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The purpose of this study is to determine what rural traditional public school leaders know and understand about charter schools, and gauge their preparedness to compete with charter schools. In this qualitative study, I interviewed eight participants, six principals and two assistant superintendents. Participants first shared their knowledge and perceptions about charter schools, and any interactions that they have had. Participants then shared their views about marketing their schools or district, and how they would respond to a charter school opening up in their district.

After interviewing participants and analyzing the data, I answered both of my research questions. First, in determining the knowledge and perceptions of rural traditional public school leaders, there is very limited interest in charter schools unless there is a direct threat. Rural traditional public school leaders are more concerned with their standing among stakeholders within their own communities, and charter schools are basically, out of sight, out of mind.

Second, I examined rural traditional public school leaders' preparedness to compete with charter schools. Overall, participants are focused internally, within their own district's borders, and they did not believe that the communities that they serve would allow an outside force like charter schools to succeed. While there are indicators among participants that experience with charter school threats create resilience among leaders, faith in their hard work and stakeholders within the communities that they serve as their competitive strategy.

For rural traditional public school leaders, where you lay your head at night is the determining factor in where a student attends school. The implications of this study will provide

strategies for how traditional public schools can better prepare themselves for competition with charter schools and a more competitive educational marketplace.

COMPETITIVE THREAT: RURAL TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADERS'
UNDERSTANDING AND PREPAREDNESS FOR COMPETITION
WITH CHARTER SCHOOLS

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Charter schools are public institutions that are tuition-free and operate on a first-come, first-served basis (Jason, 2017). According to Hornbeck et al. (2019), a charter school is “an independent school created with public funds, established by teachers, parents, community, and/or for-profit Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) under the terms of a charter with a local or national authorizer” (p. 5). Charter schools that are not EMOs operate under charter management organizations (CMOs) (Jabar, 2016). Regardless of whether a charter is classified as a CMO or EMO, these public schools are exempt from many of the regulations that are required of traditional public schools (TPS), and have applied this autonomy to hiring, compensation, curriculum, school hours, and pedagogy (Fernandes & Menezes-Filho, 2020). The charter that authorizes these schools to operate works as a contract between those who run the school and those who authorize it being open; this can be a for-profit company or a board of education (Jason, 2017).

While charter schools are typically described as public schools, they do not have to follow the same guidelines or rules as TPS (Benson, 2022). Cuban (2016) describes some of the differences between charters schools and TPS as, “released from most state regulations and unionized teachers, charter schools have been expected to create innovative curriculum, instruction, and organization and compete with traditional public schools for students” (Part 2, para 2). Although charter schools admit students on a first-come, first-served basis and can exercise options like holding a lottery when demand for seats is high, their student populations are not typically the same as those in a TPS (Han & Keefe, 2020). While TPS serve all students that are within their designated school boundaries, usually defined by county or municipal borders, a charter’s jurisdiction can extend across an entire state (Jankens et al., 2019).

Statement of the Problem

In my work in traditional public schools (TPS), I have served as a teacher assistant, teacher, and school administrator over the last decade of my career. During my tenure, I have both witnessed and been involved in myriad changes occurring in TPS. Changes have been substantial in most TPSs, with the introduction of new technology, an increased focus on testing and school performance, and the politicization of education. Among these changes, conversations about school choice have continued to grow and have drawn ire and support of families, education professionals, and community members. Educational changes are common; however, adapting to and executing change can be very slow and tedious at almost every level of implementation. In addition, the changes themselves do not always lead to better learning outcomes for students.

Recent events of the last six years, such as the 2016 election of a very polarizing and authoritarian president and the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the closing of most school buildings for several months, sent ripples throughout the world and exposed educational weaknesses that need dire attention. The politicization of public schools was felt in everyday interactions among teachers, students, and families. A study by UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access in which the researchers polled 1,500 high school teachers across the U.S. after the 2016 Election, found a 30% increase in derogatory comments and higher levels of stress than previous years (as cited in Reynolds et al., 2020). The Southern Poverty Law Center did a similar study with 10,000 teachers and found that 90% of students had been negatively affected in terms of mood and behavior, 80% of respondents reported higher anxiety among marginalized students, and 40% heard derogatory language toward under-represented groups (as cited in Reynolds et al., 2020). The political tensions that emerged from the 2016 election were further

exacerbated by the shutdown of schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. Opinions about the importance of in-person classrooms and the challenges of remote learning, and pedagogical differences about what defines a quality education created prime opportunities and conditions for change (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020). The impact of political division from the election of 2016 and fallout of decisions associated with the Covid-19 are still emerging; however, the scrutiny of TPS during this tumultuous time has raised a lot of concerns about the degree to which traditional schools are prepared and willing to adapt to a changing context.

The slow speed in which TPSs change and adjust is evident in the ways in which traditional public school advocates consider and plan for the national growth of charter schools. A comprehensive examination of studies from the 2000s, looking at the input of fiscal resources and output of school performance, comparing TPS and other school choice options (including charter schools) shows no clear indication of the best option as assessed by student performance outcomes (Maranto et al., 2010). However, despite the dramatic growth of charter and choice options over the last decade, few public school districts have made concerted efforts to be proactive during this changing educational landscape (Bickmore, 2020). This is especially true in more rural districts, where until recently charter schools have not been common. By not planning for the opening of educational alternatives in their districts, TPS leaders are modeling what charter school advocates maintain, which is that they have a problematic monopoly on education (Finn et al., 2017). From the perspective of school choice advocates, TPSs are not necessarily the best choice for students in rural districts; they are the only choice. Yet as charter schools increasingly open in rural areas, TPS leaders will be forced to respond, in part by understanding that there is now competition for students in their districts, when previously there have rarely been realistic alternatives to TPS options for most families. As part of planning for the best

response to charter school growth in rural areas, we need to understand what TPS leaders know about charter schools and their capacity to respond to a competitive educational market.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how traditional public school district leaders in rural areas think about and plan for charter school growth. From the literature review that I have conducted, it is evident that many TPS leaders only think about charter schools when one threatens their enrollment or opens its doors within their district. While the districts I used to examine in this study do not have a charter school within them, there are several in surrounding counties that draw students from the TPSs in this district. To understand what leaders in a rural TPS district know and think about charter schools, I conducted a qualitative study involving interviews with district leaders in two rural districts about charter school growth and competition.

Research Questions

In this study, I sought to answer two research questions:

1. What do district level leaders in rural TPS know and understand about charter schools?
2. How prepared do rural TPS leaders feel about marketing and competing for enrollment with charter schools?

In order to answer these questions, I interviewed principals and assistant superintendents in rural traditional public school districts that do not currently have any charter schools, but that are surrounded by districts where charter schools have begun to open. I wanted to know what these school leaders think about charter schools and how they are planning for their emergence in their districts.

Background Context

Understanding the role and impact of charter schools and the foundations of the school choice movement requires examining its roots, functionality, and evolution over time. In this section, I provide the reader with a quick synopsis of the charter schools movement to provide background context for my study. I explore the origins of the school choice movement, the role of the educational marketplace, and the state of charter school growth and development.

Origins of School Choice

The emergence of charter schools as a viable alternative to traditional education is a byproduct of Milton Friedman's arguments in his 1955 article, "The Role of Government in Education." In this article, Friedman (1955) discussed the "natural monopoly" of TPS and how the educational choices of that time were a "choice among evils" (p. 5). Additionally, Friedman (1955) went on to discuss the relationship between government and education, citing that the infusion of state money for public colleges caused private institutions to seek government aid despite the desire to remain independent. According to Friedman (1955), the solution to the potential quagmire of independent institutions maintaining their independence from the government could be in the form of vouchers given to individual families:

Any subsidy should be granted to individuals to be spent at institutions of their own choosing, provided only that the education is of a kind that it is desired to subsidize. Any government schools that are retained should charge fees covering the cost of educating students and so compete on an equal level with non-government-supported schools. (p. 8)

While Friedman never discusses charters directly, and advocated primarily for the use of vouchers that would allow all families options for more individualized choice in where and how

to receive an education, his ideas were influential in both the inception and fundamental mantra of the charter movement.

Educational Marketplace

Friedman argued that market theory should be applied to public schools, and the utilization of vouchers would provide a more competitive marketplace while empowering parents with options in education (Berends, 2015). The free market approach to education is premised upon capitalism as the foundation for educational services and serves as the basis of the modern-day school choice movement. Friedman argued that consumer choice should be at the center of education as he promoted a supply-side approach to using vouchers given to parents, as consumers, to choose “innovative and diverse methods of organization, curricula, teacher, and learning” (Berends, 2015, p. 166). According to Finn et al. (2017), Friedman “was no huge fan of charters” and saw them primarily as a market equalizer that brought an end to district monopolies on K-12 education (p. 13). Friedman’s work, along with conservative reports about public schools like “A Nation at Risk” (1983), served as catalysts for the development of a robust system of educational alternatives for families and led to the development of the first charter school in 1992 (Berends, 2015). Charter schools were initially touted as “educational labs” for innovation and collaboration with public schools, and eventually gave way to what we have now, which is largely “parallel educational systems” as most charter schools are not that different from traditional public schools (Jason, 2017, para. 20).

Growth and Development of Charter Schools

Support for charter schools has grown tremendously since the first school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992 (Benson, 2022). The popularity of charter schools gained traction during the presidency of George W. Bush as part of his educational reforms under No Child Left

Behind (NCLB) (Benson, 2022). Bush’s goal was to identify and close down underperforming schools and replace them with charter schools that supposedly could provide a more effective alternative to TPS (Benson, 2022). Although traditional support for charter schools has roots in conservative circles, charter school reform has had bi-partisan support. In 2008, President Obama allocated \$4 billion to charter schools through his Race to the Top (RTTT) program, which involved promoting competition between charter schools and TPS for funds (Berends, 2015). In 2008, President Obama stated, “I’ve consistently said we need to support charter schools. I think it is important to experiment, by looking at how we can reward excellence in the classroom” (Benson, 2022, p. 92). The acknowledgement and investment during the Obama years changed the nature of charter schools and provided a bi-partisan legitimacy that shaped and invited further support. From 2000 to 2015, the percentage of all public school students who attended charters increased from 1 to 6 percent (Hornbeck et al., 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, from 2009-2020 the number of public charter schools increased from 5,000 to 7,500 while the number of TPS decreased from 93,900 to 90,900 (para. 1).

As of July 2023, North Carolina, the state where this study takes place, had 211 charter schools operating in 64 of 100 counties (NCDPI). The 2021 legislative session allocated \$848 million, or 8.6%, of traditional public school funds to charter schools in North Carolina (Public Schools First NC). Since 1998, North Carolina has had 83 charter closings due to relinquishment, assumption, non-renewal, or revocation (Baquero, 2022). Applications for new charters average around 33 per year, but only 25.28% of those requests are approved by the State Board of Education (SBOE) each year (Baquero, 2022).

Charter schools continue to be an ever-growing part of the educational marketplace. Advocates claim that they will maximize choice, facilitate healthy competition between charter schools and TPSs, and innovate education through the understanding of successful models (Han & Keef, 2020). While the promises presented by charter school advocates are meant to demonstrate strengths and a rationale for their necessity, TPS proponents argue that comparisons between them and charters are not equitable, competition is a misnomer because of the differing compositions of their student populations, and innovation comes at the expense of exploiting racial and social inequalities (Benson, 2022). I discuss these promises and critiques further in my review of literature in chapter two; for now, it is important to know that there is little evidence that the charter school movement has revolutionized education, or that the promises of innovation and competition increasing the performance of all schools have come to fruition.

Methods

For this study, I conducted basic qualitative research involving interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to gauge TPS leaders' understanding of charter schools and their feelings about a more competitive educational market. My goal was to explore the idea of competition in rural TPS districts that do not currently have a competing charter in them but do have one in a neighboring county. Through eight interviews with TPS leaders spread across two counties, I explored rural TPS leader's knowledge of charter schools and their feelings about competing with them. One of the districts in the study exists in the shadow of a former charter school that was shut down by the state of North Carolina due to falsified enrollment numbers to get increased funding and the misuse of state funds to create a preschool. The other district has navigated two failed charter school applications and is currently under threat of a charter school opening just across its district borders. Through semi-structured interviews, my research

provided a small sample of TPS leaders with the opportunity to “make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15), particularly related to growth of charter schools in general. More specifically, I investigated how they are planning for their seemingly inevitable opening in their districts.

Pilot Study

In order to test out the feasibility of my study and my interview protocol, I conducted a two-part pilot study involving interviews with two central office leaders, a director of transportation, and a principal. These interviews helped me to refine my interview and research questions and determine the scope of the dissertation study. Initially, my interest in charter schools focused on their claims as a school choice option and how marketing played a role in influencing families. My initial two interviews took place with an assistant superintendent and a director in a rural TPS district. These two interviews provided preliminary insight into the sentiments of TPS leaders about charter schools and how they market themselves. For example, I learned about the pride these leaders had in their school districts, their concerns with how school funding has been impacted by the growth of charters, and their overall belief that TPS provide a better education than charter schools.

After my first pilot study interviews, I conducted a website analysis of a charter school and K-12 school’s websites to see how marketing influenced their design and whether there seemed to be strategic efforts by TPS leaders to market their schools. I considered this website analysis an alternative approach to conducting interviews for my research because of my interest in school marketing. Still, I decided against it because there was not enough information on those websites for a robust analysis. While I did learn a lot about the design and intentionality of charter school websites to market themselves, I realized that there was much more valuable

information that I could gain from interviews with K-12 leaders, and by adding principals as participants in my study (I initially considered only working with district office leaders).

After the initial pilot study interviews, I collected some new research that expanded on the impact of charter growth and TPS responses. Additionally, based on this research, I expanded my initial definition of TPS leadership to include school principals, whereas I had initially focused on the central office level. The addition of a principal and an executive director as part of the second round of my pilot interviews gave me more opportunities to interview various school leaders, but it also increased my capacity to connect district level decision making with the implementation of those strategies at the school level. Research studies indicate that principals see marketing as an essential component of their role as school leaders; effective marketing requires balancing a physical and virtual presence throughout their communities (Reid, 2023).

Building on the additional research I uncovered on this topic, for the second part of my pilot study, I conducted interviews with a current principal and an executive director of human resources and public information in a rural district with growing charter encroachment. I also added some new questions to my protocol, specifically about participants' general understanding of charter schools. I did this because the focus on claims made by charter school leaders and issues of marketing in the first interviews seemed to put participants in a somewhat defensive position in the interview; the updated questions provided for a more organic dialogue that started with general thoughts and understandings about the charter school movement. One major issue I changed based on the two rounds of pilot interviews was balancing the number of questions focused on marketing and adding more open-ended questions that allowed for richer discussions about feelings and sentiments toward charter schools. Some new questions include feelings about

the quality of education provided by charters compared to TPS, types of branding used by the school or district, the importance of marketing among other duties and responsibilities, and a scaling question on their preparedness to compete with a charter school. After the second round of interviews, I added a more intentional question in which I provided a list of the specific charter schools that are drawing students away from the traditional public schools in the district and a more intentional exploration of what they know about those schools and any experiences they may have interacting with staff and students who attend them. Because I studied rural TPS districts in this study, I wanted to ensure that these leaders could discuss their perceptions of charter schools while giving them room to elaborate on any prominent feelings or opinions. Taken together, in the pilot interviews participants discussed fear, their overall confidence in being the better educational option, and general admitted that they had little depth understanding about charters provide. These findings aligned with current research and provided me a base line of information as I conducted eight more interviews for the dissertation.

Given the updates to my interview protocol between the first two and second two interviews, I noticed the second interviewees were able to share more robust beliefs about TPS leadership and how they see themselves within their respective districts. The responses provided a more insightful probe of rural TPS leaders' understanding of charter schools; similar to the first interviews, the second two participants indicated they felt confident within their communities because of tradition. Faith in their community and traditional values were at the forefront of their philosophies of education, and although they held some anxiety about a possible charter school opening within their district, the idea of competing against other educational entities did not seem to detract from their functions and sense of efficacy as TPS leaders. While tradition was a key theme of the second round of interviews, there were also some surprising decisions that they

discussed, such as hiring an outside marketing firm to assist with the district's loss of students to private and charter schools.

While faith and trust were demonstrated across all of the interviews for this study, the other side of that faith in the community was a general fear and concern about charter schools. Using results from these two pilot studies and findings research from the literature review, I designed my actual dissertation study so that I could examine the experiences and perceptions of rural TPS leaders and assessed their readiness for a more competitive educational marketplace. Through this study, I hoped to learn more about the knowledge and perceptions of rural TPS leaders related to charter schools and determine whether they are ready for the challenge of non-traditional education and expanding school choice options in their districts.

Sample Population and Setting

The sample population for this study is assistant superintendents and principals from rural TPS districts that currently do not have a charter school within their boundaries, but do have charter schools in neighboring counties. I identified two rural counties in Western North Carolina where there are currently no charter schools, but there is at least one in a nearby district that draws students away from these counties. I interviewed eight leaders across two districts, including two principals from each level (elementary, middle, and high school) and two who served as assistant superintendents. I recruited participants from contacts I had in these TPS through my previous experiences as an administrator in one of the districts, and used purposeful sampling based upon the recommendations from my connections in of each participating district. Selecting participants in various areas of leadership and differing locations can help to provide more diverse results and insightful discoveries and enrich my findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection Methods

I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight different leaders located in two rural TPS districts. For convenience and participant ease, I conducted interviews via Microsoft Teams, which has the added advantage of providing a recording and transcript of the conversation (which I then edited for accuracy before beginning my analysis). I crafted my interview guide (Appendix A) based upon my review of the existing literature and topics that came up in my pilot study. Upon completing the interviews, I listened to each again while proofreading and updating the transcripts to ensure accuracy. While listening, I also was able to think more deeply about their comments and identify questions for follow-up via email. I also shared the transcripts with participants for them to check for accuracy and clarify any comments or ideas.

Data Analysis Strategies

I analyzed the interview data using standard qualitative procedures: coding the transcripts, collapsing like-codes into categories, and identifying themes by putting the categories in conversation with the literature. I used a combination of open coding and a priori coding based on topics that I identified in my review of the literature, such as competition, marketing, and choice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) define coding as “assigning some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of information” (p. 199). After I coded the data, I identified patterns and key ideas in the codes, bringing similar topics together under broader categories. I used these categories and subsequent themes to answer my research questions and share findings and ideas.

Trustworthiness/Ethical Considerations

I used three strategies to ensure trustworthiness in my research: member checks, peer review, and reflexivity. First, I conducted member checks with participants. I gave them copies of their transcripts and asked them to look them over for feedback, to check for accuracy, and to see if they wanted to add any additional information or clarify any of their answers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used email to communicate with participants and clarify preliminary analyses for resonance.

A second strategy that I used is peer review. I identified two people to serve as peer reviewers for this study who agreed to provide me with critical feedback, as well as look over my coding and help me to control for biases. The first reviewer was a fellow doctoral student, former charter school teacher, and current school administrator. The second peer reviewer was also a doctoral student, is a current school administrator, and is also writing a dissertation on charter schools. I asked these reviewers to look at a summary of my findings, ask critical questions, play devil's advocate, suggest potential interpretations of my findings, and help me to see issues I might be overlooking. As an example of this feedback, I shared my preliminary coding for Chapter 3. The peer reviewers pointed out that I had dismissed some of the participants' feelings about charter schools, and those perceptions need to be acknowledged and added to the study.

A third strategy I used to ensure trustworthiness was to be transparent about my own background related to charter schools (I say more about this in the positionality section of this chapter) and to be reflexive about my own biases on this topic. Throughout the research process, I kept a journal to log my assumptions, ideas, hunches, connections, and track changes. Engaging in reflexivity is an important way for researchers to identify their own biases and beliefs, as well as to track their processes for interpreting data and findings (Creswell & Baez, 2020). As a long-

time TPS educator, I know I have an underlying bias against charter schools, but I also knew I needed to bracket that opinion in order to listen carefully and attentively to my participants, and to not let my perspectives and experiences influence my interpretation of interviews. After reviewing my entries, I identified one significant change in my feelings about school choice, realizing that every student and family have different needs. While a TPS may help be the best option for many students, it does not mean they are always the best option for each student's educational needs. Another evolution in my thinking about school choice is that while there are several different options for families when it comes to a student receiving their education, stakeholders still have the choice to still support a student and family within their community regardless of where they choose to go to school.

Finally, in terms of ensuring an ethical approach to this research, I followed all IRB protocols for obtaining permission, providing the details of this study, and using forms for informed consent.

Limitations

The main limitation to this research is scope. I conducted this study in two rural counties in western North Carolina. Such a small sample is not representative of all issues with charter schools. At the same time, there may be unique issues in the state of North Carolina that make my findings less relevant for states where the charter school context is different. However, I anticipate educators in rural TPS around the country will find the experiences and perspectives of these leaders to be valuable, especially considering most of the research on charter schools is conducted in urban areas. This is a qualitative study that is designed to provide some context for small TPS districts that may face competition from charter schools in the future; my findings may not be generalizable to all TPS districts, but they should provide some insights into the

changing educational landscape in rural areas. The insights and themes that emerged from this study are considerations for TPS districts that are facing impending or eventual competition from charter schools.

Theoretical Framework

One theoretical framework that is relevant and potentially informative for this research on TPS competing with charter schools is institutional theory, or what is interchangeably referred to by scholars as neo-institutional theory. According to Calderon-Hernandez (2020), an institution is “a social structure comprised of symbology, social activities, and material resources, whose basic components are the rules, norms, and values which define appropriate conduct” (p. 627). Institutional theory is a sociological lens that enables scholars to examine attributes of an organization that are influenced by tradition, culture, history, and environment (Calderon-Hernandez et al., 2020). Originally known as just institutional theory, it was pioneered by John Meyer and colleagues from the 1970s-1990’s, and he theorized that schools exhibit “persistent patterns of social action that individuals take for granted” (Berends, 2015, pp. 166-167). In his early work, Meyer also signaled that public schools adapt to their environments by being “loosely coupled and isomorphic” (Davies & Quirke, 2007, p. 66). Bureaucratic influence over schools, such as federal and state guidelines, means that schools will typically look more alike while following certain categories, rules, and rituals (Berends, 2015). Since the mid-1980’s, the evolution of the educational marketplace has emphasized success for schools that adopt rationalized, standard practices (Davies & Quirke, 2007). Due to the rapid changes occurring in education in the last few decades, it can no longer be assumed that schools are following a conformist model (Davies & Quirke, 2007). In the case of this study, looking at TPS and their

understanding and preparedness to compete with charter schools provided some insight into how similar and different TPSs are compared to charter schools.

According to Scott (2008), neo-institutional theory “addresses the processes through which rules, norms, and routines provide organizations and their actors with meanings, values and scripts that may direct individual and organizational behavior” (as cited in Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 443). The first tenet needed to better understand organizations and the environment in which they operate is through organizational fields. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) introduced organizational fields to provide more context to organizational cultures (as cited in Marz & Vermeir, 2017). According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organizational fields are “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (as cited in Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 443). Burch (2007) states that, “schools are embedded within organizational fields that encompass government agencies, universities, parental organizations, professional development providers, and textbook publishers; all have their own perspectives, interests, and values” (as cited in Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 443).

A second tenet of neo-institutional theory is institutional logics. According to Scott (2008), institutional logics are a “macro belief system that identifies specific goals and values, define appropriate structures and govern organizational sense-making and cognition, constitute identities and provide meaning and order to action in institutional sectors” (as cited in Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 444). Institutional logics provide grounding for actors within an organization, while also establishing which organizations they must conform to in order to “gain or maintain legitimacy” (Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 444). Institutional logics manifest themselves as

institutional carriers and are transmitted from place to place through symbolic systems, relational systems, routines, and artifacts (Marz & Vermeir, 2017). Among these carriers, artifacts can “embody and instantiate institutional logics or knowledge that can be viewed as elements of material culture, as such exerting pressure on school organizations to act in a particular way” (Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 444). According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), there are three different types of institutional pressures: coercive (laws and rules), normative (value and norms), and mimetic (copy and imitate) (as cited in Marz & Vermeir, 2017). All of these ideas help provide context to organizations and the contexts under which they operate.

Institutional theory is often applied in higher education, particularly in cases where institutions are highly influenced by “tradition, culture, history, and environment” (as cited in Calderon-Hernandez et al., 2020, p. 628). I quickly share the following studies that are examples of how institutional theory has been applied to educational studies. Lam (2020) examined the role of scientists and their relationship between the business world and the field of science (as cited in Calderon-Hernandez et al., 2020). Hughes and Knockaert (2015) reviewed institutional elements like school mission, role models, and how reward systems influence academics’ intentions to participate in entrepreneurial activities (as cited in Calderon-Hernandez et al., 2020). Fini et al. (2017) established that changes in national and organizational contexts increase growth, but reduce the quality of the organization (as cited in Calderon-Hernandez et al., 2020).

Institutional theory was a useful lens for analyzing rural TPS leadership’s understanding of charter schools, and their preparedness to compete in a more crowded marketplace.

Specifically, institutional theory helped me understand reasons why rural TPS leaders in this study may have taken particular actions or inactions regarding charter schools based upon their experiences with them. In a metaanalysis of charter school performance studies over a 10-year

period, Berends (2015) compared student achievement and educational attainment between charter schools and TPS. Berends (2015) used institutional theory to discuss the “consequences of school choice” and argued that, “when applied to charter schools, institutional theory emphasizes that all schools operate within highly institutionalized environments and define what counts as legitimate schooling” (pp. 166–167). Although the research on charter schools and TPS has not lead to the identification a clear superior option when assessed by student outcomes, and it is likely that students' experiences are going to be similar because of isomorphism, savvy marketing and competitive practices by charter schools may be factors that give them a competitive edge in attracting students (Berends, 2015). In my study, I interviewed leaders in rural TPS districts that currently do not have charter schools within them but do have charter schools in neighboring districts that can draw students to enroll. Studying TPS leadership’s understanding of charter schools and their preparedness to compete with them through the lens of institutional theory helped to reveal future areas of growth and development for more competitive conditions. I discuss these issues more in the final chapter of this study.

Researcher Positionality

For over 11 years, I worked in a rural TPS as a teacher and assistant principal. I served in a K-12 alternative school, as a high school social studies teacher, and as a middle and high school assistant principal. In my most recent position, I served as a high school assistant principal in a school of 600 students and 40 teachers. Prior to my first administrative position in 2021, my career in K-12 TPS never exposed me to charter schools. Although I had limited exposure as an administrator, I did witness political and social changes such as the 2016 presidential election and fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, and how they created new challenges for TPS that were impossible to imagine a decade prior. While I was in the classroom

teaching history, I noticed the political shift in how students and families began scrutinizing the classroom – both in content and changes in student/parent perceptions of my position. Parent conferences revealed a disconnect between the history students were learning in my classroom and the household beliefs they valued. My last 3 years in the classroom were defined by parents in fringe corners of the political spectrum making demands related to the curriculum, students citing rhetoric from social media and questionable sources on YouTube, and administrators struggling to address these issues in a timely manner. In hindsight from my time as a teacher, my district’s actions during the pandemic foreshadowed their reactions to charter school growth: they were more reactive than proactive. For example, my total training for the pandemic equated to a 3-day workshop in the middle of the summer of 2020, and students received no training but did attend a distribution event to receive computers for remote learning. My colleagues and I in the classroom felt unprepared to adequately meet the needs of our learners, but we did the best we could with what we had available.

I have never worked in a charter school, and my most significant exposure to them (aside from research I have conducted) has been through some brief work as a high school advisor at a community college. Every time I read local news or look at educational journals, there are articles about charter schools and how much they have grown from previous years. I recall hearing rumors in each district I have worked in about potential charter openings, and while none of those rumors came to fruition (with charter schools actually opening), the rumors seemed to keep gaining momentum and it seems likely that charter schools will eventually open in more and more rural districts. As I have studied charter schools and conducted pilot research for this study, I have learned about the myriad reasons why parents may choose to send their children to a charter school. As a public school administrator, I spent many days thinking about issues

within my previous school, dealing with frustrated families and trying to understand the problems of struggling students, and too often hearing remarks about how they were going to enroll their student in a charter school in the neighboring county if they did not get the support they felt they needed from the schools.

Since so much of my own understanding about charter schools has come from my work as a doctoral student and my understanding as a school administrator was limited at best prior to beginning my program, I wonder what this means for other school leaders who have not had the opportunity to study the charter school movement in any depth. An old joke from my first teaching position regarding the school's administration was that "it's not a problem until it's a problem." It is my firm belief that now more than ever, TPS leaders need to understand charter schools and strategize for their impending arrival. Whether the TPS are in urban, rural, or suburban areas, charter competition is simply a matter of time. I used the interviews in this study to gauge the understanding of rural TPS leaders about charters and assess how important it may be for them to engage in proactive planning. Unfortunately, as I will describe in my findings, few of these leaders seem at all prepared for charter school competition.

Significance

The quality of education, and the preparation of students to be successful post-graduation, are often associated with the school they attend. For many rural communities, the local school holds significant value due to its history and connection to alumni, many of whom remain in the area to raise their own families. The tradition of attending the same school that a student's parents, grandparents, and other family members attended is often an ingrained part of a rural mindset. The history and rich connections to rural TPS often means some long-term residents are

unable to foresee challenges or imagine a rival force that may potentially change the nature of how families view education.

When examining the current literature, there are gaps in understanding rural TPS leaders' knowledge about charter schools and their capacity to compete with them. The tendency of TPS leaders to not consider charter schools as a viable threat seems to be a common practice until they are directly affected by a school opening in their district (Reid, 2023). Social and political changes have resulted in rapid changes in modern-day education. Reliance upon history and tradition in TPS is an integral part of their allure, but failure to look beyond common practices in rural education may be problematic in a more competitive marketplace. The rapid expansion of charter schools is evident from the data, and the question of whether a charter school will arrive in most rural areas seems to be a matter of when, not if, at least in most states, and especially in North Carolina where this study took place.

Going into this study, I wanted to understand what TPS leaders know and understood about charter schools and how they feel about facing competition. Although the focus of this research is about understanding what rural TPS leaders know about charters, and how they might handle a more competitive market for students, it is relevant beyond the charter school context. The umbrella of school choice includes several options like homeschooling, as well as private, religious, and online options, preparedness for charters may easily translate to overall proactive planning by rural TPS districts in general.

The results of this study may provide rural TPS leaders insights about the state of their own district and enhance their capacity to self-assess how they handle external and internal threats. This information will be valuable to TPS leaders in rural districts, but also provide context to larger districts that may have charters surrounding them. The study will give insights

about how confident TPS leaders in rural districts feel about their capacity to respond to competition from charters, and why they feel ready or unprepared. Information gained in this study may also help leaders in small TPS districts to consider the state of their own school system in relation to charters and other types of alternative approaches to schooling, and provide resources for proactive planning.

Overview of Chapters

In this first chapter, I discussed the problem, purpose, research questions, and background context. I also shared my positionality, experiences as a teacher and leader in TPS, and discussed the trustworthiness strategies I used in this study. Additionally, I provided an overview of my methodology and usage of Neo-Institutional Theory to examine the data from my interviews. I also outlined the sample population of participants, data collection methods and analysis, and limitations.

In Chapter II, I review the literature on charter schools and discuss ideas like competition and marketing between charter schools and TPS. I focus on the promises of charter schools, critiques of charter schools by TPS, and the impact of charter competition on TPSs. Furthermore, I discuss the impact of charter schools in a competitive educational marketplace with TPS. I end Chapter 2 with concluding remarks and a summary review of my findings from the literature review.

In Chapter III, I discuss the findings that emerge from the interviews and my analysis of the data. In Chapter IV, I answer my research questions, discuss the implications of my study, and offer recommendations for rural TPS leaders about their preparedness for competing with charter schools.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the state of the educational market and the competition between charter schools and TPS requires examining the body of research that has been published on this topic. In this chapter, I explore the structure of charter schools, charter school promises and reforms, critiques of charter schools, and the impact of charter schools on TPS marketing practices and leadership. Finally, I provide some concluding thoughts based upon the literature review and how what we already know from the existing research impacts the design of my study.

Charter Schools

The modern-day charter movement is complex. Emerging from calls for greater school choice, charter schools operate with public funds from TPS districts, often have bipartisan support, and are less defined by the traditional characteristics of conservatism as compared with some other choice options. Contemporary charter school and choice options have grown in a manner that supports Friedman's vision of choice and consumerism with education. Cuban (2016) describes the interest of philanthropic families, such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, and their donations as "a way of ridding the nation but especially big city schools of an obsolete model of schooling that fails to prepare U.S. children and youth for either college or an ever-changing workplace" (Part 2, para. 5). While support for charter schools has traditionally come from conservative circles, charter schools now have bipartisan support. According to Benson (2022), "The allure of charter schools underscores the neoliberal response to the lagging performance of traditional public schools, especially in urban areas, by providing choice to parents and opportunities for teachers to innovate" (p. 94). Andrew Rotherman of the 21st Century Schools Project at the Progressive Policy Institute describes charters as "the first concrete iteration of a powerful, innovative idea—that public schools are defined by operating

norms and public accountability rather than solely by who manages them” (as cited in Benson, 2022, p. 94). Before digging into the research on charter schools, it is important to understand their structure and the capitalist dimensions of this reform approach.

Charter School Structure

The proliferation and support of charter schools has continued to grow since the first one opened in 1992 (Benson, 2022). From 2000 to 2021, the number of charters grew from 1,990 to 7,800 nationally (National Alignment for Public Charters, 2022). With over 3.7 million students, and accounting for 7.5% percent of national school enrollment, charter schools are a growing educational approach that is seen by many as a genuine alternative to TPS (Benson, 2022). As of July of 2023, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) reports 7 new charter schools opened that year, there are currently 211 total charter schools located in 115 TPS districts in North Carolina. Charter schools are developed and supported in various ways, but all are premised on the belief that autonomy from many traditional public school expectations can lead to innovation and educational improvement, largely through competition for students, which ostensibly should drive innovation.

Composition

Charter schools serve public school students, are funded from tax dollars taken from TPS districts, operate under privately appointed boards, and their existence is contingent upon attracting students (Kotok et al., 2021). Practices for recruiting students vary by state and management style, but typically schools are marketed by leaders through targeted campaigns and organized efforts such as those implemented by charter-management organizations (CMOs) (Jabbar, 2016). CMOs are the current trend in charter schools and have contributed to the overall success of the modern charter movement (Richmond, 2022). Charter schools are also “open

enrollment schools” that allow for families within their boundaries to attend if there is space available (Rapa & Ennis, 2018, p. 3133). According to the Center on Research for Educational Outcomes (CREDO), “Attending a charter school that is part of a larger network of schools is associated with improved educational outcomes for students” and that “research work has shown steady and consistent, even if gradual, improvement in charter school network performance” (as cited in Richmond, 2022, p. 41).

While charter schools are open enrollment schools, their individual survival comes from how they perform in comparison with neighboring schools (West, 2016). To support enrollment and attract attention, charters tend to tout certain performance accolades, such as higher test scores, or unique pedagogical foci that can appeal to teachers, students, and administrators, sometimes leading to “creamskimming” of students and staff away from TPSs (Han & Keefe, 2020, p. 431). This talent acquisition by charters is viewed by supporters as a byproduct of superior operations that are both unique and uncommon in TPS. Although the impact of a charter school on TPS is contingent upon several variables, there can also be notable changes in both curricular and instructional practices at TPS (in response to charter schools opening in their districts) in order to increase student retention (Bickmore, 2020). These are often due to the market dimensions of the charter school movement, including a capitalist orientation toward competition. Ideally, the competition from charter schools forces TPS leaders to improve their operations and offerings as well.

Capitalism

Charter schools operate under the premise that schools should be chosen, opened, and closed like any other commodity in a capitalist marketplace. Specifically, charter school advocates work to identify successful school models and replicate their success in areas that have

similar needs (Decker, 2019). This means that the value of charter schools is contingent upon what they can produce and if there is demand for their respective educational offerings. One of the most powerful manifestations of capitalism in the educational fight for dominance between TPS and charter schools is from CMOs. In terms of branding, CMOs are viewed by many families as somewhat elite, “brand name schools,” which can be challenging to TPSs that are older and that do not have new buildings and equipment (Jabbar, 2016, p. 15). CMOs typically have dedicated marketing teams, are run by strategy officers earning over \$200,000 a year, and operate on a regional or national franchise model (Kotok et al., 2021). CMOs are funded through external sources, foundations, and money taken from TPS districts (Jabbar, 2016); the additional money from foundations and corporations often means more money is available in charter schools as compared to TPS. Principals who serve charter schools governed by CMOs are audited for brand fidelity and can serve as a point of accountability for their performance (Kotok et al., 2021). According to Han and Keefe (2020), the competition from charter schools has a significant impact on TPS. The loss of students by TPS creates financial hardship and instability; these lead to a reduction in programs and services, and eventually may handicap the quality of educational offerings available within an institution. Through competitive enrollment, better performance in tested subjects, and specialization, some worry that charter schools could potentially even take over a market that has been held by TPS.

Similar to how two competing businesses fight to best the other, and eventually win over their clientele, charter schools use this same competitive approach in developing and placing their schools in particular communities. Han and Keefe (2020) describe this market driven phenomenon by stating that, “Economic competition should improve each TPS. Each student lost to a charter school may come directly from a school’s budget” (p. 431). While schools naturally

gain and lose students throughout the year, if there is a nearby school that is drawing students beyond typical trends, it becomes an attrition factor that chips away at the institution's budget (Han & Keefe, 2020). Additionally, this capitalistic interpretation of education means that the allocation of resources should not necessarily be predetermined. Those in favor of market style competition for education argue that the pressure to keep and maintain student populations also equates to a higher quality of education; failure to keep up numbers means the school should eventually close down (Benson, 2022). While in theory, struggling schools close, that is not always what happens in practice and instead there can be uncertainty and instability in districts, especially as charter school promises are not always fulfilled in reality. I discuss the implications of charter schools' business-oriented approaches to education further in the next section.

Charter School Promises and Reforms

Since charter schools first emerged in 1992, leaders and members of think tanks have continued to develop and craft their identity in comparison to the various options that are available for families to select a personalized path for education (Berends, 2015). Charter schools are presented by choice advocates as an option for parents to have a more direct choice for how education is consumed in the communities where they live. First mentioned in 1988, Castillo (2020) describes charter schools as an "ideological big tent" that features both market and progressive ideas (p. 522). Castillo (2020) goes on to describe some distinctions between types of charter schools: "Publicly funded but privately operated, some charter schools align more with the market values of accountability, choice, competition, efficiency, managerialism, and privatization, whereas others are more situated within progressive political movements to broaden racial, social, and economic justice" (p. 522). Benson (2022) describes the three main purposes of charter schools as choice, competition, and innovation. In the following sections, I

look at each of these areas and some of the most substantial claims made by charter school leaders and their supporters in relation to these areas. I explore the research-based critiques of these claims in the section that follows.

Choice

One of the most common and powerful arguments made by charter school advocates is that they provide families with the capacity to choose the type of education that best meets their needs. Mann (2020) argues that school choice policies “rely on assumptions on how individuals consume educational services and how organizations respond to individual choices” (p. 49).

According to charter proponents, most of the TPSs that are attended by students are not schools of choice because the students who are enrolled did not choose to be there, rather, they are the only option students have (Decker, 2019). Lauen et al. (2015) state that, “Proponents, often drawing from neoclassical logic, argue that parents search across a (presumably) diverse market in demand of higher-quality schools that better suit their family’s preferences” (p. 214).

According to charter school advocates, the educational market is enriched through experimentation with a range of education options. Moreover, providing accountability data from all types of schools to the public offers families a means to choose among these options (West, 2016). Many charters are developed around a specific school focus, such as the civics centered Democracy Prep Network, environmentalism in the Jane Goodall Environmental Middle School, or global education through Exploris School (Decker, 2019). Because charters do not have the same restrictions as TPS, they can exercise a wider range of options for curriculum, staffing, and the delivery of instruction that are unique in comparison to the offerings by TPS (Decker, 2019). No matter which school is selected through individual choice, the existence of charter school options gives parents the ability to make decisions based on the educational approach they

believe best serves their child, as opposed to simply sending their child to their zoned local school. This autonomy means that when a range of options is available, families can ultimately pick an environment that they believe will keep their children engaged, provide a potentially higher chance of attending college, or meet their individualized educational needs (West, 2016).

Supporters of public choice argue that such choice is a vital part of keeping education innovative and relevant to the needs of families. Choice is also thought of by parents and families as a fundamental democratic value, thus making charter schools seemingly an option that supports democracy (Hornbeck et al., 2019). According to Finn et al. (2017), the charter concept is simple but powerful: families can make school choices for their children under the umbrella of public education without the regulations of TPS (as cited in Stahl, 2020). From the perspective of those who advocate for charter schools, bureaucratic practices in TPS such as tenure, collective bargaining, and unions are barriers to innovation (Benson, 2022). Fernandes and Menezes-Filho (2020) argue that the productivity and effectiveness of TPS are complicated by public system regulations that reduce their efficacy, especially as they only have a “limited scope” of influence in making decisions about hiring, firing, classroom sizes, and wages. According to Hoxby (2003), the loss of students to charter schools means that TPS are “taxed at the margin” and must respond by finding ways to retain students, or lose the funding that comes from their attendance (as cited in Hans & Keefe, 2020, p. 431).

Competition

A second issue that is often cited by charter school proponents as an advantage is related to their performance in comparison to TPS. Traditionally competition in education is discussed in the context of structural measures, market share and geographical choices, and student outcomes with academic performance; however, there is a recent interest among researchers to

understand how school leaders perceive competition (Creed et al., 2021). According to Creed et al. (2021) competition, in regard to school choice, is influenced by three types of factors: internal, external, and contextual. Internal factors are based on the backgrounds, ideologies, and views of school leaders. Tenured school leaders are more likely to focus on competition while those with less experience are focused on learning their job (Creed et al., 2021). External factors of competition are related to choices available to families and can include similar types of schools such as other charters or comparable demographics. According to Jabbar (2015b), the quality and number of educational choices, school practices and programs, and proximity to other school choices are external factors to a leader's perception of competition (as cited in Creed et al., 2021). Contextual factors of competition are based on variables like enrollment and the geographic locations of schools, such as urban or rural settings (Creed et al., 2021). In urban areas, contextual factors may deal with historical patterns like segregation or white flight, while more rural and suburban areas may be "choice-dense" or "choice-sparse" (Creed et al., 2021, p. 817).

An objective of some charter school leaders is to identify and replicate successful models, and this is achieved through trial and error, but this practice also connects to the roots of early charter schools to function as experimental stations for education (Decker, 2019). An orientation toward ongoing development, enhanced by the ability to make quick decisions because of freedom from some of the restraints faced by traditional public schools, allows for charter school leaders to directly manage their schools in a responsive manner (Leahy & Shore, 2019). The flexibility granted to charters to manage their schools also allows them to make changes in a swift manner that is responsive to what is happening around them (Lauen et al., 2015). Some charter schools pay higher salaries for high performing professionals and use this incentive to

draw in people with unique talents that may not be rewarded in TPS (Decker, 2019). In some cases, this may mean using data to shut down some neighboring charter schools to further support more successful models (West, 2016). The willingness of charter school management companies to shut down low performing schools, and replicate successful models, reflects their commitment of “replicating and mass-producing schools that excel” (Richmond, 2022, p. 41).

With growing numbers of charter schools, teachers, families, and students have the ability to seek out a potentially more individualized and powerful educational experience. Benson (2022) discusses how in urban areas, charters can provide safer environments for students to learn while also providing the kinds of within-school choices that are traditionally only offered to the students of more affluent parents. The exodus of “committed” students from TPS, which is discussed by anti-charter advocates as “creamskimming,” is a side-effect of families exercising their right to choose and attend charters rather than accepting lower performances of traditional schools (Fernandes & Menezes-Filho, 2020, p. 286). Kalulu et al. (2020) conducted an empirical study to examine the impact of states with charter school laws and teachers’ choice to work in TPS or charter schools in conjunction with the results of the 8th grade student proficiency levels on National Assessment of Educational Progress exams across 4 bi-annual testing cycles from 2008-2015. When compared to TPS, the results for Kentucky, Arkansas, Oregon, and District of Columbia proficiency scores show slightly better performance by students in charter schools, ranging from 0.76% to 1.86% in math and 0.90% to 1.62% for reading (Kalulu et al., 2020). While this performance data depicts charter schools having a slightly better academic achievement over TPS, it continues to follow the established research findings that there are few significant differences, on average, between performance of students in charter schools and traditional public schools. Additionally, it should be noted that Kalulu et

al. (2020) also argue that introducing strong charter laws lead to improvements; however, they also concede that the results of the study are “mixed, but mostly positive” (p. 13).

Innovation

A third area that charter schools use to support their operations within education is the assertion that they provide innovation across public and private entities. According to charter school advocates, the presence of charter schools is innovative to the educational environment, and the consequences for failing to compete are so grave that they spread their influence to surrounding schools and foster growth (Lauen et al., 2015). The freedoms afforded to charter leaders to adapt and support the communities they serve can lead to innovative leadership ideas (Leahy & Shore, 2019). For example, in a qualitative study by Garcia and Salinas (2018), the researchers examined the best practices of four successful charter school principals and a superintendent in Texas, and argued that successful schools allow for school leadership to focus on academics, make data driven decisions, and uphold high expectations of students. Garcia and Salinas (2018) conclude that unlike TPS, freedom from federal and most state regulations provides charter school leaders with the autonomy to make decisions and better respond to needs of students. Richmond (2022) argues that, “Students receive a better education when provided choices, schools have the flexibility to implement proven practices, and when our system of public education opens more schools with a record of strong results while closing those that persistently fail” (p. 43). Improvements that are working in charter schools are cited by charter advocates as innovations that will improve schooling for both charter and TPS.

Assessing the role of charter schools as laboratories for improving education involves looking at the influences of TPS and charter schooling on education as a whole. In a metaanalysis of 23 studies about charter schools in Arizona from the past 20 years, Maranto and Vasile (2018)

found evidence through qualitative fieldwork and quantitative teacher surveys that charter schools stimulate change in TPS. When charter schools create a significant market share loss for TPS because of student attrition, it causes TPS leaders to improve outreach to parents and teachers, replace ineffective administrators, and develop new programs to become more competitive (Maranato & Vasile, 2018). In their dissertation, Price (2021) uses a three-article design to explore educational innovation in charter schools, and identify positive effects of charter schools on student outcomes. Assessing 105 peer-reviewed educational articles, Price (2021) sorted these charter schools into 15 categories, identifying technology based virtual schools, specific curricular immersion programs, and extended hours as innovative charter practices as the top 3 charter school practices. Price (2021) notes that, “all three practices can have a positive effect on student learning outcomes when implementations are well planned, proper training is provided, and appropriate resources are allocated to the program” (p. 2).

Although charter schools can impact TPS, they also seek to influence educational practices and create educational reform among themselves. Quinn et al. (2016) conducted interviews with CMO and non-CMO school leaders, principals, and funders in a mixed methods study to understand when and why they thought about growth, how it influenced organizational plans and strategic priorities, and how financial supporters influenced planning. Quinn et al. (2016) analyzed interviews with charter school leaders alongside school data from the National Center for Education Statistics and the California Department of Education, and the data was also supplemented by observations from participants and non-participants at various charter school board meetings and conferences (Quinn et al., 2016). The findings from this study indicate that the CMO model of charter schools emerged from the factors that made certain charter schools successful and others failures, and that charter school model preference is an

outcome of achieving maximum impact per dollar spent (Quinn et al., 2016). For charter school advocates, financial support is given to successful models and is indicative of their commitment to enhance education as a whole, rather than just because a school happens to be a charter.

Critiques of Charter Schools

Earlier in this chapter, I outlined some of the promises and reforms made by charter school leaders and their supporters. Three major claims made by charters are that they maximize choice, create healthy competition that forces schools to remain relevant, and provide opportunities for innovation that support the overall improvement of education. I explore critiques of these three major claims below, as this information provides important background for potentially countering charter school growth and/or for effectively marketing TPSs in comparison to charter schools.

Choice

Efforts by TPS leaders to influence the public have been underway since the late 1930s, when principals began advertising their respective schools and districts to their local communities via newspapers, radio, and film (Kotok et al., 2021). After World War II, TPS leaders found themselves competing against private schools and launched a campaign to paint public schools as “good schools” compared to private schools (Kotok et al., 2021, p. 376). This perception of good and bad schools would later be built into the Southern strategy of resisting integration in the 1950s and 1960s and using data from test scores as a measuring rod for success (Ravitch, 2020). In the modern setting, TPSs have engaged in many approaches to outreach through public information officers, social media, parent-teacher organizations, and community support (Kotok et al., 2021).

While school choice is framed as families making informed decisions using factors like test scores, opportunities, and pedagogical approaches, the reality is much more complex, including the fact that parents sometimes make decisions for other reasons than quality or student performance. Moreover, there are barriers to school choice that can severely limit which students can choose to attend a charter school, and often the capacity to choose between TPS or charter is intentionally limited. According to Vasquez Heilig et al. (2019), some of the barriers that can limit the exercise of choice by families are inadequate access to transportation, insufficient information to make an informed selection, and a lack of supplemental services like special education or language services like those that are required of TPS. Charter schools typically target high-performing students in their recruitment efforts as these students improve the image or data that represent that institution; they also tend to enroll learners who do not require additional services required in TPS (Han & Keefe, 2020).

Another aspect of choice that receives criticism is the way in which charter schools frame the conversation around choice, particularly how they contrast from TPS. Often TPS and charter schools are discussed synonymously with the perception that rules apply equally to both. While TPS operate within a county or set of determined boundaries like a city, charters can have the authority to extend across an entire state (Jankens et al., 2019). Jankens et al. (2019) examined geographical impact of boundaries and jurisdiction of charter schools in the state of Michigan and found that while there were some students drawn from nearby schools, the majority of them came from outside the districts where the school was located. Because the draw of students can extend far beyond traditional boundaries, any comparison between charter schools and neighboring TPS districts is limited. Although charters are marketed as an essential part of parental choice and are described as a superior option to TPS, there is no academic consensus or

study that supports this claim. Berends (2015) argues that because of the structure of charter schools and the way they mimic TPS, those choosing to attend charters are not likely to “experience positive achievement gains” because the two types of schools have so many attributes in common (p. 167). Moreover, it is a strategic decision by some charter school leaders to carefully use and articulate terms that can influence parental decision making, such as describing themselves as public schools rather than schools funded by TPS. Rhetorically, this can make the choice between the two seem trivial and inconsequential (Ravitch, 2020).

Competition

Charter school management is a business, and their competition is TPS; the more students charter schools enroll, the more money they are allocated by the state and district. Student recruitment is an ongoing process as charter school leaders work to ensure that seats are always full and that demand continues to surge (Jabbar, 2016). According to Creed et al. (2021), “The most common goal of charter-school policy is to expand competition and generate spillover effects to traditional public schools” (p. 816). Gao and Semykina (2021) suggest that school proximity is one of the leading factors that influences parents to enroll their students into a charter school. For charter schools, the cyclical process of finding, recruiting, and retaining students is an ongoing focus and a core component of charter school growth and development. Competitive advertising between by school leaders is typically more aggressive in districts that have growing numbers of charter schools (Kotok et al., 2021). The pressure to maintain a baseline number of students and retain enrollment numbers sometimes creates an “educational survival complex” which changes the focus of the school to survivability rather than supporting the unique needs of students (Love, 2019, p. 30). Furthermore, because the survival of charter schools is contingent upon the “accumulation of capital” from TPS, it can sometimes lead to a

paradigm shift where charter school leaders focus less on academic offerings and more on ancillary aspects of the educational mission (extra programs, smaller class sizes, attractive facilities) to recruit and retain students (Eastman, 2018, p. 221). As charter schools grow, target, and enter new markets, TPS leaders will need to continue to grow and market their programs as they face impending competition with choice options in the educational marketplace.

Assessing the degree of competition for students between TPS and charter schools in any area is difficult and often subjective and contextual. While charter school advocates argue that competition and struggle improve education as a whole, research continues to show “little difference between TPS and charters” in terms of innovative practices or educational improvement (Jabbar & Creed, 2020, p. 374). In their dissertation, Smart (2019) compares two different urban schools, one charter school and one TPS, to see which model has the best return on investment in terms of dollars spent and student performance. They examined each school’s respective funds according to instruction, instructional staff support, administration, operations, and maintenance, and total support services (Smart, 2019). While the charter school placed a greater allocation of funds into administration and the TPS into instructional support, the results were “not statistically significant as the overall resource allocation outcomes was similar between charter and TPS” (Smart, 2019, p. 145). According to Mann (2020), school districts that have charter schools impacting them respond in a range of ways based on factors like enrollment, the quality and volume of competition, experience and quality of leadership, and size of the school district. Although TPSs must be creative in their response to charter competition, even the most successful TPS administrators can struggle against the business style approach of charter schools and their competitive marketing (Kotok et al., 2021). Charter schools, such as those owned by EMOs, often succeed in growing enrollment by using aggressive marketing campaigns

and strategies designed by dedicated teams of professionals (Love, 2019). The extra funds obtained by charter schools from TPS, in conjunction with less restrictive guidelines, means that TPS are very limited in their capacity to respond to small levels of competitive marketing (Love, 2019). Support at both the federal and state levels of government for charter schools has exacerbated the gaps between charter schools at TPS. The proliferation and growth of charter schools has benefited greatly from deregulation, the easing restrictions, and leniency that is simply not afforded to TPS (Benson, 2022).

Innovation

While charter schools often market themselves as an innovative laboratory for education and freedom, the support for this claim depends on where the data comes from and how it is presented. According to Ravitch (2020), the supporters of charter schools are “disruptors” of education that seek to “support the privatization of education, distrust of the public institutions, seek private control rather than elected school boards, and measure success through production models of learning with corresponding penalties and bonuses” (p. 6). While over 3 million students currently attend charter schools today, 1 million of them are in schools that underperform compared to their TPS counterparts (Benson, 2022). In most cases, the response of TPS leaders to charter school growth is to compare data and highlight their successes despite heavy regulations and competition from charters. According to Finn et al. (2017), only 17% of charter school students outperform TPS students, and in comparing the TPSs to charter schools, faculty in the latter tend to have less experience, work longer hours, have less education, and make less money (p. 13). Additionally, pro-charter studies on student performance, such as the ones done by CREDO, show that these schools sometimes make slight gains over TPS; however, those gains typically are only in the tenths or hundredths of a standard deviation (Vasquez Heilig

et al., 2019). Student achievement at charter schools also tends to be lower than that of TPS overall, and that performance is despite the loss of funds that occurs in most states when a student enrolls in a charter (Benson, 2022). Vasquez Heilig et al. (2019) further challenge the claim of charter innovation by stating that, “school choice proponents are not able to account for the fact that there are differences between the opportunities, and choices, available to families who attend charter schools which makes comparison between public and charter schools achievement outcomes problematic” (pp. 3–4).

One of the major promises made by charter school proponents is about the degree to which they support poor and underserved minority populations in urban communities, but even this assertion receives heavy criticism due to its racial and social implications. Charter school models, such as Success Academy and Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), work in tandem with the embedded traditions of oppressing marginalized and poor populations by using “aggressive paternalistic, and racist ideological teaching practices” (Love, 2019, p. 30). Although charter schools do not accept tuition from families and use a lottery system when demand exceeds the number of available seats, access to these schools does not guarantee an equitable experience for students (Han & Keefe, 2020). The expansion of charters often means that sorting can occur in such a way that affluent and white students tend to enroll in one charter school while significant populations of poor or students of color populate a different charter school or the TPS (Jabbar, 2016). According to Han and Keefe (2020),

Students may also need to navigate unfavorable transportation options to attend a charter or opt not to attend. Charter competitors are not randomly selected, as they are more likely to exist in urban areas, target lower income students, and enroll more black and Hispanic students. (p. 431)

Lee et al. (2021) discuss this phenomenon by stating that “school choice has social segregation effects, leading to children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds being worse off” (p. 111).

Research on the Impact of Charter School Growth on TPS

Charter school proliferation and increased competition with TPS impacts districts in various ways. The growth of school choice options over the past two decades has turned marketing into a “high-stakes practice” (Reid, 2023, p. 3). Bickmore (2020) conducted a case study of TPS principals and their reactions to charter school openings and found that their reactions are contingent upon their risk of losing students to other schools. In the past, TPS have not paid much attention to the availability of (or competition from) other forms of schooling because their enrollment had not been heavily impacted, but once attendance at TPSs declined in significant ways, they were forced to pay more attention to the need to compete for students (Reid, 2023). Declining enrollment has devastating consequences for a school and can mean fewer teachers, larger classroom sizes, and less funding for school operations. Responses to losing, or potentially losing, students may include academic and organizational changes, differentiating services at the school, and more intensive marketing and recruitment to gain students (Bickmore, 2020).

Because competition from charter schools affects TPSs and their districts differently, there are several factors that must be examined to determine the best ways for TPS leaders to respond, including contextual factors such as enrollment, intensity of competition, caliber of leadership, and district size (Mann, 2020). The responses of TPS can also depend on whether a charter school has opened or is simply being discussed as a potential competitor. In a dissertation, Carroll (2019) interviewed community members, including four principals in a rural TPS district, to examine their perceptions of the impact of charter schools on the community.

Carroll (2019) found that rural TPS had been significantly impacted by the increased number of charter schools, and that school leaders were very aware of the changes. Some notable changes in the rural TPS district included changes in marketing and practices to entice students and parents, and the development of enriched relationships within the community and businesses. Additionally, Carroll (2019) notes that the emergence of charter schools caused division and tension between those loyal to the TPS and families in support of the new charter schools. Similarly, Bickmore (2020) examined three K-5 TPS principals' reactions and actions in response to the opening of a K-8 charter school within their district. Bickmore (2020) found that the principals' reactions to charter schools were based on their perceptions of their own school's academic status, and that the actions taken by TPS leaders go through phases as they determine the level of threat posed to them by the competing charter school. Two of the most significant areas in which charter school growth impacts TPS are in marketing and leadership.

Marketing

The current educational market is more competitive than ever, and to compete with the myriad of choices available requires school districts to market their schools to the families they serve (Reid, 2023). Kolter and Fox (1995) defined educational marketing as, "the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets for the purpose of achieving organizational objectives" (as cited in Dâmaso & Lima, 2020, p. 28). According to Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2012), marketing in education requires four considerations: market research and analysis of the environment, creating a marketing plan and strategy, implementing the marketing plan, and evaluating the marketing process (as cited in Dâmaso & Lima, 2020). In their qualitative case study involving semi-structured interviews with five school leaders, five teachers, and five

parents at an international private school in India, Varadarajan and Malone (2018) found that both internal and external branding are critical for winning over parents. Successful branding combines internal buy-in from leaders and teachers while external communications through physical presence and social media tell the school's narrative (Varadarajan & Malone, 2018). Varadarajan and Malone (2018) also argue that based on their study, branding can be implemented as a strategy through the "sequential implementation of vision, mission, culture and brand name" (p. 943).

As charter schools have grown, they have continued to invest in resources into marketing to influence parental choices and "carve out a niche in the market" (DiMartino & Jessen, 2018, p. 4). In a dissertation by Barr (2019), he interviewed ten teachers from five different charter schools, and examined why teachers chose to leave TPS to work at a charter school. Barr found that teachers left TPS for both personal and professional reasons, and that personal values and needs helped to guide the decision, in addition to the desire to be viewed as a professional (which requires more autonomy than traditional public schools tend to provide). Second, Barr inquired about teacher's perceptions of democracy around schooling, and found that most interviewees were unable to demonstrate a sound understanding of democratic principles, or the implications of their choice to teach in a charter school on the larger democratic mission of public education. While marketing for TPS is usually related to highlighting academic performance and enrollment at individual schools to intrigue potential students, attracting faculty and staff who will accomplish those goals is equally important. In a qualitative study, Castro et al. (2022) interviewed 46 teachers in Texas where 25% of students attend charter schools, and found that despite being the less chosen educational option, charter schools were changing the ways that teachers view the profession. Castro et al. (2022) indicate that "teachers construct professional

identities to match positions in TPS, but failure to find positions or scarcity in the job market pushes teachers to renegotiate their professional identity” (p. 18). TPS (primary sector) jobs are typically associated with greater stability, higher salaries, and predictable career paths while charter school (secondary sector) positions have lower wages, weaker contracts, less transparency, and higher rates of unpredictability (Castro et al., 2022).

Advertising what a school has to offer is a typical response to competition in the contemporary competitive marketplace (Dâmaso & Lima, 2020). Some responses by TPS leaders to charter school growth may include superintendents communicating more about the safety of TPS, teachers increasing the number and quality of interactions with parents about events occurring at schools or about their children’s performance, and principals being more intentional about the conversations they hold with prospective students (Reid, 2023). TPS leaders also have had to adopt a more customer-focused orientation. Foskett (1998) described marketing-oriented organizations as “one in which the customer (or client, or clients, or those groups who are the focus of its major day-to-day activities) is central to its operation” (as cited in Dâmaso & Lima, 2020, p. 28). Sometimes competitive marketing leads to reworking academic and operational mechanisms such as offering additional academic supports or after-school programs (Jabbar, 2015b). Whereas TPS leaders have not historically had to market their schools, they now share information more strategically with the public about academic success, test scores, graduation rates, specific or unique programs, athletic offerings, and clubs (Reid, 2023). While the response of TPS leaders to charter school growth by highlighting and sharing their specific school offerings can be seen as a positive development, it must also be accompanied by strong leadership.

Leadership

There are a variety of factors that influence how TPS leaders respond to competition from charter schools. School leaders' responses are often based on "perceptions of competition" (Creed et al., 2021, p. 816). Jabbar (2015b) argues that principals experience competitive pressure based on the loss of students to other schools, and the threat of losing students is based upon their position in the marketplace and perceptions of how much competition actually exists locally. Jabbar and Creed (2020) add that school leader perceptions about charter schools, and contextual factors like income and organizational culture of schools, are significant in how competition is felt and responded to within a school district. School leaders' perceptions of competition determine whether they take actions to change their current practices, respond superficially, or even engage in competition with other educational entities at all (Creed et al., 2021). An example of TPS perceptions of competition with charter schools and their associated actions can be seen in competitive school districts. In a study by Wells et al. (1998), the researchers found that TPS leaders in California responded to charter schools based on their perceptions of competition, and their district's responses were determined by whether they felt they had a fair chance of competing for students (as cited in Creed et al., 2021). Despite the consistent loss of students to the local charter schools, these TPS leaders no longer worried about creating a competitive strategy because they did not feel capable of competing at all (as cited in Creed et al., 2021).

Although school district leaders are responsible for strategic planning for their overall district, the impact of charter school competition is often felt most significantly by school principals. In a study involving 30 interviews with 10 TPS school principals from the state of New Jersey, Reid (2023) found that they see marketing as one of the most pressing

responsibilities of school leaders, particularly with building brand recognition among the communities they serve. For principals, external pressures like increasing enrollment and providing evidence of their school's success are part of their essential role as school and district marketers (Reed, 2023). Additionally, this study highlights the need of principals to be both physically and virtually present, not only as a form of marketing, but also as a way of connecting to families and demonstrating accessibility (Reed, 2023). In a multiple case study comparison of a first year K-8 charter school located within the attendance zone of three K-5 TPSs, Bickmore (2020) found that TPS principals' actions and reactions toward charter school change over time and go through several stages that influence their overall competitive status. The first stage is characterized by principals having a lack of information from their respective districts, lack of understanding about charter schools, and an early decrease in enrollment (Bickmore, 2020). The second stage involves principals determining their competitive status in relation to the charter schools, and their insights are primarily based on comments from parents/guardians and staff, and the volume of student discipline issues at their school (Bickmore, 2020). In the third stage, principals determine their competitive status using data, make comparisons to the competing charter school, and create action plans. In this particular case study by Bickmore (2020), the TPS principals made decisions based on perceptual data about the charter school and determined that the charter school was not a viable threat due to their own "superior academic programing and organizational structures" (p. 287).

The impact of charter schools and competitive pressure has created a paradigm shift in how TPS leaders interact in the educational marketplace. Regardless of how TPS leaders feel about charter schools and competition, awareness of surrounding factors is key to understanding student movement between schools and how to respond accordingly (Creed et al., 2021). The

strategic presence of TPS leadership in contemporary education happens through maintaining physical and virtual availability (Reed, 2023). TPS districts employ public information officers and official social media pages to vet and ensure scripted messages that are conveyed to the public have official approval (Kotok et al., 2021). Conversations with families mimic client and customer relationships, and principals and district leaders craft their specific offerings to attract prospective students (Dâmaso & Lima, 2020).

Conclusion

Based upon the current literature, it is evident that there is still much confusion about the impact of charter schools on TPS and the degree to which TPS principals and other school leaders must strategically prepare for them to open in their areas. From the perspective of TPS leaders, responses to charter school growth are often more reactive than proactive. Jabbar's (2015b) conceptual framework on the three stages of TPS principal's reactions to charter schools show that they often react based on initial perceptions of market status based on insufficient information, a lack of understanding about charter schools, and anticipated decreases in enrollment. The reactive nature of TPS leaders can be correlated to feelings of safety and whether they feel a charter school may cause them significant damage, particularly in terms of the loss of a significant number of students (Bickmore, 2020). According to Creed et al. (2021), "School leaders facing declining enrollment may view all other schools as competitors regardless of their performance, demographic makeup, or location. Increasing enrollment, conversely, could lead to clearer patterns emerging in who is perceived as a competitor" (p. 820). Charter schools operate using a capitalist business model, while charter school management organizations have a goal of recruiting and replicating successful models and dissolving those that are not. Charter success is based upon a strategy of strong marketing; responding to the needs and wants of the

families that they serve; and networks of political, philanthropic, and corporate support for school choice. TPS uses a more traditional model which is centered around community support, hiring excellent teachers, holding high expectations for educators and staff, and serving families despite having limited resources.

Because they must actively recruit students, charter school leaders generally have a specific plan and strategies to compete with TPS. Alternatively, TPS only react to charter schools when they feel threatened by loss of enrollment, and thus rarely develop more proactive strategies to compete with them (Creed et al., 2021). Additionally, in many areas, TPSs have held a monopoly on education, depending on families with traditional mindsets toward community schools to maintain enrollment and support.

There is an asymmetrical dynamic between the strategies utilized by charter school and TPS leaders. While charter school leaders seem to be willing to acknowledge and seek to understand TPS, many TPS leaders only attend to the existence of charters when they are threatened or write a tuition check after losing students (Jabbar, 2015b). Charter school leaders are motivated to recruit students and professionals to their schools, and deliberately create strategies that allow them to compete in a choice driven market.

Based on my review of the literature, I am left with two major questions regarding charters and TPS that drive my own research. First, what do principals and district level leaders in rural, TPS districts know and understand about charter schools? Second, how prepared are TPS to address charter schools in terms of marketing and competition? In this study, I examined the understanding and preparedness of rural TPS leaders in districts that currently do not have a charter in their county, but where there is one or more in neighboring counties that are starting to attract students.

CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

My goal in conducting this study was to gain insight into what TPS leaders in districts that do not currently have a charter school know about charter schools, where their knowledge comes from, and how they are preparing for the arrival of charter schools in their district (as well as those that are in nearby districts). I interviewed eight school leaders for this study. Six are principals at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, while the other two are assistant superintendents. All participants currently serve in rural TPS districts that do not have a charter school within them currently, but do have them in surrounding counties.

In the rest of this chapter, I will provide details about what rural TPS leaders know and understand about charter schools, participant perceptions of what they see as threats to themselves and their schools or districts, and their readiness to compete against charter schools. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss some of the themes that have emerged from my data analysis, and summarize ideas that stand out from the research. The data presented in this chapter is important for establishing how school leaders in rural areas think about charter schools, and how perceptions about charter schools influence rural TPS leadership.

Description of the Study Participants

I chose the participants for this study from two rural TPS districts that do not have a charter school within them, but do have at least one in a neighboring county. I reached out to school leaders in the two districts via email and phone calls, starting with personal connections I had from previously working as an Assistant Principal in a nearby district. In total, I had eight participants: two elementary school principals, two middle school principals, two high school principals, and two assistant superintendents. All of the participants identify as white, three were male and five were female, and all had been in leadership roles for at least five years. I use

pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of participants; I also don't use the names of schools and districts so as to further protect participants' identities.

The two districts represented in this study have had different interactions with charter schools, and these experiences provide insights into their approaches to charter schools. District A operates in the shadow of a former charter school that operated for over 20 years and was shut down due to financial misconduct. The location of the former charter school in District A was very close to the border of the county, and it also was close to several other TPS districts. District B has weathered two unsuccessful charter school applications, and may be facing a possible new charter school right across the county border. While a charter school has not yet opened in District B, charter school applications have become more common and potentially disruptive in the past several years.

The elementary principals I interviewed were Gordon (District A) and Marsha (District B). Gordon has been an administrator for five years and has worked at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. He taught middle school before becoming a school administrator. Marsha is a 15-year administrator who has served at the elementary and middle school levels. Her background in teaching was at the elementary level before entering into administration.

The middle school principals who participated in this study are Lola (District A) and Jerry (District A). Lola has been an administrator for ten years and has worked at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She is a former high school teacher, and she served as an instructional specialist before becoming an administrator. Jerry is an 11-year administrator who served in elementary and middle school classrooms before becoming an administrator. His first four years in education were at charter school before he transitioned into traditional K-5 education.

Jade (District A) and Haley (District A) are the pseudonyms of the two high school principals. Jade is a former high school teacher who served at multiple schools in her county before becoming a principal. She is currently in her 6th year as an administrator. Haley is a 25-year veteran who has been an administrator for 11 years. She is a former high school teacher and has served as an administrator at the middle and high school levels.

The two assistant superintendents for this study are Jennifer (District B) and William (District A). Jennifer is a former high school teacher, who also served as a principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She then transitioned to a central office to work in curriculum and instruction before taking on her current duties as assistant superintendent and director of human resources. William is a 26-year veteran in education who served as an administrator for eight years across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. He has worked in several different roles in a central office, including in student services and finance. He now serves as assistant superintendent and director of human resources.

Knowledge of Charter Schools

One of the goals of this study was to look at what TPS leaders know and understand about charter schools, specifically what they know about the philosophy and growth of charter schools and where that knowledge comes from. In the following two sections, I will examine participants' knowledge about charter schools, in addition to any experiences or interactions that participants have had with charter schools. My analysis of participants' knowledge of charter schools provides context for how rural TPS leaders' identify threats to their school or district, and also contributes to my later analysis of their readiness for a more competitive educational marketplace.

Understanding

When I asked questions about TPS leaders' knowledge of charter schools, most participants opened by discussing their overall lack of knowledge before sharing some perceptions or assumptions, that is, things that they thought they knew or heard anecdotally. Five of the participants immediately shared that they did not "know much" about charter schools and that they were "not very familiar" with this educational reform movement. After providing his answer, William the assistant superintendent even followed up with, "If you were to survey most traditional public school leaders, I think, from those I've met with and spoken with, talked with, you would find that they actually know very little about charter schools." Jade shared a similar sentiment and said, "I've never visited one. So, I don't know anything about them. I just know what's put out there in the news." This trend of limited knowledge continued with Jennifer as she provided a very quick response of "not a lot" when I asked her about charter schools. Similarly, Gordon stated, "I'm not all that familiar with charter schools," and Haley divulged, "I really have very limited knowledge."

While there was not a lot of confidence from participants about their knowledge of charter schools, there were several useful insights about their perceptions and misunderstandings of charter schools. After establishing a limited knowledge about charter schools, three participants shared some concerns they had with charter schools (even despite their avowed lack of understanding of how they worked) and described some differences they perceived between charter schools and TPSs, while also sometimes being careful to distinguish between facts and their assumptions or beliefs. For example, Haley shared,

Well, my assumptions are that they are publicly funded. I believe that they receive all of their funding through state funds. My assumptions are that they don't have to follow the

same rules that public schools do and that they are not graded in the same way that public schools do.

For Haley, she described that she felt charter schools are different than TPS, and she is also not alone in this assumption. Lola also followed up her initial description of charter schools by sharing, “My impression is they get to pick their curriculum. We have a specific curriculum we all have to teach; they can pick whatever they want. I think they take our tests, maybe because they show up on our testing data.” Jade provided a mix of concerns with her knowledge of charter schools as well and stated,

I know that [charter schools] have to be open in their acceptance of students [and] that [they] can't discriminate. [Describing charter schools in general, she noted] I know they [can be] a for profit school, and that there are a lot of people who feel like those schools that aren't being monitored for their academic content. Sometimes their academic content comes into question whether students are actually getting a thorough education or not.

But I don't know, I've never visited one.

While Haley and Jade shared a more abstract interpretation of charter schools, Marsha had a more grounded opinion about charter schools and shared a more robust knowledge. Marsha also has the benefit of working with a former charter school employee who helped provide her with some context about charter schools. She describes charter schools as,

Charters are public [schools]. They receive funding through the state with their average daily membership (ADM) and run like a public school. My current assistant principal was a director at charter school before becoming my assistant principal so I hear a lot from him. I hear they have a board of directors to serve as a school board. They have a little

more flexibility a lot of times in how they use their funding and their hiring. They follow standard course of study and federal mandates and that kind of thing.

While Marsha seems to get a lot of information from her assistant principal, others get their information from interactions with students and their families. Gordon stated that most of his knowledge comes from “former colleagues that worked at charter schools, or students and families that transferred from a charter school and into TPS.” Jerry has the most unique take on charter schools because he is a former charter school teacher, and he describes why he started his career in that setting: “The reason I went to a charter school was because I was, at the time, not a highly qualified teacher. I went there because there were more laid back rules.” I will discuss Jerry’s experience in more detail in the next section.

Overall, it seems like the participants were mostly interested in showing that TPS and charter schools are not all that different, though they did have concerns about the comparative autonomy that charter schools seemed to have, as compared to the mandates and policies that they had to follow. At the same time, they were surprisingly open about their ignorance of how charter schools operate in general. They had some ideas, for example, about the curricular freedoms afforded in charter schools, but little in-depth knowledge about the charter school application and approval processes, or to what extent charter school leadership had to adhere to state mandates related to curriculum and instruction and services provided.

Experiences

As discussed in the previous section, a majority of participants had limited knowledge about charter schools, and this lack of exposure caused them to default to describing their own work in TPS, as opposed to answering the questions I posed about charter schools and how they operate. When I asked them about their experiences with charter schools, both professionally and

on a more personal level, I was surprised how minimal these experiences were, especially given the larger national conversations around the growth of charter schools. Their overall experiences seemed mixed and they seemed ambivalent about the charter school movement. For example, William described trying to make connections with area charter schools, but there being little follow through. He mentioned,

We do invite [leaders and administrators from] private and charter schools to a lot of our federal program meetings here at the district level to kind of collaborate with them.

Invitations are sent every year, but they hardly ever show. I don't know of a time they've shown that I've been there.

When there have been moments of collaboration or shared spaces among TPS and charter school leaders, most of the interactions that have occurred are due to unique or special circumstances, not to any systematic relationship. Haley shared that when she was a contender for a state award, she worked on subcommittees with charter school representatives from around the state in an “advisory type role of listening about policy about charter schools.” While each participant has a slightly different personal experience, the two districts in this study have two different stories to tell: resisting the possibility of an impending charter school or working in the shadow of a former charter school.

The participants from the two districts in this study have different experiences with charter schools. District A had a charter at the corner of its border for over 20 years before shutting down in 2021. Participants in the other district mainly discussed their experiences with charter school applications and rumors of a school opening across the district’s border. William the assistant superintendent recalled his memory of that particular charter school, “We did have a charter school that was up at the border [of the district]. I guess it was that charter school closed

down. The state actually shut it down several years ago.” Haley received many of the students from this charter school into her school. She reflected on this experience: “It seemed as if there was a pattern that maybe students that had enrolled in that charter school had been previously enrolled in a public school, and that there had been a lot of patterns with [unwanted] behavior [in the charter school].” Lola had a similar experience from these students when they transferred to her school but in the form of academics. She shares,

The charter was a K-8 school. I know they had an online curriculum, and they had adults leading it, but it wasn’t necessarily them teaching it. They always seemed behind in various areas of content. A kid would say they were in seventh grade, but then when you got to work on things, there was lots of gaps.

Haley also shared a similar experience as Lola with students and academic performance; she said the students she received from that charter school were always “several grade levels behind.” Since principals like Haley and Lola work together, and also have common experiences with students from charter schools, these experiences of a failing charter school and the students who transferred to their school influenced their overall perceptions of what a charter school offers in terms of student preparation versus student outcomes in their own schools.

One surprise among the eight participants in this study was that Jerry had direct experience working at the aforementioned charter school. While Jerry did not stay until the school was shut down, it was where he began his career in education. When I asked about his experiences working in that charter school, he explained,

I served as athletic director there for four years, and so my interaction with admin was athletic-based or related. Board meetings were kind of kept hush-hush. Teachers weren’t really invited or made known that they were going on. The board was made up of

people's buddies. People in the office were made up of some of their friends. It was kind of a hodgepodge deal, and it wasn't really anything legit. The computers at our school were very obsolete. It was just scraping the bottom of the barrel, basically, and I don't know why unless embezzlement was taking place during that time, too.

Jerry also shared that the teachers at the charter school were contracted, there were large discrepancies in employee salaries, and if there were board meetings it was not announced with the staff.

When I interviewed Jerry and realized that he had a wealth of knowledge about the charter school, I continued to ask for more details about his time as a teacher, the classes he taught, and the supplies that he had to perform his job. Jerry described his classroom experience at this school:

It was an alternative school, and I had never taught when I went there. I had a full time teaching assistant, every classroom did, but they were combination classes. So I taught a four or five combo for four years there. I had never had a list of the 11 to 12 individualized educational plans (IEPs) in that room. It was a lot of special needs and a lot of kids with ADHD. Some of the kids that I thought were very successful out of that school, but I would say at least 60% to 70% of those kids either had an IEP or had behavior issues.

When I asked Jerry about how he supported students with such diverse needs, he said that he had “no textbooks and zero resources.” Jerry also explained that he eventually got some supplies for his classroom, but it was because he had to “beg and borrow everything that I could, and two different principals in a neighboring county met me on a Saturday afternoon so I could get old sets of classroom books.”

While District A has been impacted by a former charter school, in District B there were two unsuccessful application attempts to open a charter school, and there are currently rumors of a charter school opening just across the county line. Jennifer the assistant superintendent discussed her experience with the two unsuccessful charter school applications and her work at district-level. She reflected,

There have been some undercurrents and some applications for charter schools that ended up not being supported. As a district, we've walked the line carefully. As far as talking with folks that we could talk with, and helping them understand when a charter school application was reporting incorrect information. The superintendent at the time had me review a charter school application and mark up what was inaccurate because they were trying to show a need in our county, and they were trying to use negative information about our schools that was not true.

Marsha shared the same experience about the charter application in District B. She states, "A few years ago, a couple of charters tried to get established, and our superintendent was very active in pointing out some of the flaws in the charter application. The exact same application was submitted two years later." As Jennifer discussed her experiences with charter schools, she also shared another experience from her time in the district's curriculum office. She reflected on her experience working at a state meeting to work on their respective districts' academically and intellectually gifted (AIG) plans for human resources (HR):

So they're trying to handle HR stuff. They're trying to figure out how to run an AIG plan for example, and we had some charter school folks who would come to meetings or come to a state meeting about AIG, and they were just clueless. I mean, I hate to be ugly, but they were clueless. They were coming because they had to write a plan, but they didn't

have any district leadership or any district support. There were people who worked in the charter school and we're trying to figure it out and do it all without having central office support. So in some ways, I've kind of felt sorry for them because the people who are trying to do all these things that they don't necessarily know how to do are in a pickle. One interesting aspect among participants from both districts is that principals and leaders in each district clearly talk and work together with each other. These experiences may have an impact on how participants shape opinions about charter schools.

The participants in this study are influenced by their experiences with charter schools, with leaders from District A living in the memory of a charter school while District B has an ongoing threat of a charter school emerging either within their borders or just popping up across their district's boundary. For District A, the experience of a failed charter school seems to live on through those that experienced it and share these experiences, along with rumors and secondhand knowledge. District B seems to be resisting impending charter schools, and the experience of facing a charter school application has made them more aware of what may happen to them in the coming years. In the next section, I examine the preparedness of rural TPS leaders to compete with charter schools; this information gives more insight into their readiness for a more competitive educational marketplace.

Growing Threats

While the knowledge of rural TPS leaders is contingent upon their experiences and exposure to charter schools over time, and while many of the participants in this study do not have direct experiences with charter schools, they heard many secondhand accounts and rumors. Despite most of the participants in this study having a limited knowledge of charter schools, the myths about them that circulate in the news and among community members create strong

feelings toward charter schools. In the following sections, I examine participants' feelings about charter schools in comparison to TPS, perceptions about the quality of charter school and their accountability, and some anxieties and fears that participants have expressed about charter schools. Further understanding of the factors will provide insight into how TPS leaders see themselves amidst charter school growth and proliferation.

Comparison

When I asked participants how they felt about their work compared to that of charter schools, there were several different perspectives. Jade, Jerry, and Marsha felt that comparisons of their TPS with charter schools are inconsequential. According to Jade, “I feel like they’re probably in the same standing with us. You’re going to have some that take it [education] very seriously, and others that aren’t very strong. To me, I just feel like it [the education they receive] would be the same.” Marsha also took a very neutral approach to her work in TPS being compared to a charter schools and shared that,

From what I know as a comparison is students who have come to my public school from a charter school, and what I have seen is that there's a great deal of variation in how close to or above grade level children are coming from different charters. When we have multiple kids from the same charter, you can kind of draw some conclusions and make some generalizations, and some [charters] have higher quality students and others have lower quality, just when you can generalize.

While Marsha and Jade have not worked in a charter school, they did provide a very similar answer to Jerry. He expressed concerns related to charter schools, noting, “I don't think charters are a bad thing at all. If it's done correctly, according to the law. I mean, you know what you've got. You’ll [always] get some schools that are known as bad apples.”

While Jade, Masha, and Jerry took a more relaxed approach to TPS comparisons to charter schools, Jennifer the assistant superintendent was much more outspoken. She passionately shared that, “We [the district] feel like a lot of times we're not comparing apples to apples. Don't compare apples to oranges, and then put that data in the paper, or on the internet or whatever, to bash public schools.” Jennifer went on to provide a specific example of unfair comparison between traditional high schools and a state-wide residential magnet school and explained,

If you want to look at some of the studies that rank the [state-level magnet school] as the number one high school in North Carolina. Well, hold on. Let's again, compare apples to apples. You're not comparing apples to apples. You have a very stringent application and selection process. you're selecting the cream of the crop across the whole state. That's not fair to compare North Carolina School of Science and Math to every other high school in the state. If we're going to compare schools, let's compare what's comparable.

As passionate as Jennifer felt about this state public magnet school being compared to TPS in her district, it was interesting that she did not know, or did not consider, that charter schools can also creamskim top students and have non-traditional borders.

Although some participants seemed unconcerned about comparing charter schools with TPS, and one commented strongly about appropriate comparisons of all schools, their overall experiences beg the question: are TPS leaders okay with being compared to other educational entities? Three participants indicated that these comparisons should be among other TPS districts. Jennifer, who shared a very passionate disdain for being compared to both charter schools and non-traditional public schools, provided this insight about TPS and how they measure themselves. She shared that,

For public schools, we compare ourselves to surrounding districts, right? So there's always a little sense of competition in comparison, even among public schools. But I think our focus has really been on how can we be better than we were last year, not how do we be better than a private school, or how can we be better than a charter. Not how do we be better than a private school. It's how can we [TPS] be better than we were last year.

Jennifer was not alone in finding value among neighboring TPS districts. Gordon shared that he values how his school performs compared to the state average and also added, "Our biggest focus is those [districts] surrounding us. Our bordering counties is what I hear and see the most comparison to. Our local competition, I think is what we really focus on as a district." William the assistant superintendent echoed the same feeling about comparison, and shared that surpassing a neighboring TPS district was an accomplishment. He described this experience proudly:

For the first time last year we passed a neighboring school district. We always compare ourselves to that district because our schools are so much alike. We have almost the same number of the communities, and are the same in a lot of areas. I would say that county has outperformed us academically for years, and for us to catch them has been great!

Rural TPS leaders seem to accept some level of competition, especially if the schools they are being compared to feel and look similar to those in their districts.

Overall, participants have a mixed view of having their schools compared to charter schools, and while there was a range of perspectives on that issue, the school leaders I talked with desired a fair comparison between themselves and other schools. There is a sense of value, and possibly some pride when this comparison is made on an equal footing and among other

TPSs that look and feel similar to the ones in their districts. The issue for these school leaders seems to be when they feel that their school or district's data is being taken out of context to make their schools look bad, especially in comparison to newer options. In the next section, I explore how rural TPS leaders view differences between their schools and charter schools, and how their perceptions of fairness complicate this comparison.

Fairness and Accountability

During the interviews for this study, three of the participants made comments about their perceptions of fairness, and how charter schools seem to have a lot more flexibility than TPS. Whether it is a principal or an assistant superintendent reflecting on this issue, they sensed that TPS and charter schools are different and thus comparisons can be unhelpful and damaging. While I have established that at least among my participants, they had a very limited knowledge of charter schools, they nonetheless perceived differences between themselves and charter schools and felt comparisons were typically unfair. Discussing these perceived differences between TPS and charter schools, Haley shared,

I guess my assumption, and maybe my bias, is that they probably have different reporting procedures than public schools. My assumption is that they don't have a lot of the same restrictions, or higher levels of accountability for what happens. I think they have lots more freedom.

The perceptions among TPS leaders that charter schools have significant freedoms compared to the rules and regulations placed upon TPS will continue to play a role in how these participants engage and consider charter schools. Jennifer expressed this sentiment as well when she attended a recent meeting with the state of North Carolina, and as her team was going over the upcoming mandates the ambiguity of “does this apply to charter schools?” resonated with her. The feeling

that charter schools play by different rules may also affect how TPS leaders perceive that the state should establish a sense of fairness between TPSs and charter schools. According to Jerry,

The State's got to level the playing field as far as the requirements, because, for lack of a better word, we're held by the throat on a lot of it [state level regulations]. Where charter schools have so much more free rein. It makes it not fair, and it's not a fair playing field. It's like we're trying to fight with one hand tied behind our backs.

The differences between charter school rules and regulations and the guidelines that TPSs follow creates a sense of confusion because charter schools are publicly funded, yet they have leniency and distinct flexibility compared to TPS. Jennifer also felt that the playing field between TPS and charter schools wasn't level. She states,

I think that those of us who work in public schools always just want the playing field to be leveled. We want the playing field to be fair, particularly when it's the public or at the state level with legislators who're deciding on funding. We want the playing field to be fair. That's what we ask.

Beyond just academic comparisons, Haley also shared some of the same concerns about unfairness in relation to charter schools but in regard to high school athletics. During a state championship athletic event a few years ago, Haley described how inequitable she felt the scenario was between her daughter's high school team competing against a charter school. She shared that, "It is just a very unfair concept that we can only have students from our little school district that are eligible to play, but they have the ability to almost recruit like a college."

While participants in this study have established their sense of fairness based upon their own limited knowledge, they shared a broad sense of some differences between TPS and charter schools. One area that Haley discussed was charter school accountability, and their discretion to

use money differently than TPSs. She shared stories of charter school principals having “floodgates of money that they receive with unlimited discretion of how to use them.” Haley went on to share how her own funding works in comparison to charter schools, offering, “I don't have that. I get money per student, but you can bet your bottom dollar that I'm gonna have to justify every single way that I spend it, and it can only be spent on certain things!” William also had thoughts about charter schools and their funding, and he feels that there needs to similar oversight like that of TPS. He shares, “There needs to be some equity involved if the state's going to allot funding to charter schools versus being supported by a corporation. If you're gonna get public dollars for school, then you need to be held accountable for it.” Jerry also shared his thoughts about charter schools following different rules for their accountability compared to TPS. Jerry maintains, “If we have to abide by the rules, charter schools should have a similar set of rules. I think some oversight has come down the pike, but when I worked for [a charter school], man, it was whatever you wanted to do.”

Participants' feelings about fairness and accountability show that while they do not completely understand the rules and regulations that apply to charter schools compared to TPS, they desire a level playing field where they are treated the same by the state. Additionally, while my participants' knowledge about charter schools was limited, they understand that something is different between charter schools and TPS. Because of these differences, TPS leaders may choose to remain somewhat about charter schools, particularly in relation to issues like accountability with public dollars, oversight from a higher authority, and whether they have similar guidelines as TPS. In the next section, I examine TPS leaders' perceptions of the quality of services that charter schools offer compared to their own in TPS.

Quality

Five of the participants in this study expressed concerns about charter schools and the quality of educational services they provide in comparison to TPS. Despite most of the participants in this study admitting to having limited knowledge and experience with charter schools, it did not prevent them from talking about their perceptions about charter schools, especially in comparison to the quality of their own work in TPS. While the concerns about quality came up for various reasons, Gordon feels that quality control for teachers was worth mentioning. For example, he mentioned educator licensure and how teachers in a TPS must have at least a 4 year degree and a license, yet as he understood it, this is not a requirement at a charter school. He also shares that teachers at a charter school are “given more roles and responsibilities above what their degree allows them to do in a TPS setting.” For Lola the discrepancies between charter school and TPS qualifications not only impacts the quality of their work, but also their ability to even be compared against TPS. She explains her feelings about professional quality standards, sharing,

I feel like it's [the education students receive] subpar most of the time. The State really has high expectations for what we're supposed to teach in a year. They have high expectations for how it is assessed. They have high expectations for the attendance that we're supposed to hold kids to come into school, and the charters don't have to do that. The state has high expectations for teacher qualifications, the amount of education or certifications, that we keep our license up to date, that we keep professional development, and a charter school can hire anybody. My impression is anybody with a high school diploma who could run a classroom could be a charter school teacher. You don't have to

have any kind of degree or that's my impression. So I think I see the quality is very much less in most charter schools than what public school offers.

Haley shared similar feelings about quality and standards that students are held to and feels that rigor is not the same in a charter school as compared to what is offered in TPSs. During her experience as a middle school principal, Haley shared that she would get students from the now shut down charter school, and that students “were not getting the core instruction they needed to maintain progress [academically].” Jade shared similar concerns about the quality of services offered by charter schools, and felt that the promises made by charter schools are dishonest. She states that,

I do worry about the quality of the education that students are getting, because these parents are buying into this hope that they are doing the right thing for their kid by making this choice. And I would hate to think that someone is preying on that hope, and not providing their student with the best quality of education.

Both Haley and Jade share experiences with students who struggled at their schools, and their basis for questioning the quality control issues at charter schools came from their interactions with students who enrolled in both charter and TPS.

While the quality of education students receive within charter schools was a concern for most of the participants in this study, there was some variation in their perceptions of the services rendered to students and families at charter schools. For Marsha, she maintains that the quality of education was no different than that of a TPS, and stated that a students’ experience at a charter school was “just as varied as it is in the public school world.” Jenny also shared a more neutral tone about the quality of student experiences at a charter school and compared them to that of TPS. She claims that, “I’m sure some of them [charter schools] might have questionable

backgrounds, but I'm also sure that just as many are very in good standing with their students. I don't think it's any different from [a] traditional high school.” The neutral tone from Marsha and Jenny toward charter school quality does not come from direct experience, but it may be reflective of their personal comfort and exposure to charter schools compared to some other participants.

While five of the participants in this study expressed concerns about charter schools and the quality of educational services offered, they offered these thoughts based on their own assumptions of how charter schools work, not on significant first-hand experiences. At the same time, other participants shared negative opinions about the quality of charter schools in comparison to TPS, and while they were apprehensive about TPSs being compared to charter schools, they had no issue with offering a critique of charter school quality, even if the basis for this opinion is from their own assumptions. In the next section, I examine participants' anxieties and fears of charter schools and how their own feelings and experiences have grown into concerns.

Anxiety and Fear

During the interviews for this study, I asked several questions to gauge participants' knowledge and feelings about charter schools. As interviews progressed, I picked up on anxieties and fears that these rural TPS leaders felt regarding charter schools. While many topics came up in the course of our conversations, regulation and oversight were the most common issues cited by participants. Jade shared her concerns about charter school regulation, worrying about, “the fact that the oversight is not necessarily there from a bigger organization or some kind of larger home office that's overlooking charter schools. I think that worries me quite a bit.” For Haley, charter school flexibility is a defining difference that separates them from TPS. She says, “It

really does start to sound an awful lot like they [charters] are private schools, and they function like a private school, but with public funding.” Jennifer the assistant superintendent echoed the same sentiment as Haley regarding the perceived ambiguous identity of charter schools, and shared her perception, offering “they [charter schools] are somewhat like a private school, they're a little bit more on their own, so they have more autonomy, but that also means that they don't necessarily have the support that our public schools would have.” Jennifer went on to share a very powerful insight about her sentiments toward charter schools and their ambiguous status compared to TPS. She shares,

What I have seen and witnessed in job fair situations are charter schools dressing the way that appears to look and feel cool, new, fresh, and trendy. They attract the young new teachers and promise them the world. You have all the autonomy you want. You can teach whatever you want. They make it sound like they are promising them the world.

The frustrations toward charter schools seems to stem from charters being identified at public schools, yet they also seem to follow their own set of rules and regulations in comparison to TPSs. One major area of accountability for TPS is testing, and Jerry is aware of this since he has worked in both a charter and TPS. He said that during his experience at a charter school “It [testing] was definitely not secure like it is at a TPS if you get my drift.” Since Jerry is a leader within his district, and he works closely with other principals and district level administrators, he may also contribute to some of these sentiments that others in the district hold toward what they perceive as relaxed standards at charter schools.

While flexibility and an ambiguous identity were on the minds of Jade, Jennifer, William, Jerry, and Haley, there were also additional feelings that emerged from participants about the

symbolism of charter schools. For William, he associated charter schools with broader changes in education. He shares,

Public schools have changed so much in the last 10 years, I never thought we would be in a place where we can't find teachers, staff members, and things like that. There is no telling what it looks like five years from now and I often wonder because my youngest daughter is going in education. She could be an elementary teacher. She's in college now. And I often ask myself, what will education be like for her as a teacher?

William sees charter schools as a concrete manifestation of bigger changes in the field of education, and Jerry seemed to share some similar concerns. During the interview, Jerry and I discussed some aspects of school choice. He shared that, "I think this voucher thing is just the beginning of it. It's [bigger changes related to choice] coming, and it's going to put pressure on us as traditional schools to really up the ante." While William and Jerry feel pressure from change in general, Gordon has anxiety about possible changes in the number of students attending his school and funding. Gordon states, "We're a Title I funded school. So, losing students and changes in the student population will cause a major drop in funds, and it's going to be really hard to maintain what we're doing with the loss of funding." Haley also is concerned about shifts in student population from her school to a charter, but for reasons beyond student dollars. She worried that charter schools are acting as elite schools that will attract "affluent families and an abundance of private family funding" that is not available to TPS.

Overall, participants shared several different fears and anxieties about charter schools, and their concerns range from oversight to elite privatization of schools, despite the fact that charter schools are funded by public dollars that are taken away from TPS. At the same time, many of these concerns come from rumors and secondhand information, and it seems that it may

be difficult to separate myth from fact in rural areas when it comes to dealing with charter schools. In the next section, I examine rural TPS preparedness to compete with charter schools and how competition, marketing, and school specialization may shape their presence in the educational marketplace.

Preparedness for Competition

As mentioned previously, growing threats play a large part in the way that rural TPS leaders perceive their schools in comparison to charter schools. The feelings that participants have toward charter schools will continue to play a role in the preparedness of rural districts to compete against charter schools. In this section, I look at aspects of how TPS leaders have prepared for competition with charter schools, and how their perceptions of competition, marketing schools and districts, and school specializations may impact their ability to anticipate and respond to other forms of competition.

Competition

Most participants in this study shared that their current distance from charter schools gives them “little concern” about competition with charter schools. This led me to wonder how rural TPS leaders see competition at their schools or district in general, and what they value in terms of competition. One aspect of competition that four of the participants discussed is homeschooling. For example, when I asked about rumors and possible threats from charter schools in Jennifer’s district, she responded, “I really don’t hear about charters. Honestly, our biggest competitor or threat in our county is homeschool students.” This answer surprised me, but she was not the only participant to share these feelings. Lola shared a similar answer about the same question, and shared that, “There are not a lot of options for middle schoolers to go to a charter here, but they’ll very quickly go homeschool. When we push about things like attendance,

they're just like, well, we'll just go homeschool.” Marsha and Jennifer indicated that the threat of homeschooling was significant enough that their district kept their virtual academy open after Covid closures ended, even despite declining numbers. She states, “That program [the county’s virtual school], specifically meets a lot of the needs that homeschool parents are looking for.” The intentional response of leaders in the district to maintain a school that could be attended virtually, and is also appealing to homeschool families, is an indicator of rural TPS leaders’ capacity to respond to the needs of their own communities.

Another aspect of competition that came from participants is that they see competition as “friendly,” and that causal rivalry comes exclusively from other TPS districts like themselves or state recommended benchmarks for performance. All the principals in this study felt that the best way to handle potential competition is to focus on strengthening their own programs and offerings, thereby “remaining the best choice” for families in the community. Jade shared that, “I don't feel like we've had any conversations about threats of competition. Principals compete amongst each other in the county, but it's more of a friendly competition.” While William, Gordon, and Jade talked briefly about competition with other elementary, middle, or high schools as an “internal motivator,” there were no extensive conversations about negative effects of competition. Regarding other elementary schools, Gordon shared, “I feel like we use the competition as momentum. We're not as much threatened by it, but use it as a way for our people to get better.” For Jennifer the assistant superintendent, she shared that charter schools would be competition “if they're pulling kids and pulling funds away from the traditional public schools.” Lola seemed to share Jennifer’s feelings about schools pulling students from their schools, and how she does not differentiate between them. When I shared the list of charter schools surrounding participants' respective districts, Lola actually mentioned a private Christian school

as one of the charter schools she thought was around. Realizing that Christian school was private and not a charter school, she followed up with “So that's one thing that I guess I don't see them as separate. They're all charter like, [even] if it's private or charter. It's all one big bucket and it doesn't really matter.”

One of the reasons that TPS leaders in this study seemed fairly unconcerned about charter school competition is because there are no charter schools currently operating within their districts. Participants had an implicit sense of “out of sight, out of mind.” For example, Jade said, “I don't feel any overwhelming threat right now unless one [charter] starts in my backyard.” Both Jade and Haley describe how they thought charter schools were an urban phenomenon and that they wouldn't be practical or feasible in a rural area. Additionally, because of the ties between rural TPS leaders and their communities and the ways in which TPS leaders use stakeholder and family feedback to collaborate in the education of kids in the district, they had little cause for concern. Lola explains this position well by sharing, “I think they're still far enough away from our community and the district that I am in, that people would not use them [even if a charter school opened]. I think they're just too far.”

Geography also plays a significant role in how rural school leaders think about charter school competition. Jerry shared his position on the proximity of a neighboring charter school, offering,

I don't see a charter as being a threat to me. No. I love watching my own district because you're looking at almost a 40-minute drive one way. I do know that charter [the charter school in a nearby district] does run community stop buses, but they're mainly towards bigger cities in that area. I know they run some of the mountain areas community stops, but I don't perceive that charter as competition to my district.

The rural nature of many TPS and their distance from more urban areas are both factors that limit TPS leaders from being concerned about their growth in their areas, and concurrently, give them a sense of comfort for their school's well-being and longevity. While currently distance acts as a buffer between rural TPS and charter schools as none exist in the two districts in this study, there were several participants who indicated concerns along the borders of their county as there is a growing number of charter schools in some of those bordering districts. Gordon shared, "I think definitely the borders pose a threat to kids that may get upset and find opportunities outside of our district." Lola also shared a similar concern: "If you lived in other parts of our county, you might be close enough to go, but I don't see them as a place where our parents would choose." The feelings by Gordon and Lola resonate because the aforementioned charter school that is now shut down operated on the border of their own county, and it pulled students from several districts during its 20+ years of existence.

Several participants acknowledged that they felt safe within their own community in terms of maintaining a healthy enrollment in their schools; they saw the borders of their respective counties as an area of risk. At the same time, they acknowledged that money may ultimately be the factor that influences how much attention a school or district leader is willing to give to a competing charter school. The blurring of competition, and grouping any competing schools into "one big pot" also indicates that response can be proactive, but may also be reactive if there is a sudden change in enrollment at a school or district. In the next section, I turn to the participant philosophies on marketing, and how rural TPS leaders market their schools.

Marketing

When I asked participants in this study to discuss the role that marketing plays in their schools, the two approaches that stood out were either a blend of traditional marketing through

branding and social media, or a more interpersonal approach. The participants in this study indicated that they mostly utilized logos, mission statements, and social media as their biggest marketing tools, and the extent to which they market their school varies from person to person. Gordon, who is a first year principal, shared that “This year coming in as a new principal, one of my major focuses has been branding the school, looking at our current logo, and at our current mission statements. Our new logo is on t-shirts and wristbands. It’s posted everywhere!” Much like Gordon, Jerry also makes use of an emblem to leave a recognizable mark on the school and create pride within the community. Jerry sees marketing as being somewhat synonymous with competition, and the recognition and use of a school emblem within the community is the same as having “a Nike check” on your clothes. A connection between Gordon and Jerry’s approaches to marketing is that while shared logos, symbols, and history creates pride among students and families in the community, it also connects students and alumni throughout the community. Gordon and Jerry both see emblems as a significant part of their personal marketing campaigns; however, Lola keeps a very simple approach. She shares that, “We have our school seal and we have our school mission statement. We post to Facebook and share materials with our mission statement, but I don't think we have other ways that we brand our school or promote [ourselves].” Marsha also shared that her school uses a very similar approach as Lola, but with the addition of a school newsletter that comes out each month and some school merchandise. She also mentioned that part of District B’s strategic plan is to not only have a recognizable tagline for marketing, but also discuss the accomplishments of the district. Marsha explains that,

I think for a small, rural county, our district does a good job with having a strategic plan. With our district mission statement that is branded in lots of places, when someone is considering a move to the area, and they see it, the marketing does play a role when those

parents are looking for a place to go. Having a tight focus on that strategic plan, and specifically, goals like having a 90% graduation rate, or meeting and exceeding growth in all schools. The district is making sure that we are honed in [on those goals] and that everything that we do is for the benefit of kids reaching those two goals. That's a pretty effective strategy.

While Marsha's views marketing as an extension of her district's strategic plan, William the assistant superintendent takes a more classic approach in District A. He shares that the only branding in his district is their "logo, colors, and social media outlets." Haley had the most surprising answer regarding her school's approach to marketing because it is interwoven among her students, teachers, and the community. She says,

We are very, very active on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Our public relations team also creates a quarterly newsletter that basically uses lots of pictures of what kids have done in each class or department, and we highlight that because we want to not only have that big focus on what our kids are doing in clubs and in athletics, but also what they're doing academically. So we just try to flood social media with all the positives on our school website.

Although marketing approaches vary from person to person, all of my participants emphasized connecting and sharing memorable things that the community can recognize as originating from the school it came from.

While half of the participants talked about marketing through popular mediums like social media, or recognizable branding that can be associated with a school, the other four shared the importance of interpersonal communication with people as their key marketing strategy. When I asked Jade about marketing her school she shared, "You can spend a lot of money and

put up a lot of posters and signs, but nothing, nothing in the world beats going out and meeting people face-to-face and telling them your story, and letting them experience coming into your place.” While Jade feels that one-on-one interactions are her biggest marketing tool, Jennifer uses this approach, but takes it beyond the borders of her own district. One of Jennifer’s applications of this strategy in human resources is to directly recruit teachers to come and work in her district. She describes her approach:

I’m always going to volunteer to lead workshops on that day [recruitment fair] because I want to get in front of them [potential employees] and make sure that I’ve got my logo on, or have it in my background, and then I can get our district’s name out there. But again, that’s extra work on top of the normal job. That’s hard and it requires a lot of time outside of a normal work day. With local colleges, I helped him with mock interviews to get access to kids before job fair time. So my focus is a little different than just getting stuff out online.

Leaders see significant value in individual interactions because these are valued within their communities and schools, and it fits the context of their community values and traditions.

While some like Jennifer and Marsha see the marketing of both their school and district as a unified effort among school leaders, not every participant felt capable of taking on this role. As Lola continued to talk about marketing at her school, she indicated that she did not feel a need to devote much energy into marketing since geography automatically dictates where many students go to school. However, she also shared her frustrations with taking on a more formal role with marketing. Lola stated, “I’ve got 100 things to do here today and the idea of having to market and promote my school ... Can I hire a PR manager? Like is that going to be in my budget because that’s just not a priority for me right now.” At the end of the interviews, I asked

participants if there was anything else they felt that they needed to share about rural TPS becoming more prepared to compete with charter schools, and Lola shared more of her thoughts about marketing and her role as principal. She explained:

It gives me anxiety to hear you talk about the possibility of more charter schools because then that could mean I have to be now the marketer. Right now, this is the school people come to when they attend a particular elementary school. You go to this middle school, and then you go to the neighboring high school. There's no other choices there unless you go homeschool, or you're willing to drive across town to the private school. So hopefully we're not getting a charter school soon.

I found Lola's feelings about marketing her school interesting because the rest of the participants in this study seemed confident in sharing their marketing strategy, but I also wondered if she was alone in her thinking. This revelation about what a charter school may do to her own school was a significant moment for Lola. While she was alone in admitting her feelings of being overwhelmed by the thought of having to actively market her school, her comments provide powerful implications for this study that I address in the final chapter of this study. In this next section, I examine participant views toward specialization, which could be seen as one aspect of marketing, and how they view their schools' offerings in comparison to that of other schools around them.

Specialization

Because many charter schools have specialized programs and specific curricular missions to draw students and families, I was curious whether rural TPS leaders feel the need to provide similar specificity to their schools or to offer unique programs that could attract students. The answer to this question was mixed among participants. Jerry, Lola, and Gordon mentioned that

there is no specialization aside from the traditional curriculum at the schools. William shared, “We don't really have specialized schools other than the Early College. They've been able to really design their own program and build that culture there around a college-like atmosphere, maturity, and responsibility. It's the hottest ticket we have!” While William described the early college model as a form of specialization that could draw students to their school, and sees a demand from parents to enroll in their school because of this program, the other participants seemed less certain that parents wanted to be actively involved in making a choice among schools (as opposed to simply sending their children to the school in their zoned district). Jade does not think that parents care about specialization based on her experiences in the county. She shared,

My experience being at four of the five high schools is that I don't think parents necessarily choose schools for a particular program. I think it's really just about where they live, and then the reputation overall of the school. I don't see any parents coming in and specifically asking about a STEM program or a CTE program. It's almost like they don't even know those things exist. I don't think parents are really aware or have a good understanding of what's offered in each of our districts. I think it's just, that I live here and that's where my kid's gonna go. Whereas in other places people really look for particular programs to move their kids around to the right school.

It seems that the success of the early college in this district may be connected, at least in part, to the fact that parents are not aware that there are other forms of schooling that can be available and are available in larger districts.

While some leaders do not see a desire or need for educational specialization as a significant factor within their district currently, other participants shared a different view of

specialization. For example, Jennifer the assistant superintendent described specialization in her district as “expanding student choice through the virtual academy; Career and Technical Education (CTE); Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM); and the early college.” Haley also explained varied and diverse options for students to take AP and college courses, CTE, and a leadership program to provide students with additional choices beyond traditional high school classes. Overall, while there are mixed opinions about specialization from school to school, the goal among these principals seems to be providing a quality education or choices that carry the “small classroom feel” that is common in more rural areas.

Response to Potential Charter School Growth

As I discussed in the previous section, rural TPS leaders see competition more as friendly and internal within the district, not as something they worry about in terms of academic programming or the potential of other schools to open in their areas, including charter schools. Currently there is very little focus in either district on presenting specialized approaches to their offerings for families, or in competing against other educational options besides homeschooling. The default idea they seemed to hold is that students are bound by geography, and where you lay your head at night determines where you go to school. One of the questions I asked participants is what they would do if a charter school opened up 15 minutes away from their current school. In this section, I explore participants' plans to respond to a possible charter school if they suddenly had to compete, and their rationale for their chosen responses.

The majority of participants in this study had a very similar answer when asked about how they would respond to a charter school opening close to their own schools, and the most common response was, “There is no plan.” For Jade, she stated, “I feel like if I had more applicants talking about it's between you and this charter school, it's between you and this, I

think I would have to come up with some kind of plan of action.” Jerry also had a very similar response and shared,

No, we don't have a reaction for charter schools. Honest, we don't. If we did have competition come close, that's something we would have to try to hold, get it polished, and then put that as part of our campaign.

The lack of planning, or at least an urgency to think more about what may be encroaching on their district, is likely a reflection of their beliefs about the symbiotic nature of schools and the community, something that is especially a characteristic of rural districts. In many ways TPS are a part of the fabric of the communities that they serve, and any problem faced by a school is solved by the community.

While most participants thought they could and would create a plan if and when they saw a need to respond to a charter, they felt that tradition and community were still such a strong influence in their areas that they doubted the charter school movement would take hold there. Lola embodies this feeling perfectly in her response to this question about competition when she states that,

I don't think I would have a response. I feel like parents choose what they want. And while there might be some sales techniques you could use, in the end, a parent is going to choose what a parent is going to choose. And if your school is strong enough, it'll speak for itself. Additionally, the way that rural TPS leaders see themselves as an extension of their communities, and openly acknowledge their co-dependent relationships with the people and communities in their districts, helps to provide some context as to why developing plans to compete with potential charter schools is not a priority. Rather than worry about what may or

may not be coming, the tactic, as mentioned by Jennifer, is to “focus on district goals for how to improve and [generate] community support.”

Throughout my interviews with TPS leaders, I anticipated some of the responses I would receive, and in many ways I was correct because of my own experience as a rural TPS leader. Six of the participants do not fear charter school growth or think there is much chance that charter schools will become potential threats to their own schools and districts. Two participants shared comments that yielded more insight about changes in education and how they see themselves amidst the disruption. For Jade, progressive changes are happening within her district, but other factors are also changing in her community. She shared that,

I worry that we are not being progressive enough at times when we're thinking 10 to 20 years down the road, how things are going to change. You know, a long time ago, we were very much agriculture and factory based. And while there are still kids who want to take automotive classes, I think some of the older generation doesn't realize that's not as much of an interest as it was when they were younger. And I think we're not really preparing for having to specialize more within our schools. I don't think there's anything wrong with it [specialization]. I don't think it would hurt us, but I just still don't see us moving in a direction where we're being more progressive and looking toward the future of what our students need. And I don't know if that's just because we haven't really had that conversation. I don't know if people are just trying to survive their job in administration, but I do think it's something we have to be concerned about.

Jade's concerns about progressive thinking and long-term planning may also stem from her collaborating with other principals in different districts affected by more competitive educational marketplaces. For William the assistant superintendent, his experiences as an assistant

superintendent and head of human resources have put him close enough to hear the differences between conversations in his own district and what is being discussed by charter school recruiters. He shared the difficulty of trying to entice potential employees to come to District A versus the conversations held by charter school representatives. William stated that, at a recruiting event, a charter school representative at a neighboring table offered “bonuses, childcare, fitness, gym memberships, and a staff cafe. Things that would attract teachers.” TPS do not have funds to provide these amenities to their employees, and in the same way that charter schools seek to recruit educators, they may also entice students to enroll at their schools. At the end of his interview, William shared one last insight about his growing concern of charter schools and their potential impact in District A. He explained,

I would say we don't really focus a whole lot on the threat of competition. But I will say that every year, it becomes kind of like that little being on your shoulders whispering in your ear that, if we get a charter school here, and when, and people can go, and they start getting a base, now we're going to have competition.

While the perspectives of both Jade and William seem to be in the minority compared to the other six participants, I also realize that the interviews for this study may be among the few in-depth conversations that participants have had about charter schools and they may not be alone in these feelings.

Summary

Based on the interviews with participants in this study, there are three central themes that I take away from these interviews. The first is that there was very little knowledge about charter schools among rural TPS leaders in my study. In some ways this surprised me given the fact that charter schools are opening up in rural areas throughout the state. The reasons for this disinterest

are varied and include the fact that historically, they do not have to worry about competition due to isolated geography; they have a history of community support from families who have lived in the area for generations; and traditional values keep families loyal to their local public schools. The belief that schools serve their community, and that the community is composed of alumni with fidelity to their local school, seems ubiquitous. These participants have little interest in, or knowledge of, charter schools. For example, William shared,

I think the majority of educators know very little about them [charter schools], even the leadership. And I don't know if you've interviewed any superintendents or not, but I'll be curious across the state how much they know about charter schools, at least in our area where there's none. I don't think that you're going to find people that are that are very knowledgeable.

If and when a charter does show up in these rural districts, and leaders feel the impact of their newfound competition, and only when their presence becomes disruptive, will charter schools be considered any sort of a threat. While slight shifts in student enrollment are typical for schools, the right charter school with an aggressive and calculated marketing strategy could divide these traditional communities and cause unforeseen damage.

The second theme is that because knowledge about charter schools is so limited by rural TPS leaders, many of the myths about charter schools carry as much weight in their imagination as actual facts. Despite many of the participants in this study sharing that they had never been to a charter school, they shared plenty of generalizations about charter schools and conjectures about how they would do against rural TPS in a competitive educational marketplace.

Additionally, I experienced what seemed like a double standard in many of the participants in relation to their thoughts about charter schools, such as not wanting to be compared to charter

schools, but at the same time, hubris in their confidence to compete or provide a higher caliber of service in comparison.

The third theme is that because rural TPS leaders tend to look among schools within their district when they are reflecting on educational changes, or similar school districts that look and feel like their own, they don't understand or pay sufficient attention to what else surrounds them. Not once during these interviews were online charters, or the consideration of established charter schools expanding into their districts, mentioned by my participants, even as virtual education is growing in the state. Technology has superseded geography, and while any dollars leaving the county are currently small in comparison to the population that stays within the district, the right offerings and marketing could cause an influx of students to try something different. In the same way that homeschooling is accepted within both of these districts as a viable alternative to rural TPS, is it a stretch to imagine charter schools doing the exact same thing that homeschooling currently does, which is take students away from the local schools?

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

TPSs in rural and isolated geographic districts tend to adjust slowly to educational innovations for various reasons. While there are always some options available for parents to enroll their children, including private and religious schools and homeschooling, the default option in the rural communities where this research took place was almost always TPS. Currently charter schools tend to be located more in urban than rural areas, and their distance from rural communities means that they can seem to be a strange reality compared to the farms and sparseness of the countryside. While many educators in rural TPS districts feel a sense of safety and immunity from the encroachment of charter schools, the data that exists at the state and federal levels indicate that the arrival of a charter is likely a situation of when rather than if. At the same time, the principals and other school leaders in this study seem unworried about issues or problems outside of their own borders, and their focus tends to be on the communities that they serve, without much concern that those communities could be disrupted by the arrival of a charter school. Because charter schools are largely an abstract and distant idea from how participants think about schooling, it is difficult for TPS leaders to imagine or plan to prevent something of which they have minimal experience and understanding. The reactive rather than proactive approach taken by the principals in this study seems to be the result of a combination of willful omission, limited resources, and a myopic view of education that tends to stop at the county's borders. It is also fair to say that these principals are rational actors making strategic choices about what must be prioritized each day. Eventually, rural TPS districts will have to both acknowledge and respond to the possibility of a charter school, and without a plan, the consequences may be disruptive to the very things prized so much in rural areas: community and tradition.

My purpose in conducting this study was to explore how rural TPS leaders think about and understand charter schools, and to garner insights that could help them and other educational leaders in rural areas to develop a plan of action to be more proactive in the face of growing educational options. The research I shared in my literature review in Chapter 2 indicates that leaders in rural TPS districts tend only to acknowledge charter schools once they lose students and are forced to pay some of the money they previously received to the respective charter schools, or when they open in close proximity to one of their own schools. The principals I interviewed for this study were no different. They largely seem unconcerned about, and unprepared for charter school growth in their areas.

Summary of Key Findings

The results from this study provide insights into what a small sample of rural TPS leaders in rural districts in Western North Carolina know and understand about charter schools, and how they may respond to the opening of a charter school that competes with their district or schools. Whether districts acknowledge, prepare for, and dedicate time and resources to a charter school is contingent upon how much or little it affects a school or district. In the case of rural TPS leaders, distance and disruption are the two factors that force a change in the traditional mindset of education within their districts. The decision to look around their own borders and understand schools that are different from their own seems to be against the very protective and insular nature of many rural communities. Because the schools serve the community, and any issues or problems that arise are typically solved by the community, there is little incentive for them to change their focus or to assume that the supportive relationships between the school and community might shift. Each of the leaders participating in this study works in a district that does not have a charter within their borders, but they do have at least one in a neighboring

county. This choice was essential to the design of this study because I want to understand what, if anything, shakes their tunnel vision of their own district.

What TPS Leaders Know About Charter Schools

My expectations for this question were that most of the participants in this study would have limited knowledge of charter schools and what they did know was likely a mixture of myth and accurate information. Findings from the interviews show that because none of the participants experienced any sort of direct threat or competition to their schools or districts, they held little knowledge about the charter school movement beyond broad, superficial, or secondhand information. In one of the two districts, there had been two failed charter school applications, and while these applications were active, they took a direct approach in countering factual inaccuracies in what the charter school claimed about the district schools, all as part of ensuring that their district would remain “the best choice” regardless of the competition. Neither of these two charter schools were approved. The other district has not faced the threat of a charter school opening, but they have worked in the shadow of one that was very close to the edge of their district borders, and has now shut down.

Each of the participants in my study felt that their districts and schools were better than any other educational options available to students. All of the participants also shared that their own districts are their main concern, “friendly” local competition is what TPS leaders value, however limited as it is in rural areas. While most principals had little experience with charter schools or any corresponding threats (especially to enrollment) that may be associated with their presence, both superintendents had some understanding of what a charter school might offer potential employees, and they were aware of similarities in terms of providing curriculum and student support, and about a charter school’s structure. Jerry was unique among the principals in

this study because he began his teaching career working in a charter school, and he worked there for four years before eventually transitioning to a rural TPS district. Additionally, because of Jerry's experience working in the charter school and the fact that the principals in his current district work together collaboratively, his nonchalance may have influenced the opinions of other leaders within his district.

The experiences of participants with charter schools were very minimal, and while they occasionally had some sort of interaction, these were mainly in the form of job fairs or state-level meetings. Four out of the six principals had almost no direct experience or interaction with a charter school, and because their likelihood of interacting or competing with one felt so abstract compared to their daily routines, it is understandable why they would pay little mind to them.

Another interesting finding related to those who had been exposed to charter schools is that they were not afraid of them, nor did they think they could provide a realistic threat in their areas. The confidence of these participants in their ability to compete against any other form of educational competition is connected to their deep faith in the fact that their communities support their schools, and if the educational options and programming are in line with the community's values, they have little to fear. An additional interesting finding was that for the participants in this study, they saw few meaningful differences between different types of schooling, whether they are charter, private, religious, or homeschool.

Each participant in this study noted a strong connection to their community in almost all aspects of their work. Whenever there was a discussion of a problem or the need to seek approval for something they were doing within their district, the community's approval of their work was crucial. When I asked the question about a charter school opening 15 minutes away from their current school, three participants shared that they did not think it would do well if it did not align

with the values in the community that they serve, which would be hard to do because the existing schools already reflect the communities' values and tradition. These leaders felt secure in their support from the local community and did not think that would be threatened by a charter school opening (Gao & Semykina, 2021).

The majority of the participants admitted to having a very limited knowledge about charter schools, and this lack of understanding meant that most of what they did know was based on rumors or secondhand information. The myths about charter schools were essentially facts for these rural TPS leaders, and their unfounded knowledge led to many myths being interchangeable with what few facts they did know. Several anxieties and fears emerged from participants such as oversight and accountability, flexibility with spending and regulation, and changes in funding due to the loss of students.

Throughout the interviews for this study, participants showed very little concern about charter schools or the potential that one might open in their districts (Reid, 2023). Despite having limited knowledge and understanding about charter schools, there was a shared belief that no outside force could compete with what they offered within their own schools and districts (Bickmore, 2020). For these participants, there was little need to look too far beyond their own communities because they are protected, supported, and answer to the families that they serve (Mann, 2020).

Preparedness for Competition

When interviewing participants in this study, I wanted to not only see if rural TPS leaders were aware of any charter schools around their district, but also if they knew how many there were. Four of the eight participants in this study had some knowledge of charter schools that surrounded their district, and overall, participants were surprised by the total number once I

shared it with them. There was a sense of apathy toward the proximity of charter schools because many of them were “45-60 minutes away” from their current schools, and they saw it as an inconvenience for parents even to try to figure out how to send their students to a charter (Gao & Semykina, 2021). At no point did participants consider the option of virtual charter schools or the idea that the feeder patterns for charter schools are not the same as TPS districts. Geography was a determining and limiting factor for most participants, and the traditional approach of “where you lay your head at night is where you go to school” prevailed.

For the majority of participants in this study, competition is a “friendly” byproduct of their work against colleagues at different schools and rarely does the scope of competition apply outside of district boundaries or is competition felt in terms of student enrollment (Reid, 2023). The only real threat of competition that half of the participants discussed was homeschooling, and how parents often take their students into that setting when they become disgruntled with what they offer at their schools. While most of these conversations alluded to religious reasons or requirements such as student attendance, there seemed to be some general frustration with the growing numbers of homeschool families in their districts. This reality disrupts the narrative shared by rural TPS leaders about how the power of community and tradition will make their schools always be the best option for families in the district (Mann, 2020). Yet I wonder, if a few homeschool parents can ruffle the feathers of these participants, what would happen if a well-organized and well-funded charter school was able to market to parents within their district, especially to the seemingly growing numbers of homeschool parents?

Marketing took the form of social media and branding, such as logos and mission statements, and these materials were shared mostly as merchandise or on social media. Three of the participants believed in taking an interpersonal approach through one-on-one interactions to

convince parents and students to come to their schools (Reid, 2023). Lola revealed a very honest concern about marketing for her school and shared that it was not her biggest priority since she had so many other things to take care of. She seemed to hope that a charter just would not come to her district, and the tradition of students living within the district of her school would continue to be the norm. Although this approach appears to be haphazard, it supports Foskett's (1998) argument that marketing oriented organizations should focus their major daily activities around the clients they serve (as cited in Dâmaso & Lima, 2020).

My participants had mixed thoughts about the value of education specialization of the type that charter schools can offer. Answers about school specializations were based upon their limited experiences with charter schools, but they may also be an indicator of how much risk they feel (Bickmore, 2020). The district operating in the shadow of a former charter school has an early college option, and principals determine if there is any specialized offerings or programs for students. William the assistant superintendent even referred to the early college as being the "hot ticket item" within District A, and indicated that parents could not get enough of this option when it comes to information or opportunities to learn more. Jade (District A) shared that she did not believe that most parents within her community understood or really cared about ideas like specialization, and that an educational marketplace was limited to more urban areas. Meanwhile, District B has faced two charter school applications and has responded by diversifying its high school's academic offerings, is continuing to run their virtual academy, and seems more prepared to respond to a charter due to previous experiences.

Responses to an Emerging Charter School

I asked participants about their plans for responding to a charter school if one opened close to their current school, and the vast majority shared that they have no plan. Instead, the

participants were focused on how to improve upon work within their community and surmised that if a charter school were actually to open up, they would then have to come up with a plan to respond. For them, they see little evidence that a charter could open in their districts because there are no conversations or direct evidence that command their attention at the moment. In many ways, it's as if parents, students, and even rural TPS leaders do not understand that other educational options aside from TPSs (and homeschooling) exist.

Despite the general sense that charters were not coming to their districts any time soon, two participants indicated openness and acceptance of impending change in their community. The first was Jade, who mentioned that now that many long-time economic staples like farming and factories have left, that schools may feel the effects of economic downturns and out migration. William also alluded to changes on the horizon and experienced that pressure from incoming charters continued to grow a little more each year. William shared that, "Every year, it becomes this little being on your shoulders whispering in your ear that, if we get a charter school here, and when, and people can afford to go, and they start getting a base, now we're going to have competition."

Research Questions Answered

My study was designed to answer two research questions. The first question was, what do rural traditional public school leaders know and understand about charter schools? In the previous section, I shared that the rural TPS leaders in my study know very little about charter schools, and their motivation to learn more about them currently is minimal. Participants noted that their interests lie entirely within their own communities, and any problem faced by the school community is also solved by the community. They do not currently feel any direct pressure from potential charters schools and thus they are basically, out of sight, out of mind.

Each participant had a different level of knowledge about charter schools, and the majority of participants had secondhand experience or simply knew rumors. Participants shared a mostly negative perception toward charter schools, and this was because there have been efforts to open a charter school in the past (District A), or they work in the shadow of a former charter school (District B). Three participants maintained a mostly neutral position about their potential presence or threat level, but these individuals either worked in a charter school or had a close relationship with a former employee of a charter school who is now working in a rural TPS. Outside of experiencing a direct threat, hiring or recruiting former charter school employees was the most common interaction that participants shared. Yet once these people were working at their schools, they tended to forget they came from the charter school world.

Just as participants in this study have a limited knowledge of charter schools, they also share a very limited understanding of the broader charter school movement, types of specializations, and the range of ways that charter schools can function. The primary characteristics of rural TPS districts are community, traditions, and maintaining trust between schools and the communities that they serve. The decision to only perceive competition from other TPS districts means that while they may occasionally acknowledge one or two districts, there are many other choices that families could choose. The implication would be that any form of competition would not be acknowledged unless funds were sent to those schools each month. In many ways, participants in this study seem to value faith and trust by the community to keep their schools afloat regardless of the conditions and the ever-changing landscape of educational choice.

For my second research question, I wanted to know about rural TPS leaders' preparedness to compete with charter schools. The short answer is they're not. It was repeated by

most participants throughout this study that their focus was internal, within their district's borders, and they did not believe that the communities that they serve would allow an outside force like charter schools to succeed in their areas. Internal investment, friendly competition, and default enrollment based on geography are the strategies utilized by rural TPS leaders, though these are not really strategies as much as the default ways they have always done things.

The school leaders in my study held significant faith that the community would continue to help schools to weather any challenge posed to them by charter schools. Repeated mention of their own school's distance from the closest charter school seemed to serve as sufficient buffer between themselves and any issues a charter school may impose upon them. For all the talk about the strength of their communities and the influence of tradition keeping families tied to their local schools, several of my participants acknowledged the limitations of their own beliefs, especially in relation to their frustrations about homeschooling. While there are only a small number of families currently homeschooling their children in the district, the numbers are growing, which indicates if an organized charter arrived within a district and marketed itself to homeschooled families, or students with similar needs but limited resources, it could create tension in the district and foment the need for more proactive actions from the TPS.

One interesting finding is that these districts do have many different specialized programs that they don't tend to market as specializations, especially not in the same ways that charter school leaders might. One participant revealed that she did not think parents cared or really understood the significance of specialization, and that location of a school was a much more of a determining factor in school selection. There was also no current consideration of online or virtual options for students, or anxiety about online charter options or how broadly charter school districts can extend given the right conditions.

Implications of Findings

The preservation of tradition, support of the community, and self-improvement are at the heart of rural TPS leaders' mission and vision. For the participants within the communities I studied, there was little cause for concern because of how interdependent schools are with their communities. However, I think that for some of the participants, the questions I asked them in the interviews may be one of their first times they really considered that change may be on the horizon. For some, the idea of a change to their perceptions of schooling seemed simply out of the question, but for others, the more I shared some statistics and information about the growth of charter schools in other areas, the more they seemed to be interested in the topic and our conversations may have created a desire to proactively plan for changes. As I discuss implications from this study below, I discuss the role of change, impact of competition, and influence of the community as it relates to the potential of charter school growth in rural North Carolina.

The Inception of Change

Part of what makes rural communities so attractive to families who live there is their simplicity, consistency, and longevity; change comes slowly to rural areas as compared to urban areas. Schools are a staple of rural communities, and their familiarity connects stakeholders with shared experiences and memories. Additionally, the distance between the sparse countryside and crowded nature of cities is a point of comfort for those who live in these communities. Because charter schools are typically associated with urban areas, they are almost completely disassociated from rural areas as a plausible form of competition (Han & Keefe, 2020). Rural TPS leaders tend not to pay much attention to charter schools or believe they will be a threat in their communities; however, as charter schools continue to expand and encroach on rural

boundaries, they are more likely to influence parents to enroll their students (Gao & Semykina, 2021).

The resistance to change expressed by participants in this study closely follows the tenets of John Meyer's Neo-Institutional Theory. The first tenet, organizational fields, provides context to organizational cultures, which "constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 443). In the case of this study, participants like the assistant superintendents William and Jennifer shared that they occasionally look at how they are doing compared to other districts that look like themselves, and charter schools do not fit that implied value. The second tenet refers to institutional logics, or a "macro belief system that identifies specific goals and values, define appropriate structures and govern organizational sense-making and cognition, constitute identities and provide meaning and order to action in institutional sectors" (Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 444). These logics with rural TPS take the form of traditions, and maintaining and enhancing these core values over time is necessary to "gain or create legitimacy" among stakeholders (Marz & Vermeir, 2017, p. 444). This tenet provides context to the almost naive approach that participants in this study have because concepts or ideas from outside of their respective communities do not hold much value to them. Marz and Vermeir (2017) share that there are three different types of institutional pressures: coercive (laws and rules), normative (value and norms), and mimetic (copy and imitate), and in the case of rural TPSs, traditions and community values essentially regulate entities like TPSs. The belief in maintaining the ascribed rules and value of a community gives context for why participants in this study feel that they can continue to omit charter schools from their competitive considerations; however, this also means that a change in the community's

values or norms could also have grave consequences for TPS. The right parent or influential citizen could possibly disrupt TPS and swing the pendulum in a way that promotes particular ideas through a charter school or other educational medium.

The TPS leaders in this study do not believe that charter schools can compete with the quality of education offered by their schools, and it is these “perceptions of competition” that likely keep them from taking action sooner or proactively preparing for their arrival (Creed et al., 2021, p. 816). This is not to say that all rural TPS district leaders feel that another school or district could outperform them, but at least in the districts I studied, the rural TPS leaders who I interviewed did not consider charter schools as a threat because of their confidence in their traditional longevity and their own sense of superiority (Bickmore, 2020).

So what can rural TPS leaders do to be more proactive about impending school choice options, including charter schools? Planning and being proactive about school choice options could prevent TPS leaders from shifting their focus from their current student centered culture to operating more in a “survival complex” mode (Love, 2019, p. 30). Creating a plan to compete with charter schools (as well as other potential choice options) means that TPS district leaders will need to examine enrollment, the quality and volume of surrounding competition, utilize experienced and high quality leadership, and use the size of their district and the competitive threat to fine-tune their strategies for ensuring high quality educational offerings in their districts (Mann, 2020).

Competition

The rural TPS leaders in my study did not perceive competition beyond their own borders, and while they occasionally acknowledged state-level rankings or performance, they gauged quality of their work holistically and primarily in the context of the students and

stakeholders they serve. Because rural TPS leaders forge close-knit relationships within their communities, their status among families is often complemented by memories and experiences that extend through multiple generations. The success and failure of schools is related to the opinions of the community members as a whole, and this means that rural TPS leaders' perceptions of competition are typically friendly (for example, in terms of sports) and internal. This insular approach to competition means that perceptions of competition, or acknowledgment of possible disruptions from outside of the community, are only attended to if there is a clear threat of disruption (Creed et al., 2021). What most surprised me among the leaders in this study is that they felt secure and unconcerned about charter school encroachment despite having a very limited knowledge or understanding of charter schools in general. This is consistent with findings from a study conducted by Bickmore (2020), where TPS principals found a competing charter a nonviable threat because of the belief that their own district offered "superior academic programming and organizational structure" (p. 287). While leaders in both TPSs and charter schools claim that they are better than the other, the evidence is mixed and there is no clear superior choice as measured by educational outcomes (Maranto et al., 2010).

What changes the perceptions and actions of principals to engage and consider charter schools as a legitimate force and to plan for competition with them? The short answer is student enrollment. Average daily membership (ADM) is the primary source of funding for all schools, and the gain or loss of students means a gain or loss in capital. Significant gains or losses mean losing positions, operational funding, and other resources that help schools perform at their best. Several participants in this study shared that they did not have particular concerns about charter schools, but later conceded that a shift in ADM would mean taking a competing charter much more seriously because there would be significant consequences to the daily operations of their

schools if they lost funding. The strategy by participants to simply react to a potential charter school if it comes, rather than preemptively plan or learn about them, is one of the most concerning findings in this study. This response by participants is similar to findings by Jabar (2015b), particularly the fact that competitive pressure builds based upon the threat of losing students, and until this threat is really, it is not felt by rural school leaders. While it is evident that rural TPS leaders feel confident in the quality of their schools, they don't seem prepared for educational competition or its likely reality in their district. Their limited knowledge of charter schools and how they come to exist in rural areas seems especially troubling.

Community

A constant part of the safety and security expressed by participants throughout this study is due to the influence of the community on rural TPS. The attitude of participants throughout this study has been that any problem faced within the community is also solved by the community. Participants shared that each school's respective stakeholders work together and maintain a sense of unity, but what happens if there is a rift within these districts? According to Carroll (2019), the emergence of charter schools causes division and tension among families and can spell dire consequences for TPS. In this sense, faith alone in the community's ability to withstand competitive pressure from charter schools almost makes a virtue out of not planning for them. While it seemed like there was some interest by school and district leaders to learn more about charters, especially after our interviews, the idea that one might open in their district seems to be a distant, largely inconceivable possibility, in part because of the community lens they use to filter issues and craft responses to their own problems. Even the most creative responses to charter school competition can be challenging for leaders in TPS districts due to the

business-style approach charter schools use to attract students and families to come to their school, including professionalized marketing (Kotok et al., 2021).

I was encouraged by the fact that a few participants seemed to concede, largely indirectly, that there is a need to be more progressive in the wake of impending change. While one district in this study has denied two charter school applications and there are rumors of another charter school opening just across their borders, the other noted economic and social change, such as the shift away from agriculture and factories, could mean enrollment challenges in the future. For many within these communities, the likelihood of economic and social change was not even considered until the changes were already underway. The case for school options following a similar path seems equally possible, and whether rural TPS leaders want to acknowledge charter schools as a legitimate threat or not, given their growth around the state and in the country, it seems likely that the issue of whether a charter school comes is one of when, not if. Ignoring a potential competitive threat rather than trying to understand it is a risky approach, and regardless of how rural TPS leaders feel about charter schools, awareness of surrounding factors and how charter schools have gained a foothold in rural districts are crucial components in knowing how to responding accordingly (Creed et al., 2021).

Limitations of this Study

This study builds upon research about TPSs and their experiences with charter school growth and competition. My goal was to build upon existing research, but also take a unique approach by looking at rural districts rather than the more urban settings where charter schools tend to be located. I only worked with eight school leaders for this research, and such a small number of participants cannot represent all aspects of leadership in rural TPS. Another limiting factor is that my participants only come from two school districts out of the 115 total in North

Carolina, so while their insights are powerful, hearing from TPS leaders in more areas could be much more potent on a larger scale. Finally, I only interviewed each participant once, and looking back over my interview transcripts, I saw areas where I could have followed up more to get more stories and perspectives. For example, leaders in one district mentioned that there was a charter school application in the past in their district, but they did not know much more than that about when that happened, who was leading the effort and why, or how it impacted feelings about the local schools. If I had interviewed more people, or these leaders in more depth, I may have been able to uncover more implicit knowledge and beliefs my participants have in relation to charter schools.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the research I conducted for this study, I offer three recommendations for practice. All of these recommendations involve taking a proactive approach through planning and contextual understanding of what surrounds rural TPS in terms of what charter schools are and how they operate. A more in-depth understanding of the charter school movement and the current ways charter schools are expanding in rural areas (and their impacts) will allow for rural TPS districts to respond proactively, with confidence and accurate knowledge, rather than in a reactive and haphazard manner.

Recommendations for Rural Traditional Public School District Leaders

Four of the participants that I interviewed for this study indicated that they had a very limited understanding of charter schools, how they work, or even how many charter schools surrounded their own district. One of the questions I asked is if participants knew what charter schools currently surround their districts, and while four participants knew of a few schools, the other four had much more limited knowledge of any schools that could provide competition.

While principals struggle to keep up with the increasing demands of leadership, professional development around charter schools could be an area that district leadership takes upon themselves to support their school-level principals. This could work well in these districts since both assistant superintendents in this study seemed to have slightly more knowledge about charter schools and how they operate.

For district-level leaders, I would suggest taking a proactive approach to investigating their surroundings, learning more about successful charter school models around them, and having that information ready to share with their principals. Most of the participants in this study felt confident in their ability to share, brag, and highlight the amazing things happening at their schools, and they are masters of one-on-one conversations with parents about what they can offer students. This additional knowledge about surrounding charter schools would enhance principals' ability to not only be more competitive but also think about their own schools and what they need to consider for their schools in the future.

Recommendations for Rural Traditional Public School Principals

For principals, the main force that influences their decisions at the school level is the community. There is a symbiotic relationship between community members and their schools that allows for them to flourish or crumble, and this mutual understanding means there must be ongoing communication to maintain a healthy relationship. While this practice is likely already taking place, principals must understand why students come and go from their schools, and understand the degree to which student attrition may be influenced by the threat of a charter school (Creed et al., 2021). Students can leave for myriad reasons, and as the choice market continues to expand, it is worth paying close attention to these reasons, noting patterns when they occur, and responding proactively to some of these patterns. For principals, they experience

pressure based on the loss of students to other schools, and whether their place in the educational marketplace is disrupted (Jabbar 2015b). Additionally, culture plays a large role in how pressure and competition is felt on the ground level, and whether a school or district feels that it is capable of responding to a charter school (Jabbar & Creed, 2020).

While TPSs are the default school choice in most scenarios, if there is a shift of multiple students leaving for the same alternative school option, it is essential to try and understand why. Indeed, it would make sense to study how this has happened in other districts, including other rural districts in the state and the consequences, rather than assuming it is unlikely for charter schools to open in their areas. These patterns, reasons, and shifts can cause disruptions within schools should they happen quickly. Additionally, while I focused on charter school preparedness in this study, I feel that many of the same strategies to address the threat from charter schools can be applied to any choices that parents may want for their students, including homeschooling. Although TPS may not be the best option for every student, it is vital to understand the alternatives parents have in their area, and to stay abreast of what is happening within and beyond their traditional borders.

Recommendations for Principal and District Leader Marketing

When I asked participants about charter school specialization and whether their schools had specialized offerings for families, there were a lot of mixed responses. Some principals talked about a smattering of options for their students to choose from, a few mentioned having traditional but high-quality offerings that support a broad range of needs, and a few felt they did not have any unique offerings at all. One participant indicated that they had no specializations because they did not feel that they had to, and in many ways, this comment supports the charter argument that leaders of TPS feel that they are the default opinion for families within their

district, thus they don't have to make efforts to market or appeal to these families. The assistant superintendents also shared different answers to this question, and both are indicative of their experiences with charter schools. Jennifer has had the most recent interactions with charter school applications, and in response to their potential threat, her district took steps to provide multiple options for students through their high school, early college, and virtual options. Even though her district was initially facing declining enrollment in their virtual academy post-covid, it was kept in place to attract home school families to return. William and his district now work in the shadow of a former charter school, and essentially feel no pressure to differentiate or market their educational offerings. His district utilizes only one other option that is not part of their conventional offerings, yet homeschool is still an issue according to some participants.

My recommendation for both principals and district leadership is to look at what is offered within their respective schools, or as a whole district, and prepare those offerings as a marketable package that can be shared within the community. Marketing in education requires four considerations: market research and analysis of the environment, creating a marketing plan and strategy, implementing the marketing plan, and evaluating the marketing process (Dâmaso & Lima, 2020). Making efforts to be available to the community, both physically and virtually, is critical to marketing schools and districts (Reid, 2023). My dissertation study indicates that most of the participants felt very comfortable with branding their schools or district, and continuing to develop both internal and external forms of marketing is a best practice (Varadarajan & Malone, 2018). Also, sharing more about existing programs and their strengths and success not only acknowledges the hard work that occurs each day, but it also allows others to see what schools accomplish. Jennifer described TPS teachers as "humble, hardworking, and not necessarily seeking recognition for their hard work," but it is for that very reason that stakeholders must

discuss among themselves how to market their hard work among their community. Charter schools leaders are masters of marketing, and they many times have access to additional resources and professional teams to do that marketing that are not always available for TPS. Within district marketing is critical to supporting teachers, and to ensuring that teaches are viewed as professionals; both are important components of guiding teacher decisions to stay in an educational setting (Barr, 2019). These approaches to marketing add layers to proactive strategizing, and are critical for preparation to compete with charter schools.

Recommendations for Future Research

As I discussed in my limitations section, I only interviewed 8 participants from two different school districts for this study. The two districts had differing experiences with charter schools; District A lives in the shadow of a now-closed charter school, while District B still faces efforts to open a charter school both nearby and within the county. A study of the charter school leaders would be insightful to learn more about their perceptions of rural TPS, their strategies for expansion, and how they see themselves as compared to TPS. This would be a useful complement to this research, and it would be particularly helpful to TPS leaders to understand how charter schools plan to grow in their areas. It would also be informative to understand further their knowledge and understanding of TPS and how they prepare to compete against them in the educational marketplace.

A second area for additional research is to increase the scope of this study and include more participants from additional TPS districts. As I mentioned above, and also in my limitations section, that the size and scope of this study was quite small and is not representative of what a majority of rural TPS leaders think about charter schools or competition as a whole. This expansion would make it possible to provide a more comprehensive approach to helping TPS

leaders collectively plan and make decisions based on criteria that mimic their own scenarios. While there could never be a cookie-cutter approach to competition among schools, it would be helpful to have examples for how TPSs has successfully competed with charter schools that could guide districts in tailoring their unique plans.

Final Thoughts

I shared in Chapter 1 that I have worked in rural TPS for my entire career, and the only interactions I have had with charter schools were passing and superficial. Part of this limited experience has been due to a lack of charter schools where I live, and the other is that my education in TPSs is what supported me on the journey to write this dissertation. TPS leaders are experts at keeping things traditional, but that is not an excuse for ignoring or refusing to understand and acknowledge competitive threats; however, I argue that TPS leaders are held hostage between rational prioritization of their daily operations and proactively anticipating possible threats. TPS leaders and teachers are tasked with doing so many things, and with so few resources it seems to be a battle of attrition to see which school model breaks first (Creed et al., 2001). It makes sense that these rural TPS know so little about charter schools because they are fighting factors like small budgets, increasing student needs, and an overwhelming lack of resources. While many TPS leaders and districts offer so much for their students and the communities they serve, I get a sense that conversations about charter schools, or even individual schools and their specializations, may disrupt the “friendly competition” that some of these participants claim to enjoy. In many ways, it is as if the very students and stakeholders within these communities do not understand that different forms of education outside of homeschool exist. Even in terms of school choice and marketing schools, I worry that the politicization of education, combined with parental desire for more educational options for their children, will

significantly change the educational landscape in the future. While participants in this study are extremely confident in their ability to market to their own schools and communities, there is a significant difference between marketing for pride and the charter school model of marketing for profit. Education has changed before my eyes during my almost 12 years of service in rural TPS, and I worry that hubris and tradition may prove to be the demise of what these schools used to mean in these communities. The interviews for this study also seem to be the first time that many of these school leaders have thought about charter schools, and as the interviews continued, their demeanor shifted from ignorant confidence to uncertainty. My hope is that these conversations are the beginning of a new way of thinking, and principals and district leadership can think about issues of competition and charter schools in new ways.

As I come to the end of writing this dissertation, there are 211 charter schools in the state of North Carolina, and 7 of those are new as of the 2023-2024 school year (NCDPI). Currently, there may be only a slight threat to the specific rural TPS districts in this study; however, if current patterns are sustained, there is evidence that school choice options will continue to emerge everywhere, including charter schools and virtual charter schools. Now more than ever, TPS leaders should plan and prepare for how to best anticipate and respond to charter schools and the school choice movement. I feel some hope that strong communities that have long-standing support for their schools will help mitigate some of the losses that rural TPS will face, but change is on its way regardless of how they feel about charters or schools of choice. William summed up many of my own thoughts about charter schools in a powerful comment that I have shared previously, “Every year, it becomes kind of like that little being on your shoulders whispering in your ear that, if we get a charter school here, and when and people can afford to go, and they start getting a base, now we're going to have competition.”

I have to admit that I started this dissertation with a prejudice against charter schools and school choice, but I feel this way because my education in a TPS saved my life, brought me out of poverty, and empowered me with the skills and knowledge to help others do the same. Haley's final thoughts about charter schools were, "They burn my biscuit so I'm just going to tell you that, and you know that this is a very biased view because I have an uneducated view." For a long time I felt the same as Haley, and although there is still a lot that I do not know about charter schools, I can confidently say that I now have a more research-based perspective and understanding of what charter schools are and how they operate. Part of me has always known that there would be limited knowledge about charter schools among rural TPS leaders, but understanding the why had always eluded me. TPS leaders ignore or believe they are above the possibility of charter schools because they have faith that their community will always be there to support them. There is nothing wrong with having faith, but it cannot be a substitute for not thinking, learning more, and preparing for the inevitability of changes, even if we don't not have a good sense of what changes are coming. While participants' feelings toward charter schools ranged from indifferent to contemptuous, possessing the knowledge to make informed decisions will be a key component to successfully competing against charter schools. After completing this study, I now have a more open mind toward school choice, and I also understand that every student and family has different needs that may not be met in a traditional educational setting. Furthermore, I also think that the school choice movement has continued to grow in strength because there is a general frustration with public education, and while public school leaders typically hold good intentions to do what is best for kids, there are other forces impacting the direction of education in this country that are not as noble.

My hope is that this study can provide insight and understanding, but more importantly, promote the need for TPS leaders to understand the charter school movement and prepare for competition with charter schools. Ultimately, I want educators within the field to continue to grow and empower students with the knowledge to understand, define, and reach their respective goals while serving their students and communities. Growing up in a rural setting and working in rural TPS, I am aware that change often comes very slowly within these communities. Part of the charm of these small towns and community schools is that they harbor feelings of simplicity and nostalgia. Walking down the hall of the school where your parents and grandparents attended, or going into town and mainly seeing familiar faces provides comfort and connection that is hard to feel in a more urban environment. For many, schools and their leaders hold tremendous power over children and shape their communities many years after they retire or pass away. In the same regard, community and tradition can also be toxic and smothering if they inhibit the ability to be progressive and proactive in responding to inevitable changes. Traditionally, where you lay your head at night determines the school that you attend; however, charter schools are neither traditional nor do they follow the same rules in terms of district attendance patterns. If the goal of rural TPS and communities is to preserve and protect their past, then they must plan for how to ensure their future.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Briefly describe your current role and background working for traditional public schools?
2. When, if ever, have you interacted with a charter school? What do you know about them? Where does the knowledge you do have come from?
3. Living in a rural community can often mean tradition and values influence multiple factors, including the schools that students attend. Have you noticed any changes to that mindset among families and the community in recent years, regarding education? How about charter schools?
4. How do you feel about the education offered by charter schools, and how do you think the quality of their work compares to TPS?
5. What do you know about the charter schools surrounding your district, and what interactions have you had with those schools?
6. While there are no charter schools currently in your district, there are several that are within driving distance for interested families. How do you feel about those charter schools' proximity to your district? If a charter were closer or opened within your community, how would you respond?
7. Many charter schools are organized around focuses such as democracy, technology, globalization, and other specific themes to draw students into their schools. Does this district utilize any specialized focus areas, and if so, what are they?
8. Researchers indicate that one consequence of charter school growth is that due to competition for students, traditional public schools have to be much more deliberate about marketing. What type of branding or marketing does your school and district use? What platforms or mediums do you use to promote that branding?
9. Based on your current roles and responsibilities, how does marketing and competition from other schools rank among your priorities?
10. What role do you play in promoting your school/district? What resources do you have available to accomplish this task? What resources do you feel would make your work more effective?

11. What conversations, if any, have occurred in your district about competing with other schools and districts? (strategic plans, outreach programs, competitive offerings in academia, or services offered)
12. As a district, how do you distinguish between competition and the threat of competition?
13. What other thoughts do you have about charter school and potential competition that you think are important to share?