

SAUNDERS, JASON BRIAN, Ed.D. *Assessing Charter School Choice in North Carolina: An Analysis of the Factors That Impact Student Enrollment Decisions.* (2019) Directed by Dr. Kathy Hytten. 204 pp.

Families in the United States have more options with school choice than ever before; one option that exists is charter school. But within this free market education system, is school choice fully open to everyone? Unfortunately, current data suggest that charter schools nationwide, especially those in North Carolina where I focused this study, are significantly less diverse with regards to the students they serve than traditional public schools. The purpose of this study was to investigate approaches to marketing and messaging by North Carolina charter schools and the impact these may have on access for families. I was interested in barriers, both explicit and hidden, to charter school enrollment.

Using critical discourse analysis, I studied 30 charter school websites. I also interviewed principals from four of these charter schools. Fifteen of the 30 websites were from schools with a student demographic that was predominantly White, in spite of being located within a racially diverse community. The other 15 websites were from racially diverse charter schools in which the largest student group by race made up less than half of the entire student population. Two of the 4 leaders for the interviews were from the predominantly White schools, and the other 2 were from the racially diverse group.

Findings from this study contribute to existing literature and inform future practice and research. First, I found a general lack of intentional use of the school website for marketing and messaging purposes by charter school leaders. Messages about school offerings, opportunities, and services that one would expect to be

commonplace were quite sporadic among the reviewed websites. Second, the school websites featured images that made the schools' racial makeup very evident to prospective families who were looking for a strong match between themselves and the school. Third, there was a significant difference between schools in each set with regard to messaging on their websites in four key areas—free or reduced lunch opportunities, monetary and time contributions from parents, student participation in athletics, and curriculum and instruction within the school. Finally, the charter school leaders I interviewed differed in how they viewed marketing for recruitment purposes.

Implications of this study involve decision-makers at the school level and the state level; I also share recommendations for future research. I suggest charter school leaders should form a concrete plan for increasing and maintaining diversity within their school and be more intentional with information and images on their schools' websites. State legislators should consider ideas like the weighted lottery in order to move school choice toward a more inclusive model for all families. Future research should focus on how information is obtained and perceived by families, including those with special needs, via a range of possibilities that include the school website and the school tour.

ASSESSING CHARTER SCHOOL CHOICE IN NORTH CAROLINA: AN  
ANALYSIS OF THE FACTORS THAT IMPACT STUDENT  
ENROLLMENT DECISIONS

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

Greensboro  
2019

Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The first acknowledgment is for my wife, Kathy. She has been a motivating force in my life over these past 14 years of marriage. She gave me the extra push I needed to begin my Master's degree program in School Administration in 2007 and then supported my dream of a doctorate in 2013. She has been patient through the years and has sacrificed in order to make the completion of this dissertation possible. I thank her for the love and support she has given me.

The next acknowledgments go to our kids—our daughter Kate and her husband Phillip, our son Ken and his wife Amy, and our daughter, Julianna. Kate, Phillip, Ken, and Amy—I have not seen enough of any of you over these past 6 years. I love you all and I appreciate the interest you took in my project and the words of encouragement you offered me along this journey. I fondly look forward to increased time with you all, with this dissertation now complete. For Julianna, this work over 6 years of her young life has required her understanding and patience as well. While this process has taken time for me to complete, I know that Julianna sees the work ethic that went into it and the value of the finished product. Thank you for granting Dad an extension beyond your elementary years.

Mom, Dad, and Corey—I miss seeing you three as well and look forward to more Sunday afternoons together. Mom and Dad, I will never be able to thank you enough for what you have given me. Besides a stable home and access to good schools, you gave me love and pushed me to meet my potential. I know that you both are proud of me.

Corey—I finally completed it! Thank you for helping me take my mind away from the stress of it all. Now I can go to a ballgame with you and not feel guilty that I should be back at home working on it.

I am so proud of this finished product and I owe these feelings of pride to my Committee Chair, Dr. Kathy Hytten, whose approach with descriptive feedback is unrivaled. I stand in awe of the time and effort she gives each of her students. She met with me, emailed me with suggestions and encouragement, but most importantly, she took her time with my document. Thank you, Dr. Hytten, for embracing your students' work as if each one is your only student.

Thank you to my Committee members—Dr. Carl Lashley, Dr. Craig Peck, and Dr. Brian Clarida—who provided me with critical resources and quality direction for my study at my proposal defense. Courses with Dr. Lashley and Dr. Peck also impacted my decision to pursue this topic in greater detail. I owe much of the person I am today to the professors with whom I interacted and from whom I learned in the Graduate School; this includes Dr. Larry Coble, Dr. Ann Davis, Dr. Kim Kappler Hewitt, and Dr. Silvia Bettez. I made the right decision to attend UNC-Greensboro.

And lastly, to all the individuals, too many to name, who made the schools I led during these past 6 years special for the students, I say thank you. It was, and is, my honor to lead at each of these schools and to share in student success with you. Thank you for putting up with my early departures to Greensboro and any off days I had with

the balancing act required of a part-time doctoral student. Reflecting upon this journey will always include you all as well.

Thank you all for helping my dream become a reality!



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## **CHAPTER I**

### **RATIONALE AND FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

Education in the United States, and more specifically North Carolina, has seemingly entered a new era in terms of where schooling takes place and the choices available to families. Options abound, including public schools, private schools, charter schools, virtual schools, and schooling at home. School choice is heralded by reformers, policymakers, and both major political parties as a desirable direction for our education system under the pretense that competition and consumer choice improve all schools and thus breed success within a market system of education (Lubienski, 2006). It follows common sense logic that choice in schools would be advantageous for families, but research suggests an alarming trend with some choice options in which freedom of choice is not reality. Specifically, not only is choice illusory for many families, critics also argue that choice makes schools less, rather than more, equitable.

#### **Research Problem and Purpose Statement**

One schooling option that has quickly become more available to families across the nation and in both urban and rural settings is the choice of a charter school. Unfortunately, current data suggest that charter schools nationwide, and also in the state of North Carolina where I focus this study, are significantly less diverse with regards to the students they serve than traditional public schools (TPS). In a world where school options exist, and given that public schools receive funding *per pupil*, it is easy to see

why schools care about how they are received (and even *perceived*) by the public. Schools that can attract more students receive more funding. To attract more students, a school either *is* better for students (higher quality teachers and instruction) or is *perceived* to be better. Chubb and Moe (1990) argue that, to be successful, schools need to find a niche—a segment of the market they can attract and recruit. Competition can certainly create a landscape in which schools work harder to achieve better student outcomes, but competition also creates winners and losers, and the team with the “best” players usually wins. There has been little research on how school leaders market their schools, but this notion of chasing the “best” students to win a competition and receive financial incentive must be studied (Olson Beal, Stewart, & Lubienski, 2016). Marketing entails schools employing specific types of messages to directly assert and define who they are within an emerging education market (Olson Beal et al., 2016). When it occurs within a framework of competition, the focus shifts away from what is best for all students to what is best for one school and the students who are fortunate to attend that school. Scott and Wells (2013) point out that educational entrepreneurs target market niches in a manner that maximizes short-term success for themselves yet fail to improve educational opportunities for students in need, and worsen socioeconomic stratification. When a school begins with “better” students, it has less distance to travel to earn the type of positive notoriety it wishes to have within the community. For that matter, the school has a more favorable chance of survival within the context of education today—high-stakes accountability (Welner, 2013). Schools that have large at-risk populations tend to have lower test scores and lower performance ratings and in turn, can face state takeover or

even closure. In contrast, schools with high test scores benefit from positive word-of-mouth within the community. “In short, nothing succeeds like success, and the greatest determinants of success are the raw materials—the students who enroll” (Welner, 2013, p. 2). With more positive perception comes more students and more funding. This is the juncture at which it is important to study strategic messaging of schools of choice and the potential of discriminatory policy and/or practice.

Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) or Education Management Organizations (EMOs) spend exorbitantly to ensure their charter schools attract the best students (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016). These non-profit organizations are made up of a conglomerate of charter schools. CMOs and EMOs can engage in prestige marketing where perception (through presentation) outweighs actual experience of the product. Because parents make the choices for their children and do not actually experience the product, they must rely upon other indicators than their own experiences in the schools to assess quality (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016). Public schools cannot compete against CMOs from a marketing standpoint (typically); for example, one CMO was noted as having spent \$700,000 on marketing in just one year (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016). *Hall Academy*, one of the North Carolina charter schools that I visited and that I discuss in greater detail in Chapter V, utilizes television and radio to market itself and it is run by an Educational Management Organization. Traditional public schools don’t generally have the resources to advertise comparably.

Jessen and DiMartino (2016) looked at three ways that traditional public schools (TPS), private schools, and charter schools market themselves—school and

organizational websites, social media campaigns, and *YouTube* videos. They also analyzed mission statements for each to discover messaging trends (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016). They found that traditional public schools provide student outcomes and characteristic information for their audience, keeping in line with what appears expected of them by state government. Private schools tend to focus more on emotional themes that may tie students and families to a school (like community or religious values) and the way being enrolled with them will feel to a potential student. Charter schools tend to evade their public status in marketing, choosing instead to focus on specific academic programming and themes that set them apart from TPSs. I found this to be the case in my study as well, as I will describe in much more detail in ensuing chapters. Many charter schools also market private-school-like characteristics such as an emphasis on character education, safety, and uniforms. CMO charter schools project a certain singularity and it is this portrayal of uniqueness (or prestige) that many parents find desirable (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016). The charter school leaders I interviewed as part of this study described how they market their uniqueness so as to stand out within their respective community.

Charter school messaging that implicitly seeks to attract only a specific set of families and charter school policies that inhibit an equitable playing field for school choice may be among the root causes for the demographic differences between traditional public schools and charter schools, particularly racial differences, seen across the United States. North Carolina is the only non-western state to have a higher percentage of White students among the charter enrollment than TPS (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang,



2011, p. 48). I share some of the studies that support this claim in greater depth are shared in Chapter II, but the purpose of this study was to investigate approaches to marketing and messaging by North Carolina charter schools and the impact these may have on access for families. I am interested in barriers, both explicit and hidden, to charter school enrollment. Welner (2013) argues that

Equity concerns arise whenever a publicly funded opportunity is provided to a more fortunate group of children but denied to others, even if that skimming takes place within a disadvantaged community. This gilds inequalities with socially acceptable language and constructs about individual choice, and it's particularly problematic when children are denied opportunities based on special needs status or English learner status—or when the poorest children in a community are pushed aside. (p. 5)

Equity and access issues surrounding North Carolina charter schools, which are ostensibly “public” schools, may also be related to policy decisions made by the individual schools. These policies might involve the absence of transportation or free lunch opportunities program, the existence of behavior and academic contracts prior to admission, or early dismissal from school on some weekdays Mandated parent volunteer hours, or even fines for dress code violations, prove burdensome for families in need. (Frankenberg et al., 2011). So, in addition to examining the implicit and explicit messaging (about who belongs in the school and who currently attends the school) when North Carolina charter schools present themselves to the public, I also explored policies and practices within North Carolina charter schools that limit access for some families, even in spite of a common rhetoric of equality.

## Research Questions

The primary research question that drives this study is about the messaging and accessibility of charter schools. Specifically:

- What messages do North Carolina charter schools communicate to the public through their marketing practices?

Garcia (2008) states, “charter schools influence school choice decisions through active advertising and marketing efforts to help precondition the type of students who seek admission” (p. 816). While this claim resonates with my personal experiences as a high school principal in a district that was increasingly facing competition from charter schools, Garcia does not back it up with any research-based evidence. In fact, I have been unable to find any research that directly assesses charter school policies and practices for the ways in which they are potentially discriminatory. I hope to contribute to the literature surrounding the charter school and school choice by finding answers to the question above. I am also particularly interested in whether their policies and practices create barriers, perhaps unintentionally, for families trying to access these schools for their children and the perceptions that charter school administrators hold about these policy choices. The secondary research question that I sought to answer was,

- How do charter school leaders discuss issues of marketing and enrollment for their schools?

Questioning leads to solutions and discourse leads to quality policy making (Fischer, 2003). I am curious about the expressed commitments charter school leaders make to

marketing and enrollment because actions within these arenas impact equity, social justice, and diversity.

### **Methodology**

My research study involves a critical discourse analysis of 30 charter school websites in North Carolina and interviews with four charter school principals. I organized the 30 websites into two groups of 15, based upon differences in the demographics of the school and the traditional school district where the charter school is located. The first 15 represent schools in which 80% or more of the students are White, but the local school district(s) from which they draw students is racially diverse. The other 15 websites are from racially diverse charter schools; these are schools in which the leading racial demographic subgroup is less than 50% of the entire school. In studying the websites of these charter schools, I analyze the implicit and explicit messages the school communicates to the local community that may lead certain families to choose the school over others. Given that school websites are a significant source of information on the school, they can certainly be considered marketing tools (DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Jennings, 2010; Lubienski, 2007). The words, images, and communicated policies carry significance in the way the local community receives them. I conduct the critical discourse analysis of these websites through a critical constructivist lens, modeling this part of my study after one conducted by Wilson and Carlsen in 2016. Wilson and Carlsen (2016) used a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to show how charter schools implicitly message about race, culture, and diversity. Additionally, Wilson and Carlsen (2016) analyzed how the concepts of academic achievement and individualized learning

are used to signal who belongs in the school. In my study, I determine the common themes among each of these groups of 15 charter school websites that may signal to families who belongs in the school. I elaborate more fully on the methodology for the website analysis portion of my study (as well as for the interviews I also conducted) in Chapter III and present the data and my analysis of the data in Chapter IV.

Inspiration for this study also came from a study commissioned by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) in 2016 by Izzi Hernandez-Cruz. Hernandez-Cruz (2016) investigated whether North Carolina charter schools reasonably reflect their community and diversity. I define what it means to “reasonably reflect” in Chapter II where I elaborate more fully on this important study. Using demographic data made public by the NCDPI, Hernandez-Cruz determined which charter schools were significantly more segregated than the traditional school districts in the community and which were representative of the surrounding area. Hernandez-Cruz chose ten charter schools for a focus group from a larger group whose student populations reasonably reflected that of the local school district. He analyzed the websites of these ten for common themes and interviewed the administrators at each to discover intentional methods they employed that supported the diversity within their school. Hernandez-Cruz concluded the study with recommendations that the NCDPI could share with North Carolina charter schools for better reflecting the diversity seen in their local community.

As part of the second phase of my study, I interviewed four charter school principals to see how they discuss and commit to certain marketing practices, as well as how they view their school’s enrollment. I selected two principals from the first group of

fifteen charter schools and the other two from the second group. The interviews added depth to my study by contributing insight about certain choices made on the websites and with policy in general at the school. I asked questions in the interviews aimed at marketing practices and specific policies set by the charter school leadership. For the schools in the first 15 whose students are overwhelmingly White, but whose community is racially diverse, the marketing and policy choices must be understood better, especially if these practices contributed to, and/or exacerbate, racial segregation. For the second group of 15, I explored whether the racial diversity we see in these schools was due (at least in part) to intentional efforts by the school to market themselves to a wider range of students and set policy that is inclusive in nature. In Chapter II, I discuss issues for students related to matriculation through highly segregated schools in greater depth. The literature is very clear on the impact segregation has on our young people in school. Then, in Chapter V, I discuss the interviews I complete for the study and share important findings and common themes.

### **Researcher Positionality and Interest**

Charter schools receive their funding from state aid and local school districts and they are chartered by the state to serve a specific locale. Taxpaying citizens fund the school system and, by extension, the charter schools in the area. Policies and practices that I researched that pose barriers to some students accessing charter schools, and an experience of my own as a school administrator, led me designing and conducting this dissertation study. Within the small urban school community where I was recently a principal, the local charter school expanded in 2015 to include grades six through eight;

prior to this it was a ninth-grade to 12th-grade high school. This expansion impacted the middle school where I served as principal, specifically through the loss of 37 students. The students who departed for the charter school were almost entirely from stable, middle-class households and all but five were White students. The students we lost were high academic achievers, scoring almost entirely at level four and five (with 5 being the highest score) in terms of academic proficiency on the North Carolina End-of-Grade exams. Largely the students we lost did not create any behavioral issues at school, but rather, they were academic role models within the classroom. Why were these students so similar demographically? If there was a lottery system for admission, why was there not a more diverse range of students exiting to the charter school?

Given the prevalence of marketing by charter schools today, many can be classified as embracing a fairly new concept known as “brand community.” An entity’s “brand” can be defined as a unique symbol or identifier linked in the mind of the consumer to that entity so that it then becomes memorable and even favorable as compared to other options (Olson Beal & Beal, 2016). “Community” involves a coming together of people and implies a connectedness. The local charter school in my previous community pushed to be a “brand community”—a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Olson Beal & Beal, 2016, p. 85). In some ways, parents who choose the local charter school see themselves as part of a brand and then actively recruit others into this school community. A “brand community” is built upon a foundation of perceived uniqueness, exclusivity, performance, or outcomes that may or may not match reality.

Followers believe that to be a part of the brand community is an improvement in one's life; therefore, actual educational programming or student outcomes can be less significant to them than the community of which they are a part. Additionally, as Harris and Larsen (2014) found about the role of childcare availability and extracurricular activities like sports, sometimes these play a stronger role in consumer choices than measures of academic quality.

While the loss of such strong students was selfishly problematic for me as a principal, the even greater issue was (and still is) one of social justice within the community. Entry and enrollment into the new charter school was, in fact, quite difficult for families of color and low socioeconomic status (SES), even as all students in the community supposedly had equal access to the school. First, the charter school chose to end their school day on Fridays at 12 noon. An occasional early-release day is perhaps manageable for parents or guardians who cannot easily get away from work or work multiple jobs to make ends meet, but a weekly early release can be a major obstacle. Next, while transportation from hub locations was provided from the county to the south of the school's location, there was no bus transportation provided within our city. This policy decision was a major barrier for low-socioeconomic families in our community. And lastly, there were no free or reduced accommodations made with breakfast or lunch at the school. Public-school educators understand well the challenges facing many of our students today in terms of three nutritious meals a day; challenges created by expense. Seeing these difficulties for low-SES families in my community, coupled with my research on charter school enrollment patterns and practices, led me to this dissertation.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

It is common for the theoretical perspective a researcher takes with a study to emerge, at least initially, from one's personal experiences. I choose to investigate issues of equity and access issues because children and their civil rights are involved in the larger topic of school choice and I am passionate about social justice as a school administrator. The school I led during the 2016-2017 school year was 44% Hispanic, 35% White, 15% Black, and 4% Multi-Racial. Choice, in general, possesses a democratic quality. Indeed, freedom to choose tends to be touted as a hallmark feature of democracy. When low-SES families cannot engage school choice within their community because of procedures or operations the charter school could better control, then what we seem to have are exclusionary practices based upon privilege.

I conceptualize this project through a critical constructivist lens. In his book, *Critical Constructivism Primer*, Kincheloe (2005) lays out the key tenets of critical constructivism in ways that are useful for this study. Fundamentally, critical constructivism entails questioning the social constructs that surround us—like school choice—and how they impact different populations. This approach represents a challenge to positivist claims about the neutrality of policies. Furthermore, it encourages criticality when questioning the social constructs that surround us all, which means asking questions about power and both the intended and unintended impacts of policies. Critical constructivists contend that knowledge and phenomena are socially constructed in a dialogue between institutions and cultures and seek to understand how society influences an object of inquiry. The theory, though, moves beyond understanding social



constructs and aims to trouble the effect that power and privilege play in our world (Kincheloe, 2005).

The ways I review literature, frame my research methods, and analyze findings are shaped by the personal experiences I have had and the specific questions about my world for which I seek answers. Critical constructivists believe that knowledge is constructed in the minds of individuals, but that, more specifically, a person's mind is formed by the world around him/her. Where privilege and power can lead to hegemony in our society, scholars drawing upon critical constructivism seek out new ways of thinking and/or bring to the surface knowledge that has been suppressed (Kincheloe, 2005). This is an approach that resonates with me and one that has framed others' research as well. Examples from some other critical constructivists research projects can help to show its value for and connection to my research.

Cahill and Hall (2014) conducted a critical ethnography of working-class families making choices in schools after primary school and used a critical constructivist lens in doing so. The study occurred over a 3-year period from 2009 to 2012. They conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 participants—parents, students, and teachers—in Portown Community School. Participant observation over the 3 years of the study was also a key piece of the data. Purposeful sampling took place for the interviews and those selected were invited to participate. The participants chosen represented a cross-section of the school community. Transcribed interviews, observations and reflections, and the data were coded for meaning (Cahill & Hall, 2014). Within the Irish community of Portown, Cahill and Hall (2014) conclude that a competitive, market-based approach to

education serves to widen the gap between the Irish working-class and middle-class. They argue that little attention was paid to “the inequality of access to information and knowledge with which parents and students are equipped with upon entry into the field of choice” (Cahill & Hall, 2014, p. 395). Cahill and Hall (2014) refer to a “latent hegemony” (p. 395) that is a contributing factor to social inequality through education and I seek to join them in the effort to expose it, especially if it exists in North Carolina. This study has helped inform the methodologies I plan to employ.

Another example where a critical constructivist lens was used was a study that explored mentoring of beginning teachers. While only loosely related to my interest in charter school marketing, this study provided insight into how we can trouble power brokers within the educational system in order to construct a new and better reality. When teachers first begin their career, they are almost always assigned a mentor. Aderibigbe, Colucci-Gray, and Gray (2014) used a critical constructivist approach to examine the work of mentoring in an effort to improve outcomes of it within schools. They employed semi-structured interviews and case studies in their research of best practices for supporting beginning teachers through the mentoring process. After transcribing the interviews, they coded and analyzed these and the field notes from their case studies. They concluded that a critical constructivist approach to mentoring was highly advantageous because it allowed beginning teachers to collaborate with one another and with their mentors in a give-and-take manner. Each teacher experiences her/his work through her or his own personal experiences and making of meaning. Rather than simply receiving information from the mentor, the teacher engages in

reflection and sharing that leads to more successful outcomes within the classroom and a greater sense of efficacy (Aderibigbe et al., 2014). By troubling the traditional role of the mentor as an all-knowing figurehead, the more collaborative approach empowers the beginning teacher to take control of her or his own professional growth. Within my own study, by troubling the messaging practices and policy choices of some North Carolina charter schools, less privileged sectors of our community can potentially benefit via the construction of a more inclusive public-school system.

### **The Significance of This Study**

This research is significant because it can lead to more inclusive student recruitment and enrollment practices among charter schools. One of my goals is to fight against segregation documented within charter schools by raising awareness and affecting change in policy and statute (Frankenberg et al., 2011). If we are going to continue developing a public-school choice model, all families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, should be able to fully choose among all public schools, charter or traditional, in their local area. Furthermore, all the choices available to them should be high-quality options. There are significant civil rights issues at hand when demographic subgroups and students with special needs are unable to access schooling options due to policy barriers. An orientation toward a free market has created a hegemonic state for too many families and this reality is not likely to change until researchers present compelling evidence of problems in full and a discourse around it begins (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 2002).

School choice is lauded by both major political parties as a move in the right direction for education. Rather than focusing efforts to improve existing schools, legislators have instead embraced the idea that competition will improve our nation's public education system. Largely based upon the neoliberal viewpoint that free-market competition among schools would force schools to improve the outcomes produced, school choice has been heralded as democratic and just (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 2002). Charter schools were created as a free and public option for families; charter schools were promised as sites that would test out new and innovative approaches to instruction within a less-regulated environment than traditional schools. In communities across the nation, parents have been given a new schooling option for their children, assuming in many cases they have the means to transport their child and cover daily lunch expenses. Unfortunately, transportation and meal costs serve as just two potential barriers to low-socioeconomic families, with regards to true school choice within the community.

From a democratic perspective, charter schools could provide low-SES families an "escape route" from a failing school if school choice were fully accessible for them. However, as accountability measures, like end-of-year exams, have increasingly been put in place for charter schools over the past decade, it has become clear that charter schools are not in fact outperforming traditional public schools, even though some are doing great work with students, just as some traditional schools are (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013). What needs to be examined, however, is "who" is "escaping" from what they perceive to be failing schools? If it is only the families with

the means to do so, our communities have an equity problem that needs to be addressed. I also hope to uncover whether charter schools are intentionally or unintentionally seeking out certain students over others when they market themselves and/or recruit students. School choice is likely causing inequities, but this reality is not well understood by decision and policymakers, or the general public. With my research, I will add to existing literature on how charter schools market their schools and the level of awareness of equity issues among charter school leaders. Decisionmakers and policy-setters should understand the degree to which all families are able to access the supposed educational options.

### **Overview**

The primary question I address in this study is: What messages do North Carolina charter schools communicate to the public through their marketing practices? Seeking answers to this question, the purpose of the study was to investigate approaches to marketing and messaging by North Carolina charter schools and the impact these may have on access for families. I can solidify my findings by answering my secondary research question—How do charter school leaders discuss issues of marketing and enrollment for their schools?—via interviews with four charter school principals. At the heart of this second research question are these two concerns: What is their level of awareness and intentionality with marketing that occurs on their school’s website and how do they reflect upon and impact their school’s enrollment?

One desire of mine with this study is to contribute to existing literature that is related to the topic. School segregation remains a hot topic today, even 60 years after the

Civil Rights Movement in our country. School segregation should not be allowed to continue unchecked in our state and in our country, yet there are many schools, like charter schools in North Carolina, where the student population is overwhelmingly White, despite the local community being racially diverse. There is a General Statute in North Carolina that challenges charter schools to make a reasonable effort to reflect the demographics of the local school district, but they are no longer required to reach that balance (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015). My study will help shed light on how school leaders make decisions that impact how families might feel about one school over another when viewing information about the schools. Related research exists for this topic, though my study is unique in ways that will become clearer after I review the existing literature in Chapter II, lay out my methodology in Chapter III, discuss findings in Chapters IV and V, and discuss conclusions and implications from my study in Chapter VI.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Current data suggest that charter schools in North Carolina are more segregated than traditional public schools (TPS) (Frankenberg et al., 2011). Charter schools are public schools which are allowed more freedom from government regulations than TPS. Because of this freedom, charter schools have greater flexibility with scheduling and curriculum, ideally so that new innovations may be tested and developed (Metcalf, Muller, & Legan, 2001). Charter schools receive per-pupil expenditure funds from state aid and from the local public-school district where the student would be slotted to attend. Because charter schools are public schools that receive per-pupil funding from the local school district (via tax dollars), it is reasonable to expect that all families in a community where a charter school exists would have equal access to enroll their children in that school.

What follows is a review of the literature that provides a foundation for the research that I conduct in this study. In the first two sections, I provide some historical and demographic perspective on charter schools in the United States and in North Carolina, where this study takes place. In the third section, I share several perspectives on segregation and negative outcomes for students that are associated with the charter school movement. I then provide a comprehensive look at how policy and practices can serve to exclude certain families from accessing a school in their community. Marketing

efforts serve, intentionally or unintentionally, to communicate information to families about who should apply or enroll at a school. In the final section of the chapter, I explore the literature on implicit and explicit messaging; a topic that is the primary focus of my study.

### **A Brief History of Charter Schools**

The first charter school law was created in Minnesota in 1991. Soon after, the number of charter schools grew quickly during the late 1990s and early 2000s, thanks to much bipartisan support. During the 2012-2013 school year, charter school legislation had passed in 42 states and the District of Columbia. In 2015, 6,500 charter schools were operating in 42 states, with their student population representing 5.3% of the public-school students in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015a). The highest percentage of charters schools at that time, 37% of the nation's schools, were in the western region of states, including California and Arizona. The southern region of the country was close behind at 31%. In the southern region, North Carolina has had one of the fastest growing charter programs in the country (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015b). As of 2018 in the United States, over 7,000 charter schools are part of the public school infrastructure in all but six states, educating approximately 3.2 million students (David & Hesla, 2018).

Charter schools are a product of a much larger economic and educational platform, often espoused by neoliberals, involving a free market and individual freedoms. They are widely believed to have risen from the work of Milton Friedman in the 1960s.



Friedman (2002) posited that an education system based upon a free market framework would expand educational opportunities for all families. The concept of charter schools as we know it today, however, did not take shape until the late 1980s when a professor of school administration, Ray Budde, proposed the idea for their development (Metcalf, Muller, & Legan, 2001). Budde believed that innovative teachers should be able to do their work without “red tape,” though this idea has becoming increasingly less salient in the charter school movement. Budde would later disagree with the use of charters as a full-scale education reform effort (Metcalf, Muller, & Legan, 2001). Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers in New York, helped to move the concept forward in 1988 before it catapulted in exposure with the 1990 book, *Politics, Markets, and America’s Schools*, by Chubb and Moe (Metcalf et al., 2001).

North Carolina joined the charter school movement in 1996 when the North Carolina General Assembly passed the Charter School Act (House Bill 955). This legislation encouraged a system of charter schools with the intent to improve student learning, increase learning opportunities for all students, encourage innovative teaching methods, create new professional opportunities for educators, provide parents with expanded choices within the public-school framework, and hold schools accountable for measurable student achievement results (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014). In 1996, 34 charter schools were approved.

By the 2010-2011 school year, the number of charter schools in operation in North Carolina more than doubled to ninety-nine schools. In 2011, an initial cap on the number of charter schools allowed in the state was lifted by the North Carolina General

Assembly and charter schools began to expand rapidly. Since that time, 85 new charter schools have opened in North Carolina and charter school enrollment has increased from approximately 41,332 students in 2011 to 109,389 in November of 2018 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). Currently, this represents approximately 7.3 percent of the total student population for Kindergarten to 12th Grade in the state (Public Schools First NC, 2019). During the 2018-2019 school year, 184 charter schools were operating within North Carolina, including two virtual charter schools (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2017, 2019). An additional eight schools were approved in 2018 to open in August of 2019. Also in 2018, seven schools were granted a one-year delay in opening. These fifteen new schools bring the state's total number of charter schools to 199 in the 2019-2020 academic year. The state received 35 applications for new schools to open in 2020-2021; these are currently under review (Public Schools First NC, 2019). The amount of state funds allotted to charter schools increased from just over 16 million dollars in 1997 to more than 580 million for the 2017-2018 school year (Public Schools First NC, 2019).

### **Demographic Characteristics of Charter School Students**

Charter schools in North Carolina are not bound by school-district drawn lines on a map; they can draw students from multiple school districts. As noted already, a significant issue for North Carolina charter schools is segregation in which schools are either predominantly White or predominantly Black. Despite individual charter school segregation, there is little discrepancy in the overall demographics across the state as a whole. During the 2017-2018 school year, 55% of students in North Carolina charter

schools were White, compared to 48% of students in traditional public schools (TPS). Twenty-six percent of North Carolina charter school students were Black in comparison to 25% in the traditional public schools. Hispanic students in North Carolina made up about 10% of students in charter schools while Hispanic students in the traditional public schools made up 18%. Additionally in 2017-2018, the percentage of students labeled Students with Disabilities made up 12.2% of students in traditional public schools and 10.3% of students in charter schools in North Carolina. The greatest difference between public schools and charter schools in North Carolina is in the percentage of Economically Disadvantaged students. Charter schools consist of 33% of students who are classified as Economically Disadvantaged while TPS is 59%. The data regarding the percentage of Economically Disadvantaged students in charter schools could be unreliable, however, because charter schools do not have to participate in the federal lunch program and do not collect detailed household income information (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

While the demographic data shared above related to charter schools and traditional public school enrollment across the state is not strikingly different, one must look closely to see the at demographics in individual schools to uncover issues of segregation (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011). One might mistakenly conclude there is more equitable access to resources than what exists and this illusion is dangerous because it could serve to prevent positive change.

A recent study by Hernandez-Cruz (2016) sheds light on the segregation of students in North Carolina charter schools today. House Bill 955 in 1996 allowed for the creation of charter schools in North Carolina. Within the General Statute, it was written that

within one year after the charter school begins operation, the charter school shall make efforts for the population of the school to reasonably reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the general population residing within the local school administrative unit in which the school is located. (Hernandez-Cruz, 2016, p. 1)

Hernandez-Cruz (2016) investigated whether North Carolina charter schools reasonably reflect their community and diversity. Since guidance was not provided in the North Carolina Statute to define what “reasonably reflect” meant, he turned to similar legislation from South Carolina which specified that charter school student population can differ “by no more than twenty percent” (p. 2). For the comparisons in his study, he looked at the difference in percentage points between a subgroup of students in the local school district and the charter school that resides in that community. Differences of under 20 percentage points would signify the charter school “reasonably reflects” TPS while those over 20 would be classified as “substantially different” (p. 2). Hernandez-Cruz also defined a predominantly White school as having 80% or more White students, while a school that was predominantly minority had 80% or greater minority students. Table 1 indicates the number of substantially different racial/ethnic groups in North Carolina charter schools during the 2015-2016 school year when 158 charter schools were opened.

Building upon this initial finding, Hernandez-Cruz (2016) discovered that 94 charter schools in North Carolina are either 80% Majority or 80% Minority. Subtracting

out the charter schools located within a traditional school district that itself lacked racial/ethnic diversity, he found 75 racially imbalanced charter schools in racially diverse school districts (these are districts he defined as having a White student population between 20% and 80%)—42 that were 80% Majority (or White) and 33 that were 80% Minority. At the time, that was 47% of all charter schools in North Carolina. Only 27 charter schools (or 17%) met the two goals of reasonably reflecting the school district within which it resides and consisting of a racially diverse student body.

Table 1

## Substantially Different Racial/Ethnic Groups

Substantially Different Racial/Ethnic Groups	Number of Schools	Percentage of Total
0	56	36%
1	40	25%
2	55	35%
3	7	4%

*Note.* Source: Hernandez-Cruz (2016).

Hernandez-Cruz (2016) discovered steps that some charter schools took to increase or maintain the diversity of their student body and these discoveries became recommendations that the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction could then share with other charter school leaders and/or future charters. For my own study, these steps became ones that I looked for within my own review of school websites and during my interviews with the four charter school leaders. The first discovery involved pictures of diverse groups of students and families on the schools' websites and social media sites.

Next, schools included language of inclusivity within their website, their lottery application, and/or their mission statement. Creation of a football team was touted by one school as a means to not only support a more diverse student body, but also as a way of bringing families together each fall. Another school created a dance team and a step team. Administrators at another charter school developed relationships with Black pastors and often visited the public housing complexes to offer their support and to connect with families there. Service projects were developed as a way to connect better with families in need at more than one school in Hernandez-Cruz's (2016) study. One charter school even moved its location in order to better reach students needing their school the most. Busing and free or reduced lunch was often discussed by the leaders of these schools that Hernandez-Cruz (2016) met with and some of the schools were able to make both work financially. Lastly, these charter school leaders worked very hard to build diverse staffs at their respective schools, believing that any desire to have a diverse student body had to start with having a diverse staff. In order to reasonably reflect the demographics of the community after just one year of existence, these administrators recommended that a good deal of groundwork (as in, these steps identified here) be laid prior to the inaugural lottery (Hernandez-Cruz, 2016).

### **Clear Evidence of Segregation**

Research evidence supports the contention that segregation impacts students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds negatively. Frankenberg et al. (2011) identified equity and access issues inherent in school choice. They used the 2007-2008 Common Core of Data, the 2006 Civil Rights Data Collection, and the 2007-2008

Schools and Staffing Survey to arrive at their findings. Through an analysis of these data sources, Frankenberg et al. (2011) found that charter schools were more racially segregated than traditional public schools (TPS) in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation. Orfield and Lee (2007) reported that the percentage of Black students attending majority-White schools in the South stood at 43.5% in 1988, but it dropped to 27% in 2005. In other words, segregation has worsened in traditional public schools over the past several decades, even before the significant growth of charter schools. Charters are now more segregated than TPS; they are often predominantly White or predominantly Black.

Data from Frankenberg et al. (2011) on the extent to which charter schools were serving low-income and English language learners was incomplete, but seemed to point to the fact that a substantial share of charter schools did not enroll such students. In addition, they found a number of studies that indicated that charter schools were educating a significantly lower number of special needs students than TPS. Research data indicate a pattern of charter schools moving to the extremes regarding poverty level, race and ethnicity, special needs status, and English Language (ELL) status, rather than more closely mirroring local school district averages (Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010). For example, at-risk students are disproportionately enrolled in a small subset of mission-oriented charters. The majority of charter-school students with severe disabilities in Florida are concentrated in a handful of schools that specialize in those disabilities (Welner, 2013). Researchers at the University of Minnesota found that charter schools are much more likely to be segregated than TPS in the Minneapolis-St.

Paul area (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). In these researchers' judgment, the promise of charter schools to use choice to foster integration and equality in America has yet to be realized. The patterns for special education and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students reflect differences that generalize across charter schools in the nation. Charters are either not attracting these populations, not serving them well, or purposefully avoiding them (Malkus & Hatfield, 2017).

This promise of harmonious integration of the races through school choice was perhaps most influentially espoused by Milton Friedman in the 1960s. Friedman (2002) argued that school choice would mediate the racial divide through integration of students (and families) within schools they desired. Time and time again, however, families tend to choose schools for reasons that can exacerbate segregation, including perceptions of safety (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Goyette, 2014; Patillo, 2015), distance between home and school (Denice & Gross, 2016; Glazerman & Dotter, 2017), extracurricular offerings (Harris & Larsen, 2014), or for their racial makeup (Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, Schellenberg, & Walters, 2019; Denice & Gross, 2016; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). Friedman's school choice promise and his plan for vouchers were not enough to trump colorblind public policy, inherent racism, and the sense that some people hold that the neighborhood charter school down the street is more exclusive than the "public school." The academic model chosen by the leadership of the neighborhood charter school often caters to the demographics of the community, thus increasing the likelihood of segregation within charter schools. No-excuses charter schools—highly structured schools with strict disciplinary systems—are predominantly found in areas with more



poor, black, and low-performing students. On the other hand, classical charter schools—those that use pedagogical approaches like the Socratic or Trivium method—are predominantly found in areas with fewer poor students and more White students than other models (Malkus & Hatfield, 2017).

As I mentioned previously, the demographic comparisons between charter schools and traditional public schools do not tell the full story of enrollment patterns. Nearly 90% of Black charter school students are in schools where minority students make up more than 50% of the student population. This statistic is compared to just 71% within traditional public schools in the United States (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003). Renzulli (2006) examined data from nearly 900 charter schools and discovered two alarming trends. First, Whites are also highly segregated and are more likely to attend a charter school when their home district is more integrated. And along similar lines, districts that are more segregated have more Black students in charters.

North Carolina is the only non-western state to have a higher percentage of White students among the charter enrollment than TPS; a statistic suggestive of “white flight” (Frankenberg et al., 2011, p. 48). There is mounting research to suggest that U.S. charter schools contribute to racial inequality and sustain White privilege. White, economically-advantaged parents have been found to choose segregated schools (that is, schools with an overwhelming majority of White students in this particular case) because schools where they are not in the majority have a lower perceived market value (Bifulco et al., 2009; Cobb & Glass, 1999; Garcia, 2008; Roda & Wells, 2013). I explore four studies about the reproduction of white privilege in charter schools in greater detail below

because their findings are significant to my study. First, while stereotyping and internalized racism related to perceptions of TPS are likely one cause of “white flight,” it is important that Cobb and Glass (1999) compared 55 urban and 57 rural charter schools to TPS in Arizona and concluded that perception can also be reality. They argue that schools that are majority minority lack the political capital necessary to ensure equitable resources, similar teacher quality, and sufficient numbers of supportive parents (Cobb & Glass, 1999).

While Cobb and Glass (1999) utilized Arizona enrollment records for their study, Garcia (2008) used test records to compare charter schools to TPS (since Arizona, like most other states, requires all students be tested). Garcia (2008) examined student attendance patterns over a 4-year period, providing arguably the best longitudinal data on charter schools at the time of his study. His findings indicated that students from various racial groups (except for Hispanics) sought out charter schools with greater percentages of their same racial group than the school they exited while the students were in elementary school. The trend was not supported in his study at the high school level. According to Garcia’s (2008) findings, Blacks and Native Americans “congregate” in charter schools with students like themselves (p. 826). I am interested in whether the way in which charter schools market themselves could be one of the reasons for this outcome. Every human being desires to be welcomed and a part of a community. Do charter schools in North Carolina “welcome” a diverse population of students when they market themselves?

Bifulco et al. (2009) conducted an empirical analysis of charter school attendance in Durham, North Carolina during the 2002-2003 school year and found that the pattern of school choice in Durham increased the level of segregation above what it would have been if students had attended their assigned TPS. Furthermore, they found that advantaged families tend to exit TPS more frequently to link up with other advantaged families, while disadvantaged families look to integrate more frequently with advantaged families—a finding somewhat inconsistent with what the research suggests families of color tend to do. There is evidence that parent choice contributes to segregation.

Roda and Wells (2013) examined segregation by choice via a public elementary school choice plan operating within one of the community school districts in New York City. In other words, they did not look at charter schools, but rather at parental choice considerations for public Kindergarten. They interviewed 59 randomly sampled parents of different racial backgrounds who completed the 2006 Kindergarten school choice process within what they referred to as District Q. Of those interviewed, 39 of them were White and the researchers describe them as more advantaged than the non-white parents in the study. These parents indicated initially that it was “very” or “somewhat” important for their child to attend a diverse school to prepare them for a global society, but when it came time for them to pick a school, they were drawn toward the predominantly White schools (Roda & Wells, 2013, p. 266). Perhaps due to their own personal educations, these parents were almost entirely aware of the privilege they enjoy and considered themselves more open to racial diversity than their suburban counterparts. This awareness then troubled them when it came to school choice, but Roda and Wells (2013)

claimed that this situation is none too surprising within a society that establishes separate and unequal schools and continues this trend year after year. Additionally, increased discourse in our country around global competition and measured achievement by students has created a climate in which White families worry their child's schooling and preparation for future endeavors will be insufficient (Roda & Wells, 2013).

Contributing to this train of thought about competition for seemingly scarce resources, noted charter-school scholar Lubienski (2013) believes there to be "*de facto* privatization where the equity potential is often eclipsed by competitive incentives that produce patterns of inequality of opportunity" (p. 507). In other words, White, affluent families choose to send their child to a charter school because they find it to have a private-school feel without a private-school price tag. In my own personal experience over a 15-year career in public education, I have noticed that many families are less concerned with picking a school for its academics and more concerned with what they perceive as a "safe" and nurturing environment, or because of the quality of the sports program. Roda and Wells (2013) discovered the same occurs with families of color; they have other reasons for choosing a school that are separate from academics.

Cucchiara (2013) conducted a qualitative study at an urban neighborhood school that, at the time of the study, was 85% Black and 11% White. Most of the White students, however, were in the lower grades because they eventually left to attend private and magnet schools in the area after elementary school. Darcy Elementary students consistently did better on standardized tests than the district average. Cucchiara (2013) conducted a total of 32 interviews with parents, staff, and members of the neighborhood.

She also did 70 hours of observations at Darcy or within the community. A prominent theme in the data was parental anxiety, particularly among the White parents, as they viewed the choice of a neighborhood school as “unsafe” (Cucchiara, 2013, p. 75). A group of White Darcy parents, however, worked to change this belief in their local school. First, they organized and met monthly to discuss concerns and think through solutions. The discourse they engaged in was likened to therapy, but it extended beyond that as the group got involved with the school and offered assistance in many ways. While the group was unable to keep several families enrolled at Darcy, largely due to anxiety over harming their child’s future prospects, their effort symbolizes what might be needed in order to make one’s neighborhood school seem like a good choice. More discussion is necessary if we are to overcome that which moves us in the direction of racial (and class) segregation.

Beyond this study, Walters (2014) used a structural model of school choice and academic achievement to study the demands for charter schools in Boston. In this quantitative study, he found that while disadvantaged students are most likely to benefit from charter schools, they are significantly less likely to apply and enroll. Such a finding represents the heart of my research essentially. While there may be self-segregation at play, other factors may also be important to why some students are not enrolling in charter schools, including an insufficient or discriminatory marketing plan, and policies that act like barriers to enrollment.

Segregation and its effects have been made clear through these studies. And, it should be noted that there is not a “separate but equal” scenario at play. Research on a

national stage indicates that charter schools do not gain significantly better student proficiency than TPS and, in some states, charter schools perform less well (Miron et al., 2010). For the 2017-2018 school year, traditional public schools in North Carolina had a slightly lower percentage of schools with a State Report Card rating of D or F—21.2% for district schools, versus 21.9% for charters (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). While a slightly higher percentage of charter schools than TPS exceeded expected growth with their students (27.2 versus 26.7%) in 2017-2018, the gap between the two was greater with failing to meet expected growth (31.4% of charters as compared to 27% of TPS) (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). Lastly, in a measure of North Carolina schools with at least 60% of their students showing grade-level proficiency, 56.7% of charters met the mark, while only 44.3% of TPS met it (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

In fact, across most test score measures in 2018, North Carolina students in charter schools outperformed those in TPS, but the academic concern exists within majority minority schools and not within those that may be a result of White flight. Majority minority schools often lack the resources to be successful. Many families of color tend to self-segregate by choice—a phenomenon that could be tied to how schools make them feel when marketing—and majority minority schools have not proven better as options. Advantaged families tend to seek out other advantaged families because they can access the better resources and advantaged schools tend to move students ahead at a much faster pace.

### **Exclusionary Policies and Practices**

Over the past 15 years, charter schools have been examined from a variety of angles by researchers. Demographically-representative student enrollment is one topic that has garnered much attention. Using school year data from 1999-2000 in Washington, DC, Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, and Henig (2002) led an effort with fellow researchers to determine whether charter schools “skimmed” the best students “off the top” in school districts, leaving more highly disadvantaged students to be served by TPS. Their findings did not substantiate this hypothesis. They found almost no support for the idea that charter schools in Washington, DC were focused solely on enrolling top students (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002). With that said though, they did find evidence of something different. Those same charter schools were less likely to serve high-need students than traditional public schools. Rather than “skimming off the top,” charter schools may have been “cropping off the bottom” by not providing language services or special needs services to their students (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002).

Cobb and Glass (1999), however, found credence in the notion of “skimming” within the city of Scottsdale, Arizona (p. 29). The three most predominantly White charter schools were all situated within low SES neighborhoods and the school population was a stark contrast demographically to that of the surrounding neighborhood. They also found instances of selectivity within charter schools. Waiting lists for enrollment are one place where names at the top can often be those of the privileged because of their greater access to information and their mobility. Cobb and Glass (1999) also found exclusionary practices at work via parent contracts and the provision of

transportation. Increasing costs for such things as meals, transportation, and missed work can significantly limit the possibilities of charter schools for low SES families.

Additional research related to potentially inequitable enrollment patterns and practices has been quite telling as well. For example, researchers discovered that while KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) charter schools nationwide have a more democratic lottery process for first-time school or cohort entry (than most charter schools do), these schools admit late entrants (students entering the school at a later grade when a spot opens) who tend to have higher baseline achievement, are females, and are not special education students (Nichols-Barrer, Gleason, Gill, & Tuttle, 2016).

While charter schools are exempt from certain educational policies within their state, there has never been an exemption from the federal government's law that protects students with disabilities. Estes (2009) studied this issue using descriptive statistics from the Texas Public Education Information Management system and conducting five interviews with charter school personnel regarding special education services within their school. Despite knowledge of disciplinary protections provided for special education students in the federal government's Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), only three of the five followed the requirements, believing they could send students with IEPs back to their home school if they violated the charter's school's code of conduct. Four of the five knew what pre-referral intervention was, but only one confirmed its existence within their school. Instances were even observed in which parents were advised to take their children to another school where his or her needs could best be met (Estes, 2009). Estes (2009) states "a free appropriate



public education remains the centerpiece of the IDEIA” (p. 222), but it is not clear that charter schools are obligated to provide all the resources that students need.

On a more concrete level, school policy decisions and common practices by charter school leaders can serve to exclude certain subsets of students, intentionally or unintentionally. I am particularly interested in such policies and practices because identifying them is the first step in seeking change that supports greater access to choice for all families. First, as noted earlier, seeking “the best” students is certainly an intentional move and it can be achieved in a number of ways—applications that are made available just a few hours a year; lengthy, English-only forms that demand essays, teacher recommendations, and disciplinary records; demands for Social Security cards and birth certificates in spite of federal law; mandatory family interviews; behavior and/or academic contracts; entry exams; academic prerequisites; and required documentation of disabilities (Simon, 2013; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016).

And yet there are other policy and practice decisions in which intentionality can be difficult to judge, but exclusion occurs nonetheless. These policies and practices might involve the absence of provided transportation to and from school, the absence of a free or reduced lunch program for families in need, or early dismissal from school on some weekdays—a significant issue for working parents who require after-school care for their children. In some cases, charter schools have mandated a minimum number of volunteer hours from family members, another potentially unfair burden on working-class families. In Chicago, some charter schools have collected fines for dress code infractions.

Kevin Welner (2013) categorized the ways in which charter schools construct their student body. For him, the judgment of a school's success through measured outcomes is strongly connected to inputs—in this case, students. Charter schools, unlike traditional public schools, aim to attract families to enroll there. All schools want to be successful; they want their students to demonstrate clear proficiency with state assessments because it serves as an indicator that their instructional methods work. Success then breeds success in attracting more students via positive word-of-mouth among friends, realtors, and press outlets (Welner, 2013). As stated earlier in the chapter, there are several reasons why families choose a school. One of those reasons is of course academics at the school (Krull, 2016). What Welner's (2013) research and classification system indicates, however, is that schools can create a very easy pathway to large proficiency numbers among their students by taking steps to ensure proficient students are the ones walking in the door in the first place. He referred to this list as *The Dirty Dozen*. The question that leads each numbered entry below is pulled directly from Welner's (2013) *Dirty Dozen*. What follows each one is brief commentary on it.

1. What subgroups of students will the school serve? Decisions made to respond to this question may immediately shut the school doors for groups of children.
2. Where will the school be located? Families with fewer transportation options may be placed at a disadvantage.
3. What audience does the school hope to attract through messaging to the public? How and where marketing takes place is an exercise of influence

over who applies. For instance, materials produced only in English can only be accessed by those who speak the language. Such a decision also communicates to families who speak another language that the school is either less able or less interested in reaching them. Visual images used in marketing materials send messages to families about who the school looks to serve. Additionally, as noted in research, schools looking to attract students who excel academically may use expressions like “college prep” or emphasize rigor (Welner, 2013, p. 2). This third approach is the focus of my study.

4. How extensive will the application itself be? As noted above, requiring parent essays, parent interviews at the school, and other steps can prove too taxing for low socioeconomic, lesser-educated families.
5. Will the school require government documents or disability reporting prior to admission? These steps, along with a requirement to attend the school’s tuition-based pre-K program, will steer enrollment toward the privileged.
6. What conditions on enrollment are included? Requiring prior academic success of a certain level or volunteer hours for parents are just two of the policy decisions identified within this category. Conditions on enrollment communicate very explicitly who is desired at the school . . . and who is not.
7. Are parents of high-need students steered to remain in the local public school? Some parents are advised that opportunities for their son or daughter will be richer in their assigned public school.

8. Will the school provide special services? Advising parents that the school does not have the resources to provide a reading specialist or an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher immediately eliminates certain students from inclusion.
9. Will the school “weed out” students who are not a “good fit”? Charter school students are there of their own accord, but can easily return to their local school if things are not going well in the charter. Parents will often take the counseling provided by the school and follow the direction given. For example, if the school personnel suggest the student will be more successful elsewhere, the parent will likely move their child out. Additionally, when school personnel suggest a student will be more successful elsewhere, it is a strong indication that the school has given up effort on the student and her/his needs.
10. Will the school use grade retention as a threat? At KIPP charter schools, grade retention occurs for those students who struggle and remain there. Families can avoid it altogether by unenrolling prior to the decision coming down.
11. How strict will the discipline policy be? Some charter schools with very strict discipline policies see more disruptive students unenroll.
12. Will the school set a cap on the number of students per grade? Charter schools that enroll through a lottery system tend to have grade-level enrollments that fluctuate very little. They can determine if, when, and with

whom they want to “backfill” that grade with, should a spot open up (Welner, 2013).

Not all charter schools move in these 12 directions, but even patterns related to just two or three of these 12 will impact the type of students and families who can access a school. Privilege can easily be identified here because those who can, enroll, and those who cannot, remain in their current school. Schools that are able to tout higher proficiency percentages are, by nature, more attractive to the general public. But higher proficiency rates than neighboring TPS could actually be a product of one or two factors other than superior teaching or effective approach, like lower proportions of special education or LEP students or significantly more parent engagement among the population that could access the school (Malkus & Hatfield, 2017).

Nevertheless, the impact that charter school policies and practices can potentially have is clear and it is directly related to the research questions for which I sought answers to in this study. A report in 2014 looked at the survey results of parents in eight cities. The findings were troubling. Parents with less education, those with special-needs children, and parents of color all were more likely than other parents to report difficulty accessing information on schools in their area, managing the application, and accomplishing these things by a deadline (Jochim, DeArmond, Gross, & Lake, 2014). Additionally, the survey also found that transportation was a significant barrier to parents with less education (Jochim et al., 2014). The ways in which schools reach parents in the community with information must be considered within any discussion about equitable school choice.

Contrary to the aims of public education to be completely inclusive, marketing materials can serve to entice families through subtle signals and language, and exclude others based on such variables as race, socioeconomic status, or ability (Jennings, 2010). As indicated by Welner (2013) above, marketing most assuredly leads to a form of student selection as schools that market themselves seek certain types of students, as compared to traditional public schools who enroll all students within their attendance zone and historically have not had to think about issues related to marketing. Jabbar (2016) looked at school leaders' perceptions in New Orleans of their marketing intentions and how their marketing practices generated inequities. Jabbar (2016) studied a stratified random sample of 30 schools in New Orleans. In addition to formal and informal interviews, Jabbar (2016) also collected historical documents, marketing materials, and school board meeting minutes. He conducted seventy-two interviews with 47 school leaders, district staff members, and board members, coding the data within Nvivo for topics like "perceptions of competition," "glossification," and "selection strategies" (Jabbar, 2016, p. 11). Jabbar classified schools into three groups of low, medium, and high competition. Marketing strategies included signs and billboards, flyers and mailings, phone calls, door-to-door, newspaper, radio, television, bags and t-shirts, and open houses. Some schools emphasized facilities and atmosphere in their marketing, even though these are relatively superficial as compared to academic performance. Programming for the gifted, extracurriculars, and approaches with student discipline, when marketed, can serve as signals to parents of low-performing students that a school may not be the best fit for their child. Some schools with open seats that could have been

filled during the school year chose not to advertise this fact to avoid less-desirable students. Findings reflect that increased student outcome data is of paramount importance to charter school leaders, certainly over equity and access within the community (Jabbar, 2016).

As previously mentioned, I analyzed charter school websites as part of this study. Wilson and Carlsen (2016) did the same through critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 55 elementary charter school websites from the Minneapolis - St. Paul area. Affirming other studies, they found that school websites serve as “discursive texts that signal the potential ‘fit’ between particular schools and particular families” (p. 25). Furthermore, Lubienski (2007) argued that school-generated information is often partial and incomplete. Given this presumption and the observation that families tend to make decisions based on the reputation or feel of a school, marketing can then shape and influence choices about schools in a significant way. Wilson and Carlsen (2016) contend that “school websites do not just describe a field of choice options; they act to shape the availability, meaning, and nature of those choices” (p. 29). The 55 schools they examined in their study were divided, based on early coding, into four groups: (a) elite/international, (b) culturally specific, (c) results-oriented, and (d) progressive. The first group of schools, elite/international, rarely mentioned race, culture, or diversity on their websites. Whiteness has long been considered “normal” because it is rarely pointed out as a descriptor. Therefore, in not naming it, these schools silently proclaim their Whiteness. These schools also used more visual codes, like school crests, that are typically associated with elite independent schools, and all fourteen used the term “academy” or

“preparatory” in their name. Each school in the study communicated through images and text the type of place it was and which type of students would likely feel most comfortable there. Wilson and Carlsen (2016) concluded that “choice is likely to lead the segmentation and stratification of educational options, with negative results for equity” (p. 38).

### **Colorblind Individualism**

An issue that deserves attention when analyzing charter schools is colorblind individualism. When policy-making is colorblind, or supposedly race-neutral, it fails to consider preexisting discrimination. Individualism is a concept that meshes well with America’s capitalistic meritocracy. Legislators who operate with a mindset of colorblind individualism believe that if everyone works hard to maximize their individual potential and access to resources is equal for all (via school choice or school vouchers for instance), then the market will distribute value to all (Straus & Lemieux, 2016). According to Straus and Lemieux (2016), school choice is one way that “colorblind individualism” manifests itself to the detriment of families of color (p. 45). When race is not seen or considered by individuals setting policy, discrimination continues and is hidden within public policy. For example, when school attendance lines are drawn a particular way, or charter schools are allowed the flexibility to determine their own policies, these decisions can be perceived as “natural, individual choices rather than racist policy” (Straus & Lemieux, 2016, p. 46).

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) came about with a focus on individual student achievement and individual teacher accountability. Test scores



quickly and then consistently began to bear witness to a hegemonic state in which schools attended by Whites and Asians greatly outperform those attended by Blacks and Latinos. Achievement and accountability took center stage and provided a diversion away from culturally relevant pedagogy and policies to integrate and/or enhance resources for those in need (Scott, 2011; Straus & Lemieux, 2016). During the decade from 2001 to 2011, charter school growth ballooned. A focus on achievement and accountability set the stage for charter schools to act in a competitive manner rather than aiming to serve the community as bastions of innovation, or as places of cultural inclusiveness.

Race is often interpreted through discourse, or the way language, imagery, and texts create a social understanding of race. Visual and written texts shape and reinforce meanings of race. These meanings are learned, acquired, and legitimated within discourse that leads to collective meaning making (Hernandez, 2016). And the dominant racial structure that complicates racial discourse today is color blindness. A colorblind approach is predicated on the idea that race is no longer an important factor in a person's life or within society. Alternatively, as Hernandez (2016) indicates, everyone supposedly is extended equal opportunity and any inability to get ahead is grounded in the individual's merit. One way that racial groups are marginalized is with terms like poor, low-income, or urban rather than explicit racial terms. Additionally, text that describes negative occurrences in communities of color typically employs a passive voice. For example, phrases like "officer-involved shooting" or "shots were fired" obscure those responsible for the negative events against Black or Hispanic individuals, leaving the cause of the harm indeterminate (Hernandez, 2016).

To understand how ideologies of colorblind individualism can influence the charter school movement, Hernandez (2016) conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 34 documents from two prominent Charter Management Organizations (CMOs), finding that color blindness was highly evident within these marketing documents. She found *low-income*, *high-poverty*, *high-need*, *underserved*, *at-risk*, and *high-risk* were terms commonly used, in spite of high percentages of students of color. Economic and social ills—unemployment, low wages, long hours, lack of healthcare, substandard housing, and high crime rates—were named as challenges within the community, but racism was not. Such text serves to place students and their families within a deficient construct; one in which the systemic and structural causes of such hardship go unnamed. A projection of deficiency, which then is painted as a matter of fact for students of color, positions these CMOs to be savior-like entities in the lives of these students. Within their marketing materials, these charter schools advertise that they serve “the students who need us most” (Hernandez, 2016, p. 58). The approach is self-serving, furthers color blindness, and contributes to the racial segregation seen within U.S. charter schools today.

Court cases relevant to my topic have also been decided with a colorblind approach that fails to adequately address issues of poverty. *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* in 1973 made it permissible for states to fund schools unequally through local property taxes rather than general state revenues. The use of local property taxes for district funding versus a per-pupil needs assessment is an example of structural racism. Making matters worse, charter schools receive their funding to operate to the detriment of local

school districts “supplying” the student. More specifically, the charter school receives the per-pupil allotment for that student from the state that would have gone to the local school district to cover the expenses associated with educating that child. Students from poverty typically have more cost to the school associated with them due to the need to provide additional instruction or intervention to remedy learning deficits that too often exist (Duncombe & Yinger, 2005). *Milliken v. Bradley* in 1974 allowed “white flight” to continue unchecked in the major metropolitan areas because deliberate pupil assignments based upon race were found to be unconstitutional. District attendance lines, however, could be drawn as those in power saw fit. The Supreme Court maintained such thinking as recently as 2007 with *Parents Involved v. Seattle School District* when it was determined that race could not be used as a tiebreaker in school assignments for students—move that the district desired in order to increase integration (Straus & Lemieux, 2016).

### **Market-based Competition**

Exclusionary practices and policies, like those I discussed in the previous section, are more readily identifiable than the more subtle, negative effects of market-based competition. Lubienski (2013) advises that social justice and market-based competition are two approaches (for educational reform) with divergent goals—one focuses on liberation from injustice for marginalized groups of people while the other is more concerned with advancement of self-interests. Additionally, Jennings (2010) indicates from a sociological standpoint, a school reform model with a focus on what the other schools are doing, instead of improvement of one’s own practices, moves to the forefront.

School leaders spend more time on marketing than on instructional leadership (Jabbar, 2016). I have seen the word “incentive” across multiple works related to charter schools and it causes me to question whether charter schools are in service to their own individual goals more than broader social justice goals. Market-based competition between charters and traditional public schools leads to concepts like incentives being discussed and problematic questions in a system supposedly committed to equality of opportunity. What are the incentives to locating a charter school here or locating it in another part of town? What are the incentives for providing transportation to students to attend a charter school and how will we afford to do so? These are the wrong questions for school leaders to be asking themselves. Instructional support for each student who walks through a school’s doors should always remain at the forefront of what is discussed within schools and about schools. In the context of the growth of competition, however, school leaders find themselves less concerned with sharing their effectiveness and more concerned with targeting particular audiences with symbolic and emotional messages (Lubienski, 2007). Chubb and Moe (1990) argue that individuals can make better choices for their children than a government and, when given the power to do so, will improve the educational system when low-quality providers are weeded out. However, this argument assumes that parents have access to the information about their child and the provider that is needed to make the most accurate choice (Stewart & Good, 2016).

The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) (2013) conducted an exhaustive analysis of charter schools across the nation and concluded that U.S. charter schools were not significantly better academically for students than their

traditional counterparts. Only 25% of U.S. charter schools exceeded TPS in reading and only 29% in math. Fifty-six percent of charters show no difference in a student's reading growth and the same lack of difference is seen in 40% of charters for math. Nineteen percent of charter schools perform worse than TPS in reading and 31% perform worse in math (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013). Competition, as it was claimed, was supposed to improve education for all. For those parents able to access choice options within their vicinity, and for those "left behind" in their traditional school, competition was expected to force school leaders to improve instruction, services, extracurricular options, and/or efficiency (Goldhaber, Guin, Henig, Hess, & Weiss, 2005; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). However, there is little evidence that those intentions have come to fruition. Instead, researchers consistently show that charter schools market themselves in ways that contribute to exacerbating inequalities by targeting more academically-skilled students instead of promoting diverse educational options that any student in the local community can access (Lubienski & Lee, 2016).

### **Recruiting and Marketing for Diversity**

Where policies allow for increased integration, however, Black students tend to achieve at a higher level. According to a number of studies, students of color who attended schools where Whites were the majority race had higher levels of achievement, lower drop-out rates, and lower truancy rates than their counterparts at majority-minority segregated schools (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Wells et al., 2009; Wohlstetter, Gonzales, & Wang, 2016). Rumberger and Palardy (2005) used the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) that began in 1988 and analyzed the data collected in the

study over a period of time using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM). They concluded that whom a person attends school with matters and, more specifically, the socioeconomic makeup of a school matters to parents. For poor and minority students, attending a more diverse school boosts achievement (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016). Bergman (2018) found that a desegregation plan that allows students of color to transfer to more affluent schools made up of more White students increased college enrollment for students of color.

Furthermore, a report from the Poverty & Race Research Action Council in 2012 described how students possessed less bias and discriminatory attitudes when attending a diverse school (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2012). Students in diverse settings had stronger critical-thinking skills and produced higher academic achievement gains as compared to students in more homogeneous settings. They were also more likely to develop stronger cross-racial trust and live in a diverse neighborhood 5 years after graduation (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2012; Mickelson, 2016; Wells et al., 2016).

In recent years across the nation, charter schools with a specific focus on increasing the diversity of their student body have opened up (Potter & Quick, 2018). *The Century Foundation* found roughly 200 that feature such a focus, though some of them had yet to achieve their stated goal (Potter & Quick, 2018). *The Francine Delaney New School* in Asheville, North Carolina has been recognized by *The Century Foundation* as a “Diverse by Design” charter school because of its mission statement, strategies for increasing diversity, expressed appreciation for diversity, and promotion of the benefits that a diverse learning environment has for its students (North Carolina

Department of Public Instruction, 2019). Diversity was defined by *The Century Foundation* as having no more than 70% of any single racial/ethnic group in the school. As I share in Chapter III, I defined a diverse school within my study as having no more than 50% of any one race or ethnic group within the school.

These schools, with an intentional focus on diversity, have employed inclusionary strategies to recruit additional students of color to their school. Jabbar and Wilson (2018) examined a subset of these schools through case studies in New Orleans and Minneapolis. They found that school leaders with missions to serve low-socioeconomic families in their immediate community had to be intentional with their recruitment efforts. Gentrification within these two urban areas, combined with the desires of middle- and high-income parents to engage their child with the theme of the school, created a need for intentionality. Local *Head Start* facilities and school fairs, for instance, were visited by one principal in New Orleans during the recruitment period. Another principal in New Orleans stated, “we feel a moral obligation to go out and make sure we’re reaching everyone; that we’re not overlooking families who just hear ‘international school’ and think ‘that’s not available to me’” (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018, p. 13).

Lottery systems are a common and legally constructed aspect of enrollment for most charter schools in each state. School leaders in New Orleans fought against a centralized enrollment system, like *OneApp*, believing it would greatly hinder their efforts to diversify. One principal noted that, at minimum, if they went to *OneApp*, that a minimum number of seats dedicated for low-SES students would be an absolute must.

As I share in Chapter V, Principal Patricia Singh at *Challenge Community School (CCS)* here in North Carolina is fighting for the same for her charter school. Such recruitment and policy efforts are not made to attract numbers to the lottery each year. As one principal in Minneapolis shared, word-of-mouth among networks of families is enough to drive up the numbers; this is about diversity (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018). He noted that *who* recruits is important too. Having people from specific communities lead the recruiting efforts as “cultural liaisons” was a strategic move (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018, p. 17).

Like decisions of who is put in front of families face-to-face, decisions about images chosen for the school website, for *Facebook*, the school newsletter, and other tools of public information and outreach are also strategic. Within a school-choice market, images provide both direct messages, like who is in the school, and more subtle messages, like that which is valued. The school leaders in New Orleans and Minneapolis who valued diversity within their school made strategic choices about images that were put out for public consumption.

Another charter school leader Jabbar and Wilson (2018) describe in their study limited the timeframe in which his school would accept applications. He recognized that more privileged families searched and applied early, often to several sites, and this gave them a natural advantage over low-SES families. To counter this, he recruited heavily in low-SES neighborhoods and communicated the school’s tight application window that was forthcoming to families he met. Once he felt confident he had a diverse pool of applications, he then opened up the process to everyone. He kept the window as tight as possible, while maintaining legal obligations, so as to recruit “just enough” (Jabbar &



Wilson, 2018, p. 14). Ideally, in his eyes, there would then be no need for a lottery; one that he felt would be saturated with more advantaged families.

Diversity considerations can come into play when school leaders determine the location of their school, but this too requires intentional direction. Oftentimes location is determined more by an existing need within an area or community. But when diversity is being considered, public transportation stops nearby and the history of the area are two points to weigh. In spite of best efforts to locate and serve families of color, school leaders within urban areas have also encountered the onset of gentrification within their city. For example, New Orleans experienced significant gentrification following Hurricane Katrina (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018).

What can be said with certainty is that a plan for diversity is necessary. Jabbar and Wilson (2018) encountered several school leaders in the two cities who possessed either no real plan or a rather haphazard approach, despite a desire for a diverse school. Defining how much diversity is important, as is the acknowledgment of challenges, like gentrification. Has diversity become a good to be obtained by privileged families within this new market? School leaders will need a plan in order to find success with their mission to serve families of color and/or students in poverty.

### **Conclusions from the Literature**

Alexander (2016) reminds all of us that “the imperatives of family, neighborhood, and school tend to be mutually reinforcing—privileging those already privileged and disadvantaging those already disadvantaged” unless individuals stay aware and actively seek to fight the injustice (p. 19). Walters (2014) conducted research and found that

while disadvantaged students are most likely to benefit from charter schools, they are significantly less likely to apply and enroll. Such a finding represents the heart of my research essentially. As seen in the literature reviewed in this chapter, there are forces at work that create disproportionate segregation between Whites and Blacks within North Carolina charter schools and policies implemented that undermine the potential of school choice within highly impacted communities. While there may be self-segregation at play, an insufficient or discriminatory marketing plan, coupled with policies that act like barriers to enrollment, also may be to blame for charter schools reproducing privilege. And even still, once students of color do enroll, schools must provide sufficient supports if these doors are to remain open. White graduates of charter schools are concentrated in the nation's 468 most well-funded, selective 4-year colleges and universities while Black and Hispanic students are more concentrated in the 3,250 least well-funded 2- and 4-year colleges (Chapman & Donnor, 2015). This discrepancy points to serious inequities in the reality of charter school reform.

Through my study and by adding to the existing literature, I seek to explore whether choice in schools within North Carolina communities is a realistic option for many families of color. And as the literature I discussed has illustrated, 80% minority schools create crippling deficits in achievement for students of color. Where diversity exists though, White students, Black students, and other racial or ethnic student groups excel. Hernandez-Cruz (2016) concluded his study by offering the NCDPI strategies that could be shared with charter schools across the state to better ensure enrollments that reasonably reflect the local school district. Building upon his study, I review the websites

of 15 charter schools in the state that are racially imbalanced with White students compared to the racially-diverse school districts within which they are located and 15 racially-diverse charter schools. I sought common themes among these sites which serve to message about the school so that these can be shared within literature. Awareness of these themes will add to the research conducted by Hernandez-Cruz, helping to promote greater diversity within North Carolina charter schools, and ultimately, true choice in local schools for all families. Interviews with four charter school administrators add additional depth to the study. Ultimately, I hope to show that messaging plays an important role in enrollment practices. I turn in the next chapter to a detailed description of my methodology for this study.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to investigate approaches to marketing and messaging by North Carolina charter schools and the impact these have on access for families. I was interested in barriers, both explicit and hidden, to charter school enrollment. The study is meant to provide meaningful answers to the following two guiding research questions:

- What messages do North Carolina charter schools communicate to the public through their marketing practices?
- How do charter school leaders discuss issues of marketing and enrollment for their schools?

With these questions in mind, I conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 30 charter school websites in North Carolina and interviews with four charter school principals of schools from these 30. I selected the websites intentionally. The first 15 websites belong to schools whose White student population is 80% or greater in spite of the fact that the Local Education Agency (LEA) in which they are located is racially diverse. “Racially diverse,” for the 15 traditional public-school districts (LEAs) involved here, is defined as having a White student population at or below 50%. I used a critical constructivist lens in the critical discourse analysis of these websites, similar to the strategy employed by Wilson and Carlsen in 2016. As I discussed in Chapter II, Wilson

and Carlsen (2016) used a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to show how schools implicitly message about race, culture, and diversity. Additionally, they analyzed how the concepts of academic achievement and individualized learning were used to signal who belongs in the school. For my second group of 15 charter school websites, I chose to look at the other end of the spectrum, namely schools that are racially diverse. For these schools, “racially diverse” indicated charter schools with a leading racial subgroup of students that was less than 50% of the overall student population in the school. In my study, I determined the common themes among each of these two groups of charter school websites that may signal to families who belongs in the school.

Given that school websites are a significant source of information on the school, they can certainly be considered marketing tools (DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Jennings, 2010; Lubienski, 2007). The words, images, and communicated policies carry significance in the way the local community receives them. “In an [educational] system of market-based competition, schools must compete for a minimum share of student enrollment in order to remain financially solvent” (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016, p. 24). Competition forces schools to find a segment of the market to which they can attract support (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Marketing materials, like the school website, take on added significance as sources of information on schools for families, especially when school report cards and other sources of data are less readily available (Glazerman & Dotter, 2017). Additionally, some families may find some materials difficult to read and comprehend so the “feel” of a school moves to the forefront and this emotion can be

derived from messages conveyed by the school in its website (DiMartino & Jessen, 2014; Jennings, 2010; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016).

Segregation of students concerns me because the positive effects of a diverse student body for students and the negative effects of segregation have been well documented in the research. School choice should not exacerbate patterns of segregation, but thus far, it appears to do just that unfortunately (Bifulco et al., 2009; Garcia, 2008). By contributing my analysis of implicit and explicit messaging on the websites, I afford school leaders, state officials, and legislators a better understanding of how school segregation may be occurring within these communities due to specific marketing approaches.

The websites were a logical choice to analyze as a marketing tool for this study. First, websites, typically with all the relevant information about a school that one would need, are easily accessible. Families can access the internet via a home or business computer, via public access at a library, or with a smartphone. Second, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) supports school websites as a means of communication with families by providing the website links on their own website. This support by the NCDPI signifies the importance of the school website as primary location for information on each school. Lastly, charter schools aim to attract families into their school. They can advertise in the local press or hold an Open House. However, perhaps the best way though to reach the greatest number of families at any given time is via the school's website.

Websites offer a window into how a school wants to be understood within the community; through symbolic representations and word choices, they attract or deter potential families (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). In treating charter school websites as qualitative documents, I add to existing literature in which school websites are analyzed critically as vehicles of discourse (Drew, 2013; Wilkins, 2012; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). School websites can be analyzed critically as texts that evoke and employ a range of social and cultural meanings (Wilson & Carlsen, 2016).

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

For my methodology, I drew initial inspiration and insights from Stitzlein's (2013) critical discourse analysis of for-profit charter schools' websites, curricula, initial charters, and documented interviews with their founders. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a methodology that researchers use to identify correlations between language and social practices. It is also used to analyze how texts are distributed and consumed, practices at the heart of advertisements of schools, including their websites and brochures (Rogers, 2011). Researchers who perform critical discourse analyses believe language and communication are never individualistic in nature; instead our discourse positions us within a power structure in which all things are interconnected (Hernandez, 2016).

Stitzlein's (2013) interest was in citizenship education for students and whether democratic purposes could be reconciled with the policies and practices within for-profit public charter schools. For her critical discourse analysis, Stitzlein (2013) explored micro, macro, and meso level structures in relation to charter school websites. At the micro level, the concept of "self" came out in her critical discourse analysis of for-profit

charters. Rather than educating students toward civic responsibility and stewardship, she revealed a proclivity within these schools to promote the advancement of each individual student. I addressed the concept of individualism earlier in my review of the relevant literature on this topic. The schools in her study regularly included language in their publications like “individualized learning customized to each child’s needs . . . to help students find their own path” (Stitzlein, 2013, p. 259). On a macro level, Stitzlein (2013) found contradiction in the way the for-profit charter schools she studied used the word “freedom.” The freedom of individual families to pull their child from traditional public schools “leaves behind the communal concerns of the welfare state and the notions of citizenship as concern for others and the common good” (Stitzlein, 2013, p. 259). While “freedom” is their chosen word to describe what is occurring, privilege within a power-based structure is the invisible reality. Lastly, Stitzlein (2013) conducted a meso-level reading to see how marketing materials were constructed and consumed within and by the charter school community. For this level of reading, Stitzlein (2013) looked at how the messages of individual advancement and freedom from government-regulated schools came out in charter school advertisement and marketing materials. Testimonials to “customer success” and test score touting were very common for her to see at this level of analysis (Stitzlein, 2013, p. 260). Her methods provided a strong model, but I also found Wilson’s and Carlsen’s (2016) use of Fairclough’s three-dimensional methodology informative as well.

Fairclough (1995) sees discourse as a blend of text, discursive practices, and social practices. Text is that which is intentionally chosen and communicated and is the



object of analysis. Discursive practices are the processes involved in the creating and receiving of the text and these are analyzed interpretively. The last dimension, social practices, is understood as the social context (cultural, political, or economic) that bears upon the text and dictates much with the discursive practices. Documents, according to Fairclough (1995), do not just represent the world, but help to shape it. Wilson and Carlsen (2016) point out in their study that school websites do not simply share a field of choice options, but rather “they act to shape the availability, meaning, and nature of those choices. Websites, in effect, both describe and shape choices” (p. 30).

### **Developing My Study**

The decision to analyze charter school websites was one of the first choices that I made in designing my dissertation study, for all the reasons stated in the previous sections of this chapter. The websites provide insight for answering the primary research question of how charter schools message themselves to the public. I developed the research questions for this study from a pilot study I conducted in 2016. I further focused and refined my study when I discovered a better route than analysis of *each* charter school across North Carolina. In the next two subsections, I share insights from my pilot study and the process I underwent to better develop the current study.

#### **Pilot Study**

As I began to study this topic, I conducted a small-scale pilot to explore two questions:

- What are the similarities and differences between a traditional public school and a charter school?

- What impact, if any, is felt by a traditional public school when a charter school opens nearby?

I began with two interviews—one with a charter school principal and the other with a traditional public-school principal. I transcribed and analyzed the interviews thematically. Along with these two interviews, I also conducted two qualitative observations—one at a K-8 charter school where I toured the school side-by-side with an administrator and the other at a traditional elementary school’s Math Night. I wrote field notes and analyzed these for themes as well.

Three themes emerged from this work. First, the presence of charter schools created an air of competition instead of collaboration in the district where the two schools I visited were located (which some might argue was the intention of those who founded charter schools as bastions of innovation). This first theme led me to think about sales messages as a key issue for the dissertation. For example, charter schools often proclaim something like “Ninety-two percent of our students on average are proficient each year” on a particular test, which functions as a type of sales message. From a critical constructivist standpoint, I believe collaboration entails people learning from other people within a social construct, but competition carries with it a basis of power over another. A traditional public school and a public charter school should not be at odds with one another. Messages that highlight individual achievements may work against inclusivity, in part because the goal is to separate from the pack instead of embracing the pack as like kin. Traditional public schools have begun marketing themselves to the public as well.

The second theme from my work involved the notion that a charter school is a private school without the price tag. Charter schools across the state seemingly use whatever available space they can find to house kids, at least in their initial years. In my own experiences prior to conducting the pilot study, I did not see charter school facilities presenting like private schools. I wondered, at the time, why parents would send their children to a renovated warehouse, like the one I visited during the pilot study, that has no playground, music room, or other similar learning space that traditional public schools possess?

The third theme to emerge within my pilot study was that of exclusionary policies in place at the charter school. The charter school in my pilot study had it written in their charter that bus transportation would not be provided to students. In addition, lunch was made available by way of a local restaurant, but the price per day was five dollars. These were two policy areas I then chose to explore in my larger study.

The pilot study allowed me the opportunity to assess methodological approaches. I discovered that interviews with charter school principals were not only enjoyable but would also afford me the most direct answers to questions I had about marketing and messaging. With that said, I also confirmed that I first wanted to review the websites in order to build a rich data set and generate additional questions for the interviews.

### **Evolving Research Design**

My original plan for the study was to critically analyze each of the over 150 charter school websites in North Carolina (at the time) and interview four of the charter school principals. Drawing upon a variety of sources, I developed a rubric to evaluate the

degree to which inclusivity was modeled on each school's website. My plan was to rate a series of items from zero to three on the rubric. There were eighteen specific items I identified as important to examine on each of the sites. Some of these items were, for example, whether transportation was stated as being available, the diversity seen within pictures on the site, and whether diversity among the student body was explicitly stated as a goal of the school. My plan was to rate each of the schools and make connections between the "inclusivity score" I calculated and their racial demographics. I would then choose two principals from the top twenty and two from the bottom twenty of scores to interview to enrich the findings of the study.

The problem with this initial plan was the subjectivity of the inclusivity rubric that I designed. How could diversity within pictures on a website be defined and measured, and who could say that the way I would measure it would be the way another person might measure it? Moreover, how could I measure it on a numerical scale? One of the items I intended to look for was school uniforms. While one person might feel school uniforms communicate an elitist mentality, a different person might view them as a great strategy for improving school safety or the emotional wellbeing of students. I found that my initial rubric, while it gave me areas to study, was quite subjective. The reliability of the data would likely be called into question because the rubric might produce ten different scores among ten different people.

I found myself at a crossroads with my methodology due to the subjectivity of my rubric. While trying to figure out what I was going to do, I took a slight detour and decided to look at whether I could even access demographic data easily on the North

Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) website when the time would come. It was here that I discovered the study the NCDPI had commissioned with Hernandez-Cruz (2016). The Hernandez-Cruz study guided me back to the tenets of a qualitative study and reminded me that qualitative studies add to existing literature by deepening understanding of a topic and by generating new questions to be explored in future research. Coding and thematic exploration as part of a critical discourse analysis of 30 charter school websites adds depth to that which we already know and informs both school leaders and legislators in North Carolina and beyond.

### **Methodology**

I utilized two research methods in this study in order to answer the research questions. First, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of 30 charter school websites in North Carolina, divided into two groups of 15: schools with student demographics that reasonably reflected the local demographics and schools that were not representatively diverse. Secondly, I interviewed four North Carolina charter school principals; two from each group of 15 schools.

#### **Charter School Website Analysis**

For the first part of this study, I conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 30 charter school websites in North Carolina. I chose the first 15 schools because they had a White student population at or greater than 80% during the 2016-2017 school year, in spite of the fact that the Local Education Agency (LEA) in which they were located was racially diverse (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2017). I define “racially diverse” as having a White student population at or below 50%. A gap of

greater than 30 percentage points between the White student population at the charter school and the percentage of White students in the traditional public-school district where the charter school is located is significant from a demographic perspective. Because of this racial gap, I chose these 15 charter schools, all of which have 350 students or more. Other North Carolina charter schools have a higher percentage of White students or a larger racial gap, but they have significantly fewer students as well. The 15 I chose have 350 or more students which means that any gap that exists is that much more significant. It is suggestive of White flight and signifies that I reviewed charter schools in which there was a great difference demographically between the students enrolled there and the community that surrounds the school. It suggests that true school choice may not be the reality for many families in the vicinity of the charter school. With a goal of this study being an in-depth look at how marketing and messaging by North Carolina charter schools impacts families, it is useful to explore schools that are not demographically inclusive to see what might contribute to this segregation. These 15 charter schools were located in nine different traditional public-school districts.

If the first 15 were messaging themselves through common themes that contributed to their lack of diversity, then what were the schools that were significantly more racially diverse doing to attract their students? For my next 15 charter school websites, I drew from North Carolina charter schools that were racially diverse. A “racially diverse” charter school, for the purposes of my study, was defined here as having a leading racial demographic subgroup that is 50% or less of the entire school. This signified that no one racial subgroup of students made up more than half of the

school, regardless of what race carried this highest percentage. I chose 15 of the most racially diverse charter schools in North Carolina, all of which also had 350 or more students. In fact, six of these 15 charter schools were actually *more* racially diverse than the local school district where they resided.

I protect the actual identities of the 30 charter schools throughout my study. I assigned each school a pseudonym. Basic demographic information about each school is provided in the tables below. Table 2 contains the 15 charter schools with a student body consisting of 80% or more White students, the percentage of White students among its student body, and the percentage of White students attending school within the local school district where the charter school is located. Table 3 shows the schools that reasonably reflect the diversity of their district.

Table 2

Charter Schools with 80% or Greater Student Body, and Percentages of White Students Within the Charter Schools and Within the School District

<b>North Carolina Charter School</b>	<b>Percentage of White Students Within the Charter School</b>	<b>Percentage of White Students Within the Local School District (or LEA)</b>
Beautiful Day Charter	85.46	46.59
Dogwood Avenue School	86.07	28.61
Franklin Preparatory School	84.47	39.15
Future Leaders Academy	84.60	47.03
Mission School	88.28	45.72
Mullins Charter	94.74	37.13
Paulus Preparatory School	83.88	47.03

Table 2

Cont.

<b>North Carolina Charter School</b>	<b>Percentage of White Students Within the Charter School</b>	<b>Percentage of White Students Within the Local School District (or LEA)</b>
Pearson Charter	82.46	50.27
The Challenge Community School	82.00	51.30
The Champion Center	81.31	51.30
The Elite Education School	86.97	47.03
The Goodnight Academy	81.48	44.88
The Next Man Up Academy	81.53	47.03
The Wooten School	81.56	47.03
Warsaw Memorial Charter	83.50	47.03

Table 3

Charter Schools That Reflect District Diversity

<b>North Carolina Charter School</b>	<b>Highest Percentage Racial Subgroup Among Students in the School</b>
Allentown Charter	39.41% (Black students)
Battleground Charter	49.59 (White)
Chilly Forest School of Excellence	43.15 (Black)
First Wave Charter	41.58 (Black)
Hall Academy	48.92 (Black)
Holloway Community School	46.98 (White)
Isenhour Academic Center	38.75 (White)
Mitchell Memorial Academy	41.72 (White)
Northern Movement Charter	43.44 (White)



Table 3

Cont.

North Carolina Charter School	Highest Percentage Racial Subgroup Among Students in the School
Oaktown Academy	40.77 (Asian)
Reynolds Charter	44.38 (Black)
Sanderson Charter	49.21 (White)
Southern Charter	49.95 (Black)
The Newton School	46.79 (White)
The Open Door Center of Excellence	42.53 (Black)

As I uncovered how these 30 charter schools marketed themselves to the public, I examined the images, texts, and links of their websites critically to see how they reflected the students they were hoping to attract. I envisioned this work through a critical lens because policymakers find themselves in a position of power over others. They either contribute to a hegemonic state or fight to prevent it. Charter schools have the freedom to establish both policies and procedures for their daily operations and marketing strategies for attracting families. Are charter schools embracing their responsibility as a public school to serve all in the community in an inclusive manner?

The website analysis I employed for my methodology was inspired by Wilson and Carlsen's (2016) work in which they analyzed and coded 55 charter school websites and Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional view of CDA: description, interpretation, and explanation. I began with an open-ended phase of analysis. During this phase, I kept an electronic document for recording what I read or saw on a school's website of relevance

on one of my two computer screens, while the website was on the other screen. I transferred an extensive amount of text and observation to my recording document. I included the initials of the school and, in some cases, if the finding was significant or unique, the specific location on the website that I found the text or image. The length of narrative-type recordings ranged, per school, from one half of a page for the ones with little online content to, in some instances, two plus pages. Although the “description” phase of analysis was intended to be open, the focus of the study (messaging that may lead to increased segregation with these schools) most likely conditioned my reading of the websites. Additionally, previous research efforts provided a lens through which to look at these websites. Some of the potential messages and wording I looked for included, but were not limited to:

- “diversity” used in the school slogan and/or mission statement
- “underserved communities”
- “individualized”
- “unique learners”
- “diverse student needs”
- “academic excellence” or “academic rigor”
- “achievement gap”
- “safety”
- emphasis on specific groups of students
- multiculturalism
- pictures of the school’s actual students

- presence of school uniforms
- provisions for transportation
- provisions for free or reduced lunch
- other financial aid opportunities
- daily school schedule considerations (early release, etc.)
- school application considerations (ease of access, ease of completion, length of window, etc.)
- requirements for parents (volunteer hours, etc.)
- limiting factors for incoming students (behavior plans, etc.)
- resource and service availability for special-need or language learners (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016; Lubienski, 2007; Lubienski & Lee, 2016; Welner, 2013; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016)

I then followed the initial phase with a more analytic phase of coding that was connected to Fairclough's (1995) interpretation phase. Analysis of the websites involved large amounts of initial data, followed by subsequent classification, sorting, and interpretation. Lichtman (2013) describes it as "sorting and sifting" (p. 248) in order to reduce what could be 100 codes down to a more manageable 15-20 codes that can help organize the eventual findings.

Within this second phase, the analysis became more focused on discourse of diversity and race, as well as statements of policies and practices at the school. Again drawing from Wilson and Carlsen (2016), I ran my descriptions from phase one through a filter, using questions like:

- How does the website understand and position its audience?
- How are discourses of race and diversity portrayed through visual information?
- What school policies and practices are likely to catch the attention of prospective parents (p. 30)?

The method that worked for me was to create a new electronic document in which the prominent themes from the text and images of the websites became headers. I moved findings from my initial document underneath these “theme headers.” When there was not enough data to justify a theme within my published study, I moved on, unless the finding was unique in some way and I felt my reader would benefit from its inclusion in Chapter IV. This phase of the analysis work then brought clarity to the framework for the final phase—the explanation phase. Chapter IV was structured in such a way that you, the reader, could grasp the major findings from two groups of 15 school websites.

What follows are two sample website analyses. The analysis I conducted with these two informed my eventual process within the full study as well as some considerations of trustworthiness for it. In what follows, I italicized words that were either featured repeatedly on the websites or carried significance in relation to the literature on issues surrounding diversity and equity within charter schools.

**Sample website analysis #1.** *Beautiful Day Charter School*, from the first set of 15 North Carolina charter schools in my study, could be described as a school that desires great things for its students, but whose policies may limit who can enroll. A school with a White enrollment that was 39 percentage points greater than the local school district

(85.46% versus 46.59%), the pictures on the school's website were most certainly indicative of this difference. *Beautiful Day Charter* featured an extensive campus with outdoor learning experiences available, as well as a focus on student growth.

*Beautiful Day* messaged an aim to teach the *whole child* and “draw upon all his gifts” so that he or she reaches his or her *greatest potential*. *Personal responsibility, both socially and academically* as it was described, is nurtured at the school and students should have a *passion for excellence*. Each child is allowed *freedom of choice in setting individual goals* that lead to *academic excellence* and embrace his or her *curiosity, creativity, and imagination*. Teachers know a student's *personal learning style* and students are taught to *take risks and not fear failure*, to *refine their emotional responses*, to *stand up for themselves*, and *respect the natural diversity of human beings*.

*Beautiful Day's* emphasis on *community* as an “international school” was prevalent throughout the site. The school communicated a desire to be an *environment rich in warmth, kindness, and respect* that hones a student's *lifelong commitment to give something back through service*. Students are taught to *understand and respect those who hold different beliefs* from their own and to be *aware of issues facing our world*. The school encourages families to *share their cultural traditions, travel, and traditional festivals* so that students become *critical and caring members of a pluralistic society*. The site messaged that *changing our world lies in each of us* and featured a video specifically devoted to valuing diversity. *Beautiful Day* offered both a Parenting Center and an Ambassador Parent Program, along with a monthly class and community meeting. The school shared its desire to maintain equity within the classrooms, to offer a

continuum of special education and related services, and to provide or pursue financial aid for families in need.

Nevertheless, there was much to found in *Beautiful Day's* website that helped to explain the lack of diversity within the school. First, the school offered up a series of questions for parents to ask themselves to see if their child would be a good fit for the school. Is my child an independent worker? Is my child able to follow directions? Is my child able to accept responsibility? Is my child able to focus on tasks and ignore distractions? Am I, as a parent, willing to be active in my child's education? Am I, as a parent, comfortable with alternative learning methods? Any or all of these questions could potentially stop some parents from taking another step toward choosing this school. Secondly, some Black parents may have been turned off by the school's advertising of a field trip to a local plantation and the "cultivating of an appreciation for family and community heritage." Somewhat odd was the school's mention of doing dishes, sewing, ironing, and setting of tables; skills that individuals may need, but why are these messaged on a public charter school's website?

Contradictory statements were present on the site and may have been most noticeable for low-socioeconomic families. Even though financial aid was mentioned, there were costs associated with *Beautiful Day Charter School* that could limit this school as a choice for families. Expenses at *Beautiful Day* occurred in a variety of ways. First, *tuition* was necessary for some programs. Next, parents were expected to contribute to the school's Annual Fund and needed to give at least *twenty hours of volunteer hours per academic year*. A requirement of volunteer hours is an enormous limiting factor for

parents and guardians who work more than one job to make ends meet or lack transportation to and from the school. The school messaged that it was *dependent upon donations by parents* and the *generosity of parents*. That statement alone could be enough to turn away low-SES families. The school went on to message that parents must ensure that *all extracurriculars are paid in full*. Before- and after-school care was available, but for a price that might be exclusionary. School uniforms were in place and a clothing closet for families in need existed, but I found myself wondering, based upon my own experiences as a public school leader within Title I schools, is it enough for families in need at *Beautiful Day Charter*? Lunch was the responsibility of the parent and there was no mention of school buses for transportation to and from school. In spite of several admirable approaches and compelling rhetoric around diversity, the demographics at Beautiful Day raise an eyebrow; demographics to which its policies, practices, and website messages may contribute.

**Sample website analysis #2.** *Allentown Charter* was a racially diverse charter school from the second set of 15 schools in my study. Its Black students made up 39.41% of the student body and that was the largest group. *Allentown's* website began with a brief video presentation in which the student body was the focus. The images on the website largely indicated only Black and White students at the school (which may be representative of the local community); the students appeared cooperative and happy.

The school promoted *academic excellence, positive character, service, and leadership* as its primary pillars. *Student engagement* is a goal via a *hands-on workshop model*. *Twenty-first century skills* are developed within a *challenging* setting in which a

*strong work ethic* is expected from each student. It messaged as a positive behavior support school that fosters *Responsible, Respectful, Safe, and Resourceful* behavior. Students are *encouraged and empowered to take ownership over their own learning at Allentown*. The Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) was promoted as active at the school and parents were not mandated to participate in their child's school, but rather, they were encouraged to do so.

Overall, I found several important pieces of evidence to suggest a highly inclusive school. First and foremost, free and reduced meals were messaged as available for families in need and bus transportation to and from the school was offered. Special education (EC for Exceptional Children in North Carolina), Academically Gifted (AIG), and English-Language Learner (ELL) services were offered at this school that stated it is *for all types of learners*. A visitor to the site should not have difficulty finding detailed information regarding these services because the information was readily available. Non-discrimination statements and documentation have been included on the site, as well as *And Justice for All* posters. Before- and after-school care was indicated as available (for a fee) as well.

The PTO page and the student handbook both spoke to the desire for community at the school. Quotes from the PTO leadership include *"Be the change you want to see in the world"* (Gandhi) and one from the book of Matthew, *"Treat others as you wish to be treated."* The PTO leadership requested that prospective parents bring their *time, talents, and feedback* to the organization. Within the student handbook, expectations include: 1.



Discover and create connections between each other, 2. Take time to get to know one another, and 3. Understand the needs of others.

Within *Allentown's* website, there were a few policies communicated that might potentially deter a family from joining or remaining at the school. The school did utilize uniforms; a policy that some families might find difficult to afford or sustain. There was no immediate indication on the website that assistance with uniforms was available for families in need. Additionally, the school communicated on the website that it reserved the right to refuse admission to any student applying who had been expelled or had failed to meet the academic requirements of the grade for which he or she was applying. And lastly, families were asked to re-apply each year; a policy that some families may have found to be cumbersome and hence, burdensome.

From an overall perspective, *Allentown* presented as inclusive of all students through its images on the website, its choice of text, and its policies. It was difficult to know whether uniforms (for which a link to *Land's End Company* was provided on the site) presented a barrier, but based upon the evidence shared above, it was likely the school had established levels of assistance for families in need. It appeared, to this analyst, that *Allentown* was a charter school quite accessible for families in the community it served.

### **Interviews with Four Charter School Principals**

Choosing to interview four North Carolina charter school principals was an easy and logical choice, following both my experiences with my pilot study and my website analysis. The findings from the interviews added richness to my overall study and helped

answer additional questions. After I completed my coding and analysis of the 30 websites, I was then ready to select principals from two schools from the first 15 and two from the second to visit for the interviews. The purpose of this portion of my study was, as stated before, to arrive at answers to my second research question: How do charter school leaders discuss marketing and enrollment for their schools?

I chose the leaders with school websites that stood out for a particular reason. From the first group of schools with predominantly White students, I chose to interview Principal Patricia Singh from *Challenge Community School* and Principal Jim Anderson at *Warsaw Memorial Charter*. *Challenge Community School* appealed to me because the images on their website featured the Whiteness, if you will, of their school. It was quite overwhelming, as I will describe in more detail in Chapter IV. With that said, however, text on their website spoke positively of diversity. This interplay was intriguing to me when making my selections. *Warsaw*, I chose, because I came across messaging on their website that had an elitist, private school feel to it. I wanted to hear whether the school's principal viewed *Warsaw* in the same way. Would the marketing via the website match up with the rhetoric of the school's primary leader? As for the racially-diverse group of schools, I chose to interview Principal Roger Jackson at *Battleground Charter* and Principal Barbara Joyner with *Hall Academy*. *Battleground Charter's* website addressed the experiences students would enjoy at the school, but overall the website caught my attention for its general lack of intentional marketing for diversity. Other than a visual about International Month at the school, there was very little else that would suggest a school with the racial diversity present at *Battleground*. I sensed an opportunity to fill in

the missing information, if possible, via the interview. And lastly, I chose *Hall Academy* because my website analysis revealed it to be part of an Educational Management Organization, or EMO. I was able to determine this fact because its website was structured identically to others I reviewed and even contained some of the same images. I felt it would add richness to my data set to include an interview with a school leader from an EMO-led institution. Unlike *Battleground Charter*, *Hall Academy* displayed a variety of students on their website and I desired to hear more about whether the image selections were intentional or not.

For the interviews, I met the requirement of IRB approval beforehand, outlining within my proposal the details of my plan. Having earned approval, I invited participants via my university email, describing the nature of my study and providing informed consent forms to each of them at that time. The consent form communicated that involvement in my study would not do harm to them, as well as their ability to withdraw from the study at any point in the process. I conducted the interviews, at their request, at each of their schools and I recorded each with a handheld, digital recorder. I conducted three of the four in one day, while the fourth one with Barbara Joyner at *Hall Academy* required a little more time to arrange. All four participants were cordial and welcoming to me during the time I spent at their school. Each of four met with me on an instructional day at their school so they gave me the agreed upon time of 45 to 60 minutes. I met with each of them in their office. A somewhat humorous note to me, as I too serve as a school leader, was that some degree of distraction to the participant occurred during each session, whether it was simply a hand wave back to students

passing by on the other side of the office window or the receptionist needing a question answered. These were just minor distractions, however, and did not seem to inhibit the interview. Each participant seemed open and was candid in her/his responses.

I hired a transcription service to transcribe each interview verbatim and shared the transcript with each participant so that each could review it for accuracy and have peace-of-mind for what they had shared with me. As with the school names, the names of the principals are pseudonyms to provide anonymity to each participant.

The interview guide that I utilized is provided below. The interview questions I adapted from literature I reviewed, primarily the work by Jabbar (2014), were aimed at marketing practices, both within and beyond the school website, and policies set by the charter school leadership. Merriam (1988) discusses various approaches to conducting effective interviews. For example, one might choose questions that (a) involve context, (b) employ hypothetical situations, (c) provide an opposing view, (d) request the description of an ideal situation, and/or (e) require the participant to react to some of what he or she has said during the interview. Merriam also cautions that questions which lack a singular focus may impact the participant's clarity, while recall questions can frustrate the participant or cause negative feelings.

### **Charter School Principal Interview Questions**

(Adapted from and with permission from Jabbar, 2014)

#### **(Background)**

How did you become a principal at this school?

When did this school open and who wrote the charter?

What are you most proud of here at \_\_\_\_\_ Charter School?

**(Enrollment)**

What are the racial and socioeconomic demographics of your school currently?

Please describe the application and/or enrollment process for \_\_\_\_\_ Charter School to me.

(if necessary) What is the window of time allotted for applications to come in?

(if necessary) How is the application window advertised to the local community?

(if necessary) Are the applications available in both English and Spanish?

(if necessary) Is proof of citizenship required as part of your enrollment process?

Are there any policies here at \_\_\_\_\_ Charter School that you believe make it easier or harder for certain students to attend here?

**(Competition)**

What are other schools that parents consider in this area for their child, other than yours and what type of school are those other schools?

What are your thoughts on why parents choose your school over another option?

Ok, flipping that and considering students who are enrolled with you already, but choose to leave your school, what are some of the reasons why they have made that choice?

Do you do anything to attract and enroll more students?

Do your strategies seem to work better with one type of student over another?

Do you think your school *competes* for students?

(If yes) How do you make \_\_\_\_\_ Charter School more competitive?

(programming, school mission, marketing, school day logistics)

**(Marketing)**

(If no or otherwise) Ok, that's interesting. I'm curious then, how do parents find out about \_\_\_\_\_ Charter School?

Where specifically do you do this advertisement or outreach?

What's your opinion of how parents obtain information about school choices in this area?

Do you think your school and/or its advertising materials appeal to one type of student over another type?

Are you actively seeking to increase the overall diversity of \_\_\_\_\_ Charter School?

(If yes) Why is that important and how are you going about this effort?

(If no and if necessary) Please elaborate a little more on that for me.

Who manages the school website and how often?

How intentional are the decisions about text and images on the website?

On the website, \_\_\_\_\_ can be read/seen by visitors. Are you aware of this and what are your thoughts about it?

These four interviews were critical to this study. While the results of the website analyses rested with me as the researcher who conducted the analysis, the responses from interviews provided an important perspective on marketing, messaging, and diversity awareness because they included the words and thoughts of charter school principals themselves. Once I had the printed transcriptions in my hands, I went through the same three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) that I had with my website analyses: description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough, 1995). For the description phase, I underlined relevant text in each transcript and made notes to myself

in the margins. Given that there were four school leaders in this section of my research, versus two groups of 15 schools, I found it much easier to work with paper/pencil than electronic documents on the computer screen. I wanted to be able to see the notes from each transcript on one sheet of paper, so I transferred the underlined text to a sheet of printer paper turned landscape view. I wrote small, but still had to place the transferred text of the fourth school leader on the backside. Nevertheless, this view, for the interpretation phase, aided me immensely. I was more easily able to pull out themes and interesting discoveries by organizing in this way. I share the findings from my interviews in Chapter V.

### **Trustworthiness**

Multiple sources of data contribute immensely to the trustworthiness of research findings and, as already discussed, I collected data via a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 30 North Carolina charter school websites and interviews with four charter school principals. Wilson and Carlsen (2016) point out in their study that school websites do not simply share a field of choice options, but rather “they act to shape the availability, meaning, and nature of those choices. Websites, in effect, both describe and shape choices” (p. 30). The study also allowed me to hear from school leaders about the local public, whom they desire to reach with their communication, and how diverse a student body they envision for their school. The data shared in Chapters IV and V, from two sets of polar-opposite schools and interviews respectively, allowed me to triangulate my data. Triangulation involves the researcher collecting evidence from different sources to identify themes in a study and it strengthens the validity (or accuracy) of a qualitative

study (Creswell, 2016). My typed notes from the websites and the interview transcriptions were two types of sources that Creswell (2016) says are used to triangulate. When I coded for themes, I was also engaged in triangulation, according to Creswell (2016).

For the website analysis, having conducted a sample website analysis already, I understood better the importance of framing my own thinking, with the approaches of Fairclough and Stitzlein as guides. Fairclough (1995) sees discourse as a blend of text, discursive practices, and social practices. Text is that which is intentionally chosen and communicated and is the object of analysis. Text analysis was at the heart of my study, but I considered the social context of the schools as well in the analysis in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of my data. I further solidified the trustworthiness of my data by analyzing each website from a micro, macro, and meso level like Stitzlein (2013) did with her own analysis (as discussed earlier in the chapter). To summarize, Stitzlein (2013) found a theme of individual advancement at the micro level (with what was communicated in black and white by the schools), a theme of freedom at the macro level (in what was communicated more globally across all pages), and then examined what products these two themes produced at the meso level that could also be used to market the school. I used a similar structure within my study in order to show how the schools are messaging and marketing themselves within their localities.

Also aiding the trustworthiness of the study, the transcript for each individual interview was shared with that participant to verify the accuracy of it. This step of my research process would be considered a degree of member checking (Merriam, 1988;



Creswell, 2016). Member checking can provide another opportunity for data analysis through participants' reactions to the transcript of their responses, especially if they have feedback that is not just about the accuracy of the transcription. New insights may be shared, outside of the formal interviews, that can then be included in the published findings (Hunzicker, 2010). Two of my participants responded simply that their transcript appeared accurate and two elected not to respond, but nevertheless, their transcripts were provided to them as an accuracy check.

Further adding to the trustworthiness and ethics of the study, in the process of coding and interpreting the interview transcripts, I identified several direct quotes to share in Chapter V. Direct quotes help to reveal meaning as they are straight from the source and they contribute to the densely written reports indicative of the qualitative tradition (Lichtman, 2013).

My positionality in this study is also significant. I am a school principal. My everyday role within my school matches that of my interview participants. With this study, I had a choice to make of whether to present as a traditional public-school leader to the charter school principals or simply present as a University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) doctoral student. When I sent the invitation email from my UNCG email account, I presented solely as a doctoral candidate. Given the unfortunate competition for students that has arisen in most states between TPS and charter schools, mainly due to the structure established for charter school funding, I could not be certain I would be granted an interview if I presented as a TPS principal. After meeting and spending time with the four charter school leaders I interviewed, I felt confident that I

could have presented as both a TPS leader and a doctoral student. If and when asked by a participant about myself, I informed her or him that I was a TPS principal. Sharing this aspect of myself did not appear to alter the openness of my four participants or the amount of time they provided me. I share this information, though, to say that I better understood their responses because we speak the same schooling language.

Lastly, in what I find to be a form of peer debriefing, as described by Creswell (2016), my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Kathy Hytten, reviewed my study as I worked through it over this past year. These “check-ins” were invaluable to me and significantly aided the trustworthiness of this study. Given her expertise in the field of educational research, Dr. Hytten was a major resource to me, particularly with pointing out areas in my study where gaps or holes seemed to exist that required my attention. “This peer can provide support, play devil’s advocate, play challenger, and help refine the study,” states Creswell (2016) and Dr. Hytten served in these capacities for me (p. 194).

### **Positionality and Subjectivity**

Researchers must maintain a transparent awareness of how their background, perspective, and research interests affect the interactions with participants and analysis of the data (Creswell, 2016; Lichtman, 2013). It is impossible to completely divorce one’s self from the roles we play, the experiences, and the feelings while living. As I stated in Chapter I, losing students to the charter school in the locality where I previously worked was difficult for me to reconcile. Several of them had been students at the elementary school where I was principal and I had established caring relationships with them. I knew them well and I knew their parents through a variety of interactions at awards days,

skate nights, field trips, and other moments. I continued to see them, after their departure to the charter school, around town or at the Friday night football game and, I suppose, I felt betrayed. For this study, it was critical that I recognized these feelings and acknowledged them. This reflection, or reflexivity as Creswell (2016) explains it, further aids the validity of my study because the reader can better understand my researcher perspective and interpretation.

### **Remaining Chapters Overview**

Documents, according to Fairclough (1995), do not just represent the world, but help to shape it. In this study, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of 30 charter school websites and enrich the findings from that half of the study through interviews with four charter school principals. I have laid out the methods I used to conduct the study in this third chapter. The final three chapters of my dissertation include the findings of my research and my conclusions. In Chapter IV, the first of two chapters within which I present data that I collected and analyzed for this study, I share what I found in analyzing the 30 charter school websites. Chapter V is devoted to my analysis of the four interviews. Finally, in Chapter VI, I tie it all together to draw conclusions, discuss implications, and make recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS FROM THE CHARTER SCHOOL WEBSITES**

In this chapter I discuss the findings from my analysis of charter school websites. Conducting a critical discourse analysis of the 30 charter school websites that I identified in Chapter III was quite informative. It took me between 30 and 90 minutes to complete the initial review of each website, depending upon the number of documents, subpages, videos, and external links utilized by the school on their site. Most of the websites were unique when compared to the others; however, three of the schools in the first set of 15 and two in the second set belong to a singular Educational Management Organization (EMO) which sets forth the style and information contained within its schools' websites.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a methodology that researchers use to identify correlations between language and social practices. It is also used to analyze how texts are distributed and consumed, practices at the heart of advertisements of schools, including their websites and brochures (Rogers, 2011). Hernandez (2016) states that language and communication are never individualistic in nature; our discourse positions us within a power structure in which all things are interconnected. Correlations between language and social practices lie at the very heart of what I have discovered with these two sets of schools and their websites. The interactions with the website content of these schools that families typically have, and that I engaged in as part of this study, lead to assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs that ultimately can significantly influence the

social practice of “choosing” a particular school in the community over other available options. Wilson and Carlsen (2016) argue that school websites play a pivotal role with information about potential schools. After carefully reviewing 30 charter school websites, I agree with this assertion about how much these sites can shape and influence the choices that families make for their children.

I divide this fourth chapter into three major sections. The first section is devoted to the analysis of the first group of 15 North Carolina charter schools—those with an overwhelmingly White student population that reside in a racially diverse community. I devote the second section to the other group of 15 schools—those that I define as racially diverse because their predominant racial group makes up less than 50% of the overall student population. In the third and final section of the chapter, I explore similarities and differences between the two sets of websites and draw inferences about how marketing and messaging might influence the enrollment patterns in both integrated and more segregated schools.

### **Fifteen Predominantly White North Carolina Charter Schools**

The 15 predominantly White North Carolina Charter schools with websites under review in this study have percentages of White students that range from 81.31 to 94.74% while being located in a traditional school district with 28.61 to 51.3% White students (Table 2 on pages 67-68). These 15 have White student populations that far exceed the next racial group within the school. *Mullins Charter* enrolls the highest percentage of White students of any charter school in North Carolina at 94.74%. Such high percentages of one racial group of students would be reconcilable if the local school district was

reasonably similar in makeup, but that is not the case with nearly half of all charter schools in the state. Hernandez-Cruz (2016) discovered that 94 charter schools in North Carolina are either 80% Majority or 80% Minority. Subtracting out the charter schools located within a traditional school district that itself lacked racial/ethnic diversity, he found 75 racially imbalanced charter schools in racially diverse school districts (these are districts he defined as having a White student population between 20% and 80%)—42 that were 80% Majority (or White) and 33 that were 80% Minority. In 2016, that was 47% of all charter schools in North Carolina. Only 27 charter schools (or 17%) met the two goals of reasonably reflecting the school district within which it resides and consisting of a racially diverse student body.

So, how did we arrive at the point of such racial imbalance? With the percentages so distinctly different in these communities, it begs the question—why? Why are a significant number of White families choosing these charter schools while students of color—who do reside in these communities as indicated by the local school district’s racial makeup—remain in the traditional public school? This study certainly cannot prove causality as there are simply too many variables at play. However, a study of the websites can point to some possibilities, especially in answering the primary research question that I have for this research: What messages do North Carolina charter schools communicate to the public through their marketing practices?

As I outlined in my methodology chapter, I began with an open-ended review of each website. I recorded text and my own observations from images on each site based upon terms, images, and messages identified as important by other researchers in the

field. I include a full list of these on pages 70-71. They include words/descriptions that point to diversity, multiculturalism, and community; academic quality, excellence, and rigor; policies and practices that influence enrollment (transportation, lunch, volunteer hours, financial aid); and school application requirements and student expectations. I also found information on the websites which had not been specifically identified by previous researchers, so I recorded it in my notes in order to see if any trends developed among the sites collectively. I then analyzed and coded my notes. What messages were communicated most frequently and how might salient words and images be interpreted by families within the community? This was a question that resonated with me during the coding process. In these next sections, which encompass the interpretation phase of my analysis, I share information on the themes that were most prominent from the websites. I also provide explanation (phase three of three) to assist my reader with significant connections that need to be made. And one final note here—in some of these sections that follow, I sometimes identify a specific number of schools, out of the 15 in that group, that presented messages consistent with a particular topic. It should be noted though that schools may have simply not included information on a specific topic on their website. The absence of information certainly does not help families seeking information about the school, but this note is important for the reader to keep in mind as I provide numbers like “five out of the 15” or “ten out of the 15.”

### **Academic Excellence**

A very common message, occurring in ten of the 15 websites of predominantly White charter schools, is the text message of “academic excellence.” As discussed in

Chapter II, Lubienski (2013) believes there to be “*de facto* privatization where the equity potential is often eclipsed by competitive incentives that produce patterns of inequality of opportunity” within charter schools (p. 507). In other words, White, affluent families choose to send their child to a charter school because they find it to have a private-school feel without a private-school price tag. Roda and Wells (2013) discovered the same occurs with families of color, but they have other reasons for choosing a school that are separate from academics. This distinction is then quite important here. Additionally, as Welner (2013) describes, families with children who struggle academically may not feel that a school with a heavy emphasis on “excellence” will adequately support their children. I recognize that students who struggle academically can be of any race or background. But marketing academic excellence has the potential to create a superiority vs. inferiority dichotomy. Such a scenario then forces families, consciously or unconsciously, to determine the group in which they fit. This expression on the websites was espoused directly as “academic excellence,” but also as:

- “students challenged academically”
- “excellent academics”
- “educational excellence”
- “challenging learning environment”
- “rigorous curriculum”
- “believing that mediocrity is unacceptable”
- “safe, challenging, and creative learning environment”
- “provide our students the competitive edge to win in tomorrow’s world”



- “innovation and excellence”
- “a challenging intellectual journey for highly motivated learners”
- “high expectations for all students”

With each of these ten websites, there were also no additional specifics, other than very basic information, about the academics, the curriculum, or the “journey” being marketed to prospective students. Without details, these words bulleted above were rather empty. It might have been true that the instruction or the curriculum at these schools could be considered of an excellent quality, but there was little to no evidence of it on their websites. Interestingly, only two of the six schools that shared student outcome information on their websites had A+ ratings from the North Carolina School Report Card. Even with such a rating, though, there was no way for me to know whether 85% or more of the student body (necessary to achieve an A+ rating) had achieved grade-level proficiency based upon their own given ability or due to the instruction provided at the school. As a traditional public school leader myself, I can say that very few traditional schools market themselves to the public, though the competition from charters and private schools has led many to do more of it. The words bulleted above have never been necessary on a traditional school’s website until now, in this new market that exists, except for the mission or vision statement tucked away inside the website or school improvement plan somewhere. If these findings are any indication, then many charter schools are messaging about themselves with the words above, similar to how a private school might sell itself to a community.

## Diversity and Community

Among these 15 websites, there was very little use of the word “diversity” or “community.” Three schools used the word “diversity” and four used the word “community.” However, one of the school websites stated that the school “welcomes students from all backgrounds” so one could include this school as a fourth within the diversity group. The few schools that lauded themselves in this manner used language like “an inclusive community of learning,” “inclusivity and diversity celebrated,” or “with help from our diverse community.” Mission School stated that it will “foster community.”

Seven of the 15 schools used other language in goal-oriented or philosophy statements that one could argue falls under the diversity or community umbrella. Again, this amounts to just half of the schools reviewed that chose this language. The phrases used were:

- “love of democratic ideals and spirit of freedom”
- “critical and caring members of a pluralistic society”
- “curriculum incorporates universal experiences shared by all people”
- “promoting compassionate understanding”
- “a decrease in the sense of ‘otherness’”
- “honoring differences”
- “showing respect for every person”
- “civil discourse and development of good citizens”
- “expectation of no racist language or actions”

- “relationships characterized by mutual respect and trust, honest and civility, awareness and engagement of the world that compels active lives of service and young citizens
- “empowering learners to change the world”

This type of language is certainly conducive to potentially attracting a diverse student body within these schools, but unfortunately that is not the reality of their demographics. One reason for this may be that several other messages to families evident on these websites may have acted to contradict this inclusive language.

### **Visual Images**

For the 15 websites, images appear as still photos and via video images in promotional clips on some of the schools’ sites. Obviously these 15 charter schools are predominantly made up of White students. It is nonetheless significant that the images found on their websites, feature this *Whiteness* very clearly. Even with the handful of schools that espoused dedication to democratic ideals and differences among people, it was hard to find images representing these values on the websites. The images on all 15 websites feature an overwhelming percentage of White students and staff. While a few of the schools include photos of students, teachers, or parents of color, the entire group of 15 utilize images that match their student demographic percentages. All the schools appear to feature their own students (unlike the second group of 15 schools in this study), so it follows logic that their images match their demographics. Simply put, however, I saw little evidence of any effort to frame their images in a way that might appeal to a

more diverse demographic. Indeed, five of the 15 schools featured multiple photos in which each person was White.

For many people, images are more quickly accessed than text and are also more subliminally etched into one's consciousness. As a child, I remember spending significantly more time on the photos in *Sports Illustrated* magazines than the text of the articles. I read captions, but I feel as though it was the images chosen for the story that would pull me in and lead me to read the article, paragraph for paragraph. Today, people use apps on their smartphones like *Instagram*, *Tinder*, and *Snapchat*—all of which are significantly image-based applications. And what about parents or guardians who are illiterate or struggle with written English? The images on the website are everything for those individuals. I am not sure parents looking for inclusivity would find it in the images featured on these 15 schools' websites.

The reader should know that I scoured each website thoroughly to ensure I had found all images chosen by the school and presumably that represent who goes to school there, who their parents are, who their teachers are, and so forth. I counted the number of students that I subjectively viewed to be Black and did the same with those viewed to be Latina/Latino (when I note race below, I mean Black appearing or Latino/a appearing, as well as White appearing). My observation notes included the following findings about individual schools' websites:

- three Black students out of 30 on the elementary page
- the opening photo indicates only four Black teachers out of 48
- five graduates out of 40 are of color, but only one is Black

- a student group has only two of 40 students who are Black
- only one Black member of a sports team out of 25
- Two Black girls and 26 White girls out of a group of 28
- hallway transition shows one Hispanic student and 15 White students

In the sections that follow, I highlight different messages that may also be impacting the inclusivity of these schools in a negative fashion.

### **Information Regarding Special Education Services**

Parents with children requiring special educational services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) might seek information, prior to enrollment, about a school and its ability to serve their child. Looking at the level of communicated inclusivity of these 15 schools, only seven of them present any information regarding Exceptional Child (EC) services at their site. These seven include a webpage on their website with information about their available EC services. These webpages contain basic information, primarily letting families know that services are available at the school. Out of the 15 schools, one school, *The Elite Education School*, appeared to make a significant effort to serve students requiring special education services. Thirty percent of their students are identified as needing services. The school has eighteen EC staff members and a “full range” of services that includes an Occupational Course of Study (OCS) program for appropriately identified EC students entering the workforce immediately after graduation. This school is the only one that presents with this level of support in this first group of 15.

### **Financial Contributions Needed**

Nine of the 15 schools use their websites to address their need for financial assistance from families in order to continue operations. With these nine sites, there is a prominent link on the main page to either a Donations page, an Annual Fund, an Educational Foundation, a *Bridge the GAP* fundraising effort, or a Capital Campaign.

On the pages, it is common to see general statements by the school that it is dependent upon donations and the generosity of the parents to do what is desired for its students. Such statements might easily scare off low-socioeconomic (SES) families in the community who may fear they will be ostracized for their inability to contribute financially to the school. On the *Future Leaders Academy* Parent page, for example, the news of a recent \$12,000 fundraiser is made public. A few of the sites indicate that funds are needed for construction, building, and facility needs. *The Elite Education School* benefits from PTO and Booster Club fundraising, but also manages an Annual Fund to “offset the 30% less they receive.” This statement references fewer dollars that North Carolina charter schools receive, per pupil, as compared to what the average traditional public school receives to educate a child in the state. However, the percentage is not a 30% difference as stated.

Again, low SES families cannot contribute additional funds to the school, which may lead them to believe that they are not really welcome in the school community. In fact, more likely, some of those families would need financial aid opportunities within the school for their child to participate in certain curricular or extracurricular activities. Only two of the 15 schools indicated financial aid as a possibility for students.

### **Volunteer Hours Required**

A potential strain on low SES families would be the requirement of volunteer hours for parents and/or students. Families in poverty are rarely positioned to be able to drive to volunteer sites or give up time that could be spent earning income. Volunteer efforts within a community are often directed at serving families in poverty, not vice versa. Ten of the 15 predominantly White schools required some level of parent and/or student volunteerism:

Beautiful Day Charter: Parents must contribute 20 hours per academic year

Mission School: Parents must contribute 4 hours per month

Paulus Preparatory School: Parents must rotate coverage of the lunch room in order to relieve the teachers; students must complete 100 hours of community service while in high school

Pearson Charter: Parents must contribute 8 hours of community service each year or continued enrollment at the school may be discussed

The Challenge Community School: Parents must contribute 20 hours per academic year; students must complete 50 hours

The Elite Education School: Students must complete 30 volunteer hours, a portfolio, an internship in their final year, and 4 job shadows per year

The Goodnight Academy: Student must complete 60 service hours

The Next Man Up Academy: Parents must contribute 4 volunteer hours per month

The Wooten School: Parents must contribute 8 volunteer hours per month

Warsaw Memorial Charter: Parents are expected to volunteer during lunch time at the school

Required volunteer hours could prove to be a decisive barrier to enrollment at the school, particularly when parents work full-time and would struggle to find time to volunteer at their children's schools. This section of my findings is in no way meant to be an indictment against required volunteer hours. Service to others should be mandated more often for students within our schools and service learning is growing as an initiative with many public schools today. Growing a more democratic society, made up of thoughtful citizens, should be a goal of every school district across the country. Rather, required volunteer hours for parents, when combined with other policy choices in these North Carolina charter schools, have the potential to limit diversity within a school where choice to enroll should be open to anyone. This is particularly true where volunteer hours are required of the parents. Such a requirement is rarely seen within traditional public schools, if at all. Within these charter schools, this policy choice may serve to burden parents who do not have time to give to such an endeavor and promote the parents with the ability to give their time and effort.

### **School Uniforms**

Five of the 15 schools require either school uniforms or standard mode of dress (SMOD). School uniforms may or may not be a barrier for families wishing to choose a school. With freedom of choice in where the uniforms are purchased or a store on site at the school for those in need, families can more easily navigate school uniform policy. It's when the school sets one brand or one store as the required site for purchase that this



policy decision becomes a potential impediment to enrollment for certain families. With options available for school uniform purchases, educators are aware that families are then able to avoid having to purchase the high-dollar clothing and shoes (*Abercrombie, Nike Jordan's*, etc.) that boys and girls want to wear to school to impress others. It appeared only one of the five schools with uniforms required that parents to use a specific vendor to purchase them. Two of the five have a store that parents can use to get uniform clothing at lower prices or perhaps even for free. The majority of these 15 schools choose not to address their dress code on their website and I find that very interesting. I thoroughly examined each school's student and/or parent handbook during my website reviews as well, if those documents were uploaded to the website. These handbooks almost always contain information about the school's dress code. There were four schools that made it easy to see that they operate with a more traditional dress code in place, one in which students can wear clothing of their choice (within reason).

### **Free or Reduced Lunch**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), 22% of children in North Carolina under the age of 18 are in families living in poverty. The national average is 19%. Additionally, in our nation, 46% of Black children under the age of 18 are in a mother-only household and 35% are in a father-only household. Forty-seven percent of Hispanic children under 18 years old are in a mother-only household and 28% are in a father-only home. Having only one parent in the home, from an income perspective, can be significantly difficult. Many of these families need the federally funded free- and reduced-lunch program offered within public schools today.

Within these 15 North Carolina charter schools with student populations that are predominantly White, only two of them offer free or reduced lunch as an option for families. *Dogwood Avenue School* and *The Goodnight Academy* make this option available for families in need of it. *Dogwood* “reserves a number of spots for qualifying free- or reduced-lunch students” and *Goodnight* simply makes it available for eligible students. Messages from the other schools include:

- lunch is the responsibility of parents
- students must bring lunch and a water bottle
- hot lunch available via *CiCi's Pizza*
- proceeds from hot lunch support school events
- local vendors provide lunch options
- online *Golden Corral* and *Lil' Caesar's* lunch
- pre-ordered catered lunch via six local restaurants
- *Chick-fil-A* and *Elizabeth's* lunches
- opportunities “on occasion” to purchase hot lunch
- no formal lunch; parents must provide it
- PTO provides a lunch option via [MyHotLunch.com](http://MyHotLunch.com)
- lunch from home or purchased per week

The decision to not provide free and reduced lunch, and the ways in which this message comes across the school websites, is likely to dissuade families in need from pursuing these schools. The full gamut of families within these communities will be unable to make these schools work because of the expense of daily lunches for one or more

children in the household who are school age. If a school offered free- or reduced-lunch for its students, it is highly likely it would communicate such a resource in as many mediums as possible. Absence of information regarding lunches on the websites seems to suggest then that no assistance of this sort is available at those schools, though it is possible that there are options that are not mentioned on the website. In addition, the use of outside restaurants for hot lunches is certainly attractive to kids—kids who often perpetuate a stigma that school food is bad. However, these restaurant options are only attractive to the families who can access them financially.

### **Bus Transportation**

Another significant factor in whether access to a school is fully open to all families in the community is transportation to and from school via school buses. It would seem here, as with free or reduced lunch availability, that one can assume the absence of information about busing on a charter school's website is likely an indication of no transportation services at the school. Charter schools typically serve students from a large radius unless they are located in the heart of a large urban area where city buses or walking to and from school may be viable options. Serving a large radius then creates a situation in which families must determine how their child will get to school daily.

Most of the schools I reviewed in this study refer to the car-rider loop of their school as the carpool drop-off and pick-up area. Carpooling provides a degree of relief for families that live a distance away from the school, but this option only works if a team of parents can all contribute to the effort. It seems that it would be a rare situation for a family if their son or daughter is invited to ride with area families in a carpool setup, but

they as a family do not have to pitch in and assist with the carpooling as well. Four of the 15 schools provide a carpool matching service on their websites for parents to use to find one another. It would seem the schools want to assist their families and, therefore, they acknowledge that transportation is a significant factor impacting enrollment. As mentioned earlier, though, all families cannot access carpooling as an option due to time or financial constraints. Interestingly, *Warsaw Memorial Charter* chose to be very clear with their message for families, stating “parents are responsible for transportation to and from school.”

If schools of choice are to be fully open to all families, busing is necessary. One size doesn't fit all—busing provides an option for many families. Out of these 15 schools, only five of them offer some form of busing. *Mission School* states they have five buses to use each day. *Mullins Charter* utilizes three buses and they pickup/drop-off at six hub locations. A hub is an off-campus location that families bring their sons and daughters to where the school bus will meet them. Again, when the radius served is large, street-by-street pickup and drop-off is more costly for schools. *The Challenge Community School* uses buses to and from three hub locations but asks families to cover two dollars per ride. This adds up to \$20 a week per child, which is likely cost prohibitive for some families. One bus and one hub location are in use at *The Champion Center*, while *The Wooten School* indicates that they have no school buses, but forty students currently use city bus passes to get to and from school daily. These five schools are attempting to provide greater access to their school, though one can see that unfortunately there are still barriers (pay-to-ride and hub locations) that are not present if

the family chooses their traditional zoned school. The scope of busing that a charter school can engage in is also very likely a funding issue for these schools. North Carolina charter schools are currently, as of 2019, seeking the full allotment of per-pupil funds from the state in order to provide such services as transportation on a much wider scope.

### **Additional Messages of Note**

My review of this first group of 15 North Carolina charter schools revealed some additional messages that I find noteworthy for how each might be interpreted by local families examining the school via the website. First, I find it concerning that *Beautiful Day Charter* describes a field trip to a local plantation while also proclaiming to teach their students to do dishes, sew, iron, and set tables. The issue I have is not primarily about the history surrounding Southern plantations and slavery. My daughter attends a diverse school and her grade-level visited Mt. Vernon this year—most certainly a site of slavery for George and Martha Washington. Rather, the issue here is the conservative, highly traditional, and perhaps uber old-fashioned teaching (within a public school) of chores done at home, with the expectation that there are “right” ways to set a table, for example. When combined with the field trip to a local plantation, I find myself wondering why this field trip is highlighted and which families it is meant to attract. The school appears to value an era that has since passed, several times over—an era that was not particularly good for families of color in this country.

A somewhat similar message occurs on *Paulus Preparatory School’s* website where they state that students will be exposed to “traditional American values.” This endeavor will be accomplished via a direct-instruction model involving rapid pacing and

choral group responses. “All students deserve a safe, supportive, structured, and orderly learning environment” and “[*Paulus*] encourages appropriate behavior.” What are “traditional American values?” Is there any flexibility in place for students with special behavioral needs? Might “traditional” harken back to an earlier era when schools were segregated? If I wonder about this, do families of color that visit the *Paulus* website?

Also appearing quite rigid in terms of expectations is *Pearson Charter*. Students suspended twice are subject to removal from the school and expulsion is threatened multiple times on their site. Charter schools are still public schools, so providing FAPE—a free and appropriate public education—should apply to charters. Within a traditional school, expulsion is matched with an offense (or series of offenses) of a significant degree of seriousness. Here, though, *Pearson* indicates that any suspension-worthy behavior will not be tolerated. *Pearson* also states that parents must contribute eight volunteer hours or a continued partnership with the school will be discussed. Again, for parents, this makes clear the expectations for this public charter school. For parents with children who have gotten suspended or spent time out of class at the traditional public school due to misbehaviors, it is unlikely that *Pearson* would be a good fit. Additionally, low-SES families may not have transportation to come volunteer or the time away from work responsibilities to volunteer. None of these topic areas above can be considered in isolation from the others. When a parent views a school’s website, there are a variety of messages at play. As I stated earlier, this fact, in turn, means that while one of these topic areas might not be problematic by itself, it becomes more of an issue

when combined with the others. Cumulatively the images, policies, foci, and overall messages speak to who belongs at the school and who does not.

As an example, *The Next Man Up Academy*, takes an extremely conservative approach by specifically outlining the hair styles, earring locations, and more that are permitted at the school. Policy choices like these with dress code dictate the type of student the school desires.

I fully acknowledge my biases as a traditional public school leader and concede that a review of these websites would be open to several different interpretations. Contrasting them against the second group of 15 schools and their websites will provide more depth to these first 15 and overall to this study.

### **Fifteen Racially Diverse Charter Schools in North Carolina**

For my next 15 charter school websites (reference Table 3 on pages 68–69), I drew from North Carolina charter schools that are racially diverse. I defined a “racially diverse” charter school, for the purposes of my study, as having a leading racial demographic subgroup that is 50% or less of the entire school. This signifies that no one racial subgroup of students makes up more than half of the school, regardless of what race carries this highest percentage. I chose 15 of the most racially diverse charter schools in North Carolina, all of which have 350 or more students. In fact, six of these 15 charter schools are actually *more* racially diverse than the local school district where they reside.

I reviewed the websites of these 15 schools in the same manner, with the same “look-fors,” as the first group of 15 sites. In this group, the schools vary in which racial

group makes up the highest percentage of students in the school. Most are either White or Black, but *Oaktown Academy*'s largest student group is Asian. The largest student group among these schools ranges from the White students at Isenhour Academic Center (38.75%) to the Black students at Southern Charter (49.95%). I begin my analysis of these 15 with four topic areas of my review which are similar in focus to the findings from the first 15 school websites.

### **Academic Excellence**

Through my analysis of the 15 racially-diverse charter schools, I discovered little difference between the two sets of 15 schools in this study in terms of the discussion of academics. Among the first set of schools, those that are predominantly made up of White students, ten out of 15 of the schools used some form of language to message their school as a site of "academic excellence." In this second group of schools, nine out of 15 used similar language on their website to describe themselves. Marketing one's school with this type of language does not appear to contribute in any significant way to the demographic makeup of the school. The idea that promotion of academic excellence may scare parents of special needs children away is not supported here, but I do also recognize that my analysis does not include an actual comparison of the number of identified students in each school.

Academic excellence on these websites was espoused as:

- "high academic achievement"
- "personal academic excellence"
- "academically challenged"



- “rigorous academic program”
- “academic excellence”
- “inspire students to excel academically”
- “CASA—culture of respect, ambition, small learning community, and achievement”
- “fosters educational excellence in America”
- “strong academics that are better than \_\_\_\_\_ County”
- “challenging curriculum”

Similar to the first group of 15 schools, there are only four schools that can back up their claims of academic excellence with noted achievement of student outcomes.

Two of the 15 were found to be A+-rated schools on the North Carolina School Report Card for the year before this analysis and two schools report their “B” rating. There were two schools that made it quite easy to see their “D” rating, but they also did not exclaim “academic excellence” language elsewhere on their site.

### **Information Regarding Special Education Services**

Parents with children requiring special educational services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) might seek information, prior to enrollment, about a school and its ability to serve their child. Somewhat surprisingly, because of the noted diversity otherwise, only six of these 15 charter schools present any information regarding Exceptional Child (EC) services at their site. Furthermore, for two of these six, I could find information on EC services only in the School Handbook, thus making it a bit difficult for the average parent to find this desired information for their son or

daughter by looking at the website. Out of the 15 schools, I did find one school, *Allentown Charter*, making a significant effort to serve students requiring special education services. *Allentown* notes that they have EC, Academically Gifted, and English as a Second Language services to offer their students and families. They also make it very easy for a parent with a special needs child to gain the necessary information via their website. Their full EC guidelines are laid out on their site. Nevertheless, as I stated in relation to the first set of 15 schools, it is surprising to see so few of these schools include information about special services on their website.

### **School Uniforms**

From evidence provided on the website, it seems like these more diverse schools prefer school uniforms for their students. Thirteen of the 15 schools reviewed require school uniforms, with the other two choosing a more traditional dress code of wear-what-you-want within our guidelines. One of the 13 asks families to purchase uniform items from a specific online store. Two other schools not only have school uniforms in place, but they also set grooming and hygiene expectations.

School uniforms, by my estimation here, appear to be viewed by charter school leaders in general as a positive policy decision that makes their school “better” and that perhaps creates a sense of community. The presence of uniforms does not seem to correlate with the diversity of students and families at a school. Once thought exclusionary for low socioeconomic families, school uniforms arguably provide a more equitable playing field for parents clothing their children than designer brands. As a school principal myself, I recognize the potential of school uniforms to reduce

distractions among coeds, reduce the instances of bullying that occur over clothing and, in turn, create a safer and less distracting learning environment for students.

### **Bus Transportation**

Similar to uniforms, bus transportation availability does not appear to contribute to increased racial diversity within a North Carolina charter school. Bus transportation, as stated earlier, is an expense that many North Carolina charter schools cannot afford, and these diverse schools seem no different in this regard. Only three of the 15 schools offer bus transportation. *Allentown Charter* simply states on their website that bus transportation is available. *Holloway Community School* offers transportation from five counties via hubs and also coordinates transportation services with child-care centers. *Oaktown Academy* makes hub stops for buses available for their families. Carpooling is described on six of the websites, much as it was within the sites of the first 15 schools. Busing is necessary if school choice within a community is to be fully open to all families. While the decision to operate without bus transportation seems to have little impact on the racial makeup of these schools, it is very likely that at least some low-socioeconomic families cannot access the local charter school unless they are within walking distance.

Bus transportation, and the issues I discussed in the three sections that preceded this section, represent analyzed areas that were similar between the two groups of North Carolina Charter schools. The sections that follow involve policy decisions and messages on the websites which are recognizably different for the racially diverse schools as compared to those of the first group analyzed earlier in this fourth chapter. As this

study focuses significantly on how the marketing and messaging of a North Carolina charter school may contribute to more or less racial diversity within the school, the commonalities and differences between these two groups of 15 schools provide quality additions to existing literature on the topic and spark additional study. Again, what follows are the differences that were noted in the second group of 15 schools as compared to the first group.

### **Diversity and Community**

There is not a substantial increase in the usage of “diversity” or “community” as word choices with this second group of schools, but overall, the schools in this group have more to say about diversity and community. Whereas three schools used the word “diversity” and four used the word “community” in the first group of 15 schools, there are six in the second group that use “diverse” or “diversity” and two that focus on the idea of “community.” However, ten of the 15 schools use language in goal-oriented or philosophy statements that can be said to fall under the diversity or community umbrella. Only 50% of the first group of schools included such language. The phrases used by the second group of schools include:

- “respect for themselves and others”
- “community as a school”
- “rich diversity of backgrounds and opinions”
- “you’re special but no more special than others”
- “open and respectful discussions”
- “students’ ethical and moral growth”

- “civic responsibility is developed and strengthened”
- “engaged citizens”
- “maintain and advance our democratic society”
- “honor individuality and diversity”
- “responsible global citizens”
- “one of the core values is diversity”
- “community of character, cooperation, empathy, lasting relationships, trust, and parental involvement”
- “we provide a diverse and welcoming environment where your children can thrive”
- “equal opportunity for all prospective students in lottery”

This type of language is certainly conducive to a more diverse student body within these schools and it's the reality of their demographics. It is welcoming and suggestive of a school that values the growth of each individual student over school performance or some other agenda. Nevertheless, given that there are only three more schools than the first group of 15 that include messages of this nature, in some ways the websites of the two groups are not as different as I anticipated they might be. There were five schools in this second group with websites seemingly devoid of this type of language altogether, similar to schools in the less diverse category. As discussed earlier, it is important to weigh this section alongside others to gain a broader picture of these schools.

## Visual Images

Given the racial makeup of these 15 schools, it likely comes as no surprise to the reader that the still images and marketing videos for these schools feature significant diversity. The images chosen carry weight, even if the school's webmaster may not have intentionally sought to display the racial diversity within the school, the effect on the prospective families nonetheless still exists. Within the first group of 15 schools, the lack of diversity within each school was on full display in the images. With those schools, there was very little visual evidence that the student and staff population was diverse. But with this second group, the images make it clear that each of these schools is truly diverse.

What follows is a breakdown of some of the significant observations I made about these websites, with the caveat that all 15 feature their school's diversity within their website. With *Allentown Charter*, there were equal photos between White and Black students and one of the photos featured an "And Justice for All" poster. *Battleground Charter* shared with visitors their students of families with Middle Eastern and Asian heritage and a picture of international flags. The *Chilly Forest School of Excellence* used images to specifically communicate some of their core beliefs. Within their promotional video, visitors to the site see a Black boy speak about how *Chilly Forest School* "won't give up on you like most schools." We hear how the kids at the school are not judgmental, how the school is a big family, and how diversity is necessary. At *First Wave Charter*, diversity is indicated as a core value and there is a picture of Hispanic-appearing students engaged in traditional dance. *Hall Academy* shows their pride by

posting the demographics of their school prominently on their site. Such a message was not seen on any of the other 29 school websites as prominently as it was on this one. The *Isenhour Academic Center* shows off the diversity of their staff in one of their site pictures. In *Reynolds Charter* school, 15 of 59 staffers appeared to be people of color. For me, as a school leader myself, diversity within a faculty and school staff is meaningful because it can be difficult to achieve in some areas of North Carolina, despite the best of intentions. With *The Newton School*, it was striking to me how few White students there were in the pictures on their website, in spite of the fact that 47% of their students are White. Again, that 47% is their majority group. As visitor to each of these websites, I certainly did not expect what *The Newton School* did from each of them, but this second group of 15 schools seem to own their student makeup and proclaim it proudly on their websites through the visual images. For that matter, I suppose the first group of 15 schools did as well, but again, their visual images featured a noticeable lack of diversity. Pictures speak to people. I firmly believe they can tell a story. For some families, viewing pictures on a school's website may be preferable (or all that is possible) to reading text on the site or digging into the dropdown menus and links that are available. To this point then, pictures can be quite powerful messages for both who attends, and who belongs and who does not belong at a particular school.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

Another area that distinguishes the marketing and messaging of these 15 schools from the first 15 is the inclusion of language specifically directed at the curriculum and the manner in which it is delivered in each school. Surprisingly, I found very little of this

language in the first group of 15 schools. Describing what students will be engaged in each day would seem very important for schools to communicate on a website. The inclusion of this language was quite clear on thirteen of the 15 diverse school sites. Here is the information found within these 13 websites:

Allentown Charter: Hands-on workshop model; all types of learners; encourages and empowers students to take ownership over their own learning

Battleground Charter: Attends to students' individual needs; a number of elective offerings

Chilly Forest School of Excellence: Children do not learn all the same way; critical thought; individual attention; Paideia approach; all students can learn; each student valued within a supportive learning environment; personalized education

First Wave Charter: A focus on STEM competitions

Hall Academy: Success means creating endless opportunities for your child to become their best; apply critical thinking to real-world problems; 21st century challenges

Holloway Community School: Pre-AP curriculum; coding and mobile app development grant; cooperative learning; equitable student engagement

Isenhour Academic Center: Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, Inspire; arts integration and mission statement; we want to develop problem-solvers/critical thinkers and grit



Mitchell Memorial Academy: Spanish immersion and Spanish enrichment curriculum; critical thinking skills

Oaktown Academy: STEM focus; smaller classes; successful academic teams

Reynolds Charter: Apply critical thinking to real-world problems

Sanderson Charter: Student-centered learning environment; project-based learning; technology driven; individual diverse student needs; personalized learning plans; local community-centered academic programming

Southern Charter: Children are encouraged to excel and perform at their maximum potential; promotes creativity and excellence; Paideia; we believe all children can succeed; 21st century skills; smaller class sizes

The Newton School: Value the relationship between the teacher and the student; all children can learn; experiential learning through community engagement; individualized approach to learning; rigorous Cambridge curriculum for high school students

Within these statements on the diverse charter school websites, there are some noticeable trends. First, there is a clear focus on students and their individual needs. Next, these schools address the 4 C's of 21st Century learning—communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Kay & Greenhill, 2012). And lastly, there is a focus on curricular programs specific to the school—Spanish immersion, pre-AP, STEM, and more. As stated earlier, it is striking that this second group of 15 schools so significantly addressed curriculum and instruction as compared to the first group of

schools. The parents who visit the websites of these more diverse schools can easily get a feel for what their child will receive each day, particularly in contrast to the traditional public schools in the district. My experience as a school leader has been that charter schools market themselves within their community significantly more than traditional public schools do. In spite of the fact that a traditional public school may be doing exceptional things with students, parents may not be aware of them because the school does not typically share this information as widely as perhaps they should. Thirteen of the 15 charter schools in this more diverse group do an excellent job of illustrating on their websites the heart of what a school is about—teaching and learning. They paint a picture of academic excellence.

### **Financial Contributions Needed**

Within the websites of this group of schools, there is less messaging, overall, about the need for financial contributions from parents. Only six of the schools, compared to nine in the first group, communicate their need for financial assistance. *Battleground Charter* and *Northern Movement Charter* have links on their main pages for donations. *Chilly Forest School of Excellence* maintains a school fee of \$75 for middle school and \$100 for the high school. They were the only school in this section to state a school or student fee for attendance. The Capital Campaign at *Mitchell Memorial Academy* raised \$60,000 last year to support Montessori training, two adults in each classroom, immigration sponsorship, art, music, and physical education. As I am primarily interested in racial diversity within North Carolina charter schools, versus socioeconomic status diversity, this theme in the messaging may not carry weight

individually, one way or the other. However, as stated before, the cumulative effect of multiple policy or direction decisions, coupled with the manner in which these are displayed on the website, may contribute to a sense among certain families that they would not fit in well at a particular school. One thing seems certain, for families who cannot easily contribute financially, it may be worrisome to send your child to a school that expects this type of involvement.

### **Volunteer Hours Required**

Ten out of the 15 schools in the first group of schools required some form of volunteer hours from parents, but here, in the second group, only four of the 15 require volunteer hours. This difference in the two groups is significant. My own experience as a traditional public-school administrator has been that most traditional public schools do not ask their families to contribute a certain amount of volunteer hours per school year. These policies do appear to be most common within private schools and, obviously here, charter schools. This second group of charter schools, the more diverse of the two sets, contains significantly fewer schools that expect their families to give their time.

While four of the schools do ask their parents to contribute time, others schools make statements to indicate that volunteering is explicitly not required. At *Allentown Charter*, for example, parents are “simply encouraged to participate.” *Battleground Charter* states that “15 hours per year of volunteering is encouraged, but not mandated.” At *Chilly Forest* and *First Wave Charter*, they discuss “family and community partnerships,” but do not put any specific parameters on these. Parents either read

nothing of volunteer hours on these websites or, except for four, are *encouraged* to get involved at the school.

### **Athletics**

Another noticeable difference between the two sets of schools occurs with regards to the featuring/messaging of athletic programs. Thirteen of the 15 schools in the first group feature a page or pages devoted to their school's athletic teams. As I reviewed the visual images for the first group of schools, I found that many of the photos I had access to were on the athletic pages. Additionally, eight of the 15 schools that are predominantly made up of White students ask the families to pay for athletic participation. In contrast, only one school in the second group of schools indicated a "pay to play" policy and only eight of the schools address their athletic program. Geography could play a role in whether a school has the space for athletic facilities; rural schools would be at a noticeable advantage within this arena. Athletic teams can be expensive for a school as I know from my own experience. It is not surprising to see the same schools that need capital contributions from families also requesting a fee for athletic participation and this is observed more, as stated earlier, from the first group of 15 schools.

### **Free or Reduced Lunch**

The last area for which these two groups of schools are noticeably different involves the offering of, or lack thereof, free or reduced lunch. In the first group of 15 schools, there were only two schools that offered families a free or reduced lunch option for those below the poverty line. Furthermore, within the first 15, there were statements

such as “lunch is the responsibility of parents,” “opportunities on occasion to purchase hot lunch,” and “parents must provide it.” The policy direction for the overwhelming majority of the first group was made clear. This area may be the most starkly different from the first group to the second as the second group of 15 schools seems overall to take a very different approach. Free or reduced lunch offerings are conspicuously offered at nine of the 15 schools. At these nine, families in need can gain the assistance for which they qualify. Another noticeable difference is that, within the second set, the schools that do not offer free or reduced lunch within this group instead choose to message about their catered lunch program (*Chilly Forest* and *First Wave Charter*), breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria (*Holloway Community School*), or a vendor lunch that is available (*Northern Movement* and *Oaktown*). Rather than using language that puts the responsibility on the parents or that which downplays the importance of hot lunch in the life of a child, these schools simply state the facts and leave it there. This area may be quite significant as a factor in which families feel welcome and which feel they must remain at the traditional public school where free or reduced lunch is an option. This marks the final topic area of difference between the two groups of schools.

### **Layered Analysis of Each Group of 15 Websites**

In this final section of Chapter IV, I provide a critical discourse analysis of these website findings. Stitzlein (2013) conducted a critical discourse analysis of for-profit charter schools’ websites, curricula, and initial charters. Her interest was in citizenship education for students and whether democratic purposes could be reconciled with the policies and practices within for-profit public charter schools. As part of her critical

discourse analysis, Stitzlein (2013) explored micro, macro, and meso level structures, a heuristic that I now apply to the wealth of information afforded me from this first group of 15 charter school websites.

### **The Predominantly White Charter Schools**

The micro level exists at the level of the individual. Individual students are not represented in statements of academic excellence or in the details of a policy decision. Instead, individuals in the first group of 15 websites are seen and experienced in the still photos, promotional films, and/or activity-based videos featured on the sites. Overall, there is limited diversity in these pictures and videos. The perceived diversity among students represented on these websites is significant because it communicates messages—however intended—about who belongs and who does not belong. White students seem to give way to more White students on these websites, thus potentially creating a comfort level for prospective White families and questions for families of color.

The visual images reflect the lack of diversity in these schools. All of these 15 schools are predominantly made up of White students—81% or higher. *Beautiful Day Charter's* images are predominantly White students. *Dogwood Avenue School* features photos that are all White. *Mullins Charter*, which has the highest percentage of White students in the state, has a website reflective of this fact. Shockingly, nearly all their photos on the website are entirely of White individuals. *Pearson's* Board of Directors is entirely White. *The Challenge Community School* featured all White arms meeting in the middle at the hands. Additionally, on *Challenge's* website, there were no athletic photos

that featured a non-White student-athlete. Many school websites today feature scrolling photos at the top of the main page. These photos give an immediate sense of the school and what one will find there. *Warsaw Memorial Charter* used scrolling photos on their website and everyone in the photos is White. There was no racial diversity featured in these very important photos. The one school out of these 15 that appeared to embrace the desire for diversity was *The Wooten School*. One of their scrolling photos features a diverse group of eleven students with *Be the Change* t-shirts on, sitting with a Black man in a suit. This school includes a promotional film on their site and it prominently highlights their Black students. Community is stressed, first and foremost, in their approach to discipline and relationships factor heavily in everything they do, according to the website. Out of the 15, *Wooten* has one of the lower percentages of White students, so it comes as no surprise that the school appears to value diversity. Overall, the individual race is significant with these 15 websites at the micro level.

A macro examination (at a systemic or structural level) reveals a theme that appears to permeate and reflect this entire group of schools. My analysis leads me to a sense that required financial contributions by families is a theme that, largely, spans this first group of 15. Earlier I discussed financial contributions by parents to the school in the form of Annual Funds or Foundations. Nine of the 15 schools use their websites to address their need for financial assistance from families in order to continue operations. With these nine sites, there is a prominent link on the main page to either a Donations page, an Annual Fund, an Educational Foundation, a *Bridge the GAP* fundraising effort, or a Capital Campaign.

Adding to the variety of Annual Funds and donation pages, there are somewhat smaller financial requests made on a few of the school websites. First, there were two schools that openly communicated about a trip to Europe and an annual overnight trip, respectively, without any mention of financial aid being available for these trips. Next, the word “tuition” was used to describe that which would be necessary for some programs. On another school’s website “parents must ensure that extracurriculars are paid in full.” There was a Bring-Your-Own-Device (BYOD) school. Students could rent a loaner device from the school if necessary, but typically loaner devices are not as reliable or useful as when students have their own personal devices, and they can also make student’s poverty more conspicuous. And lastly, there were a few schools in which student-athletes would need to pay to play. One of the schools set a requirement of \$100 per sport. As a school administrator myself, I know firsthand that athletics cost tens of thousands of dollars to execute and be offered at the school. With that said, my school would need a substantially higher contribution from the district office if we did not receive the financial contribution we receive each year from our Athletic Boosters Club. Fundraisers by the Boosters Club reach supporters in the community who can contribute. Pay-to-play policy, on the other hand, asks that each family of a student-athlete, regardless of financial capacity, contribute the same monetary amount as the next athlete and his/her family. One approach accesses those *able* to contribute, while the other likely prevents low-SES students from participating in athletics.

Each of these messages might deter families from applying to attend or enrolling at one of these schools. At the traditional public school that I lead, we actively account



for and monitor the fees and fines that we ask our families to cover. We understand that public school is funded through taxpayer dollars, so additional financial allocations by families should be kept to a minimum. Schools in this first group of 15, though, need families to contribute financially, in some fashion or form. This need is a communicated message on their website and, while most likely unintentional, it has the potential to frighten away low-SES families.

Stitzlein (2013) conducted a meso-level reading to see how marketing materials were constructed and consumed within and by the charter school community. For this level of reading, Stitzlein (2013) looked at how the messages of individual advancement and freedom from government-regulated schools came out in charter school advertisement and marketing materials. Testimonials to “customer success” and test score touting were very common for her to see at this level of analysis (Stitzlein, 2013, p. 260).

Looking at a theme within the meso level of analysis, these 15 schools, via their websites, trend toward marketing messages they believe put them in a very positive light, but a deeper review of each school reveals contradictions with those messages. Highlighted first in the sections above is the message of “academic excellence.” This expression is used, in some form or fashion, by nearly all of the 15 schools. Whether they “believe that mediocrity is unacceptable” or they offer a “challenging intellectual journey for highly motivated learners,” this group espouses a belief that they offer something substantially better than the traditional public schools in the community. Such a message can reflect positively for a school, but it could also worry families that the

focus is more on the school and what the school accomplishes and less on the individual students and their academic, social, and/or behavioral needs. In reality, only two schools offer North Carolina School Report Card outcomes that confirm academic excellence within the school (an A+ rating). The message of “academic excellence” appears to be marketing rhetoric more than anything concrete.

Next, a handful of schools say they celebrate inclusivity and diversity at their school. Some of these same schools and others in the group offer statements about the value of civil discourse, the development of good citizens and successful citizens, expectations of no racist language or actions, honoring differences, a decrease in the sense of “otherness,” awareness and engagement of the world, and relationships characterized by mutual respect and trust. It is equally important that other schools do not speak of these beliefs at all.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to locate evidence that these messages are part of the fabric of the schools that speak of them on the websites. To fully embrace inclusivity and diversity, one must accept that a variety of individuals may desire access to you or your organization. The visual images on these websites suggest much work may still need to be done in terms of promoting inclusivity and diversity. The lack of transportation to and from school is quite problematic for an extensive set of families in the community. I want to remind the reader that the communities where these charter schools are located are racially and socioeconomically diverse. Families would benefit from free or reduced lunch for their children, but few of these charter schools offer it as an option. The expectation of volunteer hours for parents and students represents a

failure to acknowledge who typically needs assistance offered by volunteers in the community. It also excludes parents who lack the available time or resources to volunteer. And lastly, there are schools in this group that ask much of their families in terms of financial contributions. Requests for financial assistance are understandable. One of the high schools that I led had both an Athletic Boosters Club and a Band Boosters Club. Fundraising is necessary to support activities and opportunities for our students. From this group of 15 charter schools, however, donations and fundraising are featured as a prominent message on the main pages of their websites. Might a low-SES family fear they will not fit in well at a school where fundraising is this necessary? What will help to place these findings in perspective is the review of the second 15 North Carolina charter schools featured in this study.

### **The Racially Diverse Set of 15 Schools**

As stated, the micro level exists at the level of the individual. Individual students are seen in the still photos, promotional films, and/or activity-based videos featured on the sites. Mothers and fathers will use these photos to see if the school is a good fit for their son or daughter. Are there images of boys or girls that match their own child? Will their son or daughter fit in? The perceived race of the students carries significance with it in these 15 websites because there is a clear message communicated along with it about who belongs and who does not belong.

The visual images on the websites of these 15 schools portray the diversity within these schools. The largest racial group within each of these schools does not surpass 50% of the overall student body. Diversity, then, is to be expected from this group. However,

the culture that exists within these schools, overall, seems to be such that diversity is celebrated by the individual in charge of the website (the webmaster) as well.

Repeatedly, from one school to the next within this group of 15, students of color were featured. Within the videos, students of color were chosen to give testimonials. I shared specific details from the websites in the *Visual Images* section above. Families of color can see themselves in these images and perhaps feel a sense that it is a school that could also work for their child. As I have noted before though, there is a cumulative effect of multiple messages within these schools' websites. There is much more to these websites than simply the visual images.

Thirteen of these 15 schools make curriculum and instruction a clear focus on their websites. The macro level consists of a theme that appears to permeate and reflect the entire group of schools and this focal point of curriculum and instruction (as opposed to financial contribution), in my analysis, meets this measure. Earlier, within the *Curriculum and Instruction* section, I noted three overarching categories for these messages. The first is the focus on students and their individual needs, the second involves the four C's of 21<sup>st</sup> Century instruction (communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking), and the third is the emphasis on specific curricular programs offered at the school. Eight schools—*Allentown Charter, Battleground, Chilly Forest, Hall Academy, Holloway, Sanderson, Southern, and The Newton School*—specifically describe what they expect their students to gain from the classroom. “Individual attention,” “equitable student engagement,” “[empowering] students to take ownership over their own learning,” and “opportunities for your child to become their

best” represent the highlights of these messages on the sites. Personalized education for students remains a focus today and these schools recognize the value of it for families considering their school. Additionally important, parents want their children prepared for an ever-changing world and to possess skills that will allow them to be successful within it. *Chilly Forest School of Excellence, Hall Academy, Holloway, Isenhour, Mitchell Memorial, Reynolds, and Southern Charter* all address one or more of the 4 C’s of communication, collaboration, creativity, or critical thinking in messages on their website. Finally, there is a focus in this group of websites on the curricular programs specific to the school—Spanish immersion, pre-AP, STEM, and more. The macro theme in which the value of curriculum and instruction is the focus is quite clear for this second group of 15 schools. From my own experience, I do not believe traditional public schools do as strong a job of explicitly communicating highlights of their instructional offerings as this group of charter schools. It may be that charter schools are more of an unknown to families in the community than the traditional public school is, and therefore they need to be more direct with what they have to offer. Whatever the case, families can easily gain an understanding of what learning presumably will look like within these schools noted here. The reader should note that, surprisingly, there were few schools in the first group of 15 that explicitly addressed curriculum and instruction. The inclusion of this information within the second group may contribute to a more inviting setting; one that a more diverse group of parents can feel confident in for their child.

At the meso level of analysis for these websites, I find a sense of welcoming that permeates across the messages and chosen policies of these schools. First, diversity and

community are clearly messaged on the sites. Ten of the 15 schools, versus seven in the first group, explicitly message about either diversity or community. This is, perhaps, insignificant if viewed from the perspective that only three additional schools addressed it. With that said, though, I find more here. It is both the way in which they did it and the cumulative effect with other items I will note shortly. For example, *Hall Academy* posted the demographics of their school on their site. Such a message was not seen by any of the other twenty-nine schools. Two schools featured images of their diverse staff—*The Isenhour Academic Center* and *Reynolds Charter*. Several schools, through the visual images on their site, communicated the variety of races present within their school, while others touted a global focus or messaged about community.

Policy choices add to this sense of welcoming across this group at Stitzlein's (2013) meso level of analysis. First, only six schools (as compared to nine in the first group) include prominent requests for financial (or capital) contributions from families. What may be burdensome for some families occurs at fewer of these schools. Next, only four of these 15 schools (as compared to ten in the first group) require volunteer hours of the parents each school year. My experience as a school leader has shown me that stay-at-home parents with children school-age or older can contribute in this manner, but they don't volunteer regularly just because they are available. If these parents are not always volunteering, even if they are available, then how is it that employed parents can do so? Certainly, parents will do for their child(ren) all that they can but working parents may find such a requirement difficult (regardless of employment statutes in place that allow for it). If the parent works more than one job, this requirement becomes extremely

cumbersome or even impossible. Again, in this study I was primarily interested in racial diversity, but any policy choice that acts as a limiting factor can hinder a more diverse population. The third policy choice among these 15 schools that contributes to a more inclusive environment is free and reduced lunch offerings. Nine schools (as compared to two in the first group) offer students a free or reduced lunch option for daily meals. Along similar lines as before, this is significant because it is less of a limiting factor at these schools for families who need the service.

### **Conclusion**

Within this fourth chapter, I analyzed the websites of each of the 30 schools. These findings allowed me to respond to the research question: What messages do North Carolina charter schools communicate to the public through their marketing practices? I took two distinctly different groups of North Carolina charter schools and examined their websites to find both messages they intentionally use to attract families to enroll with them and messages they unintentionally communicate that may have the opposite effect. When I completed this analysis, I turned my attention to the second half of my research—the interviews with four North Carolina charter school principals. How do charter school leaders discuss issues of marketing and enrollment for their schools? This is the secondary research question I address in Chapter V.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **INTERVIEWS WITH CHARTER SCHOOL PRINCIPALS**

As part of my research design, I interviewed four charter school principals in North Carolina, each the head of one of the 30 schools whose websites I had analyzed. As with the names of the schools, I changed the names of my participants in order to maintain their anonymity. I outlined in my UNC-Greensboro Institutional Review Board research plan the steps I took to ensure anonymity. I shared the approved plan with my four participants and had each sign off on it. I also shared their interview transcript with them afterwards to ensure their comfort with the process and to improve the validity of the data. Each participant gave approval of the transcript.

The questions I asked each participant in the interviews focused on diversity within the schools and how the schools market and message themselves to the community or communities they serve (see interview protocol in Chapter III). As a reminder to the reader, the primary research question is:

- What messages do North Carolina charter schools communicate to the public through their marketing practices?

I used the website analysis to provide findings to answer the primary question. I designed the exploratory interviews to address my secondary research question:

- How do charter school leaders discuss issues of marketing and enrollment for their schools?



While I followed a semi-structured interview protocol within each interview, I also asked clarifying and follow-up questions which dug a little deeper than the initial question. The four participants were willing to assist with my study and, from my perspective, were very open and transparent when answering my questions of them. Each interview was between 40 and 55 minutes long.

The interviews involved two principals at predominantly White charter schools in North Carolina—selected from the first group of 15 schools in my study—and two from racially diverse schools from the second set of 15. From the first set of 15, I chose to interview Principal Patricia Singh from *The Challenge Community School* and Principal Jim Anderson at *Warsaw Memorial Charter*. From the racially diverse set, I interviewed Principal Roger Jackson at *Battleground Charter* and Principal Barbara Joyner from *Hall Academy*. I chose these four schools specifically because the analysis of their schools' websites revealed some intriguing findings that I wanted to explore further with their primary leader.

Upon completion of the interviews, what immediately caught my attention was the loyalty and long tenures of three of these leaders (Singh, Anderson, and Jackson) within their respective schools, and Principal Joyner's years of experience in public education overall. *Challenge, Warsaw, and Battleground* were part of the first 100 charter schools in North Carolina; a significant point because the number of charter schools in North Carolina was capped at 100 for many years before the cap was removed in 2011. The three leaders have been at their respective schools for nearly the entire existence of their school. Jim Anderson of *Warsaw Memorial Charter* stated,

I was very involved when this school opened. The school was going to be self-governing, but after about 5 years in, they realized that the teachers did not want to take on the role of governing the school, so they wanted to get someone in here to be a leader for the school. They basically asked me to come take on that role as administrator.

Anderson has served at the school in an administrative capacity for over 15 years.

Principal Patricia Singh, at *The Challenge Community School*, has been there even longer, having served as a jack-of-all-trades in the early years—teacher, computer technician, curriculum director, and custodian to name a few positions—prior to assuming her current leadership role. She, like Anderson, has seen her school evolve from a small, commercial office space to what it is today—a stunning, stand-alone building with a campus that allows for future growth. Singh had this to say about the previous location:

It smelled bad, the walls were gross, and the carpets were a mess. There were only a few toilets for the entire school. It was also a space we loved and we kind of let one of our key messages or take-aways from that place be that it's people that make a place work. A great building does not a great school make.

*Challenge* would eventually move into a beautiful building though and, in fact, each of these schools are in new or relatively new buildings that present very well from the outside. *Warsaw* also began in a commercial space before securing enough in donations to build their own stand-alone building. Their campus does not provide for much growth opportunity in the future, but it's a school with no plan to ever add athletics (that would require fields for play). *Battleground Charter* actually began within the home of its creators. Today, *Battleground* possesses a beautiful building and campus

where its students appear to have ample space to learn and play. *Hall Academy* is managed by an Educational Management Organization, or EMO. The school, and the building it is in, are only 7 years old. There is space enough for a long, serpentine carpool lane and athletic fields. The nearly pristine state of these respective facilities was the second observation I made very early about these schools, along with the fact that donations provided the capital to make three of these new buildings possible (with *Hall* being the lone exception). *Warsaw's* building, for instance, is owned by a local foundation associated with the school.

Roger Jackson, Principal at *Battleground Charter*, moved from the role of teacher to administrator rather reluctantly. He had this to say about his experience:

My career started in the late 90s, but I came to *Battleground* 10 years ago. The principal soon made me a mentor to some of the less-experienced teachers. That went on for several years. Eventually the principal retired and someone new was hired to run the school at large, while I was put in charge of the pre-K program. Due to a variety of circumstances, I ended up wearing several hats that year and the principal only stayed about nine months. I had to work weekends and nights, but I didn't mind because I love this school. I did not want the principal position though, so they hired an interim. He was great, but he was an elderly man who did not want to do it that long. I ended up, again, doing several things on behalf of the school—anything from operations to substitute teaching. The school's Board began discussing the principal position with me and this time they didn't stop until I finally said yes to it.

These four principals all genuinely care about their school and this fact was evident in their responses to my questions. Their passion for the work, for the children, and for the families was clear and something I respect about each of them. I had no preconceived notions of anything less than this experience. In fact, from my previous experience with charter school leaders, I anticipated that they would be staunch

supporters of their schools. In previous work with charter school leaders, I have witnessed this passion firsthand. Successful charter schools require strong leaders, largely because they wear many hats. There's less bureaucracy and therefore fewer people to carry out different work within the organization. This "heavy lifting" likely creates school leaders who then care deeply about the place where they invest "blood, sweat, and tears."

For this fifth chapter of my study, I organized my findings from these four interviews into five thematic topic areas. These five are:

- Stances on Diversity
- Thoughts on Current Demographics and What Attracts Families
- The Common Thought of Charters as Private Schools
- What Detracts Families
- Website Management

I include connections and differences between the four school leaders, as well as share feedback I received on website-specific questions I had for the participants. The findings from the interviews are exploratory in nature; they help to supplement my website analysis.

I include two additional standalone sections of this fifth chapter that follow the five thematic topic areas. For the first of these sections, I discuss commentary of the principals on TPS. It is clear that each of these school leaders is passionate about their school and what their school offers to students and families who enter the lottery. Singh, Anderson, and Jackson indicated they do not feel there is competition between their

school and TPS, largely because there are long waitlists to get into their school. However, they did have thoughts to share about TPS that seem to contradict this notion. Joyner, at *Hall Academy*, has a few empty seats in her school, so they actively recruit within the community. Active recruitment implies, by its very nature, competition. I found their commentary on TPS worth noting here in Chapter V and believe the reader will as well. The other stand-alone section is one devoted to unique situations per school that I also felt the reader might find interesting; particularly those that make for potential topics of future research. I conclude Chapter V with a critical discourse analysis of my findings, following the same framework proposed by Stitzlein (2013) that I used in Chapter IV.

## **Emerging Themes**

### **Stances on Diversity**

Responses here, in this first section, indicate the level of honesty I received from my interview participants. They were candid and open, and they did not seem to offer canned responses. With regards to their stances on diversity, there was a distinct dichotomy of two and two between these principals.

Two principals, one from a predominantly White charter school and the other from a racially diverse one, felt that increasing diversity was out of their hands. Each wishes diversity could be increased but sees little possibility of impacting such a change. Predominantly White *Warsaw* Principal, Jim Anderson, stated,

We have done various things over the years, but we have found that they have not really been necessary [because] we're getting 1000+ applicants [per year]. We haven't had to do a great deal of advertising. A number of years ago there was a

charter school fair held at the mall that we participated in, but we didn't see any gains from that. Unfortunately, I think word of mouth contributes to the lack of diversity in some of the schools because it started with that group and spreads in that very small demographic.

When asked about providing the website or the application in Spanish, Anderson stated, "That's something we have talked about doing it eventually." A similar sentiment was found at *Battleground Charter* with Principal Roger Jackson. He shared, "In a charter you have no choice in choosing your students. It is literally luck of the draw."

Unfortunately, due to a number of factors, school choice is not fully open to everyone in the surrounding community. He continued:

I think if the numbers were really low [we might need to advertise], but when you have 1700 [applications], there's no need to really advertise. I guess in a sense, yes, we could go out there and say we want more Hispanic applicants. We [could] go out and seek that out somewhere, wherever that may be, just to advertise our school. We definitely could, but we have never done that. It doesn't really have anything to do with not wanting a certain, um, culture [or] ethnicity. I think it's just a matter of we freely are open to anybody.

Jackson's is a school that is already racially diverse, but as I will discuss in the next section, this is due to a large Asian population in the school's vicinity.

The other two principals—Patricia Singh at *Challenge Community School* and Barbara Joyner at *Hall Academy*—possess a very different viewpoint on increasing diversity within their respective schools. *Challenge* is actively trying to do so by petitioning the North Carolina State Charter School Board to allow them to implement an economic diversity lottery. This change would allow for a certain number of lottery spots to be reserved exclusively for low-socioeconomic students. They would join five other

charter schools in the state that already have this type of lottery, but the difference with those five schools is that they are located in highly impacted areas. *Challenge* is not in such an area and therefore its request is quite unique. This is a big step and certainly indicative of active leadership to diversify a predominantly White school. Prior to this step, Singh has, for several years, written letters, visited with civic groups and church congregations, and posted advertisements in business windows in order to attract a more diverse set of families. She formed a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to oversee the efforts. As a school, *Challenge* has experienced gains in families of color in their most recent two to three cohorts. When asked, “why diversify,” Singh responded,

I think [we’re] talking about educational excellence in 2019. You cannot be excellent without being more diverse than we are. Kids all the time talking with, playing with, arguing with, bumping up against diversity of all types. All kinds. I think I frame [such a thing] in my mind as excellence and we’re trying to be an excellent place. I just think you cannot fully grow and refine your thinking and skills without being more diverse. To the extent that charter schools are charged with re-segregating the schools, we don’t want to be any part of that. I like the fact that we are a public school for all kids.

Singh’s passion was evident during the interview.

Similarly, at *Hall Academy*, Barbara Joyner also wants a diverse school and firmly believes that diversity benefits us all as a society. While she admits that she has to take who comes, she is trying to nurture the development of their students of color by partnering with the families and setting clear expectations with the staff. “We’re the only shot they [have] got, when you get right down to it,” said Joyner. “I grew up in an area that was racially diverse. I went to schools in an area where, truthfully, I’ve been a minority.” She is working hard to establish a common school culture at [*Hall*] so that no

matter what their race or circumstances, individuals are Wildcats when they walk through the doors of the school.

### **Thoughts on Current Demographics and What Attracts Families**

The demographics for these four schools come as little surprise to their principals, but as a group, they all place a significant value on the school tours they provide to prospective families as a way of attracting potential students. *Challenge Community School* and *Warsaw Memorial Charter*—the two predominantly White schools—have leaders at the helm who possess different viewpoints on their demographics. Jim Anderson at *Warsaw* feels as though the school gets the students and families who choose to enter the lottery. Out of these four schools, *Warsaw* is the only one in which the website and application are only available in English and the window to enter the lottery is only 30 days long. Anderson adds that the families who come aboard are those who feel it's a good fit after they tour. The tours these principals give extend beyond a walk of the physical spaces, but instead are opportunities to educate parents on what they can expect for their son or daughter at the school. Families are required at *Warsaw* to take a tour before enrollment, if they didn't take one prior to the lottery. Anderson says that their low student-teacher ratio is a major selling point. Experiential learning and innovative teaching practices are also discussed during the tour. "Our vision is to provide a challenging intellectual journey for highly motivated students," Anderson states.

Patricia Singh at *Challenge*, as shared in the previous section, is taking a more aggressive approach to diversify the school, believing, as mentioned earlier, that students benefit from "bumping into others" who do not look like them. The school tour is used to



show off small class sizes and the culture that has been established at the school. Singh states, “Families like the idea of a smaller school and we’re trying to build a tight community here. I say that we’re operating on a human scale, as opposed to a bureaucratic one.”

Singh also noted a factor that is a rather large attractor of families for charter schools today and that is athletics. The same holds true at *Hall Academy*. Singh noted that, at *Challenge*, the original founders chose to steer clear of athletics, believing athletics were a move away from their vision of college for all. About 5 years ago, however, *Challenge* added a handful of sports at the middle and high school level because they were losing students to traditional public school. While there is still some loss of students, the numbers have been reduced dramatically and, equally as important, *Challenge* (and *Hall*) are just as likely to gain students because of athletics.

*Battleground Charter* and *Hall Academy* are physically situated in communities that have naturally created the diversity seen within the schools. The immediate community around *Battleground* is overwhelmingly Asian in makeup and just under 50% of its students identify as Asian. Jackson shared that their pre-K program is almost entirely made up of Asian students, but the lottery is open to anyone in the surrounding area for which the school is a good fit. Embracing the variety of cultures within the school is important to Jackson. “We have the parents come in and teach about their family’s culture, and a hit, each year, is when we line the fences at the front of the campus with the flag of each family’s heritage.” Jackson believes the individualized approach the school takes with each child is a drawing card for them. One teacher has a

student for 3 years at *Battleground Charter*—a scenario that is certainly unique. Within a traditional public school, a teacher might occasionally loop up with his or her students, but there are usually only 2 years involved and this scenario does not occur often or with every teacher. Matching with the individualized instruction theme, each of these four schools offer Special Education teachers and services.

Jackson also shared that the school rates very high on one of the school-rating websites and it is an A+ school in North Carolina. “Our parents are aware of these ratings and then it builds word-of-mouth for us.” But Jackson also echoed something I heard from Anderson at *Warsaw*, which was that some families get in who know nothing about the school. They apply to several charters in the area and they take whichever they get. If so, it is something that would be interesting for someone to explore further, particularly why these families are interested in charter schools as opposed to the TPS in the area.

The community surrounding *Hall Academy* is predominantly African-American and, similarly, just under 50% of their students are Black. Barbara Joyner, *Hall*'s Principal, says she does nothing intentional to increase the diversity within the school. Additionally, the school's “home office,” the Educational Management Organization that operates it, has never expressed a desire to see more diversity, according to Joyner. She shared that the home office wants to see the school hit their cap numbers in each classroom but has not discussed diversity with her. Joyner wants families in their area to know they are not a behavior dumping ground, as they were once thought to be, or actually were when they started 5 years ago. She and her team do tours to educate the

parents. They say to parents there is no fighting or disrupting and they are clear of the expectations their child will be held to upon enrolling. Joyner, however, values the diversity present at *Hall Academy*. “I get the impression from my Black parents that at least some of them choose us because they don’t feel their child received a fair shake in their assigned school, and not strictly with regards to discipline, but really with academic challenge or assistance,” Joyner said. She has worked hard to change the image of the school and train the staff so that they deliver quality instruction and care for each individual student. She doesn’t want anyone to be happy with a “C” grade on their North Carolina School Report Card. Joyner states, “It’s on us if it doesn’t work, no one else.” Joyner feels the community lacks the awareness that *Hall Academy* is serious about growing students academically, but she added that she plans to get the word out. Something community members appear to have heard about is the focus on character they do in classes for 25-30 minutes daily. They also have a weekly assembly on character. Joyner shared that it is not uncommon for *Hall* students to lead a religious gathering among themselves, in addition to their character focus. The schools’ parents, according to Joyner, really like the emphasis on morals as well. It’s a drawing card.

### **The Common Thought of Charters as Private Schools**

Each principal interviewed stated that it is not uncommon to encounter parents who mistakenly believe that their charter school operates as a private school. Furthermore, as with private schools, some of the same parents are also surprised to discover the absence of a tuition fee to enroll their child. The perception of private status may deter low-socioeconomic families from applying to a charter school. *Challenge*

Principal Patricia Singh goes into the community to provide accurate information to prospective parents. She has encountered numerous families who believed her pristine new school was a private school. She worries about the families she doesn't encounter and hates the thought of losing out on them. Singh, however, was the only principal of the four who worried about the misconception as a deterrent to families pursuing her school. *Warsaw's* Jim Anderson feels the competition for them is with other charter schools and referred to it as a "charter school business." Such a sentiment falls in line with the thought that charter schools are on a different plane from traditional public schools. *Battleground's* Principal, Roger Jackson, used the expression "private feel" during my interview with him. As the researcher, I observed four beautiful school buildings with well-maintained grounds and it is common, I would argue, to find most private schools in similar mint condition. As stated earlier, none of these schools struggle to enroll students. *Hall Academy* is the only one that continues to work during the school year to fill some of their empty grade-level slots, but their home office out-of-state sets class sizes higher than most charter schools I have encountered in order to carry a larger student enrollment. The other three schools have a substantially large waiting list to get into their school. Joyner at *Hall* did state, however, that "we have no problem recruiting in the area. We live and die on it, but because of our recent successes that we can then market to families, we are doing well with attracting families."

### **What Detracts Families**

On the flip side, in discussing what detracts some families from applying to charter schools, there were some similarities and differences in the responses provided

for this question. The most common talking point from each principal was extracurriculars, or the lack thereof, technically. “The largest exit point at *CCS* is eighth to ninth grade for sports, dance, band, and other available extracurriculars,” stated Principal Singh. At *Warsaw*, families tend to leave between fifth and sixth grade because of the Arts available at traditional public school. Roger Jackson at *Battleground Charter* shared that most make it all the way through eighth grade, the last one at *Battleground*, but they will leave between fifth and sixth grade for sports, an academic program, or social reasons. The parents feel it is best if they leave for a middle school that feeds the high school they want their child to attend. This is done not only for academic reasons, but perhaps more for the friend network that can be established more easily, in their eyes, at sixth grade versus ninth grade. Barbara Joyner at *Hall Academy* worked hard to add athletic programs because they were losing a lot of students at the middle school transition due to the lack of opportunity in sports. “We added athletics more to retain than to recruit, but it’s funny; I think it’s actually now a recruitment tool for us.” Funds were raised within the school to support the formation of these new teams and the School Board matched those funds with the \$35,000 the home office had provided them for “operating expenses.”

*Warsaw* principal, Jim Anderson, added a different layer to this topic of who chooses and attends their charter school, stating, “We have a very rigorous curriculum that’s *not for every child*.” He and his staff try to be very clear on this point during the school tours that are provided to prospective families. Anderson went on to say later in the interview, “Some families may choose not to apply here because of the amount of

homework, or . . . the logistics of carpool, or maybe I don't want overnight trips." These facets of matriculation at *Warsaw* are covered in the school tour that is required of each family prior to finalizing enrollment. The *Warsaw* website clearly states that "parents are responsible for transportation to and from [campus]." What might the school tour at each of these schools feel like to individual families? Remember that discourse involves an interplay between the experiences, biases, and thoughts of each side involved, so the school representative brings qualities to the school tour, consciously or unconsciously, as does the visiting family. The school tour, as an event that shapes enrollment and ultimately choice in schools, is one worthy of future research by scholars.

*Challenge Community School*, one of my two schools for interviews that is predominantly made up of White students, easily makes the strongest effort (across the board) among these four schools to diversify its student body. *Challenge* offers bus transportation, from rather long distances, via five hub locations, but its website indicates that each ride involves a two-dollar fee. Principal Singh, when asked, indicated that families can seek assistance from the school to offset fees like this one. The school also raises the necessary funds to provide free or reduced lunch to its students in need. Diversifying its student ranks is a purposeful mission at *Challenge* and their recent increases in families of color at Kindergarten is a sign that progress is being made. The other three schools do not offer transportation to families. *Warsaw* principal, Jim Anderson, stated, "we're working at a deficit, so we're not able to afford transportation and a lunch program." *Battleground* has a free or reduced lunch opportunity, but only eight families take advantage of it. With only eight families requiring assistance at the

school, *Battleground's* diversity within its student body does not include economic diversity. Their parent association will take care of student needs, but a need would have to be identified by someone within the school or brought to their attention by the parent as they do not advertise that the assistance is available. Principal Jackson was the only principal of the four who discussed the school's after-school program; however, he did add that it cannot operate for free. *Hall Academy* does not offer transportation because their Educational Management Operator (EMO) finds it too expensive to cover the associated liability insurance that comes with it. Fifty percent of *Hall Academy* students, however, receive free or reduced lunch. *Hall Academy* is one of the two diverse schools whose principal I interviewed. Principal Joyner is not actively pursuing a diversification mission, however, as this does not appear to be a priority for the home EMO office.

### **Website Management**

Chapter IV was entirely devoted to the website review that I conducted as part of my methodology for this study. The interviews provided me the opportunity to see how a representation of principals from the 30 schools think about and/or approach their school's website as a marketing or messaging tool. An overarching theme that I discovered was that the website has either only recently become a focal point within the school or it is not among the top priorities for these principals. The four websites each reflect the level of diversity found within the specific school through the visuals on the site. Singh at *Challenge*, in keeping with a purposeful approach to diversifying her school, stated, "Knowing that we want to be more diverse, there are people who are not [yet] stakeholders [in our school], but they're looking at our school. I want them to see

people they identify with, that look like them.” This desire has not translated into reality, however. On the website the images fail to indicate any degree of diversity within the school. There is one visual of all White hands coming together in the middle that is particularly notable here. When asked about the visuals on the website, Singh shared that “some of [the pictures] have been there for the entire two years [we’ve had this particular site].” This visual of the hands was still present on the *Challenge* website 7 months after the interview.

“Our website is awful,” stated Roger Jackson at *Battleground*. “I mean, every one of us say it. We need to do a lot of work on our website. Parents said [the visuals] do not represent our school.” During the interview, Jackson shared that parents had expressed a desire toward the end of the previous school year to see more *Battleground* students on the website. The summer break was upon them, though, so the best they could do was muster up a handful of students to come to the school for some staged photos. The majority of those who came out were staff members’ children. In the end, the pictures still did not fully represent the student body. Jackson shared that website management is “more of a summer task for us,” though they did recently make it more user-friendly in response to some parent complaints. From my own experience as a school leader, I know that website management is a weekly endeavor (if a school wants to use it to disseminate accurate and timely information out to families). The website at *Battleground* is primarily being used to house handbooks and basic information and is most certainly not a marketing tool. This finding aligns with other statements made by Jackson that there are no active efforts to diversify the school. The diversity comes as it will through the



families who can access information about the school, complete the application, and are selected in the annual lottery process.

At *Warsaw*, Principal Anderson shared that the website is only changed if there is information that parents need. When asked, he shared that “the pictures you see on there are probably a couple years old. We didn’t put it together for specifically marketing purposes; it was more to make it aesthetically pleasing.” The *Warsaw* website has a scrolling-picture feature at the top of the main page that features only White students. As stated before, Anderson feels there is little he or his staff can do to impact lottery applications.

The EMO for *Hall Academy* manages 100% of the website. This fact is readily apparent to someone reviewing multiple websites of charter schools as all of the websites from the same EMO look nearly identical. Principal Joyner, at the time of the interview, shared that she does not look at the website often because it is not something she or her immediate staff maintain. The visuals on the website are *Hall* people, but when asked, Joyner volunteered, “this year they are, [but] in the first three years they weren’t. They came in and took some shots, which I like because now it does seem more personal.” An interesting decision made on the *Hall* website by the EMO is to indicate the school’s student demographic makeup. *Hall* was the only school, out of 30, that published this information via their website. Joyner was unaware of this information and could not be sure why the EMO decided to publish this information and for what reasons. I found it interesting how relatively unattached to their respective websites these principals were when I sat down with them. I, myself, manage the content of our school website and I

am on there weekly. Websites are a significant source of information for families. As shared earlier, a couple of these four principals experienced parent complaints about their school's website and had to make changes. That occurrence comes as no surprise to me because I know how much our website is visited on a weekly basis through a website counter and it is enough online traffic for me to conclude that the website needs to be regularly maintained and updated with new visuals often.

Additional to the five themes I have discussed, the principals also regularly commented on some practices within the traditional public schools (TPS) during our interviews. There was enough commentary about these practices that they seemed worthy of inclusion here, helping to answer my secondary research question about how charter school principals discuss issues related to marketing and enrollment for their schools. For these charter school leaders, to understand their enrollment practices, one must understand the options available to families within the community. These leaders' thoughts on TPS not only reflect differences between their school and traditional public schools in the area, but are also likely thoughts that are shared with prospective families, much in the same way they were shared with me. This is significant from a marketing and messaging perspective. I should also add that traditional public-school principals, if interviewed about charter schools, would very likely speak about practices and procedures in charter schools at a similar plane of understanding. The level of understanding on either side is too often based upon hearsay and not actual firsthand knowledge. The original intent with charter schools was for them to serve as "labs" in which innovative practices could be attempted and then shared with all schools if

productive. We seem to have come off the rails from that original intent as there seems to be little evidence that charter and traditional public schools are working in collaboration to innovate, while there is substantial evidence of a competitive spirit between these two types of public schools today.

### **Commentary on Traditional Public Schools**

Barbara Joyner, Principal at *Hall Academy*, mentioned several times during my interview with her that she either had served as a traditional public school educator or that she possessed an abundant level of respect for the work of educators within traditional public schools because she had made a career within the traditional school or district. With that said, Ms. Joyner focused more of our conversation on her school and less on the shortcomings of nearby traditional schools in our talk together. *Hall Academy* becomes more diverse as you move from Kindergarten up through the middle grades. Joyner posited that it might be a result of families of color becoming disenchanted with their experience in local schools. Joyner's take on the local situation for students of color is that teachers in the other schools do not push students of color academically. That, however, is not the case at *Hall*, according to Joyner. Statements on the *Hall* website include "endless opportunities for your child to become their best," "critical thinking on real-world problems," and "21st Century challenges." After meeting with her and hearing her words on a variety of topics, it was clear to me that Joyner wants all of her students, regardless of race or background, exposed to these things.

The only other remark that Ms. Joyner made about TPS was one that left me a bit befuddled. When I asked about the higher class sizes at *Hall*, Joyner said she believes it

is less an issue for parents than the number of teachers in a TPS grade-level. When asked to elaborate, Joyner added that when you have a high number of teachers on a grade-level, the types of experiences that families have, from one class to another on that grade-level, differ mightily and may create division and discontent. While I can see how a grade-level of teachers could feature a variety of teaching styles, I fail to see how that issue is more problematic than a high student-teacher ratio.

*Battleground Charter*, like *Hall Academy*, is also a racially diverse charter school in North Carolina and its Principal, Roger Jackson, provided thoughtful insight about the school, as well as thoughts about what occurs in TPS. Jackson praised the traditional public school next door and indicated there is a good relationship between their schools. But, when asked why parents might choose his school over a school like the one next door, Jackson shared that, “you are able to look at the public system and say they teach to one child, the average. Students who are far ahead or below may be falling behind or, you know, bored because they’re advanced.” Jackson shared that his teachers have “a lot of different freedoms” to individualize teaching and learning for students. We have:

all materials, versus books [or] textbooks, and everybody [isn’t] doing the same thing at the same time. It’s different and that’s the first thing that draws parents in. We do care about scores, but we [also] care about students getting what they need in order to be successful in the next levels. Even though we follow some of the public standards, we’re not assessment crazy, so there is still a private feel.

In speaking to the uniqueness of his school, Jackson went on to share that students spend more than one year with the same teacher. “It’s not starting over every year with a new teacher,” he stated.

Many traditional public-school districts provide their teachers with a map of the curriculum. Essentially these maps provide a guide of what to teach and when to do it.

Jackson expressed some criticism about curriculum maps.

[*Battleground*] has always been about diversity and appreciation and I won't dive in our curriculum, but our curriculum is we don't have to follow a certain mapping, curriculum mapping. We have our own and a lot of that has to do with history and cultures and celebrations. And so, educationally, we teach just about everything. We look into our families too and invite them to, you know, teach about their culture—um, not religions but culture. So we, we have, you know, quite a bit of celebrations going on.

There has been a big push, across all public schools, to ensure we are providing culturally relevant instruction. As with any field, within ours there are certainly schools or districts that do this better than others. *Battleground's* push to involve parents is admirable and certainly a best practice. I also firmly believe there is time for cultural celebrations and guest speakers within mapped-out units of study.

At *Warsaw* and *Challenge*, Principal Anderson and Principal Singh respectively, echoed a similar sentiment about autonomy. Principal Anderson states,

We give our teachers a great deal of autonomy to bring in, you know, innovation into their own classrooms. You're not gonna see us adopt a reading program or an ELA program that's gonna go through the grade levels. We hire teachers that we believe will be masters in the classroom and inspire the students with the things they're gonna do in the classroom.

Principal Singh shared,

We have control over what fifth graders do with writing and what ninth graders do with writing. There's a whole joy there of building a skill, but I'm also interested in what behavioral cultural norms look like. We often use the word

microculture. Because we're all under one roof, you get more leverage on culture.

Moving from commentary on curriculum to that of size and physical space, *The Challenge Community School* was able to move from a very small, rented site to their current location that features immaculate grounds and a beautiful multi-story building. Principal Singh stated, "a great building does not a great school make." Nevertheless, it does matter to her to some extent.

People were worried that they would lose their small school. Um, they were worried about that and they were also worried about the kind of antiseptic standardized idea of a conventional school building . . . because the kids . . . the identity of the school was very much attached to the fact that we're different. We don't look like a school.

If *Challenge* does not look like a school from the main road in front of it, then I'm not sure what it looks like. One can see the soccer field and a very clear carpool circle in front. Inside the school, the front office is right at the front doors (as it should be in a school) and, farther down, one can clearly see cafeteria tables. Hallways feature classrooms. Frankly, the layout felt very familiar to me as a school leader myself.

Nevertheless, the idea of community is very important to Singh and she referenced the *people* within the school frequently during our time together. Singh is proud of their size and believes it provides a great opportunity to build community. She stated,

We're trying to build a tight community here. You can do that when schools are really huge, it's just tougher to do. I think a lot of our families like the idea of a smaller school. I say we're operating on a human scale, um, as opposed to a

bureaucratic one. You know, generally when we do high school in America, we do it super huge and gigantic. So, a lot of our families know that we have smaller class sizes at every grade—smaller than their districted school.

Families may be running away from larger class sizes in traditional public schools today. Class sizes within North Carolina, minus Kindergarten to Third Grade because of specific legislation, have most certainly increased over the last decade. Most charter schools are likely not following the model at *Hall Academy* either, where class sizes rival or are actually higher than nearby TPS (so that a profit can be turned). *Warsaw* Principal, Jim Anderson, believes “parents are choosing charter schools because they’re running away from something instead of *to* something.” Questions remain, however.

- Which families have the ability to “choose” a better school for their child, given obstacles that some policy decisions create for them?
- Can families access the information they need about potential schools in their area?
- Do the messages communicated to parents and children by the prospective school convey a feeling that all are welcome there?

Additional to the comments that charter school principals made about traditional schools, there were also some unique situations within each school that are worth briefly discussing before turning to my analysis of the discourse of the principals.

### **Unique Situations Per School**

There were a few discoveries at the schools that I want to highlight for the reader because they are pertinent to the broad conversation about charter schools and suggestive

of future research opportunities that I will discuss deeper in Chapter VI. I share these comments in this section.

First, the economic diversity lottery at *Challenge* is a strong attempt to diversify the student body there. If approved at the state level, the school would be able to define a certain number of incoming slots each year for low-SES families. Only six to eight charter schools across North Carolina have such a provision within their lottery. Again, this is a significant move to diversify. It does come with the caveat that these families would still need to either get to one of the bus hub locations, drive their child, or take advantage of a carpool. Free or reduced lunch seems covered, as stated earlier in the chapter, by the fundraising done at the school. The benefits and realities of this type of lottery need to be highlighted through future research, as well as through media coverage. Making such a lottery legislation in North Carolina would be a positive step forward so that more families in need could access good schools in their area. With this said, however, the funding structure for charter schools in North Carolina would also need to be addressed to make it possible for charter schools to provide the assistance low-SES families need. While it is logical that per-pupil dollars would follow the student from their base school to the charter school, the state needs to provide transportation funding for students in need of it as well.

A second issue worth mentioning involved the volunteer hours required of parents, particularly at *Warsaw*. The only school leader to bring up volunteer hours *without prompting* was Jim Anderson at *Warsaw*. Their website makes it clear that parents are expected to volunteer to cover lunch periods daily, as well as recess, so that



teachers gain time to plan lessons and collaborate with one another. Similar to the school tours given and the messages communicated during those, I find myself wondering how this expectation is communicated by the teachers to the parents in each class or by the school office. Is the tone welcoming for all families? Regardless, the expectation of volunteer time at *Warsaw* is clear and this is a policy that would be very difficult for working families.

Also of significance at *Warsaw* is the fact that they only offer the four core subjects in Kindergarten to Eighth Grade. While I know of many schools and school districts that have had to make budget cuts in their elective course offerings, this was the first time I had heard of a school doing only the four core subjects of English Language Arts/Reading, Science, Social Studies, and Mathematics. One benefit of school for low-socioeconomic families is the exposure to a wide variety of learning opportunities at no cost. Principal Anderson indicated that *Warsaw* families use time after school to ensure their child is involved in extracurricular activities. Music, Art, and Physical Education, however, are curricular in many schools, not *extra-curricular*.

Principal Jim Anderson also spoke of overnight field trips as these occur more than once at each grade-level at *Warsaw*. This is a family-related cost that is communicated up front via the school tours. There is fundraising that occurs for these to help offset the cost. Anderson was clear, as I stated earlier in the chapter, that he and his staff utilize the school tour to ensure that *Warsaw* is the right fit for prospective families. Families selected in the lottery are required to tour the school so that each receives the necessary information to make the most informed choice for their child.

Lastly, *Hall Academy* began this school year advertising via television and radio. While that is unique, in and of itself, the school (that's run by a for-profit Educational Management Organization) uses the commercials to market their student outcome results. More specifically, the message is that *Hall's* test scores are the best in the area for all schools. As a principal, it's hard for me to imagine such advertising. When we have been successful in the schools I lead, we certainly want to get the word out to our families, but the focus has never been to communicate how much better than the school down the road we are; rather, the celebration remains within our school community. We recognize the hard work that was done on behalf of our students. We want to be the best option in town, most certainly, but active recruitment of this nature does not occur. *Hall Academy* also shares, through these mediums, information about their "moral focus" time. This addition to their school day and school month is attractive to families of faith in the area—families who believe schools should do more to develop morals and character within young people. With this form of marketing, Principal Joyner shared that they need more time to see if the strategy is paying dividends for them in terms of interested families and student numbers within the school. Joyner shared that the school benefits from a lot of positive word-of-mouth in the community, but they also have an admissions representative who goes to the area preschools, daycares, and other venues to recruit for them.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis of the Findings**

In her research, Stitzlein (2013) organized her critical discourse analysis (CDA) into three levels. I discussed CDA in greater depth in Chapters II, III, and IV. Generally

speaking, Stitzlein's (2013) approach with CDA involves the following: (a) The micro level looks at the individual, (b) The macro level involves the group of participants, and (c) The meso level involves a theme that permeates through the findings from the participants.

Looking at the micro level, these four schools each utilize school tours with individual families. The school leaders I interviewed all indicated a preference for individual tours with one family at a time. It is what they strive for when scheduling them, even if they sometimes have to include several families. Much can be learned by families during a school tour. Besides the basic information like the types of classes offered, the daily schedule, or the layout of the school, parents can also gain a glimpse of the demographics of the student body, the pride the staff takes in keeping the school clean, and/or the general climate that exists among the staff and students. At the same time, school tours provide school leaders with an opportunity to share explicit and implicit messages about their school. The way that this opportunity is viewed can be shaped by the school leader's own personal biases. With the school tour occurring with individual families, it is not unreasonable to imagine, given how our biases so easily permeate our lives, that a school leader might knowingly or unknowingly steer the conversation in a particular direction. The impact of personal biases, then, cannot be underestimated within the context of a school tour. If first impressions are everything and given that most families never take a second tour, the interaction between school leader and family on a tour becomes an extremely influential piece in the decision-making process that follows about whether the school is the right place for one's child.

School tours for me, as a school leader in TPS, typically do not involve low-SES families (due to their work obligations most likely), but anyone successful with the lottery at these four charter schools must take a school tour prior to enrollment. This, in turn, means that these charter school leaders see the full gamut of families who were successful with the lottery. Within TPS, we enroll any student within our attendance zone, minus an exception or two. I do not always have the opportunity to meet the families who enroll a student, though I advise our school's Student Information Manager that it is my desire to do so. These four charter-school leaders, however, do have this opportunity. Additionally, their opportunity comes prior to an enrollment decision by the families. What is said during these school tours? Discourse takes direction from what is said by the participants. This is significant. From this discourse, perceptions take life within the individuals on either side. A sense of belonging is one area that could easily be impacted by what is said, what is not said, what is highlighted, and what is not highlighted on the school tour. Thus, it is challenging as a researcher to get a full picture of how these school leaders market their schools behind metaphoric closed doors and how this marketing shapes enrollment patterns.

It is easy to think about percentage makeups of a group when assessing the diversity that exists with a school. The school tour reminds us that individuals have decisions to make and looking at people as members of an identifiable group is a much less responsible practice than taking the time to look at the individuals who make up the group. However, when we do so, we must strive to either recognize our personal biases or standardize our approach in order to keep our biases in check. Access to a great

school, as it turns out, can be limited by policy decisions like whether transportation to and from school exists for the child. But what if we altogether alter the viewpoint of the school from that of a great school to that of one for only certain groups of people.

Messaging of that nature would demand additional research attention.

An examination of the findings from these four interviews reveals, at a macro level, two differing approaches to recruiting for diversity. Two principals, one from a predominantly White charter school and the other from a racially diverse one, felt that increasing diversity was out of their hands. *Warsaw* Principal, Jim Anderson, and *Battleground Charter* Principal, Roger Jackson, shared this belief. Jackson summed it up with his “luck of the draw” statement. This indifference is significant. If, for instance, I view myself in my current role as a traditional school principal as having no ability to raise student proficiency outcomes, then I probably will not attempt any number of best practices that lead to achieving such a goal. This is either a defeatist attitude or I believe that the status quo is quite positive already and requires no change. Certainly, recruiting diversity is not the focal point of this study. However, marketing and messaging of one’s charter school *is* the focal point of this study.

Indifference with marketing and messaging of one’s school could cause “failure to launch” for families of color, particularly those with the means to access the school. These families may not gain the same information that more well-connected families do and, subsequently, miss out on a potentially better educational opportunity for their children. It was certainly the case, among all four of these schools, that the websites were (to varying degrees, of course) neglected. The three non-EMO schools struggle

mightily to maintain the school website on a weekly basis. At *Warsaw*, Principal Anderson shared that the website is only changed if there is information that parents need. “Our website is awful,” stated Roger Jackson at *Battleground*. “We need to do a lot of work on our website.” Barbara Joyner at *Challenge* wants her school’s website to reflect their desire for increased diversity, but it falls extremely short of such a goal. Given the increases *Challenge* has seen with racial diversity in their most recent cohorts, the opportunity to message differently, via their website, is there. *Hall Academy*, run by an EMO, has a school website that suffers from a different issue. Their website lacks a personal *Hall Academy* touch, despite what Principal Joyner states regarding recently updated pictures. Instead, it looks nearly the same to the other schools in the EMO’s network. While there is some neglect or lack of personal touch with the four school websites, two of these four principals—one from each set of 15 schools studied—view diversity and their ability to impact it via marketing very differently.

Patricia Singh at *Challenge Community School* and Barbara Joyner at *Hall Academy* possess a very different viewpoint on increasing diversity within their respective schools. *Challenge* is actively trying to do so by petitioning the North Carolina State Charter School Board to allow them to implement an economic diversity lottery. This is a significant move. Separately, Singh has, for several years, written letters, visited with civic groups and church congregations, and posted advertisements in business windows. She formed a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to oversee the efforts. Singh believes a school cannot be excellent without offering its students diversity from which to learn and with which to interact. Similarly, at *Hall Academy*, Barbara

Joyner also wants a diverse school and firmly believes that “diversity benefits us all as a society.” Joyner works to nurture the development of her students of color primarily through professional development with her staff and timely conversations where the need to do so presents itself. The work by Singh and Joyner cast a shadow on individuals who believe recruiting and retaining a diverse student body is out of their hands.

Each of these four school leaders aim to provide their students with an educational experience that is unique from traditional public schools in their immediate geographical area. At the meso level of analysis, this is a theme that resonated throughout the findings from the interviews.

At *Challenge Community School*, Principal Singh wants students to feel part of a tight-knit community; one in which individual talents are celebrated and shared with others within a climate of acceptance, compassion, and empathy. Singh believes traditional high schools in the area, due to their high numbers of students, cannot match the warm climate *Challenge* offers students. Within their community, individuals are well known and this knowledge includes teachers and their knowledge of students’ academic needs. Singh did an excellent job articulating the goals and the vision for the school when I spoke with her. Unfortunately, however, the *Challenge* website completely failed to communicate this same message. Going into the interview with Singh, I had no idea I would hear about a weighted economic lottery or a concerted effort to diversify the school. The school’s website had provided me with no indication whatsoever.

*Hall Academy* provides the geographical community with a school that devotes time to moral and ethical growth via weekly lessons and monthly assemblies. North Carolina is located within the Bible Belt of the United States. There are many families, according to Principal Joyner, who specifically choose *Hall Academy* because of the lessons about morality that take place there. Second, *Hall Academy* markets itself, via television and radio spots, as a better option than local TPS for academics, based upon state examination scores. Knowing what I know about the TPS in *Hall's* geographic region, being a strong academic option for families would allow them to stand out from the crowd. I did not gain insight about the moral focus, nor the academic score success, from the school's website. This separation between the reality and that which is messaged on the school website really confused me as a school leader. Positive attributes of one's school should be communicated to the public. It occurs to me, with my own school, that we have recently installed programs for students that are not yet being highlighted yet on our website. School websites are not being utilized to their full potential.

*Warsaw Charter* offers the four core subjects to their students—English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies, and Science. Principal Anderson indicated their focus, solely on the core subjects, allows them to stretch learning well beyond what TPS in their area could accomplish with the same children. The acceleration they achieve is due to the time on task each school day within the four core subjects. This setup absolutely makes them unique, as compared to surrounding TPS. This specialization, as Anderson explains to potential families during the school tour, may not be for everyone.



Additionally, this very important feature of the school was not readily accessible via the website.

*Battleground Charter* prides itself on its curriculum. Teachers have a high degree of latitude to develop the curriculum, while at the same time also considering state standards and state assessments. The school approaches their work in a very unique way but sharing of this information would potentially compromise the anonymity of the school within this study. The approach the school takes is covered well on the website and is likely known among well-connected parents in the community.

### **Conclusion**

Within this second findings chapter, I shared much from these four school leaders that helps us answer the question of how they think about the marketing and messaging of their charter school to the community. The four participants were forthcoming, open, and honest with their responses. They were staunch supporters of their school and of charter schooling overall.

Chapter VI, the final chapter, provides the reader with a look back at the most pertinent findings from the study and how these connect to current literature on the topic of marketing and messaging by charter schools today. I also examine opportunities for future research that have emerged through this study.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the early beginnings of this project, dating back to when a new charter middle school opened in the area where I was a traditional public-school principal, I have been curious about whether school choice is fully open to all families. Hailed by legislators and neoliberals as the great equalizer, charter schools were promised as a way to free up families in underperforming schools to choose a better option. Within the community that I served, it was almost exclusively White or affluent families that exited for the charter school. Each of the students who departed had scored a level four or five out of five on the most recent End-of-Grade exams. The middle school they departed from was not considered an underperforming school, but it was a Title I school. Approximately 60% of the students within the school were classified as Economically Disadvantaged, yet not a single student who departed for the new charter school was classified in this way. Unfortunately, current data suggest that charter schools nationwide, and specifically in the state of North Carolina, are significantly less diverse with regards to the students they serve than traditional public schools (TPS).

Furthermore, as was seen in the community I served, competition for the best students became commonplace because schools suddenly existed within a choice market. Attracting the most capable students, along with families in a position to support the school, is the best way to ensure your new school remains open and grows from year to

year. The ways in which a school markets itself in the community, then, seemingly becomes particularly important and it was this facet of charter schools in which I was interested. Prior to the charter school in my small community, one would occasionally hear of a traditional public school recruiting a star athlete to cross town and come to their school, but one athlete, every few years or so, was the extent of it because there were rules against it. The charter middle school sent representatives to the traditional schools' ballgames to recruit within the stands. With fewer guidelines governing them, the charter school leaders at the time could actively and openly recruit student-athletes.

What caught my attention, though, were the demographics of the students that departed the middle school just a few months before I took over as its principal. Why were none of them Black? Why were none of them from the poor neighborhoods in town? As I discovered more about the new charter school, I found out that there was no bus to the school within the city. Our middle school served students within the city. I was told about the dismissal time of 12 noon every Friday. I realized that the charter school was only available to families possessing a car, money for gasoline, and a consistent plan for who would drop off and pick up the student daily. The choice to enter the lottery for the new charter middle school was not a choice that any family in our small community could make—there were barriers.

Hegemony occurs within our society in a multitude of ways and here was another example. There seemed to be little thought that went into how the school would build a diverse group of learners or serve the underserved. Instead, a competitive marketplace was established in this community, much as it had been established in countless others

around the country already. While the inequity of the situation was clear, high segregation rates in charter schools had already been covered extensively in the research literature up to that point.

I was most interested in how the charter schools present themselves to the community. What audience are the leaders of a charter school appealing to when they message about their institution? Do they have conscious intent in mind? The purpose of this study was to investigate approaches to marketing and messaging by North Carolina charter schools and the impact that decisions within this arena may have on families trying to access school choice within their community.

### **Key Findings from the Website Analysis**

In sharing the findings here, I want to address, or “answer,” the primary research question. What are the messages being communicated to the public, explicitly or not, through the schools’ marketing practices? While there were a few similarities between the 15 charter school websites belonging to the predominantly White charter schools and the 15 from the racially diverse group, there were more notable (and noticeable) differences. First, with the similarities, both sets of schools used language centered on academic excellence. From a marketing perspective, ten of the predominantly White schools and nine racially diverse ones messaged about the academic excellence they could offer students. Lubienski (2013) believes that *de facto* privatization—in this case, messages that aid a private school perception of charter schools—cause families to choose charter schools over TPS. The charter school principals whom I interviewed

stated that their school had something different and special to offer students in the community, so this finding here aligns with their thinking, from a marketing perspective.

Next, only a handful from each set of 15—seven from the White schools and six from the racially diverse—messed about Exceptional Child (or Special Education) services for families to access. This concerned me greatly, even as the more diverse schools were no better in addressing this issue than the predominantly White schools. The absence of information can be as important as its presence, and I believe parents with special-needs children would be turned off by a school website in which they can find nothing about Special Education services. It is unclear whether such an omission was intentional, but more care should be taken to include information as vitally important as service information.

It was surprising to me that a similar number of schools from each group—a rather small number at that—messed about diversity and/or community. I anticipated much more intentionality in this direction. As I learned from the interviews I conducted, however, intentionality via the school website did not seem to rank high on the list of priorities—at least for the four principals I interviewed. However, the idea of community was important to each of them, so this feels like a missed opportunity, overall, for the schools that failed to message in this direction. It is true that charter schools typically carry fewer students and smaller class sizes than TPS. Community, for a school, is usually easier to build with smaller numbers of people. From my own experiences, speaking with families that left for a charter, I know that some of them left because the charter school could provide more individual attention from the teacher and tighter

connections to peers, due to smaller student numbers. Besides the idea of community, I was also surprised by the low number of schools that messaged the value they place on having a diverse student body. Three predominantly White schools messaged in this way, while six did from the second set of schools.

Lastly, within this sample size, there was little difference in the number of schools that messaged about bus transportation on their website. In fact, two fewer schools from the racially diverse set of 15 provide bus transportation than the predominantly White set. If a school does not offer bus transportation, it is not going to communicate that fact. Such a thing would most certainly be an intentional omission.

The differences between the two sets of schools stood out more. Easily the most noticeable difference between the two sets of schools was the chosen images for the websites. If pictures tell a thousand words, then it would be quite easy for a parent visiting these websites to determine the approximate demographics of any one of these schools. It was a surprise to me that the schools in the first group did not make a stronger effort to show some diversity. The stark contrast of the visuals from the first set of schools to the second set may be the most significant finding from my study. With the first 15 schools and their websites, the message communicated to the surrounding community, a community that it is important to remember is racially diverse, through the pictures and videos on the websites, is that White students—a lot of White students—attend these schools. If a prospective family is White, then a feeling of belonging makes sense when they see the images. It is worth further study to ground the speculation that “White flight” is fueled by such images. Does the same sense of belonging come as

easily for a prospective family of color, for these 15 websites, as it might when they see students who look like their children in the images from the second set of 15 schools? It is a question, among others, that would make for a great study in the future.

Second, while there were only two schools from the first set that messaged about free or reduced lunch opportunities, nine from the racially diverse group mentioned meal options. Within the first 15, there were statements such as “lunch is the responsibility of parents,” “[there are] opportunities on occasion to purchase hot lunch,” and “parents must provide it.” There was no such language found on any of the 15 websites from the second group of schools. I felt stronger about the assistance provided by the schools in the second group because they also shared the types of opportunities that were available during breakfast and lunch for the students. Statements about what is available are welcoming messages for prospective families. It is in these messages that I discovered intentionality on the part of the schools. Some of the predominantly White schools seemed to want to make it very clear that parents were responsible for providing their child with lunch. If a parent cannot afford to provide her/his child with lunch each day, there is no need to enter the lottery for such a school. The school messaged that parent out of their applicant pool with this language. However, if the same parent feels the school cares about her/his child because they shared opportunities on their website, then the parent may continue reading more about the school on the website and/or consider entering her/his child into the school’s lottery.

Another substantial difference between the two sets of school websites was the text devoted to that which is needed from parents—their money and their time. Nine of

the predominantly White schools prominently displayed links to donation, fundraising, or foundation pages where money could be given as support. On all nine websites, this link stood out on the main page. Money would be needed for the trip to Europe at one school. Certainly a trip to Europe invokes a private-school feel, even as charter schools are public school. The word “tuition” was used on more than one of the sites as well. In contrast, there were six websites within the racially diverse set of school that featured such a link, but it was only prominent on four of those sites. With the other two, one would have to scroll to the bottom or find it via a dropdown menu. Time from parents was also desired. Ten out of 15 schools in the first group required some degree of volunteer hours from parents; contrasted with the second group in which only four required this assistance. The prominent requests for money might unintentionally serve to scare some prospective families away who feel marginalized because they cannot engage the fundraiser in the same way as the parents of the students in the pictures presumably can. Alternatively, asking for some funds and tuition, even in small amounts, lends a charter school a private school feel. Again, as before, who is this school for, exactly? Many families understand that public school means it is for the public and is provided for through public taxes. At the same time, public school leaders know their obligation to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). If parents are asked to be a part of Annual Funds, Educational Foundations, and Capital Campaigns, there is a sense of elitism occurring that may message a prospective family in because they want to be a part of something elite, or may message a family without the means to contribute out. With the messages about volunteer hours, I only found these on subpages of the websites. It is likely the



requirement of parent volunteer hours was less impactful as messages on the sites because they were less prominently shared with visitors. The requirement of parent volunteer hours might be a topic that comes up more during a mandatory school tour, a topic which I discuss again shortly.

Athletics were utilized as a marketing tool by the predominantly White set of schools. Thirteen of the 15 schools in the first group featured at least one webpage for their school's athletic teams. Many of the photos I found for the first set of schools were ones on their sports pages. The charter school from the area where I was once a TPS administrator that I have referenced as a catalyst for this study was predominantly made up of White students. They actively recruited athletes from TPS and marketed their school via their athletic program. Eight of the 15 White schools in my study ask their families to pay for athletic participation. In contrast, only one school in the second group indicated a "pay to play" policy and only eight of the schools messaged about sports opportunities. As with other messages on the websites, families who cannot afford to pay to play are messaged out from entering the lottery at such a school.

There was a noticeable dichotomy between these two sets of schools with regards to text about curriculum and instruction. In the first group of websites, I found so little that it failed to even establish a topic theme group. I did, however, find a lot about field trips, athletics, as I have mentioned, dress code and personal appearance, and the types of behaviors that will get one suspended or even kicked out of the school altogether. With the second diverse group, though, the inclusion of curriculum and instruction messages was easy to find on 13 of the 15 sites. There was a clear focus on students and their

individual needs, the 4 C's of 21st Century learning, and programs devoted to Spanish immersion, pre-AP, or STEM learning. As I stated in Chapter IV, these messages had the potential to act as marketing messages because traditional public schools (TPS) have not typically done a good job of sharing the news of great curricula or instruction. Instead, families could visit the websites of these charter schools and very easily gain a sense of what their child would be engaged with if he or she were to attend the charter school instead. The second set of schools are racially more diverse so I would argue that these messages about curriculum and instruction offer families of color a seemingly positive and attractive alternative to their current school. If they are on the website of the nearby charter school, they are looking for another option.

The findings gained from the review of 30 charter school websites were informative on the topic of marketing by charter schools, but I sought even more insight in order to dig more deeply into these finding through hearing from some charter school leaders. Comparing these findings to the thoughts shared by a subset of the school principals was a move I felt would strengthen my study, much as it had for Cucchiara in 2013 and Hernandez-Cruz in 2016. I asked a secondary research question that I answered through the interviews: How do charter school leaders discuss issues of marketing and enrollment for their schools?

### **Key Findings from the Interviews**

Interviews with four charter school principals—two from the predominantly White group and two from the racially diverse group—provided not only triangulation that supported the trustworthiness of the study, but also discoveries that enrich the

literature on marketing and messaging done by charter schools. Findings included thoughts on recruiting, a desire to offer something unique to the community (that the local schools, presumably, cannot), and degrees of intentionality with the school website. One note before jumping into the findings: I thought the first few questions of my interview guide would simply be warm-up questions for the participants. The questions included topics like when each became the principal, who wrote the charter for the school, and the thing at the school for which he or she was most proud. These questions, however, revealed passionate, accomplished, veteran leaders in front of me.

Two of the four principals—one from each set of schools—desired diversity within the school, while the other two principals felt that their school’s lottery provided them each year with the makeup of their school and there was little that could be done about it. Patricia Singh at *Challenge Community School* not only visits churches and community centers known for serving the Black community near her school, but she applied with the State of North Carolina in 2019 to alter her school’s lottery, moving forward, to a weighted economic diversity lottery. Such a lottery sets aside a certain number of seats in each cohort for low-socioeconomic families. While this does not, of course, guarantee racial diversity, it is a move toward increased diversity and toward serving students who may really need what her school has to offer. Barbara Joyner at *Hall Academy* is White, but this made her the minority within the community she grew up in as a child. She values diversity for her students, and in part because of her own experiences, she strives to ensure students of color feel strong connections daily within her school. Because *Hall Academy* is managed by an Educational Management

Organization (EMO), she has nothing to do with the marketing end of things for her school and has little involvement with the website, which was a striking finding. Both of these principals spoke extensively about how they strive for a strong sense of community within their respective schools though. Jim Anderson at *Warsaw Memorial Charter* and Roger Jackson at *Battleground Charter* take in the Kindergarten students each year who were selected via the lottery, took a school tour, and whose parents chose to follow through with enrollment. Both principals indicated that with well over 1,600 lottery entrants each year, there was little he or she could do to increase diversity. Both pointed out, also, that race cannot be asked for on the lottery application, nor factored for in any way. Anderson said that he and his staff posted up at the local mall one year to market their school, but it did not impact the number of students of color who enrolled a few months later. Jackson and Anderson both expressed uncertainty for which locations in their respective communities would be best to visit to recruit more intentionally for diversity. More than anything though, they did not feel recruiting was something needed at all.

A second major finding from the interviews was the general neglect of the school websites. In all fairness, Barbara Joyner at *Hall* shared that the EMO manages their website. She was unaware of content posted on the website by the management organization, which surprised me. The other three principals each stated that their school's website is not updated regularly and that images on the site have been there for many months. This approach with their websites does not change the information that is shared via the websites. Each school, at some level, made choices about the content on

their site. It does, however, support the earlier finding that active marketing for recruitment purposes is not a priority at two of these three schools. Alternatively, Principal Singh at *Challenge* expressed a strong desire to include more about their school and more diverse images on their school website.

The somewhat laissez-faire attitude or approach with the websites was somewhat surprising because each principal could have utilized the website better to communicate key information about their school. Each of the four leaders discussed with me a unique aspect of their school, as well as the autonomy they have with curriculum and instruction as a charter. Such uniqueness and autonomy create a private school feel—a perception that each principal, other than Singh at *Challenge*, agreed was a good thing for attracting families. Unique qualities included a focus on specific curriculum, rigorous core instruction, lessons on morality, and the kind of close-knit community that is possible due to enrolling fewer students as compared to the TPS. Each of these attributes could be marketed via the websites, but after a second review, following the interviews, I found some of this information here and there, but certainly not as a focal point to help the school stand out from the crowd. *Hall Academy's* focus on morals and ethics with their students was discussed on a subpage, even though Principal Joyner believes it sets her school apart from area schools. I was able to find specifics about curriculum and instruction on each of these four websites and it was a focal point on *Battleground's* site. *Battleground* offers a very unique approach to curriculum and instruction. I did not learn that *Warsaw* only offers the four core subjects (no electives like music, art, physical education, or technology), or that the administrators believe they can accelerate with

grade-level content beyond a traditional school, until I interviewed Principal Anderson. One would think something that notable would be messaged very clearly on the school's website. Principal Anderson did share with me that the website is only changed if there is information that parents need. Again, Principal Anderson did not feel active marketing at *Warsaw* was necessary.

The answers to the secondary research question provided here, combined with those gained in response to the primary research question, add to existing literature on charter schools and how their marketing and messaging approaches contribute to enrollment patterns. Next I put my findings back into conversation with the literature I reviewed on this topic throughout this dissertation, most directly in the first two chapters.

### **Implications of the Findings**

There were several connections I found between my study and the relevant work of other researchers. With qualitative studies, one of the goals is to contribute to existing literature on the topic of interest. To add to this goal, I believed my study could be significant because it might help lead to more inclusive student recruitment and enrollment practices among charter schools. By troubling the marketing and messaging practices of North Carolina charter schools, the desire is to one day see school choice be fully open to any family in any community. Best-fit options to consider for a child can only be a good thing, but we are unfortunately a long way away still from such a reality. The most pervasive issue is the movement to a free market situation for the field of education. When the marketplace itself, within our American society, is setup to reward only those with forms of capital, then low-socioeconomic families operate at the starting

line from a point of disadvantage. Competition, in this case for the “goods” that a quality school can provide, leads to winners and losers. Instead, the greatest potential for impacting positive change exists at both the school level with the principals and directors that write the charter and fight for an equitable playing field, and at the state legislative level with elected officials who (hopefully) disagree with a segregated public school system. The focus of this study was, of course, on the schools and the school leaders, so I have organized the connections to the existing literature within two major themes—essentially the role of the school/school officials and secondly, the role of the website as a marketing tool.

### **Attracting the Best Students**

Schools that actively engage in marketing practices have been examined by other researchers from the perspective that they are not just recruiting numbers, but rather that they are chasing the best students (Olson Beal et al., 2016). There is also evidence, as this study has shown, that only a handful are recruiting in ways that help to ensure that the diversity of their student bodies reflect the diversity of their communities. When a school begins with “better” students, “skimming off the top” as it is sometimes referred to, it has less distance to travel to earn the type of positive notoriety it wishes to have within the community. For that matter, the school has a more favorable chance of survival within the context of education today—high-stakes accountability (Welner, 2013). With more positive perception comes more students and more funding. Charter school families believe that to be a part of the brand community is an improvement in one’s life, therefore actual educational programming or student outcomes can be less

significant to them than the community of which they are a part (Olson Beal & Beal, 2016). A significantly fewer number of White schools in my sample size, versus the racially diverse ones, messaged about their educational programming. An even fewer number of charter schools, from either group in my study, messaged about their student outcomes. Based on my limited pool, it does not appear necessary to share the outcomes via the website with prospective families. Furthermore, Harris and Larsen (2014) found the role of extracurricular activities like sports sometimes plays a stronger role in consumer demand than measures of academic quality. The predominantly White schools within my study absolutely placed a high level of value on athletics.

Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) or Education Management Organizations (EMOs) spend exorbitantly to ensure their charter schools attract the best students (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016). CMOs and EMOs can engage in prestige marketing where perception (through presentation) outweighs actual experience of the product. Jessen and DiMartino (2016) contend that charter schools evade their public status in marketing, choosing instead to focus on that which makes them unique as compared to TPS. Within my study, *Hall Academy*, which is managed by an EMO, easily puts the most effort into this type of messaging about their unique qualities. As I shared earlier in the chapter, the other three schools could do much more with their websites to market that which makes them stand apart from the crowd. These schools do possess unique attributes as compared to TPS in their respective communities; that is a fact for which I do not argue. Absent from using the website to communicate these



attributes, I am curious whether the school tour is used for such marketing purposes, something I will come back to later in this chapter.

Many charter schools market private-school like characteristics such as character education, safety, and uniforms and I found these approaches within my study as well (Jessen & DiMartino, 2016). Lubienski (2013) believes that many White, affluent families choose to send their children to charter schools because they find them to have a private-school feel without a private-school price tag. Furthermore, Cucchiara (2013) found that safety issues were a common theme among the White parents for why they chose to leave their neighborhood school. Charter schools within my study addressed character education within their website and *Hall Academy* feels their approach to building character sets them apart from other local schools. Safety was messaged through strict policies around student behavior. With uniforms, I found several of the racially diverse schools and a few of the predominantly White schools wanted families to know about this policy via their website.

Lastly, I have already noted that messaging about Exceptional Child, or Special Education, services was minimal for the 30 schools in my study. Such omission exists on 17 of the 30 websites despite the fact that these public schools are obligated to include such service availability for their students. Situated with the notion that charter schools are chasing the best students is another notion that charter schools are “cropping off” (Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002, p. 155) adequate language services and/or special-needs services to students. Messaging about language services was not found on a single website from this group of 30 charter schools in North Carolina.

### Websites as Marketing Tools

Welner (2013) addresses the topic of charter school enrollment patterns thoughtfully in his frequently cited piece on the *Dirty Dozen*. How they answer the 12 questions that charter school leaders must address for their school can, intentionally or unintentionally, impact the diversity of the student body at the school. I shared the full list on pages 38–41. Number Three on the list is the problem I chose to study in this dissertation. It reads, What audience does the school hope to attract through messaging to the public (Welner, 2013)? How and where marketing takes place impacts who applies and websites are most certainly a hot topic for any discussion of this sort.

As a marketing and information tool, websites present somewhat of a double-edged sword for low-socioeconomic families or families for whom language could be a barrier. On the one hand, low-socioeconomic families may not have the internet access one would need to pull up the website. On the other hand, assuming there is internet access, many of the 30 charter school websites I reviewed for this study were quite dense with information. There were pages linked within pages on the sites. Finding what you need from a school's website, even for the well-educated, can be a difficult task. Information is often located and stored on the site in the way, typically, that the web designer thinks is logical. Ten different people might organize a website in ten different ways. This limits a website, then, as a highly effective marketing tool. During my own review of the websites, I found myself anxious at times because I worried that I had simply failed to find what was actually present. During my review, I hit the back button quite a bit, worried that I had potentially missed something on the previous page. I *had*

to persevere, for the trustworthiness of the study, but families in *need* of a change who are seeking information have no such obligation. The most vital marketing information will be that which loads on the main page or is perhaps just one click away, in my estimation. Within the Irish community of Portown, Cahill and Hall (2014) concluded that a competitive, market-based approach to education served to widen the gap between the Irish working-class and middle-class. The two researchers labeled what the education system there was doing “latent hegemony.” Such a gap is the problem we are facing when not only school policy decisions, like opportunities for free lunch, produce inequities, but also when the manner in which school information is rolled out leads to them as well. Parents with less formal education, those with special-needs children, and parents of color all were more likely than other parents to report difficulty accessing information on schools in their area, managing the application, and accomplishing these things by a deadline (Jochim et al., 2014).

Returning to my point that the first pieces of information the school puts in front of a family viewing their website are the most critical, I cannot help but return to the topic of photos and videos posted on the website. The visuals on the website and their importance from a marketing and messaging perspective cannot be understated. I have already referenced that White families tend to enroll together. Garcia (2008) found that Black and Native American families do the same. This move to self-segregate adds significance to the images on the school website as they provide a quick glance view of who attends the schools and/or who belongs at the school.

These findings make it all the stranger that my interviews with three of the four charter school principals each revealed an alarming degree of neglect with regards to updating the school website. The only school that wasn't alarming was *Hall Academy* and it's managed by an EMO. As a marketing and messaging tool, information must be up-to-date and accurate. If, as a school leader myself, I send home an information sheet about a new initiative at my school, I would ensure the information is accurate and would typically have at least one other person review the information prior to printing the flyers. Does the same degree of scrutiny exist with school websites, however? And, how often does information get reviewed and updated on the site? As an example of what alarms me here, I checked one school, *Challenge Community School*, to see if the images on the website had been updated. I chose *Challenge* because of Principal Singh's commitment to diversify the school's student body. During our interview, she shared with me that her Kindergarten and First Grade classes contained more students of color than the grades above because of the efforts made to reach communities of color with information about the school. The images on the *Challenge* website still had not been updated 7 months following the interview. There was a real opportunity there to showcase the diversity present in the lower grades, but it simply had not occurred.

### **Limitations of My Study**

There are typically aspects of any research study that the researchers feel could have either been handled differently or were simply unavoidable. Limitations to a study must be acknowledged as they inform the audience and offer opportunity within future research efforts. Here I discuss the limitations for this study.

First, with the websites, larger sample sizes are almost always of higher value to researchers. There were only so many predominantly White charter schools in racially diverse school districts, but there were more, particularly if I had lowered the criteria percentage I set to mark the White population. I had less wiggle room to add more racially diverse schools, however, so I settled at 15 schools for each set. I wonder whether some view it as a limitation that I did not include any websites of traditional public schools. The comparison to TPS might have allowed for a type of baseline within the study. However, while I did some comparison and contrast between the websites from the two sets of schools, that approach was not at the forefront for this study. Rather, the focus was to examine and extract from each individual website and then code for themes among that group of 15 schools.

Additionally, with the websites, it strikes me as a limitation that my review of the websites marks a static moment in time for each, rather than one that matches with what each looks like and reads like today. I recognize that a similar situation occurs with many qualitative studies, but a number of these schools may have made changes since the time of the review in early 2018. Indeed, I hope that they have.

Like the sample size limitation with the websites, I could have perhaps conducted more than four interviews. When I began inviting charter school principals, I ran into a fair amount of non-response and resistance. One responder indicated that it was not allowed by the Board for the school. Another one indicated that she had only been at the school for one month and therefore did not feel comfortable responding in a formal interview. There were a few non-responses as well. These responses created another

limitation within my study as well. The schools I visited were all within two hours of one another in North Carolina. My desire was to interview at schools set farther apart geographically than my participants' schools were, but overall it worked out well because the principals I was able to meet with were all experienced, open, and honest. I feel each of the four contributed quality to this study with their candid responses. As a final limitation of note, I wish that I had asked a few more clarifying questions about their school's website. This likely would have required us to view the website together and a move of that nature would have required some prior notice to ensure we were setup physically within the interview space to do so. As I reflect, I believe the issues I ran into with securing participants led me away from this approach. Nevertheless, I wish that I had probed a little further with each leader's thoughts on how certain text or images were shared with the public.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

What is the plan for recruiting and enrolling a student population within charter schools that approximates the surrounding community demographics? This question needs to be addressed by charter school leaders and state legislators alike if we are to move into an era in which school choice is truly an equitable and open option to all families. What is the plan? My recommendation for practitioners, moving forward, is to form a concrete plan for increasing and maintaining diversity within the school. The administrators that Hernandez-Cruz (2016) interviewed in his study made the same recommendation, suggesting that significant groundwork be laid prior to the first lottery of the school. Jabbar and Wilson (2018) add that defining the amount of diversity being

aimed for is important, as is acknowledging challenges like gentrification. Plans need to be within the written charter itself, otherwise a “demographic inertia” away from diversity can set the trajectory of the school in motion from the outset, especially when one also considers siblings who automatically get into the school (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018, p. 20). The location of the school plays an enormous role as well. The panels in each state that review charter applications receive direction from state legislators. Legislators can make a positive impact, themselves, by either making it easier for schools to incorporate a weighted lottery for the economically disadvantaged, like Principal Singh at *Challenge* applied for in 2019, or by simply making it a permanent aspect of charter school lotteries. Funds to support bus transportation would likely need to follow these students from TPS to the charter as well, and that is a decision that rests with legislators also.

From the findings in my study, the first point of emphasis for future practice among charter school leaders is to be more intentional with the school website. From my own experience, messaging through text and images on the school website does not cost additionally money. It simply requires a plan for who will do it, what will be said or shown, and how often the site will be updated.

The website was not a high priority for the principals I interviewed. We do have to recognize the possibility that some charter school leaders may not feel a diverse student body is the right thing for their school. There are leaders, I believe, who feel their school serves a very specific niche of the market. Parents, these leaders say, will select the charter school for their child that appears to be a good fit, based upon research they

have done, word-of-mouth in the immediate community, and/or the school tour.

Principal Anderson at *Warsaw Memorial* and Principal Jackson at *Battleground* seemed to be school leaders with such a mindset. While Principal Jackson at *Battleground* is at a diverse school, the diversity is entirely due to the geographical demographic in that community and not due to active strategies on the part of the school. For these school leaders, the website is not a priority.

But if a school leader wants to increase diversity at her or his school, because of the well-documented benefits of diversity, intentionality with the school website is a good place to begin. The main page of the website is critical from a marketing and messaging standpoint because, of course, first impressions are everything. A principal should determine what the most salient points about her/his school are and ensure that they communicated very clearly on the startup page of the site. To bury important details on subpages of the site is to risk a prospective family not finding this information. Equally important are the chosen photos and videos because visuals hold the power to make us feel something. Administrators in New Orleans and Minneapolis who recruit for diversity are very strategic with the images they put out for the public to see (Jabbar & Wilson, 2018). Additional parts of the brain likely get triggered with images, versus text, and these added sparks could be the difference makers for individuals evaluating a school.

The other major point that came out of my study, from the interview with Patricia Singh at *Challenge Community School*, is that diversity can be increased with the right amount of effort. It does not have to simply be, “we get who we get.” This is true even



in schools with highly competitive lotteries. Singh visits churches, community centers, and even the local barber shop that caters more to Black clientele to get the word out about her school. She started a Diversity Committee at the school whose mission it is to find new and, perhaps, creative ways to increase their diversity. And, of course, she applied for a weighted lottery through the state charter office. Singh recognized that the economically disadvantaged weighted lottery might deliver more White students, but with well over 1,600 lottery applications each year at the school, multiple strategies to recruit for diversity are necessary. I have already shared that percentages of families of color in poverty in America are higher than the same within the White population.

Jabbar and Wilson (2018) discovered other strategies being employed by charter school leaders in New Orleans and Minneapolis, beyond those already discussed here, for recruiting diversity. I described these in greater depth within my Literature Review in Chapter II, but as the recommendations they make are highly relevant for my study, it is worth summarizing them again here:

- visiting local *Head Start* facilities, pre-K centers, and daycares;
- implementing a centralized enrollment system, like *OneApp* (to make the task of applying to multiple schools easier for families);
- selecting the school's recruiters strategically (like individuals who are from a targeted community); and
- limiting the window of time for lottery applications, setting it later in the year, and communicating the window well within specific communities.

It is possible for charter schools to recruit for diversity, but it requires an awareness, a commitment, and a plan. Legislators also need to examine this issue, particularly in a state like North Carolina where racial segregation in charters is notably higher than within its traditional public schools.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study produced possibilities for future research within the topic area of charter school enrollment patterns. Potential research questions abound among each of the themes I gleaned from the website reviews and the interviews. To be fair, as well, researchers could easily keep themselves busy for years to come studying hot questions that come out of Welner's (2013) *Dirty Dozen*. With his list, Welner identifies the ways in which equity in school choice can be negatively impacted by school leaders if they fail to ask the right questions for their school up front. Nonetheless, my study produced questions for me that I would like addressed via future research. I have organized these into three topical subsections.

#### **Another Look at Segregation**

In this study I examined how marketing and messaging practices by charter schools in North Carolina, primarily through their school website, may contribute to higher racial segregation rates between charters and traditional public schools (TPS). Future research could look at disproportionate numbers of students in TPS versus charter who are identified English Language Learning, Special Education, and/or Economically Disadvantaged. Identifying the problem, along with where and how it occurs, would provide valuable information about school choice. If educators and individuals who

support education believe that school choice should be fully open to any family in any community, then a closer examination into these groups of students is a must.

Segregation among these groups might involve state or federal funds, versus the social ramifications of race, but nevertheless, it becomes an issue for legislators at that point.

Even with racial segregation, I find there is still more research to conduct. Some studies have looked at the reasons different racial groups of families choose a different school, but there are not enough of these studies. We have yet to establish a large enough sample size of findings to feel confident in what we have and some findings could be specific to their geographic region. I want to know what trends exist with safety concerns, athletics, academic rigor, prestige, and a range of other topics that lead parents and families to charter schools.

### **Finding Information on Schools**

A question that came out of this study for me was: How do families gain information about a new school or a potential school for their child? What routes to information do a variety of families take in order to educate themselves about a prospective school? Research based upon interviews with parents who recently enrolled their child in a new charter school and interviews with families in the immediate community whose child did not enroll could prove quite valuable and illuminating. I am interested in the degree to which families draw on a range of sources of information, including the school website, neighbors and friends, the newspaper, and/or Open Houses, to name a few. Such a study could also be conducted via a survey as well. Having reviewed school websites, I want to see trend data for the various sources from which

parents pull information to make their choices in schools. Are websites an important source of information or not? For that matter, is any information important? Roger Jackson and Jim Anderson both indicated that families get their child in through the lottery not knowing much at all about the school itself. They apply to several charters in the area and take the one they are successful with, via the lottery.

### **Perception Data for School Website Content**

Another potential question I have that deserves further research is: What sense of welcome and belonging do families feel from seeing the image and text messages on a school's website? Such a study could be conducted via interviews or survey and it could potentially reveal significant findings for educators to consider with their school website. Earlier in the chapter I discussed the need for greater intentionality with the school website and the findings from this type of study would educate school leaders on how certain choices they make with the website may be perceived by prospective parents.

### **The School Tour**

If I, myself, were to do a second study, I would look into the school tour as a marketing and messaging tool. This topic area is the most fascinating to me because the discourse that takes place within the school tour has the power to either attract or turn away prospective families. In Chapter V, I shared some thoughts my participants had regarding traditional public schools. Opinions shared with me during the interview are quite possibly the same shared during a school tour, with the effort being to promote one school over the other. On the other hand, one finds in the school tour the power to discourage enrollment. The first interview in my study that I conducted was with Jim

Anderson at *Warsaw Memorial*. During the interview, as I heard him reference the school tour more than once, I thought to myself, does he use the tour to help families make the decision he feels is the right choice for them? This was just a thought I had and nothing more. Principal Anderson's words:

You know, there's a lot of things that are unique about us and our whole goal is that we want our families to be happy and comfortable here. We don't want them blindsided by things that they didn't understand about us when they . . . if they get in. So, we take attendance at these tours and when we do our lottery, we go through the names and if they didn't come to a tour, we ask them to come to a make-up tour. If you want to set up a private appointment, if you want to meet with your child's future teachers, if you want to meet our special education teachers, [you can] before you make your decision. We are a very rigorous curriculum and that's, you know, that's not for every child.

It was the statement that *Warsaw* is not for every child that resonated with me and led me to wonder how Mr. Anderson uses the tour at *Warsaw*. As a school leader myself, I had never stopped to reflect upon the role I play, the parent plays, and the student, if present, plays during a tour. Personal biases and the discourse that takes place, as discussed in Chapter V, impact perceptions of whether the school is a good fit or not. It should be rather obvious that a student who requires the bus in TPS will more than likely need a bus to get to a new charter school that just opened a couple of miles from his home. In the absence of bus transportation to and from the new charter school, the student can't enroll there and must remain at the school that provides transportation. But what if the reason he doesn't enroll is not an explicit policy decision or lack of funding for buses, but rather that his mother left early from work to tour the school and was told the school might be

too tough for him, based upon the grades she shared with the tour provider? Messaging of this nature demands additional research.

### **Final Thoughts**

There are a number of questions that persist with regards to the impact that marketing and messaging has on charter school enrollment patterns. It appears that charter schools, or perhaps the self-replicating demographic within them, are attracting certain types of students, but it is still unclear which marketing and messaging approaches are intentional and which are unintentional. It is exciting to think about the future from a research standpoint and I remain hopeful that more charter school leaders will develop a plan to actively recruit to ensure at least representative diversity.

Additionally, it is also my hope that state legislators will address the issue of higher segregation rates among charter schools in their respective state. School choice should be fully open to any family, regardless of race or socioeconomic status.

I have learned so much from this study. On a personal level, this project is easily my greatest academic accomplishment. While taking on such a daunting challenge, I learned that my attention can easily stray. It has taken me longer than I initially anticipated it would, largely because I was rarely very efficient with my work when I did sit down to do it. The project has revealed to me the manner in which I prefer to write. Unlike some individuals who sit down and type all that is in their head on a topic and then go back and clean it up, I think about each sentence. I prefer more of a slow and deliberate pace with my writing. This approach, of course, has its pros and cons. During the past 2 years that I have worked on this study, I have always enjoyed returning to it,

sometimes after days away from it. The topic is one that I remain very passionate about and I will continue to monitor research on the subject.

On a professional level, this study has largely confirmed the understanding of charter schools and charter school leaders that I possessed. First, I already had a firm understanding of demographics within the charter schools across the state of North Carolina. I knew that those in more urban areas enrolled more students of color, while those in rural settings around the state enrolled more White students. I also knew that charter school principals are similar to traditional public-school principals; each prioritizes in her/his own way and each brings her/ his own belief system to the position. This is what I encountered with the principals that I interviewed. Two of them, really three of them if I also count Principal Joyner at *Hall Academy*, use the school tour to help inform families, but do very little else to recruit. Each is passionate about her/his school and prioritizes other aspects of the work, rather than issues related to diversity, including recruitment. They each make the students they have in their school top priority and I appreciate their efforts in that direction. Perhaps the greatest gift of this study was getting to meet and speak with Patricia Singh at *Challenge Community School*. The work she is doing to diversify *Challenge* is exemplary and I wish her much success as she moves forward. To hear that her Kindergarten and First-Grade cohorts are more diverse already, even prior to the weighted lottery that she hopes to have installed soon for her school, is remarkable. She has been at *Challenge* since its inception in the early 2000s, but only recently, in the past 3 years, decisively acted to diversify the school. What I appreciate about Principal Singh is her willingness to move the school in a different

direction at this point in her career. Her energy level for the work is as strong now as it ever was and seeing it has been an inspiration to me. There is much we can learn from her, and other principals like her who believe in school choice, but also believe it should be accessible and equitable for all families.



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