting in; they were not happy to go to school and so they brought them back at the end of the nine weeks.

Expectations don't meet reality. For many families, upon enrolling in a charter school they found that their experiences did not meet the expectations they had anticipated for their students. According to parents in the middle school focus group as well as the local school board member, multiple students have returned from a charter school promising high academic rigor. When those families came back, they reported that the pressure was too high in that environment and that academic rigor meant more work, and the impact on their children was that they didn't have time to "be a kid." The high school principal confirmed this sentiment, stating that a student had returned to the traditional public high school because they weren't able to be as involved in other

activities as they had been in the traditional high school because the workload was too

high. The principal explained:

> Some students come back because it's too rigorous. And I know that sounds like, well, who would want to take that rigor away? But a couple of parents have expressed the concern that the kid was only getting to be academic. They weren't having time to like, you know, they're having three and four hours of homework every night and studying and prep for classes and they're not getting to do anything else. And for their college applications, they have to be well rounded.

The high school principal also shared an example of a family who had initially left South

Lake Middle School for a charter school, but then returned to the high school because

they didn't feel like their child's needs were being met at the charter school. According

to the principal:

> One student started at middle school, it didn't go well, left the middle school went to the charter school [but then] came back; and this is a student that has some, some pretty extensive learning needs. But they didn't feel like the needs were being met at that [charter] school and they thought that here in a smaller school it would be better. And that student has been very successful here.

As one parent in one of the elementary school focus groups shared with a laugh, "they

thought the grass was greener on the other side – and then they found out what it was

fertilized with!"

Virtually all of the participants I spoke with shared a version of the following

sentiment: public-schools worked for me, and that's what I want for my kids. These

individuals loved their community and their rural traditional public-schools, and saw the

many strengths that they possessed. However, they were also realistic and recognized

that the increased presence of charter schools in their community had made an impact on

the rural traditional public-schools in their community. In the next section, I examine

those impacts, and then I examine how the rural traditional public-schools have

responded to those impacts.

Impact on Rural Traditional Public-schools

In order to examine specifically how rural traditional public-schools have been

impacted by the increased presence of charter schools in their community, I divide this

section into two sub-sections. First, I examine the real-time impact on rural traditional

public-schools in terms of number of students lost, amount of funding lost, and number of

positions lost in the rural traditional public-schools. Then I examine the perceptual

impacts – examining how participants described the impact on their community

traditional public-schools.

A Look at the Numbers

In order to determine the number of students who withdrew from the rural

traditional public-schools and enrolled in charter schools, I examined the withdrawals

from the four South Lake feeder pattern schools from July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2019.

During that time period, a total of 43 students withdrew from one of the South Lake

feeder pattern schools to enroll in a charter school. See Table 1 for specific numbers of

students withdrawing and enrolling in a charter school.

Table 1

Number of Students Withdrawing from Traditional Public-school and Enrolling in a
Charter School, July 1, 2017-June 30, 2019.

School	# of Students
Elementary School 1	10
Elementary School 2	3
Middle School	20
High School	10

In discussing the impact that the charter schools had made in terms of a loss of
student enrollment, participants recognized that the loss of students was "made worse," in
the words of one small business owner, "because our numbers are so small to begin
with." Schools lost anywhere from zero percent to four percent of the total student body
population to charter schools. See Table 2 for specific percentages of students
withdrawing from traditional public-schools to charter schools.

Table 2

Percentage of Student Population Withdrawing from Traditional Public-school and
Enrolling in a Charter School, July 1, 2017-June 30, 2019.

School	2017-2018	2018-2019
Elementary School 1	1.1%	1.7%
Elementary School 2	--	1.2%
Middle School	4%	2.5%
High School	2.5%	<1%

In order to paint a clearer picture of the impact on the rural traditional public-schools, I also examined the number of students who enrolled in the traditional public-schools from a charter school during the same time period (July 1, 2017-June 30, 2019). While I was unable to filter whether or not those students had ever been enrolled previously in a traditional public-school and if so, when they were enrolled, these numbers help paint two pictures. The second numbers account for students who have returned to traditional public-schools after spending time in a charter school. In addition, for students who enrolled in the traditional public-school after day 20, their funding for the school year they enrolled in the traditional public-school remained with the charter school. During the said time period, 21 students enrolled in a traditional public-school in the South Lake Feeder pattern from a charter school, and 8 of those students enrolled after day 20. See Table 3 for specific numbers of students enrolling in traditional public-schools.

Table 3

Number of Students Enrolling in a Traditional Public-school from a Charter School, July 1, 2017-June 30, 2019.

School	# of Students	After Day 20
Elementary School 1	2	1
Elementary School 2	0	0
Middle School	9	4
High School	10	3

When students withdraw from schools, there is often a corresponding loss of funding and teaching positions. In 2017-2018, which was the most recent data available at the time of writing, the per pupil funding for Lake County Schools, including school nutrition services was $8455 per student. When you calculate that, since July 1, 2017, South Lake feeder schools have lost 43 students in that time frame, that represents an approximate loss of more than $363,000 in funding for Lake County Schools and more specifically the South Lake feeder pattern schools. In addition, for the 8 students who enrolled in a South Lake feeder pattern school after the 20th day of school, the district and local schools had to provide them with their educational services without receiving their annual per pupil expenditure of $8455 per student, which represents a loss of more than $67,000.

This impact has also been seen in terms of teaching positions. South Lake Middle and High Schools have been most impacted by a loss of teaching positions. See Table 4 for the specific numbers of allotted teachers for the schools in the South Lake feeder pattern. The figures do not factor in teachers who are paid from Title I Class-Size Reduction funds or who teach Exceptional Children as they are paid from different funding sources. The figures include regular education and Career and Technical Education teaching positions.

Table 4

Rural Traditional Public-school Teacher Allotments, July 1, 2017-June 30, 2019.

School	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Elementary School 1	16	16	17
Elementary School 2	11	11	1
Middle School	13	13	1
High School	25.5	25.84	21.72

It's important to note that the loss of funding and positions is not exclusively because students left for charter schools. In a small community with a dwindling population, funding and position losses as a result of student withdrawal could also be attributed to families moving from the community, a declining population, and parents who chose to seek other alternative educational opportunities for their children, including homeschool. I will discuss some of these factors in the next chapter, where I examine the overall community impact from the increased presence of charter schools.

Perceived Impacts

In addition to the numerical impact of the increased presence of charter schools on rural traditional public-schools, there are also what I have termed perceived impacts – impacts that are felt more on the experiential or felt level. In this section, I examine participant perception regarding the loss of funding and teaching positions, as well as the following categories: Athletics, Competition and Morale.

Loss of funding and positions. Many of the participants I spoke with for this research study had taken the time to educate themselves about the impact that charter

schools had made on the traditional public-schools in their community. These participants came to our discussions equipped with various financial figures that they believe their community traditional public-schools had lost due to the loss of students in those schools. One member of the elementary school focus group stated they had heard Lake County Schools pays over $15,000 a month to the charter schools. Another parent from the elementary school focus group stated they had heard the county lost $4800 per student to the charter school, and $6800 per student if that child had an IEP. In addition, participants recognized that community schools had lost teaching positions in part because of the number of students leaving the rural traditional public-schools for charter schools. One of the specific impacts that has been seen as a result of the loss of funding and teaching positions is that schools in the community, especially the high school, are limited in the course offerings that are available to students. I discuss this issue in more detail in the next section when I examine the response of the traditional public-schools to the increased presence of charter schools in their community.

Athletics. One of the primary impacts that was cited by participants as a result of the presence of charter schools in the community was around athletics, especially at the high school level. Many of the parent participants lamented that with the loss of student-athletes to the charter schools, in addition to the challenges of being an already smaller, rural school, the middle and the high schools were having difficulty fielding competitive teams. As one middle school parent shared, "They're taking our best athletes. We have to play against them with their stacked team. Basically, we can't compete with that." An elementary school parent, in reflecting upon the whole conversation shared the following:

"I know we've talked more about sports than we have about education because that's really what it comes down to. People want to be on a winning team and South Lake doesn't have a winning team."

In addition, participants cited the official or unofficial recruiting practices that were occurring in the community from the charter schools, that led, in their opinions, to more student-athletes enrolling in the charter schools. One member of the elementary focus group hypothesized that if the schools could begin to encourage athletes to stay enrolled and compete for their community traditional public-schools, athletics and therefore enrollment and academics would build back up, citing a link between the two. That participant stated:

> [Once] they see what you've got, a lot of them will stay. With athletics and everything else, I think you'll see the athletics drastically improve as you see more talent coming back in. Give me one player, and I can make a huge difference on a ball court, and then all of a sudden, they're happy because their team's successful. It's little bitty jumps, if we get some kids back; I think you'll see the improvement of the school just because the demographics are better.

Competition. In speaking with the principals of the South Lake feeder pattern schools, they all recognized that the increased competition as a result of the presence of charter schools has been a positive impact on the schools, even in spite of the loss of students. One of the elementary principals recognized that the competition has "helped us to up our game," but also felt that the competition should not come at the detriment of the traditional public-schools, especially in terms of funding and testing and curriculum expectations. The middle school principal acknowledged that "if charter schools are going to present a message that they are preparing students to be most prepared… we

have to do the same" and stated that they would not have been as intentional with the

improvements and changes they made in the middle school had it not been for the

competition from the charter schools. The high school principal echoed that sentiment,

stating that:

> If we use charter schools as a way to help ourselves grow, then it's a positive thing. Of course, we lose kids and I get that, but maybe that's when we need to stop and review our practices. What are they doing that makes them so appealing? Can we do some of those things so that we are more appealing?

As I move into the next section, I will examine in more depth some of those practices that

the traditional public-schools employed to make themselves more appealing.

Morale. One of the other impacts of the increased presence of charter schools was

a decrease in morale, especially in the middle and high school. While I will discuss this

issue also in terms of loss of community morale in the next chapter, it is a relevant and

persistent impact on the traditional public-schools in the community. No doubt

discussion of morale may be idiosyncratic and heavily tied to individual's perceptions,

yet many parents seem to believe that if their children receive an education in a newer,

more updated building, then the education will somehow be better, even if the small

community is then divided. The school board member who is from the community

summed up the problem in this way:

> When you compare [South Lake] to brand new schools in the district, in addition to size and enrollment issues, it only compounds [the perceptual issues] and community members feel like they won't get as good of an education as at another school because their school is older or doesn't have all the bells and whistles.

While most educators will recognize that just the presence of a new or updated building does not guarantee a better education, new buildings often increase morale. When you compound that with limited coverage related to the traditional public-schools in the county-wide newspaper because what is happening in the community and in the South Lake schools "are not newsworthy" according to a conversation the school board member had with employees of the newspaper, this leads to staff, parents, and students feeling defeated.

Response of Rural Traditional Public-schools

While the impacts of the increased presence of charter schools have been pronounced, rural traditional public-school leaders have found that they also have to respond to that increased competition in order to slow the tide of students withdrawing to enroll in charter schools. In addition, it was important for the schools to respond in order to provide to their community the best education possible for their children. In speaking with participants, I found five primary ways in which traditional public-schools have responded to the increased presence and competition from charter schools:

1. Conversation

2. Marketing and Communication

3. Bridging the Community

4. Increased Course and Program Offerings

5. Athletic Program Responses

In addition to the five categories mentioned above, some participants felt like the traditional public-schools had not responded at all, or enough. In response, they offered

recommendations for moving forward, which I discuss in the final sub-section of this section.

Conversation

Participants in the study, especially the principals of all four feeder pattern schools in the South Lake area, described the importance of personal conversation as a strategy that has been impactful in their response to the increased presence of the charter schools. For one, all four principals indicated that when parents approached them and informed them that they were thinking about making the switch, all four of them took time to sit down and discuss the parents' concerns with them and worked to highlight what the traditional public-schools could offer their children.

As one elementary school principal put it: "I discuss with parents who are leaving or thinking about leaving. Most parents typically communicate they are happy and don't give any specific reasons why they are leaving." As a part of these conversation, principals work to highlight the benefits of their school and the community schools. The second elementary school principal shared that in addition to understanding why the parents are considering leaving, they help parents to understand all of their options and all of the information surrounding those options. Seeing as how many of the parents are looking to move their students with an eye towards the future (middle or high school), the principal also tries to inform parents about the various options available at the secondary level, including the availability of online course options. The elementary school principal (who had previously served in the administration at South Lake High School), shared the following:

> When they [parents], sit down and we explain all the differences, they see that we can offer a lot of those same opportunities here. And I talk just because I've been at the middle and high school level, I talked to a lot of our family about South... They can offer online courses. You can travel to other campuses and get the same, the same things that you get. Just because it's small. You're not pigeonholed into... You can go to the Community College. And I talked about when I was there, we had the highest number of online class credits of anybody in our district and we're the smallest school, you know, so that there are options.

At the middle school level, the principal there works to help educate parents about the decisions they are making, and specifically highlights that teachers at the charter schools do not necessarily meet the same qualifications as teachers in the rural traditional public-schools. In addition, the principal tries to focus the conversation on the branding of the middle school and the school's vision that all students will be taught with "high standards and standards-aligned instruction." In addition, the principal focuses on the quality of the middle school and their recent successes in terms of statewide data and helps parents to understand that, in the case of one charter school specifically, more work isn't always better for their students. In addition to the conversations with parents, the high school principal works to be intentional to engage in conversations with students about these decisions.

In the last two years, the Lake County School District held community meetings with parents and community members from all four South Lake feeder pattern schools to discuss the needs they saw in their community schools to help plan for changes and options moving forward. As a result of the community meetings, the district opened up enrollment in the South Lake feeder pattern schools to select members of the community whose domicile was geographically close to the South Lake schools.

Marketing and Communication

The second area of focus of traditional public-school response to the increased competition from charter schools was a targeted marketing and communication effort. In speaking with participants about the marketing and communication responses from the rural traditional public-schools, three types of marketing and communication emerged: grassroots communication, marking efforts (including social media), and building on successes.

Grassroots communication. In speaking with one of the elementary school principals, she recognized that in terms of communication with parents, there are limitations to what schools can do. The principal believes that if you can get the parents and community on the side of the traditional public-school, then parents, especially in terms of conversations with peers and friends, can have a more significant impact than the principals can in selling the traditional public-school. Members of the middle school focus group also believed that the use of word of mouth marketing was powerful. They mentioned that as parents of students in the middle school, they try to communicate and tell people about South Lake Middle School (SLMS) – about the positive things happening in the building and share examples of students who have attended SLMS who have gone on to attend a four-year college and been successful. As one parent shared:

> I'm telling them that I had a positive experience. My children have had a positive experience. At South, what is different about us is that a lot of the teachers here, we have known them all of our life. So, when you're in that situation – they do care a little bit more. They know your parents, they know your grandparents, they're going to care a little but more to see you do better than at other schools.

Parents recognize that South Lake will likely always be a small school located in a small community, but while that has limitations, that also can be a strength – as one parent noted, "we are a community school" and you will be more than a student here – your child will be known and cared for. The high school focus group members also emphasized the grassroots efforts and the power of sharing the strengths of the school, specifically mentioning that they believe that teachers are at South Lake High School because they want to be there.

Marketing efforts. In speaking with participants, especially the middle and high school principals who have received the brunt of the impact of students leaving their schools for charter schools, they agreed that marketing efforts, including strategic use of social media, were important aspect of their response to the competition. The middle school has focused on intentionally branding their school, recognizing that "if charter schools present a specific message, then we have to do the same." The branding they focused on was highlighting that at South Lake Middle School, all students would be known. Their branding focused around the slogan "South Lake for All" and they created a new mission statement "to hold ALL students to HIGH STANDARDS and provide a *personalized* and *relevant* education for each" [emphasis from the school]. In addition, the middle school has worked with a local company to create yard signs that are available for purchase for $10 that community members can place in their yards or in front of their small businesses to show their support for the middle and high school in the community.

Both the middle and the high school principals cited the use of social media as an important marketing tool to help keep students enrolled in their school or to encourage

students to re-enroll in their schools. The middle school works to showcase and communicate the things that will get students excited about attending their traditional public-school for middle school. The high school principal also utilized social media, and through conducting some research on page views and engagements, found that Facebook was the most effective tool for the high school to use. As a result, the high school has focused their use of social media using Facebook as their primary tool. They use Facebook to showcase all of the great things happening at the school, and they especially spend time highlighting aspects of the traditional high school experience that build community, including prom and homecoming, as well as their fine arts and athletics programs. The school board member also recognized the importance and effectiveness of using social media and especially Facebook to communicate with stakeholders and showcase what's great in the schools. She had gone to a session at the school board conference on how important it was to market a school to parents, and agreed that this was an important effort, especially in light of competition from charter schools.

In addition to branding and social media, members of the middle school focus group along with the middle school's administration worked together to create a marketing video that describes why South Lake Middle School is a good option for a child's education.

Building on success. A third response was for schools to work to capitalize on the successes they had already experienced. For example, at one of the elementary schools, in addition to encouraging frequent home to school communication so that parents can understand what their kids experience each day, the school also held a bring

your parents to school day. According to the principal, this was a huge leap of faith for her and for the school, but the impacts were tremendous. Parents walked away seeing firsthand the "great things happening at the school" and also gained a newfound appreciation for what the school did for their child. As a result, school leadership reported a decrease in discipline issues and an increase in parent engagement.

At the middle school, the school moved their traditional rising 6th grade orientation from the fall just before school started to the spring, so that students could come into the building, take a tour and hear from current teachers and students before the decision to potentially enroll in a charter school had been made. In addition, the school held a college fair where former South Lake Middle School students came to talk to current students about the colleges and universities they had attended. Finally, the school advertised the number of teachers at the middle school who are graduates of South Lake Middle and High Schools.

Bridging the Community

The South Lake feeder pattern consists of two different communities: Threshers and Gold Mountain. Both communities have an elementary school that feeds into South Lake Middle and High School. Historically, those communities have been separate entities and there were few opportunities for the students in the communities to interact before middle and high school. As a direct response to the increased numbers of students leaving the rural traditional public-schools, the elementary schools have worked to bridge the two communities together. Outside of the school setting, the two communities now run a joint booster program for youth athletics under the same mascot name as the middle

and high school. In addition, members of the focus group from Threshers Elementary School have been pushing school leadership to incorporate more joint events between the schools – events like field days, field trips, etc. Parents who were part of the focus group believed that if you bring the students together, you will bring the parents and families together as well, which will help to continue to bridge the two communities and ultimately keep more students enrolled in the rural traditional public-schools.

Increased Course and Program Offerings

Both the middle and the high school have offered more course and club options for their students as a direct response to the increased competition from charter schools. At the middle school level, the middle principal has worked to increase the number of clubs that are offered in their building, and many of their club topics have been modeled after clubs offered at the charter schools in the areas. In addition, the school has focused on working to offer clubs and programs that are central to the needs and wants of students in the building, based on feedback from conversations and surveys. The middle school principal explained their process:

> We've had to be really strategic and purposeful about what we are doing here at South Lake Middle School. Wanting to be able to, for our statistics and our stats to really match up against charter schools. In some ways [we've] copied some things that they've done and implemented those practices into what we do. If for example [charter school], one of the things that really draw students to them has to do with their STEM focus and a lot of that comes through clubs and some organizations like that that they can have embedded into their day. So, knowing that that was a big draw for some of our students that [at the charter school] you get to do this really fun thing, we implemented school wide clubs here three years ago. We looked at their club description and we made some really that were very comparable. We obviously did what fit our students and our needs, but we look to see this is what they're offering, this is what kids are excited about in the public-school and what can we do and provide there.

At the high school level, the high school principal in conjunction with the South Lake school district increased the number of courses available to students at South Lake High School. For some of those courses, students have the option to travel to the community college or to another high school in the district. In addition, the district has begun to develop a virtual program that offers various AP courses to students in an online format. The high school principal has recognized that the increased course offerings, even if they are virtual, have made a positive impact as they work to keep students enrolled in the school.

Athletic Program Responses

South Lake Middle School responded to the impact on their athletic programs in a unique way. The middle school sought approval from the Lake County Board of Education to allow sixth grade students to participate in all sports except football. This had been approved at the state level, but at the local level, middle school principals had voted 6-1 to not allow sixth grade students to participate in athletics. South Lake Middle School is the only middle school in Lake County to allow sixth grade students to participate in athletics. This allows them to compete with the charter schools who let 6th graders compete. At the high school level, South Lake High School stopped granting athletic releases for students who withdrew from their school to enroll in a charter school.

Recommendations Moving Forward

Despite the changes that had been made, participants in this study still noted that not enough had been done. Members of one of the elementary school focus groups felt strongly that they had not seen enough of a response from the traditional public-schools,

especially at the middle and high school levels. One participant stated that while they didn't want to belittle any efforts that the schools had made to respond to the presence of charter schools in the community, for example hosting rising 6th grade students for a tour of the middle school, these activities hadn't been enough, in their opinion, to stop the movement of students to the charter schools as they head to middle school. Another parent in the elementary school focus group said this about the high school's response: "If you don't market yourself to where we know as parents what you have to offer, then why are we not going to explore other options?" Another parent added that the high school must showcase what they have in order to keep students enrolled or entice students to enroll at the high school.

While conducting interviews and focus groups, as parents shared how they had seen their rural traditional public-schools respond to the increased presence and competition from charter schools, participants also shared recommendations they believed would help the traditional public-schools turn the tide of enrollment back in favor of the traditional public-schools. Their recommendations align with the same categories I described in the previous section.

Conversation. In speaking with the local newspaper editor about the community meetings that had been held, she described their benefit and believed more open forums and opportunities for open dialogue needed to be held in the community in order to discuss concerns and issues head on. She shared the idea to "try to pull parents in and have some open forums, more conferences."

Marketing and communication. The local newspaper editor recommended the middle and high schools make more use of surveys – for example, surveying incoming 6th graders and outgoing 8th graders about what options they would like to see at the middle and high school, respectively. She recommended asking students specifically "what would you what to see at the school that would keep you at this school and not look to leave for a charter school?" Members of one elementary school focus group stated that they would like to see the high school to be more proactive in letting people know what options there are for students at South Lake High School. They shared that they do not believe the high school is communicating "this what we can offer you to stay here" and believes the high school needs to think more along the lines of the charter schools in this regard. As one parent in an elementary school focus group shared:

> I think at the end of the day, you're not really going to find out why parents are moving. I think they're going to do what they perceive is the best for their child. I don't know how you can reverse it other than promote these tools that your schools have and make the kids want to come there.

Despite what school principals felt they were doing that's working, community members do not always see those efforts as successful, and felt that more still needs to be done in order to stop the flow of students to the charter schools.

Bridging the community. Participants also see that more work can be done to build bridges among historically separate areas within the community. One of the elementary school principals noted that "getting people here [to South Lake] is hard, but once they get here, they don't want to leave." Members of one of the elementary school focus groups see a need to grow parental involvement and build from there – to continue

to get individuals into the school building. As one parent shared, if you work to "get to know the teacher, the principal, get in the school and get involved [your response will be a whole lot different as opposed to] 'they don't have that so I am going to look somewhere else and find out.'"

Increased course and program offerings. Parents in the middle school focus groups discussed a distinct need to provide even more access to courses, especially for students at the high school level. The group felt that the size of the school should not be a limitation to what courses are offered to their students. The local newspaper editor believed that the high school should focus additional course offerings that are geared towards students who will be pursuing a degree via a trade school. Many of the current course offerings that have been added are geared towards college-bound students and while those courses are vital, especially as that is a demographic the charter schools are targeting, the high school needs course offerings that appeal to all students. By also increasing vocational offerings, the newspaper editor believed the community could better prepare students for the types of jobs that are available in the South Lake area. One drawback to the increased offerings of advanced and AP level courses for students at South Lake High School is that many of those students have to drive across the county to attend those classes in other high schools. The school board member recognized that parents do not like their kids driving across the county for the classes so increasing the number of courses available in the South Lake building would be advantageous.

Summary

Charter Schools have made an impact on rural traditional public-schools. I have examined that impact in this chapter in terms of the loss of students, the loss of funding and teaching positions, and through perceptual impacts related to issues such as athletics, competition, and morale. In response to charter school competition, rural traditional public-schools have worked to hold more conversations, better communicate and market their programs and successes, bridge historic rifts in the community, increase course and program offerings, and make changes to the athletics program. While much work has been done to respond to the impact from charter schools and slow the tide of students enrolling in charter schools, there is still work to be done at the school level. In addition, participants recognized that in many ways this is a community issue as much as it is a school issue. In light of that fact, in the next chapter I examine in more depth the impact and response of the community to this increased competition from charter schools**.**

CHAPTER V

IMPACT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS ON RURAL COMMUNITIES

In this chapter, I examine the impact that the presence of charter schools has had on rural communities surrounding the rural traditional public-schools and how the community has responded to the presence of charter schools. I organize this chapter into the following sections: General Concerns Regarding Charter Schools, Impact on the Community, and Other Factors Relating to Charter Schools in the Community.

General Concerns Regarding Charter Schools

While the presence of charter schools has created a significant tension in the South Lake feeder pattern, participants also shared general concerns about charter school practices that impacted both school operations and factored into issues within the community. Participants identified three primary areas of concern regarding the general operation of charter schools: Hiring Practices, Double Standards, and Athletics Impact. I discuss each factor in more detail in the sections below.

Hiring Practices

In speaking with participants, they noted two concerns in terms of hiring practices of charter schools. First, as discussed in the previous chapters, the middle school principal shared a concern that charter schools aren't bound by the same hiring practices as traditional public-schools in that not all staff members are required to be certified

teachers. In speaking with one of the elementary school principals, they shared this experience:

> I let go a teacher my first year here, they hired them at [a local charter school] charter. I had documentation after documentation after documentation that this teacher was not effective and was harming children and they hired them. And you know, if that's the education [you get there], like I think we offer a better education here because I am so strategic about who I hire and I spend so much time going over who's in what class and what kids are going to be in that class and what teachers are and what grade level to make sure that it is the perfect fit. And obviously, they don't do that clearly filling positions.

Double Standards

Two aspects of a "double-standard" for charter schools were discussed by my participants: double-standards for regulations for charter schools vs traditional public-schools and a perspective of double standards for traditional public-school employees who enroll their children in charter schools.

Regulations. Multiple participants shared concerns that charter schools and traditional public-schools do not operate on a level playing field. One of the elementary school principals felt strongly that charter schools and traditional public-schools should be held to the same standards in terms of funding and other operational and curriculum standards. Reflecting on the impact of charter schools in this way, the principal acknowledged that the "competition has helped us to up our game, but that shouldn't be at the detriment of the traditional public-schools." Their feeling was that the state is "throwing funding at the flashy new thing" and traditional public-schools are missing out. They concluded their statements saying "I have nothing against charter schools, they should just be held to the same standards." Other participants communicated similar

concerns. One member of the elementary school focus group echoed the concern that charter schools are not held to the same academic standards and expectations as traditional public-schools. One member of the middle school focus group also shared a concern that they did not believe that charter schools in their current form were meeting their intended purposes, stating "what's happening now is not what was originally intended," and shared that from their understanding, charter schools were originally intended to provide more opportunities for inner-city student to help improve access and opportunity.

Traditional public-school employees. Another concern shared by participants was the optics of traditional public-school and school district employees sending their own children to charter schools. Participants did not want to take away from a parents' right to choose what was best for their children, but the high school principal, one member of the elementary school focus group and a small business owner in the community shared concerns with this practice. The elementary school focus group member, seemingly frustrated, proclaimed: "When the school that you're teaching at isn't good enough for your kids, why should I be sending my kids there?" The same individual also shared a similar sentiment regarding community leaders sending their students to charter schools, sharing "When you've got leaders of the community here that are sending their kids somewhere else you're like..." and as their voice trailed off another participant finished their sentence, "…it makes you wonder." Another member of the elementary school focus group made this comparison: "If you're the CEO of Apple, you don't want to be seen playing with [an] IBM or whoever."

Athletics Impact

In the previous chapter, I highlighted various concerns relating to charter schools and their impacts on traditional public-schools in terms of a loss of student-athletes and allegations of recruiting practices. In addition to these concerns, participants also shared concerns regarding the alignment of schools in athletic conferences and the lack of fairness in competition for smaller traditional public-schools versus charter schools. The primary concerns were shared by community members and members of the middle and high school focus groups. The primary concern, apart from the perception that charter schools were recruiting students to be on their sports teams, was that because the local charter schools are drawing enrollment from as many as eight or nine other school districts, their geographic net is cast much wider than the traditional public-schools, yet they still compete in the same conference. The competitive fairness was a significant concern for participants and as one small business owner, who also serves as the high school booster club stated, this issue starts with the North Carolina High School Athletic Association and in their opinion "until larger public-schools are impacted in the same way" they don't anticipate seeing any changes. Because a majority of charter schools are smaller in student population, they often compete against the smaller traditional public-schools, many of which are rural public-schools, since their student population numbers are so similar. Community members believe those practices are unfair to the smaller traditional public-schools since their ability to enroll is based on geographic factors and the charter schools can pull from any geographic area. The booster club president

believes that until the schools in the larger athletics classifications see a similar impact from charter schools, the NCHSAA policies will not be changed.

Impact on the Community

The presence and growth of charter schools within and near the South Lake community, especially in the town of Threshers, has made an impact on members of the community. As I was speaking with participants at all levels, their passion and concern for their community was evident in the information they shared, as well as in their tone of voice and facial expressions. While all of the participants I spoke with were staunch supporters of the traditional public-school, they also loved their community and many were grieved by the impact that the charter schools had made on their community. Based on participant responses, I identified five topics related to community impact that were most concerning: Community Pride, Feelings of Betrayal, Community Divisions and Tension, Athletic Events, and Social Media. In the following sections, I examine these five topics in more detail.

Community Pride

One of the major findings from the people I talked with is that at the root of the tensions in the community surrounding charter schools and traditional public-schools is the tremendous amount of pride that members of the community have about their community and about their community schools. While this is an overwhelmingly positive aspect of the community, excessive pride can nonetheless have negative impacts.

In speaking with three of the principals of the schools in the South Lake feeder pattern, they all recognized the role that the pride in the community plays in why the area

is an attractive place to live. One of the elementary school principals recognized that many community members believe that if you live in the Threshers area, you should attend the South Lake schools. The principal of the high school discussed the fact that they frequently hear community members reminisce about the old Threshers high school and discuss the community aspect of the school as a strength.

The middle school principal, who is also a graduate of South Lake High School and a resident of Threshers, also recognized the immense pride the community members take in both the community and the schools. The middle school principal feels that the community has rallied behind the traditional public-schools because they have seen how the traditional public-schools have been impacted by the charter schools and also because of the marketing efforts the middle school has started. One of the marketing efforts mentioned in the previous chapter was the yard signs that were for sale; the middle school principal reported that you can see the yard signs throughout the community and that in their opinion, the presence of the yard signs communicates that "we believe what they are doing here [at the middle school]."

The middle school principal also mentioned the great support the schools receive from the town as an example of the sense of community pride and assistance the public-schools receive. In recent years, the mayor of Threshers has been known to attend awards ceremonies at the elementary and middle schools, and has read to students at the elementary schools for read across America week. In addition, in the last year the town of Threshers gave $1000 to South Lake Middle School to buy books for their students

and gave the elementary school money to support their "one school, one book" initiative. Speaking about the donation, the middle school principal said this:

> Threshers money is never going to support a charter school. One, because they are not in the city limits. And South Lake is not in the city limits either. But they are still going to support us because it's home.

The pride in the community and loyalty to the community schools is also seen in other areas as well. The middle school principal also serves on the Parks and Recreation board in the town of Threshers. When the Parks and Recreation board was planning a Christmas parade, the committee was very clear that South Lake schools would be the only school invited to participate in the parade. Even though there were other traditional public high schools who were geographically close, the committee decided to make the parade about the hometown schools.

In addition, the middle school principal sees a lot of town pride, especially from the members of the community who have lived there for many generations. Talking more specifically about the community pride, the middle school principal shared the following about the feelings of many members of the community:

> This is our school. This is our community. This is our town. We want to support and celebrate that every time that we can. Sometimes that means pointing out how we are different than charter schools. They take a lot of pride in this being the school that they went to.

Other participants also recognized the deep sense of community pride they witnessed in the South Lake community. The school board member believes that while Threshers is a community-oriented town, they also recognize that loyalty is deeply

important in the community, which is a topic I will discuss more later in this chapter.

One member of one of an elementary school focus group shared that many members of

the community believe that it is their civic duty to support both the community and the

schools in the community where they live. A member of the middle school focus group

explained the sense of community pride this way:

> There are a large number of people who are South through and through, and it's
> never a question for their kids. This is what my family has decided, no matter
> what opportunity, we're going to make South Lake better by being here.

The middle school focus group members also shared that they believe the community

does a very good job in supporting the community schools. This was a sentiment that

was also echoed by one member of the high school focus group, who is also the Police

Chief in the town of Threshers, who shared: "This is a great school and we have a great

community and I believe our community supports this school very well."

While community pride is a strength according to almost all the people I talked to

in this study, the deep sense of pride in the community can also manifest in a negative

manner. The local newspaper editor shared that, despite the pride in the community, it

can be hard to get community involvement until there is something people don't like and

then everyone has an opinion about it. The editor also believes that the community needs

to move beyond the "poor South" mentality when it comes to the school, stating she often

hears: "we get the short end of the stick, we don't get this, we don't have the finest

facilities, etc." The newspaper editor does not go along with that sentiment, stating: "we

do have support, we do have fine facilities… I don't go along with the poor South

mentality." The local school board member shared a similar sentiment. According to the school board member, along with the pride in the community, a sense of negativity is evident as well, particularly in relation to competition between schools. The board member believes that the community must change their mindset and get rid of the victim mentality: "Negativity breeds negativity. Positivity breeds positivity. We have to change our mindset from that." In order to move forward, the board member maintained that the community "must have complete community buy-in, get parents excited, get everyone on the same page, bring everyone together, remind them how great they are and that they are not forgotten…It takes everyone to rise up. Everyone has to buy-in."

Feelings of Betrayal

As previous mentioned, members of the South Lake community take a tremendous amount of pride in their community and in their community schools. As a result, when they see members of their community elect to enroll their children in a charter school, parents feel a deep sense of betrayal, according to one of the elementary school principals. The principal shared that "they feel like they have been betrayed by leaving the Threshers area. You live in the Threshers area; you need to attend the South area schools." That principal also shared that in their opinion, the tensions and feeling of betrayal exist primarily between the core families in the community, that is, long-standing and prominent local citizens.

Community Division and Tension

The juxtaposition of loyalty and a sense of betrayal has led to some tensions in the community. Specifically, a division in the community has emerged between families

who have remained loyal to the traditional public-schools and those families who have chosen to enroll their children in the charter schools. I explore this phenomenon in this section. I first discuss the general divisions that have emerged in the community, and then I explore the impact of established families leaving for charter schools as opposed to families who are newer to the community leaving for charter schools.

General divisions and tension. As parents make the decision to enroll their children in a charter school, the result of that decision is often a division, sometimes natural, between families who enroll in the charter schools and those families who remain enrolled in the traditional public-schools. According to one elementary school principal, many families believe that those who enroll in charter school "think they are better than us" and that parents who leave can feel like they are not part of the community any more. According to the principal, that result is sometimes intentional, as people have made a conscious decision to not associate socially with those who are enrolled in the charter schools (students) or those parents who choose to enroll their students in charter schools. At other times, the feelings of isolation are an unintentional and almost natural result of the decision, especially for the students – since you are no longer going to school with your friends back in the community, you aren't around them as much and therefore, you don't socialize on the weekend or at other times; as a result, these relationships are impacted.

The middle school principal reported seeing signs of the division, including "battle lines be drawn" between families who enroll their children in a charter school and those who are making the choice to keep their children in the traditional public-school.

Some of this, according to the middle school principal, results because the community is "loyal – to a fault," particularly in honoring traditions, culture, and community history. The principal offered an example of this by sharing a story about how new businesses have often struggled in the Threshers community because "Threshers is a hard community to be trusted in…this goes for administrators, business owners, and it goes for new residents" and for many new small business owners:

> It is very, very hard to have a successful business in this community as a startup. The businesses that are here are established. They've been here… these businesses have been around for years and years and years and they're going to continue to do well. A new restaurant opens up for the most part... it shuts down really quick. Like coffee shops, bookstores, all that. They try and it's just a few months. When Subway came in, we were real nervous if that was going to work because there's a new business and new people aren't trusted. I met with the owner of Subway, I'm trying to coordinate a movie night for the town of Threshers and he was going to sponsor that. And I told him, I said, 'these people are hard to get to trust, but they are loyal without a fault. So, if they trust you, they will always trust you, but you're going to have to do the work to get them to do that.' And he said, 'well, how do we do the work? How do I make sure that they can trust me?' And I said, 'you need to make sure that you are honoring things that they honor.' And so, he moved the train engine that is for the Farmpark over to Subway as a way to say, I'm honoring something that's so important to this town. I'm going to put this in our front yard here, this big train engine. And so, that is probably the thing that allowed him as a franchise to be successful there. Other businesses have not fared so well.

As conversations with participants went on, other examples and views on this community division began to emerge as well.

In speaking with the school board member, they spoke of growing tension and rifts in the community: "people are on edge, parents are on edge, teachers are on edge – it's caused a division in our community." Some community members felt a tremendous amount of animosity for those people who chose to send their children to the charter

schools, especially early on when it felt like the people who were leaving were leaving to "jump on the trend bus." The booster club president and small business owner described these concerns. According to the president, hard feelings developed, especially early on, when students who had gone to school with each other through middle school left for charter schools in high school. The booster club president shared that in some cases

> It just creates a bad relationship… When we feel like these people have made the choice to, I guess, abandon is not the right word, but to choose other options outside of their own school district where they actually live, I think it's just created the feelings that 'Hey, you don't want to be a part of our school. You don't want to be a positive influence in our school district.' I think some of us look at that as a negativity. Unfortunately, I think we may possibly treat them a little different. I'm not saying that's the right thing to do. I just think when we feel like they've sort of abandoned out schools, our educators…some of us take it a little bit personal.

And while the booster club president recognized there hadn't been a mass exodus, enough students have enrolled in the charter schools that it has created tensions and divisions – between students, parents, and athletic teams. A member of the elementary school focus group recognized that while the numbers of students who left traditional public-schools were small, it became a big deal and seemed like an impact because of the smaller numbers in the community, and living in a small-town community that can often be driven by cliques.

Another member of the elementary school focus group used even stronger language, suggesting that "hatred is rising" between those leaving and those staying, especially at the high school level due to athletics. As one member put it "either you love it [the charter school] and you're going to go through with it, and if you go there it's like

'I can't stand you, I want nothing to do with you.'" Another member of the elementary focus group believed that the charter schools fed an entitled mindset and as a result, there is a lot of division in the community.

Members of the middle school focus group also felt similarly about the growing tensions in the community. One member of the focus group shared that:

> I know my [spouse] is really, really just die-hard South Lake. They won't even… if they leave to go to charter schools they won't even speak to them anymore. They will have nothing to do with them. They'll say 'they don't support our community; I'm not going to help them with anything.'

One attribute to these increased tensions and divisions, according to the middle school focus group, is that parents are sending their students to charter schools that are less than 20 miles down the road, as opposed to sending them to a boarding school. Because the charter schools are so close to the community, the tensions are even higher than they might otherwise be, especially when the issues related to athletics come up, as I have previously discussed. One member of the middle school focus group shared that tensions are also high when parents who are making the choice to leave are very vocal about their choice. They offered examples that when those parents and students have subsequently made the decision to come back to the traditional public-school, and as one participant described it, they are having to come back like a dog with their tail between their legs because "they said all these bad things when they left." One parent also put this into perspective for the group, stating that:

I try, when they do come back, to be as nice as I can, because they know they realize they made a mistake. And now they want to come back. It's not fair to the kid to be hard on the kid.

The parents also recognized that the tensions and divisions were primarily seen between adults and not so much the students. The middle school focus group did believe there was a higher tension with the high school students because of athletic competition.

In the South Lake community, the tensions and divisions were powerfully demonstrated by the experiences of the local newspaper editor who shared two significant experiences. In the first example, the local newspaper editor hosted a student intern from one of the local charter schools, and was criticized for allowing this intern to write about issues from her school.

You know, we had an intern come from [a charter school] and I said, 'honey, you know what, you can't write about South Lake, you don't go there. So write about some of the things that your school was doing. And this was when they were building the middle school and everything, [there was] huge criticism [about] that… We were criticized because we were allowing her to do an internship because she wanted to be a writer. Well, you know, you can't be a writer and write about something you don't know [about], and trying to keep the peace in the community. I said, okay let's take a more general approach. Let's talk about tennis in general or let's include both schools when you do it, which is not really fair to her. But it wasn't fair to her to be seeing the criticism and the emails that were coming in. I mean, she's a kid. I can take it. But don't do that to her. She wasn't doing anything wrong.

Another example centered around the local newspaper sharing information in the Threshers Newspaper about the local charter schools, be it their students or their athletic teams. The local newspaper editor shared a story of pushback when discussing the charter school in the paper:

> Students that go to [the local charter schools] are part of the community. Their parents have businesses in town. They pay their taxes. I put these children in the paper because it's not the South Lake Newspaper, it's the Threshers Newspaper. You would not believe some of the criticisms that I have received for putting [a charter school's] graduation picture and it was 'how dare you put this in here' and I was like, 'there were seven children in this picture whose parents had businesses in this town. They deserve to be in the paper just as much as South does. 'I mean, it's unusual for a town to have a newspaper that totally focuses on just South Lake, Gold Mountain and Threshers Elementary. I mean these kids have a full academic page and a full athletic place plus a bonus page every week just devoted to them… [A local charter school] has some really great teams. Why wouldn't we put them in the paper? So, it's bothersome to me that it is making a division in the community. And I understand, I understand alumni pride and we have that tons of it now. But it shouldn't be to the exclusion of other students and those that are making the choice or their parents are making the choice.

The role of a community newspaper is to share information about all members of the community. The local newspaper editor believes that is their job to be inclusive, and is committed to continuing to do just that. They are bothered that the choices parents are making to send their children to a charter school are creating so much tension in the community. They understand that parents have a right to choose, and the newspaper editor respects that it is not an easy choice. They discussed the fact that parents are making a sacrifice the send their students to a charter school, and that parents and families should not be excluded in the community because of that choice.

Legacy vs. new families. In examining the tensions in the community surrounding charter schools, an interesting distinction emerged. Many participants noted a difference in the perceptions of families who had been members of the South Lake community for years who had chosen to leave for charter schools as opposed to those families who were newer to the community and had made the decision to enroll their children in a charter school. Initially, according to the school board member and

participants in the elementary, middle, and high school focus groups, newer families to

the communities were leaving the traditional public-schools and enrolling in charter

schools. For those families, who, according to the middle school principal, do not have

the same roots as the legacy or generational families, it's easier to make the decision to

enroll in charter schools and the tensions aren't as great.

Over time, the community has seen more of the generational families make the

choice to leave the traditional public-schools and enroll their children in the charter

schools. As the more established, generational families have left the traditional public-

schools for the charter schools, the tensions in the community have only escalated. The

high school booster club president summed up the tensions well:

> People who relocated to the area, they seem to not be as concerned about sending
> their kids to a non-traditional public-school, the charter schools… it's more of an
> issue for us when people we grew up with, they are considered [Threshers through
> and through], when they choose to send their kids to these charter schools, I think
> that hurts just a little bit more [and we show] more of a negativity towards these
> folks.

The tensions in the community are significant, especially when legacy families elect to

send their children to a charter school. One of the primary places that tension is seen is at

athletic events between the charter schools and the traditional public-schools.

Athletic Events

For many of the participants I spoke with, the tensions in the community between

charter schools and traditional public-schools are most evident and visible in the athletic

events between the rural traditional public-schools and the charter schools. This tension

has been seen only at the high school level, as the middle school only competes with

other traditional public-schools in Lake County. The high school principal, in discussing community tensions, described various issues that have occurred during athletic events involving the charter schools in the areas. One member of the elementary school focus group who also serves as a coach at the high school offered examples of a recent contest between South Lake High School and one of the local charter schools where references were made by members of the charter school crowd about the socioeconomic status of some of the members of the South Lake community population, which goes back to the stigma of Threshers and the South Lake community that I discussed earlier.

The high school booster club president shared a recent issue at a playoff baseball game between one of the local charter schools and a rural traditional public-school in the district to the immediate south of South Lake where there was a fight between student athletes from both schools. One member of the middle school focus group also mentioned that at a recent athletic event between South Lake High and one of the charter schools, tensions had run so high that the police were escorting individuals out of the gym.

Social Media

In the age of social media, it should not come as a surprise that this form of communication has played a role in the community tensions relating to the presence of charter schools in the South Lake community. I have already discussed in the previous chapter how traditional public-schools have used social media to help market the positive aspects of their schools. Yet at the same time, social media also has played a role in exacerbating the divisions in the community. Members of one elementary school focus

group shared generally that they believed that social media has played a role in making

the divisions in the community worse. Other participants cited specific examples. One

small business owner has seen parents post on social media to "inform" followers that

their children were making the switch to the charter school; they believe that when people

see those posts, it builds the tensions in the community even higher. They added that

without a doubt social media has drawn more attention to the issue of polarization within

the community; sometimes community members are using social media to intentionally

stoke the metaphoric fire, while other times it's an unintentional impact. The president of

the booster club mentioned that while they try to be mindful of the role social media can

play in community tensions and pride, they also use social media to highlight positive

things from the school, specifically in terms of athletics. The local school board member

mentioned examples of one person posting some form of wrong information about either

the traditional public-schools or the charter schools and that post and misinformation

spreading like wildfire in the community.

One of the elementary school principals shared an example of a situation that

happened to her where social media played a negative role in a well-intended post on the

school's Facebook page that, while not directly related to the charter schools, highlighted

the sensitivity in the community to promoting anything other than South Lake. I share

her experience below:

> I had a parent group last year who attacked me on Facebook because I live in the
> East Lake area. That doesn't mean anything other than I'm from Lake County.
> We got free tickets for their [East Lake] [professional] wrestling tournament, free
> tickets for all of our kids to go. So, I sent them home. You know, I had no
> question about it and they took a screenshot of my Facebook page and said, well

> this is why. And they circled where it said went to East Lake High School and they sent it all around, you know, and like it was a huge ordeal that involved HR you know, because they were attacking me or thought I was going against South. It was a free opportunity for our kids. They don't have a lot of money, it's something free to do. That's literally, that is it. I'm not supporting their program. You know, they just take it such to heart like they want, they want people in the South [area] to stay in the South [area]. And I'm not saying they're bad people, but they are just very territorial.

This is a prime example not only of the feelings of betrayal the community can experience when people leave their schools, but they can also feel this way even if they perceive someone is not in complete support of their schools and community. The tensions in this incident also illustrate the power that social media can play in these types of situations.

In a previous section I discussed the criticism and feedback the local newspaper editor experienced when she allowed a student intern from one of the charter schools to write an article highlighting their school in the local newspaper. In the aftermath, the newspaper received a tremendous amount of criticism online, especially through Facebook, though also some via e-mail communication as well. The newspaper editor described how this negative feedback "definitely happens more online – people are very, very comfortable hiding behind their computers."

Other Factors Relating to Charter Schools in the Community

In the course of conducting the research relating to charter school impact on rural traditional public-schools and the impact on the rural communities, an interesting piece of information emerged in my conversations with a few different participants. While participants recognized that charter schools are playing a role in the decreasing student

population of the South Lake area schools and the resulting impact in the loss of funding and teaching positions, they also recognized that homeschooling and their status as a small, rural community also made just as much of an impact, if not a greater impact, than the loss of students to charter schools.

The idea that homeschooling takes a high number of students away from the traditional public-schools is not new in this community. In January 2018, all principals in the Lake County School System were presented with information regarding the number of students who were homeschooled in Lake County. That number approached the 2000 student range, which is a significant number of students in a school system of just over 24,000 students.

In my interviews with school leaders in the South Lake feeder pattern, both the middle and high school principals mentioned that there were a high number of homeschooled students in the community, but, in the opinion of the high school principal, "they never enter the feeder pattern schools so they do not get the same attention as those students who leave the feeder pattern" to enter charter schools. The middle school principal thought the number of school-aged students in the community who were homeschool was much greater than the number of students who were enrolled in charter schools from the community.

Other members of the community also recognized the impact that homeschooling made on the traditional public-schools. Members of the elementary school focus group also believed that the homeschool population in South Lake is greater than the number of students enrolled in charter schools. The newspaper editor stated that the homeschooling

movement has probably pulled close to 150 students away from the tradition public-schools, that "homeschools don't get the same attention and publicity, probably in part because it's easier to attack an entity [charter schools] than a person." The newspaper editor also believed that because many families homeschool because of religious reasons, it made them harder to critique, even though they are also taking students from the traditional public-schools. In addition, the newspaper editor suggested homeschooling doesn't get the same attention as charter schools because community members don't see the families who homeschools as taking money from the traditional public-schools.

Participants also recognized that the size of the community was also a significant limitation for the traditional public-schools. Throughout the last two chapters, I have drawn on quotes and examples to highlight the struggles of keeping students enrolled and engaged despite the lack of course offerings and programs, which is often a symptom and struggle of smaller, rural schools. The fact that there are limited jobs bringing families to the area has also stymied the growth.

Summary

In this chapter, I examined how rural communities have been impacted by the presence of charter schools in their community. The rural community in which this study was situated has seen a tremendous impact in their community because of the charter schools. The immense pride community members take in their community and their community schools has been tested as some community members have chosen to enroll their children in a charter school as opposed to the traditional public-schools in the community. In addition, while tensions have increased in the community as a result of

this competition, community members have also used this competition to find ways to continue to show their support for their community traditional public-schools. In the next and final chapter, I will offer some conclusions from this study as well as reflect on the question of how we ought to respond to the growth of charter schools.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of my study was to research the impact that the presence of charter schools has had on rural traditional public-schools and their surrounding communities. In this chapter, I summarize my findings, answer my research questions directly, make recommendations for policy and practice, and discuss opportunities for future research. I also examine the implications and limitations of the study.

Summary of the Study

I designed this study to examine the impact that the increased presence of, and competition from, charter schools has made on traditional public-schools, specifically in one rural district in North Carolina. I was also interested in how competition from charter schools had affected the broad rural communities surrounding the rural traditional public-schools. The numbers of charter schools in North Carolina has increased since the cap on their number permitted by law in the state was lifted in 2011. More and more charter schools are opening in rural areas, pretty much guaranteeing that many other communities will face similar challenges to South Lake.

As the numbers of charter schools has increased in the state, and especially in rural areas, charter schools are now serving more students than ever before. In the state of North Carolina, a bulk of funding for each school is determined by the number of students in that school (per pupil expenditure) on the twentieth day of school. As the

number of charter schools has grown, and the number of students being served in the charter schools has grown, as a direct result the number of students being served in the traditional public-schools has decreased. In many rural areas, such as the one in which my study was situated, the community was already facing a declining population, and the loss of students and therefore the funding associated with those students has made a significant impact on the rural traditional public-schools. Additionally, traditional public-schools, especially the high schools, commonly serve as the backbone and cultural center in many rural communities. When this changes and the high school no longer the community hub, it is unclear what is left to hold a community together. After conducting pilot studies on the topic of charter schools in rural communities, I learned of the palpable tensions in the rural community where I located this study. These intrigued me and led me to design this study to find out more.

Through the course of this study, I determined that the increased presence of charter schools in the rural community in which my study was situated certainly has made an impact on rural traditional public-schools. Not only did the schools experience that impact through the loss of students, the loss of funding, and the loss of teaching positions, there were also changes in attitudes, relationships, and morale among residents. The traditional public schools have lost athletes to the local charter schools, disrupting historic community pride and complicating the ability of all schools to field competitive teams. In addition, morale in the schools has been negatively impacted due to the numbers of students withdrawing from the rural traditional public-schools and enrolling in the surrounding charter schools.

Rural traditional public-schools have worked to respond to the impact that charter schools have made on their schools. Leaders of these school describe intentionally engaging stakeholders in conversations around why students are withdrawing from the traditional public-schools and working to develop meaningful ways in which the schools can respond to the issue and be more competitive in terms of keeping students enrolled in the public-schools. Traditional public-school leaders have also worked to intentionally market their schools in ways that they have not had to before, describing what their schools can offer through the use of social media, tangible marketing efforts like yard signs, and through increasing communication between the school and the home. The traditional public-schools have also worked to offer more courses, online and in person, as well as additional academic programs in general in order to engage students and offer more incentives for students, especially those who are looking for additional academic opportunities, to stay in the rural traditional public-schools. Despite these efforts, the parents and community members I interviewed felt like schools could be doing more to combat the issues, especially at the middle and high school levels, which have seen the bulk of the withdrawals to charter schools.

The rural community in which this study was situated has seen an impact on the community from the increased presence of and competition from charter schools. In the community, stakeholders have a tremendous sense of pride in their community, especially in the small town of Threshers. As some community members have made the decision to enroll their children in the charter schools, tensions have grown as a result of people, especially families who had been members of the community for some time,

began to withdraw from the rural traditional public-schools. These tensions have been seen on social media, at athletic events, and through feedback and criticisms leveled in and towards the local weekly newspaper. Participants in my study also made it clear that while the tensions in the community have made a negative impact, they also have seen members of the community come together to show support for their community rural traditional public-schools in response to these tensions.

In summary, I examined two key areas of research in this dissertation study: the impact of charter schools on rural traditional public-schools and the impact of charter schools on rural communities. Three research questions guided my study:

1. How has the presence of charter schools impacted public-schools in a rural setting?

2. How have public-schools responded to the presence of charter schools in their community?

3. How has the presence of charter schools impacted the community surrounding public-schools?

While I have broadly answered those questions as part of sharing my findings in the previous two chapters, I directly and succinctly answer them in the following section.

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1

How has the presence of charter schools impacted public-schools in a rural setting?

The impacts that charter schools have had on rural traditional public-schools are evident in two ways: numerical and perceptual impacts. Over a two-year period, a total

of 43 students withdrew from one of the South Lake feeder pattern schools to enroll in a charter school. Because the initial student numbers in the South Lake feeder pattern schools were already quite small, participants in my study acknowledged that while the actual number of students leaving their schools was relatively small, the impact was larger because of the smaller student numbers to begin with. Over the same two-year period, South Lake schools lost between zero and four percent of their total student body population to charter schools. I also found that that twenty-one students enrolled in South Lake feeder pattern schools from a charter school. Of those twenty-one students, eight of them enrolled after the twentieth day of school, which meant the traditional public-school did not receive the per pupil expenditure funding associated with that student for the school year, and that money remained with the charter school where they began their school year.

With a loss of students comes a loss of funding and teaching positions. Each student who left a South Lake feeder pattern schools represents a loss of $8455 of funding per student. With 43 students leaving South Lake schools over a two-year period, schools in that feeder pattern lost a total of $363,565 in funding. The feeder pattern schools also did not receive the $67,640 associated with the students who enrolled in the South Lake schools after the twentieth day of school. Over a two-year period, South Lake Middle and High Schools lost from 1 to almost 4 teaching positions.

Perhaps more than the numbers, the felt and experienced impacts perceived by the 22 community members and educators I interviewed were significant. Participants in my study who worked outside of the field of education (parents, small business owners) were

relatively familiar with the quantitative and financial impacts that the rural traditional public-schools faced as more charter schools opened in the area. Participants recognized that the loss of funding and loss of teaching positions was prevalent in part because of the numbers of students enrolling in charter schools and in part because of the smaller size of the South Lake feeder pattern community and their schools, specifically. One of the specific impacts that was seen as a result of the loss of funding and teaching positions is that schools in the community, especially at the high school, are limited in the course options available to students.

Participants also recognized an impact on athletic programs as a result of the increased enrollment in charter schools in the community. Many of the students who left the rural traditional public-schools to enroll in charter schools were student-athletes, and the perception of many participants was that those student-athletes were being recruited by the charter schools. Because the middle and high school in South Lake are already small, when student-athletes leave, it means the traditional schools face increasing difficulties in fielding competitive teams. This, in turn, impacts community pride as high school athletics are often a central focus in rural communities.

One of the other perceptual impacts that I uncovered in my study was that as the South Lake feeder pattern schools began to experience the loss of students to the charter schools, the South Lake feeder pattern schools were forced to make changes and improvements in order to offer a better product to their stakeholders. While the competition ultimately was in many ways a positive force, participants felt this competition should not be present at the expense of the rural traditional public-schools.

A final impact that emerged was the impact on morale of stakeholders, especially in the middle and high school. As I noted, not only were there more tensions in the community, especially among long-time residents, there was a loss of morale as families saw the historic influence of the traditional public schools eroding.

Research Question 2

How have public-schools responded to the presence of charter schools in their community?

Rural traditional public-schools in the South Lake feeder pattern were impacted by the increased presence of and competition from charter schools, but they also worked to develop strategies to intentionally respond to that increased competition. I categorized their responses into five areas: conversation, marketing and communication, bridging the community, increased course and program offerings, and athletic program responses.

All four principals in the study emphasized their efforts to engage in personal conversation with community members to share the strengths and opportunities as their schools. When parents approached principals to discuss that they were considering enrolling their students in a charter school, they all indicated that they took time to sit down with these parents to discuss their concerns and factors that were present in their decision-making process, and to also showcase the benefits to the parents keeping their students enrolled in the rural traditional public-schools. These principals described that they engaged in these conversations not only to keep the child enrolled in their school, but also to equip parents to make the best decision possible for their students, and to help ensure the parents have accurate information to inform their decisions.

Rural traditional public-school leaders also utilized marketing and communications strategies in order to respond to the increased competition from charter schools. One category of responses was through the use of grassroots communication. Traditional public-school leaders worked to engage their parents in support of their schools, and knew these parents were the ones who would have the most impact on their peers, especially in helping them to see the benefits of the traditional public schools. Participants recognized that word of mouth marketing was a powerful tool to help build support for the traditional public-schools. Traditional public-school leaders also developed more formal marketing strategies, including using social media more thoughtfully and consistently to showcase their successes. The middle school spent time focusing on branding efforts to help give the schools a distinct identity, which is something the charter schools initially excelled at. Indeed, this may be a case where the public school improved due to both the competition from the charter school, and modeling their innovations surrounding marketing. The principals of the traditional public schools now use social media more consistently to highlight the positive and impactful things happening in their schools on a daily basis, and to share information about exciting existing and new initiatives.

Because the South Lake feeder pattern includes two difference communities that have historically been separate and distinct, another consequence of charter school growth is that these communities began to work together to create a more unified approach and identity. This work was taken on especially at the elementary school level and within the communities outside of the formal settings of the schools.

In response to competition, the middle and high schools in the South Lake feeder pattern worked to intentionally offer more options for their students. These increased offerings came in the form of club options at the middle school level, and increased course options for students at the high school level. The high school principal also worked to ensure that if course options weren't available in person at South Lake High School, students still had a way to get the courses they needed, either through virtual courses, enrollment in courses at another high school in the district, or at the local community college. In terms of athletics, the traditional public schools followed the lead of the charter school in allowing students in sixth grade to participate in all sports except football.

These strategies and the responses of the traditional public-schools are supported by the market-theory (Berends, et al., 2010 & Berends, 2015), and the theory of school choice (Frankenberg, et al., 2017 & Stein, 2105; &). As school leadership saw the effects of the competition from charter schools, they worked to implement new and sometimes innovative programs and practices to help encourage students to remain enrolled in the traditional public-schools as also saw academic achievement improve as a result of those practices.

Research Question 3

How has the presence of charter schools impacted the community surrounding public-schools?

As the number of charter schools in the area has grown, the impact on the community has also grown as more families make, or at least consider, the decision to

enroll their students in charter schools as opposed to the rural traditional public-schools

in the South Lake community. As I conducted this study, five areas of impact on the

community emerged: community pride, feelings of betrayal, community divisions and

tension, athletic events, and social media.

Members of the South Lake community have exceptional pride in their

community, and that pride in their community pours over into pride in their community,

traditional public-schools. I found that while community pride in and of itself is a

positive, excessive pride can manifest itself into a negative impact in the community.

Most members of the South Lake community, especially those in the town of Threshers,

believe that if you live in the community, you should attend the schools in the South Lake

feeder pattern. Because of the pride community members have in their community and in

their community schools, much of the community has rallied behind the traditional

public-schools as charter schools have pulled students from the traditional public-schools,

causing tension between these groups of parents.

Not surprisingly, my participants shared stories of community members feeling

betrayed when parents made the decision to enroll their students in a charter school. This

sense of betrayal was rooted in the immense pride that community members take in their

community and community schools, and the tension was especially evident when long-

standing members of the community enrolled their children in a charter school.

When you combine the immense pride that community members have with the

feelings of betrayal, divisions and tensions naturally emerge. This tension is especially

evident between the generational families who have remained to loyal to the traditional

public-schools and those who have chosen to leave the traditional public-schools in favor of a charter school. The parents, educators, and community members I interviewed discussed issues related to elitism, and the perception they hear that parents who enroll their students in a charter school think they are better than the families who choose to remain enrolled in the traditional public-schools. Feelings of isolation also emerged as these decisions are made and students and families used to engage with each other on a daily basis no longer do so because they are not attending school together. The tensions run from minor disruptions to animosity, especially when those community members are together in confined spaces such as at athletic events. They were also most evident on social media and written form, for example, in responses to local newspaper articles or in Facebook posts that were circulated among community members.

Discussion and Implications

When the majority of the participants in my study (many of whom attended school in the South Lake feeder pattern) were in schools, there were limited educational opportunities for families to consider, often only traditional public-schools, private schools (which exclude any families that lack economic means), and homeschool alternatives. Their families often did not have access to the same opportunities as families in the South Lake feeder pattern have today. As a result, when a majority of my participants were of school age, they attended the traditional public-schools in their community, as for most, that was the only option, or the only viable option. In fact, all the participants in my study were educated in the traditional public-school setting, and only one participant, a member of the middle school parent focus group, had a family

member who was not educated in the traditional public-school setting (his sister attended a private boarding school).

The choices available to families in North Carolina today have greatly expanded. Not only are there increased opportunities within the public-school system (magnet schools, early colleges, academies, etc.) but families also have their choice between private schools, brick-and-mortar charter schools, virtual charter schools, alternative schools, and homeschool. In this dissertation, I did not set out to study the school choice movement as a whole; I believe school choice is here to stay. Instead, I was interested in how the school choice movement, and specifically charter schools, have made an impact on rural traditional public-schools and the communities that are surrounding and supporting those traditional public-schools.

As more and more school options have emerged, and not just charter schools, traditional public-schools have seen more significant impacts, including a loss of students and funding. Additionally, schools are now being more intentional in competing for students to enroll in their schools. While it may have been common for private schools and charter schools in some areas to compete for students, most traditional public-schools, especially in rural areas, have historically not had to worry about this competition. However, as more and more families are choosing to enroll their children in charter schools as opposed to traditional public-schools, these traditional public-schools, especially in rural communities, are now faced with the need to be more active in working to encourage students to either stay enrolled in their schools or encourage their students to re-enroll in a traditional public-school. Leaders in the schools within the

South Lake feeder pattern, especially at the secondary level, found the need to partake in marketing practices to help promote their schools to the community. These practices aligned with some of the practices I described in research by DiMartino and Jessen (2018) as well as Cucchiara (2008).

The principals at the schools within the South Lake feeder pattern have become more aware of the impact of the product they are offering to their community, and have worked to implement new programs and practices to help compete with the charter schools in the area. The principals of the traditional public-schools in the South Lake feeder pattern believed that their schools were offering better products at least in part because of this competition, and their student performance was better, in part because of this competition as well. This contradicts some of the research I examined, particular by Ni (2008). However, Bettinger (2005), Holmes, et al. (2003), and Hoxby (2000, 2001) all also found that academic achievement in traditional public-schools increased as a result of competition from charter schools.

Additionally, Buddin and Zimmer (2005) found that traditional public-school principals who they surveyed were not particularly concerned with making holistic school improvement as a result of competition from charter schools. However, as the number of charter schools has greatly increased since 2005, my study confirms that over the last ten to fifteen years, increasingly principals are more focused on making improvements as a result of competition from charter schools. This is an area where additional research would be warranted and supported.

In rural communities, the traditional public-schools, especially the high schools, serve as the cultural backbone of the community and in many rural communities, events at the high school such as football and basketball games, concerts, and graduations. serve as locations and venues for important community gatherings. This was definitely true of the community in which my study was situated. As rural communities like South Lake see more and more school options come into their communities or into the areas immediately surrounding their communities, the members of the community must work to continue to find ways to show support for the traditional public-schools in their communities, or to find other ways to bring the community together. As my examination of the literature demonstrated, there have been very few studies conducted regarding the impact that charter schools have made on the community. The one study that stands out on this topic (Potterton, 2018) was situated in a more urban area than my study.

Rural community members play a vital role in the ability for traditional public-schools to thrive. Small communities that are dying are also faced with dying traditional public-schools, while small communities that are thriving have traditional public-schools that are thriving. I have shown in this study not just how one rural communities has been impacted by the increased numbers of charter schools, but also how rural communities play a significant role in the success and health of rural traditional public-schools. As the vibrancy of the community goes, so goes the vibrancy of the traditional public-schools in the community and vice-versa.

Recommendations for Practice

The increased presence of, and competition from, charter schools has made a significant impact on both the traditional public-schools in the community as well as the community surrounding the traditional public-schools. As public-schools have been impacted, they have also worked to respond to this impact and hopefully slow the number of students withdrawing from their schools and enrolling in charter schools. Findings from my study have implications for both policymakers as well as school and district leadership.

Implications for Policy Makers

As the number of charter schools in North Carolina has increased significantly over the last few years, the impact on traditional public-schools has also grown significantly. I have shown through this study that that there are two significant implications that that policymakers consider in light of the growth of school choice options, and especially the state and national level support for charter schools.

First, policy makers must revisit funding policies when it comes to charter schools and traditional public-schools. Policymakers need to consider a new funding formula that allows funds to follow students when they transfer to or from a charter school to a traditional public-school during the school year, specifically after the twentieth day of school. As the number of students enrolling in charter schools has increased, the number of students returning to traditional public-schools has increased as well, including many students who change schools during the school year. Policymakers need to consider legislation that allows funding to follow students when they transition between schools,

especially mid-year. This would result in increased funding and allow traditional public-schools to access the resources needed to effectively educate students in their building. Participants in my study, including community members, were largely aware of how school funding worked and how much the transfer of students between schools impacted funding.

A second need is for policymakers to consider is to ensure that charter schools are held to similar standards as traditional public schools. It is a common misconception that charter schools do not follow state curriculum standards, which they do. However, it seems that when charter schools are failing to meet students' academic needs, they are not always sanctioned in similar ways, or it takes longer for repercussions like school improvement status, to be put into place. Because charter schools are also receiving public funding, they should be held to similar standards as traditional public-schools to ensure the most effective use of state funding and to ensure that parents have access to accurate information about the performance of all schools.

Implications for School and District Leaders

There are also are several implications for school and district leaders to consider in relation to charter school growth in their communities that come out of my study. These include providing support and training on marketing practices for schools, taking an individualized approach to support for schools, working to increase opportunities and partnerships for rural schools, and intentionally working to engage parents and communities.

As traditional public-schools are facing increased competition from charter schools, the need for traditional public-schools to engage in marketing practices has also increased. In the past, traditional public-schools did not have to place a high priority on marketing practices to encourage enrollment in their school since very few options outside of private school and homeschool existed for a majority of families. However, as the number of educational opportunities has drastically increased in communities and especially around rural communities, the need for traditional public-schools to engage in marketing practices is evident. Charter schools are a form of competition, and in order to compete, traditional schools must "sell" their virtues. Traditional public-schools and their school districts need to be intentional in providing financial and professional development resources to schools to help them engage in marketing and communication practices to engage stakeholders and encourage family members to keep their students enrolled in the traditional public-schools or to re-enroll in the traditional public-schools. School leaders need to be provided with training on how to effectively engage stakeholders through the use of social media and other practices to help them highlight the positive aspects of their school. Additional funding should be provided for school and district leaders to engage in other more traditional marketing practices. This does not have to be a significant amount of funding, as a majority of a school and district's funding should be utilized to meet specific educational needs. However, funding options should be present for school to purchase ads on social media, publish marketing materials, and be intentional with branding via signs, posters, etc.

A second area of consideration for district leaders is to recognize that, much like a one size fits all approach does not work in educating students, a one size fits all approach does not meet the needs of all schools within a district and/or feeder pattern. The needs that the South Lake feeder pattern has are different from that of other feeder patterns in the Lake County school district. These needs are different in part due to the number of community members living in poverty, in part due to the lack of jobs in the community, which is related to a third factor, a lack of trained and qualified workforce. The Lake County school district should consider additional vocational training opportunities at South Lake High School that would first equip students for careers out of high school, and provide a larger pool of qualified, trained employees to be used by the companies that are present and successful in the community. District leadership must be intentional in providing support and resources to each feeder pattern and individual school, and recognize that this is not about schools getting special treatment, but about individual schools getting the support and resources they need in order to be highly effective in meeting the individual and unique needs of their stakeholders.

As rural traditional public-schools are constantly faced with the limitations of a small student body such as limited funding, limited number of teachers, and limited course offerings, rural traditional public-school and rural school district leaders need to be more intentional in seeking and developing innovative programs and partnerships that meet the needs of the students who are enrolled in their schools. Schools and districts need to seek out grants and other financial incentives that can help increased course and program offerings through increased funding in rural schools, and also reach out and

establish partnerships with other organizations such as community colleges,

apprenticeship programs, etc. This would allow traditional public-schools and school

districts to best support the educational needs of the students within the community and

best prepare their students for a successful future, whether that future entails enrollment

in a four-year school, a trade school, going directly into the workforce or enlisting in the

military. Schools and districts also need to offer programs that support and create a

pipeline to the jobs that are currently available in their communities.

Finally, as rural communities and rural traditional public-schools have seen

increased options for parents when it comes to their children's education, rural traditional

public-schools and school districts need to better engage parents and their communities in

the happenings of the traditional public-schools. Many urban districts have created

parent engagement or parent liaison positions to help engage parents and stakeholders in

the schools and also offer parents support so they can best offer their children support in

their educational journey. Rural traditional public-schools and school districts should

consider a similar model to increase parental engagement and support. In addition, rural

traditional public-schools should develop strategies to consistently and systematically

engage surrounding community members, not waiting for competition to drive this effort.

Recommendations for Future Research

As I reflect on the results of my study, I see three specific opportunities for future

research that can help us to understand the implications, challenges, and opportunities

that are associated with charter school growth in rural communities. First, this study and

other studies that have been conducted has only scratched the surface when it comes to

how traditional public-schools, and specifically rural traditional public-schools, have responded to the presence of and competition from charter schools in the community. There is much to be learned about how rural traditional public-schools are responding to this phenomenon. We need more case studies of districts like South Lake, as well as districts that where there have been unique and interesting relationships between charter and traditional public schools. We need to know more about how traditional public schools have responded and strengthened their schools in the face of competition, as well as which practices are effective and which practices are not as effective in communicating, marketing, and developing their schools.

A second area for future research is to continue to explore how rural communities have been impacted by the presence of charter schools in their communities. My study has shown in a small, limited setting that the impact on the community has been great, and I believe that the findings of my study could likely be expanded to apply to other rural communities. However, additional research is necessary to add significance to this study in a larger context. I am especially interested in learning more about issues of morale and how to assess them in a community as a whole. I only interviewed 22 community members in this study, however, as I live near this community, I have heard my neighbors and friends lament the changes that have taken place and share worries over the future of the community. More research on issues of morale – including how other communities have responded to internal tensions, is needed.

Finally, there has been limited research in general to the plight of rural public-schools and how they have been impacted by declining populations in their communities,

resulting in a declining student population and loss of funding, programs and opportunities for students in those communities. Much of this research could be situated outside of the context of charter schools, as rural communities are faced with these issues and concerns even in areas where competition from charter schools is not as prevalent. However, as the charter school movement increasingly expands to rural communities, it may be hard to separate these issues. Much of the charter school research focuses on urban communities. While this research is important, the impacts of charter schools in rural communities are different, and thus more research is needed to understand a changing educational context that has ripple effects on the livelihood of communities.

Final Thoughts

Conducting this study has had a profound impact on me both personally and professionally. As was shared by many of the participants in my study, I attended public-schools, public-schools worked for me, and they are the natural choice for my family as well. I believe that public-schools exist primarily to ensure the future of our democracy and society. If we want to ensure the success and future of our society, we must invest in public-schools, and we must specifically invest in rural traditional public-schools. This does not mean that we should ignore the school choice movement. In fact, it probably means just the opposite. School choice is likely here to stay, so we must learn how to best address it in rural communities like the South Lake community. The presence of additional educational opportunities in a community inherently forces traditional public-schools to consider how to offer the best possible product to their communities; the impact and competition from charter schools and other school choice opportunities may

actually help to ensure the health and vibrancy of traditional public-schools, especially those in rural communities who previously have not been faced with much competition. This remains to be seen, however, there was so promising evidence from my study that the traditional public schools in South Lake were compelled to make decisions that indeed improved the educational opportunities for all students.

As a principal in a rural area that has seen some impact from charter schools, but also impacts from home-schooling and private schools, I think it is imperative for school leaders such as myself to consider the experiences shared and lessons learned from the principals and participants in the South Lake feeder pattern. School leaders in all schools, but especially in rural areas where financial support and resources may be limited, must work to be proactive, even before the competition arrives, in creating innovative and creative programs and practices to help our schools grow. For traditional public-school educators, students and their futures are (and should be) our "why," and in order to give our students the best possible hope at a successful future, whether through college and/or career readiness, we must be vigilant in working to ensure we provide high quality education to all students. This will help to ensure the health and vibrancy of these communities.

After conducting this study, and also serving as a principal in a rural community located very near to South Lake, I have realized the profound need for traditional public-schools, and especially rural traditional public-schools, to be led by innovative, creative, and responsive leaders who are passionate about creating the best possible learning environment for their students. In many rural communities, due to factors such as low-

pay, limited resources, and few job opportunities for families, there is often a lack of

qualified individuals to innovatively lead in rural traditional public-schools. In addition,

schools and school districts need to provide professional growth and opportunities for

those leaders, especially around issues of communication, marketing, and innovation.

Despite the fact that the South Lake schools have been faced with a dwindling population

and a loss of students from their schools who are enrolling in charter schools, they have

seen sustained academic and cultural successes in recent years, and much of this can be

attributed to the leadership that is in place in those schools.

     Rural citizens must support the traditional public-schools in their communities,

and rural traditional public-schools must support their communities. There is a symbiotic

relationship between the two entities that must be strong and sustained in order to ensure

the future health of the traditional public-schools and the rural communities. Rural

community members must also recognize that competition, and the growth of alternative

educational opportunities overall, are not inherently a bad thing. The pride that rural

communities take in their traditional public-schools is an essential part of that school and

communities' culture. However, rural communities must work intentionally to ensure

that the immense sense of community pride does not become a negative, and all

stakeholders must work recognize that parents choosing what is best for their children

need not create such a divide in the community. In fact, there may be opportunities in the

future for charter and traditional public school teachers and leaders to work together in

supporting local communities. Stakeholders must recognize and respect that parents

seeking what they feel is the best option for their children is good, and those decisions

must be respected and supported. In addition, stakeholders must also recognize that despite what seems like a large number of families leaving the traditional public-schools for charter schools, the rural traditional public-schools are still the best option for a majority of the members of their community. Instead of obsessing about those students who choose to leave, they would be better served by focusing their efforts and energies on those who have chosen to stay, and by providing unwavering support to their traditional public-schools, their teachers, school leadership, and most importantly the students and children of their communities.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. As an educator, what are your views on the school choice movement and charter schools, specifically?
2. How have Charter Schools impacted your school?
3. What do you think is the appeal of charter schools for parents and students?
4. What about for the families leaving your school specifically?
5. How has your school responded to the impact of the charter school movement in your area? What have you done and what are you planning to do to respond?
6. Why do you think your school is a better option for families as opposed to charter school?
7. Do you think charter schools have made a positive or negative impact on your community?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about charter schools and their impact on your school and community?