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The purpose of this study was to determine the perceived impact of charter schools on school systems located in rural areas and to learn what strategies school leaders are using to compete with charter schools. Across the country, charter school growth has exploded over the last twenty years with over three million students now attending charter schools. North Carolina, where this study took place, has one of the fastest growing charter programs in the country. Since 2011, when a cap on the number of charter schools in North Carolina was lifted, charter schools have expanded rapidly. In fact, charter school enrollment increased almost 70% in the first 4 years after the cap was lifted. Even rural areas are now being impacted by charter schools.

This research is based on a qualitative study I conducted of two school districts impacted by the same charter school in order to understand the perceived academic, fiscal, demographic, and human resource impact and to learn about the types of initiatives, policy revisions, and strategies school leaders implemented as a direct result of competition with the charter school. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 public school leaders from two different traditional public school districts that resided in the same rural county. Participants included superintendents, central office staff, and principals.

The findings indicate that traditional public schools are impacted in a variety of ways. In one school district, this impact was primarily felt through the loss of high-achieving students and white flight. This school district felt pressure to compete for

academically successful students and responded by offering a range of new programs to attract these students back. In the other school district, the impact was primarily through student attrition and they too developed strategies to slow the loss of students, in part by better marketing their existing programs as well as developing new programs. One of the biggest lessons learned from this study is that in an era of increasing school choice, traditional public schools need to take marketing more seriously.

HOW PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADERS ARE RESPONDING
TO CHARTER SCHOOLS

by

Shon Patrick Hildreth

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Approved by

Committee Chair

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APPROVAL PAGE

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

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Charter schools were first established in the early 1990s and by the end of the decade, more than 30 states had started their own charter schools (Hess, 2002). As this movement began to gain momentum, charter schools flourished in districts across the country. Many of those districts were in urban areas. In North Carolina, the first charter schools opened in 1997. That year, 27 charter schools opened and a new era of school competition was born in the state. The state initially capped the number of charter schools at 100, but the cap reached the limit of 100 charter schools in 2001. In 2011, the cap on charter schools in North Carolina was lifted. Since that time charter schools have become more commonplace in North Carolina and they are now increasingly prevalent in rural areas where initially they were most often located in urban areas. One of those rural areas was the county in which I work.

Charter schools are public schools that are not governed by a traditional school district; rather, they are an independent organization subject to the charter school laws at the state level, with each state having its own laws governing charter schools. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website (NCDPI, 2017), these schools are defined as:

Public schools of choice that are authorized by the State Board of Education and operated by independent non-profit boards of directors. State and local tax dollars are the primary funding sources for charter schools, which have open enrollment

and cannot discriminate in admissions, associate with any religion or religious group, or charge-tuition. Charter schools operate with freedom from many of the regulations that govern district schools, but charter schools are held accountable through the State assessment and accountability system. (para. 1)

Since charter schools are operated independently of a school district, there are no attendance boundaries. Charter schools have elements of both traditional public schools and private schools. Like traditional public schools, charter schools cannot require tuition because they have public funding and are held to the same accountability measures as traditional public schools. Like private schools, charter schools have fewer restrictions and more flexibility than traditional public schools. Charter schools were created to improve student performance, encourage innovation, and provide choice for parents (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). By providing choice, charter schools create competition between schools for student enrollment; proponents believe this competition will improve all public schools. Traditional public schools are viewed as holding a monopoly that stifles creativity and limits growth. By allowing more flexibility and autonomy, charter schools supposedly illicit a higher level of parent satisfaction as well.

Charter school growth has been exponential during the last 20 years. Currently about three million students attend charter schools across the nation (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). The number of charter schools across the country has grown to over 6,000, with California enrolling the largest number of students in any state. The western states have the highest percentage of charter schools but the southern states are second. North Carolina has one of the fastest growing charter programs in the

country. The only states without charter school legislation are Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In regards to location, over half of charter schools across the country exist in urban areas, which is more than double that of traditional public schools. A higher percentage of traditional public schools are also located in suburban areas.

Bipartisan support has guided the growth of charter school reform. Former Presidents Clinton and Bush both voiced strong support for charter schools during the early phases of charter school reform. More recently, previously existing caps on the number of charter schools in many parts of the country were lifted in order for states to receive Race to the Top funding under the Obama administration. As part of the Race to the Top program, charter school reform was pushed as a way that states could help secure a portion of the \$4 billion offered to public schools. In this competitive funding program, points were allocated for states that raised or eliminated caps on charter schools as well as established new charter schools.

In North Carolina, the charter school movement began in 1996 when the Charter School Act was ratified (North Carolina House Bill 955, 1995). Though an initial cap of 100 was set on charter schools, the cap was lifted in 2011 by the North Carolina General Assembly in order for schools in the state to gain access to federal funding (NCSB8, 2011). This reform had bi-partisan support in the state, and in 2013, House Bill 250 allowed charter schools to increase enrollment by 20% annually (North Carolina House Bill 250, 2013). Since 2011, charter schools have expanded rapidly in North Carolina.

In fact, charter school enrollment increased almost 70% in the first 4 years after the cap was lifted (NCDPI, 2015). With traditional public schools in North Carolina losing so many students to newly opened charter schools, I wondered about the impact of charter school growth on these schools and if traditional public school leaders were responding in order to keep students and promote and sustain their schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to examine how school districts are responding to charter school growth in North Carolina. From the literature that I reviewed, I learned that that charter schools can impact traditional public schools in a variety of ways. While some charter schools have little to no impact, others have a significant impact on traditional public school districts, particularly in terms of shifting enrollment patterns. Additionally, the response of traditional public school districts to charter schools can vary greatly. To help understand the response of school districts to academic, fiscal, demographic, and human resource impacts of charter schools on traditional public schools, or lack thereof, I conducted a qualitative study of two school districts impacted by the same charter school. I was also interested in understanding the types of initiatives, policy revisions, and strategies they have implemented as a direct result of competition with charter schools.

Research Questions

In this study, I sought to answer one principal research question and two sub-questions:

1. How are leaders in public school districts in North Carolina responding to charter schools?
 - a. What are the perceived academic, fiscal, demographic, and human resource impacts of charter schools on traditional public school districts?
 - b. What types of initiatives, policy revisions, and strategies have been implemented as a result of competition from charter schools?

In order to answer these research questions, I collected qualitative data through personal interviews with public school leaders. These public school leaders were from two separate traditional public school districts that resided in the same rural county and included superintendents, central office staff, and principals. In conducting these interviews, I sought to learn about the perceived impact of the local charter school. I wondered if the presence of a charter school spurred improvements in these two traditional public school districts. I also sought to learn how the traditional public school leaders had chosen to respond, if they had chosen to respond at all, to competition from a charter school. For example, I wanted to know if these school districts had made changes in order to compete with the local charter school. Also, I sought to learn if school district leaders felt that the formation of the charter school had resulted in the improvement of the school district in any way.

Positionality

My introduction to charter schools came at the beginning of my second year as a principal when a new charter school opened a few miles from the school. This was the first charter school in our rural county and in the surrounding region. The charter school

was in an ideal location for a new school because it was near the city and easily accessed. I knew little about charter schools and neither did many of my peers. Over time, the effects of the charter school on my school became apparent. The charter school was something new and exciting and began to market itself to the community in which my school resides. The charter school promised more hands-on learning and technology, and they catered food from various restaurants for student meals. Students also got out early on Friday of each week. In contrast to our large school, they provided a smaller setting with fewer students.

During the next 3 years, our student enrollment dropped significantly as we lost more than 10% of our students to the charter school. I found myself in the difficult situation of having to displace teachers because of our falling enrollment. Some of our teachers and community began to see the charter school as competition. The charter school impacted other high schools in my district as well. In fact, students from several of the surrounding school systems began to attend the charter school and it reached capacity. I wondered why so many students had left our school and district. I did not believe that students were leaving my high school because of our school performance. Our school had earned higher student growth on end of course tests and a higher letter grade on the North Carolina Report Card than the charter school. If our school performance was not the main impetus for students leaving, why were they leaving our school? Were other public schools and districts in North Carolina experiencing this as well? If they were, how were they responding?

Theoretical Influences

In order to understand charter schools as a phenomenon and the nature of competition, one must understand the perspective of neoliberalism, the economic and political theory that shapes the context in which charter schools are growing.

Neoliberalism began to take root in the 1970s as Keynesian economics began to fade.

School choice is consistent with a neoliberal ideology, where individual goods and choices are elevated above commitments to the public. According to Davies and Bansel (2007),

the public service and schools were early targets of this neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal management technologies that were installed included increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures, and the implementation of performance goals in the contracts of management. (p. 254)

Neoliberalism is characterized by the “corporatization, commodification, and privatization of hitherto public assets” (Harvey, 2007, p. 160). Simply characterized, neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that views the free market as the most effective means for production and consumption of needs (Klaf & Kwan, 2010). For a free market economy to work, consumers have to be able to consume (Sidorkin, 2007). Neoliberal theory involves the deregulation of public policies (including those governing education) and calls for a limited role for the government in daily life. It is often paired with the theory of Pareto Efficiency, which says that economic redistribution is more harmful to the wealthy than it is helpful to those in need (Tienken, 2013). Redistribution of wealth is viewed as harmful by neoliberals, and many state and federal services are viewed as basically involving redistribution (Tienken, 2013). Advocates of neoliberalism believe

that the role of the government should be limited and that privatization results in better services and better business.

Market-driven school choice is an outgrowth of neoliberal ideology in which public goods are seen as inefficient and wasteful, and in which public education is viewed as being overly bureaucratic and rigid. The charter school movement advances many tenets of neoliberalism ideology (Wells, Slayton, & Scott, 2002). Public education is seen as a monopoly provider because students are required to attend school until they reach a certain age. Since most families cannot afford private school, public schools have long been the only choice. Thus, public schools have controlled the market. Neoliberal advocates elevate individual goods over public ones, including education, which they see as a private good or commodity that is meant for the consumer, the student. Education is seen as primarily for preparing students for economic competition (Saltman, 2014). The focus is competition in the marketplace within the global economy. As such, measurable outcomes of performance or the bottom line is the metric for which success is judged. In education, the measurable outcomes are often test data.

While neoliberal theory is the backdrop for understanding the growth of charter schools, market theory helps us to understand why they are so popular. With varying levels of autonomy from government rules and regulations, school choice advocates believe schools will become more innovative. Often charter schools have limited leadership and no central office personnel and advocate a curriculum that is more flexible than in traditional public schools. Administrators and teachers often report to a single leader such as superintendent or CEO of the charter school. Advocates of school choice

want “a public education system that is responsive to immediate demands of the consumers” (Wells et al., 2002, p. 338). Well-known advocates for school choice and charter school reform are the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Broad Education Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation, among many others (Scott, 2009).

Market theory influences this study by acting as a lens through which to view and better understand perceived competition generated by charter schools. Market models of educational reform posit that charter school growth will force traditional schools to change their practices in order to be more effective and to keep students. As I began this study I questioned, “Do the public school leaders involved in this study feel competitive pressure from the charter school enough to change practices?” When traditional public school districts lose students, they lose funding. This is similar to what happens in the broader consumer market, when customers are lost to other businesses. The financial incentive would therefore spur public school districts to adapt to the competition through a variety of responses. The expected response would be to try and win those students back or to limit more students leaving. If the traditional public school districts in this study strategically respond to charter school growth, how do they do this? Does market theory help to explain their responses? For example, do traditional public schools begin to model the practices of the more effective charter schools, a concept from institutional theory known as institutional isomorphism (Davis, 2013)?

Neoliberalism and market theory are not without critics. Opponents say that the educational system is too complex for simple market analysis and that the privatization of public education could result in inequity within education (Cucchiara, Gold, & Simon,

2011; Ravitch, 2010; Scott, 2009). Critics believe that neoliberalism and school choice have the hallmarks of meritocracy and that students who are of a higher social standing receive the best services. They believe that this framework can be at odds with the basic tenets of democracy. Ultimately, neoliberal theory provides the backdrop for understanding the growth of school choice movements, while market theory helps me to understand the responses of the school district personnel whom I interviewed for this study.

Significance of the Study

Through this research, my hope is that practitioners, policymakers, educators in leadership preparation programs, and future researchers will gain a more in-depth understanding of how traditional public school leaders perceive the impact of charter schools on their schools. These public school leaders will have experienced the impact of a charter school and therefore will be able to provide insight into effects and how they responded. This study might benefit school leaders who are facing competition from charter schools, especially those who are experiencing competition for the first time. Policymakers might better understand the powerful impact of charter schools and the competitive effects on traditional public schools, particularly in terms of competition for students. Did these school systems become more innovative? Is competition benefitting traditional public schools as well as charter schools? Preparation programs might be better informed as to the new challenges school leaders are facing in regard to competition. Are school leaders prepared to market their schools and make the necessary changes to be competitive? Finally, my hope is that this study adds to the small body of

research on traditional public school leader perceptions and response to the charter school movement. In the future, studies of this nature could include a larger variety of school districts gleaning more insight from a larger number of school leaders.

Summary and Overview

In this chapter, I briefly touched on charter school growth across the nation and discussed the beginning of the charter school movement in North Carolina. I explained the purpose of charter schools and described the autonomy and flexibility they are granted. In North Carolina, the charter school movement was strengthened by the removal of the cap on charter schools and charter schools have flourished since that time, making this research particularly timely.

In the following chapters, I describe the research I conducted and my findings from this interview-based study I conducted in two school districts in a rural area in North Carolina. In Chapter II, I review relevant literature pertaining to charter schools. In Chapter III, I describe the methodology for this study. In Chapter IV, I discuss the findings on the impact of the charter school. In Chapter V, I share the strategies both school districts were using in response to the charter school. Finally, in Chapter VI, I offer a conclusion to this study, alongside recommendations for research and practice.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to Charter Schools

As my school began to lose students to the local charter school, rumors abounded as to what charter schools actually were. Were they public schools? What was the purpose of charter schools? As these questions arose, I realized I knew very little about these schools and neither did many of my teachers. One reason for this was that this new school was the first charter school in our county.

As I began to research this topic, I found that charter schools could have an academic, fiscal, demographic, and human resource impact on traditional public schools across the country. Yet, there are still many educators who have little knowledge of charter schools; thus, it is important to provide a foundational understanding of this reform movement in order to explore the impact of these schools. Therefore, I begin by exploring the history and purpose of charter schools in this literature review. I also discuss the impact charter schools are having on public schools and I examine the limited existing literature about the public school response to charter schools.

The History of Charter Schools

The school choice has roots in the work of Milton Friedman, an economist at the University of Chicago. Friedman (1962) believed in promoting a free market of competition within the education sphere. In 1955, he published a piece titled “The Role

of Government in Education.” In this essay, he argued for school vouchers so that parents could choose where they wanted their children to attend school. This included attending private schools. Friedman thought that many schools would be created to meet consumer demand as a result. He believed that because of competition to meet consumer demand, all schools would improve and become more flexible. His assumption was that absent competition, schools did not have a compelling reason to improve or work hard to ensure all students achieve. Alternatively, if families had options, public schools would have to change to keep students, and therefore student achievement would improve as a result. Later Friedman became one of Ronald Reagan’s advisors with the former president advocating for school choice and bringing it to the national consciousness in 1983 with the publication of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, which painted public education as failing and in need of reform (Ravitch, 2010). During this time, a range of different ideas for educational reform were taking shape, and people were hungry for new ideas to ‘save’ public schools. In fact, the abolishment of the Department of Education was also proposed during the Reagan era (Forman, 2010).

Complementing the work of Friedman, in 1956, Charles Tiebout published “A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures” in which he espoused the importance of voting with one’s feet. He argued that each community has a local government that provides good and services and that people choose to live in areas where they have the highest level of utility (Bewley, 1981). In essence, competition in regard to government services would lead to equilibrium and people would move from one community to another in order to obtain better public services. School choice advocates draw on this argument in their

analysis of public education. If parents are not happy with the school in their district, they will seek other options such as charter schools, or move into a school district in which the schools are more effective. This theory relies on the assumption that choice will create competition between school districts and also between other school options thereby leading to improved schools.

In addition to Friedman and Tiebout, school choice advocates often cite John Chubb and Terry Moe. Chubb and Moe (1990) emphasized institutional reform that “eliminates most political and bureaucratic control over the schools and relies instead on indirect control through markets and parental choice” (p. 5). They believed that the educational system was broken and that the academic performance of students would continue to suffer unless the system was reformed. According to Chubb and Moe, the only way to reform the system was by empowering individual families through school choice. This new reform would allow for outside groups to receive a charter so that they could run a school free of district level control. District level control was perceived as part of the problem. Competition and the free market system were presented as the saving grace for schooling in America and Chubb and Moe had forecast this new movement (Ravitch, 2010).

Different versions of school choice programs began to emerge. Budde (1988) called for education by charter and advocated for a complete restructuring of the current school system. He was the professor who first developed the idea of charter schools while at the University of Massachusetts. He saw the potential these schools could have as places for innovation and experimentation. His vision also included one in which

teachers would be given more authority. Ideally, these schools would be given a certain amount of time to demonstrate they had accomplished their goals in order to be renewed.

In 1988, Albert Shanker proposed a similar idea. He was the President of the American Federation of Teachers, and much like Budde, saw the potential of charter schools as “teacher-run schools freed from state or district mandates” (Goldstein, 2014, p. 173). Shanker proposed these would be research-based schools with an allotted time frame to test out ideas for improving education (Ravitch, 2010). This proposal began to catch on as the charter school movement continued to gain traction. Ironically, later Shanker changed his views on charter schools and no longer supported them.

In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass a law allowing charter schools to be developed (Ravitch, 2010). A year later the first charter school, which was called City Academy High School, was formed in St. Paul, Minnesota. This school was developed to support students who had dropped out of school. California became the second state to approve charter schools in 1992 and the first start charter schools in that state began in 1993. A few years after that, North Carolina joined the charter school movement. In 1996 the Charter School Act was passed by the North Carolina General Assembly.

The Purpose of Charter Schools

There are over 6,800 charter schools across the nation in 43 states (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017). New Orleans has more students in charter schools based on percentage than any other city in the country. The states of Washington and Mississippi currently have legislation regarding charter schools but do not have any charter schools operating in their states. Alabama, Kentucky, Nebraska, Montana, North

Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia do not charter schools or have laws governing charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017).

According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2017), of the charter schools across the nation, over 60% are independently run non-profit single-site schools. Twenty percent of charter schools nationwide are run by non-profit organizations that run more than one school. About 13% are run for profit. Charter schools are governed by state and federal standards; however, the specific requirements vary by state. Charter schools differ across the country because of the regulations guiding each state, but there are several similarities. Charter schools are public schools that are allowed more freedom for innovation than traditional public schools (depending upon the conditions laid out in their charter), and they are open to all students. Charter schools have significant flexibility with scheduling and curriculum. Charter schools cannot require tuition because they are public schools. Charter schools are formed when an outside agency, which could be a group of parents or community members, receives a charter from the state to create a school. As previously mentioned, some states have caps on the number of charter schools they will allow. Usually there is a time frame on the charters which stipulates that the school must demonstrate performance goals in order to remain open. There is also a variety of different types of charter schools. Independent Charter Schools are individual schools that can be started by anyone, often a group of parents, teachers, or community members. Charter Management Organizations are non-profit entities that manage more than one charter school (Farrell, Wohlstetter, & Smith, 2012). Education Management Organizations are private organizations or firms that get

public funds to manage schools, and some have a goal of making a profit (Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010). These schools have been in existence since the early 1990s.

Charter schools in North Carolina do not operate under the auspices of a public school district but are funded by a combination of local, state, and federal tax dollars based on student enrollment numbers. When a student leaves a school district and enrolls at a charter school, the funding for that student goes with him or her to the charter school with no additional cost to the state. This per-pupil funding can vary depending on how the student's needs are classified (Cho, Chudnofsky, Jian, Landes, & Mortimer, 2013).

In North Carolina, legislation encourages 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, and provide parents with expanded choices within the public school; at the same time, they are held accountable for measurable student achievement results (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2016). In collaboration with the North Carolina State Board of Education, the General Assembly codified some state board policies into statute that specified a minimum academic performance for these schools. Charter schools that do not meet the minimum standard for performance receive a warning letter and could face termination if they do not improve. According to North Carolina General Statute 115C-218.94, a charter school that receives a D or F school performance grade, and does not meet growth, is identified as a low-performing charter

school (North Carolina General Statute, 2016). In 2012, the State Board revoked a charter school for inadequate academic performance for the first time (NCDPI, 2016).

North Carolina charter schools are open to all students, but many have a lottery system for entrance because of the demand. They are funded by a mix of local, state, and federal tax dollars. This has created controversy because they are being funded by the public, yet many are not accessible to all members of the general public because of the lottery system which has to be utilized as a result of enrollment caps. In North Carolina, the State Board of Education can authorize a charter school and also created and adopted policies to aid in the governance of the charter schools. These policies relate to enrollment, accountability requirements, admission, liability insurance, financial and governance noncompliance, renewal process, revocation for lack of academic performance, application and review process, planning, charter amendments, and fast track replication (NCDPI, 2015). The State Board of Education reviews the effectiveness of charter schools in the state as well as their impact on the traditional public schools in the school district where the charter school resides in compliance with North Carolina General Statute 115C-218.110.

There are various policies governing charter schools in North Carolina. One of those dictates the length of a charter school term. After a charter is approved in North Carolina, the term is good for 10 years. After the 10-year term is over, it must be renewed. In other states across the nation, this term or contract can vary in length. Additionally, there can be different stipulations with these contracts.

The admissions requirements for North Carolina charter schools are outlined in North Carolina General Statute 115C-218.45. In regards to enrollment in North Carolina charter schools, any student eligible for a traditional public school is also eligible for a charter school. The charter school cannot limit student admission based on ability or disability unless it is provided by law or is outlined in the mission of the charter school. Additionally, the charter school cannot limit admission based on race or religion. Enrollment in charter schools is not based on attendance zones and is not determined by the local education agency (LEA). Admission is by lottery once the applications exceed the capacity of the school. Also, the siblings of students and children of full-time employees are given enrollment preference. Charter schools in North Carolina can provide transportation if they choose, but must provide a transportation plan so that transportation is not an issue for any student who resides in the LEA in which the school resides.

Charter schools in North Carolina are afforded flexibility in certain areas. They are exempt from statutes and rules that apply to local school districts except for laws pertaining to those governing health and safety, instructional hours, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) assessments, and performance. Just as traditional public schools, charter schools must provide instruction for at least 185 days or 1,025 hours but are not bound by the state's calendar law. As defined by North Carolina General Statute 115C-218.90, charter schools can also set their own teacher salaries and are required to have at least 50% of their teachers hold a teaching license. Additionally, charter school teachers have the same access to the retirement system as traditional public

school teachers. Table 1 compares the North Carolina requirements for traditional public schools versus those for charter schools.

Table 1

NC Requirements for Traditional Public Schools vs. Charter Schools

NC Requirements	Traditional Public Schools	Charter Schools
Admission	Open	Open (Possible Lottery)
Attendance	School Zone	Open
Calendar Law	Yes	No
Certified Teachers	100%	50%
Class Size Restrictions	Yes	No
Federal Lunch Program	Yes	No
Instructional Days/Hours	Yes	Yes
Teacher Salary	Set	Negotiable
Testing	All	EOG/EOC
Transportation	LEA Option	Not Required

Charter schools in North Carolina are directly governed by the North Carolina Charter Schools Advisory Board. The board consists of State Board of Education members, the Governor and Lieutenant Governor, members of the House and Senate, and the Superintendent. According to NC General Assembly G.S. 115C-218 Purpose of charter schools and establishment of NC Charter Schools Advisory Board, the duties of this board are to:

- Make recommendations to the State Board of Education (SBE) on the adoption of rules regarding all aspects of charter school operation, including timelines, standards, and criteria for acceptance and approval of applications, monitoring of charter schools, and grounds for revocation of charters;
- Review applications and make recommendations to the SBE for final approval of charter applications;
- Make recommendations to the SBE on actions regarding a charter school, including renewals or charters, and revocations of charters; and
- Undertake any other duties and responsibilities as assigned by the SBE.

The Argument for Charter Schools

Some proponents of charter schools argue that they were created to give lower income or at-risk students what more affluent students at private schools already receive. For example, students at private schools are often privy to smaller classes, smaller schools, involved communities, and a flexible curriculum (Fabricant & Fine, 2015). Proponents of charter schools argue that these schools provide more hands-on learning and smaller class sizes compared to public schools and that these contribute to greater academic growth. Furthermore, proponents state that charter schools are more innovative and create a more comprehensive learning experience for students (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Lubienski, 2003). They say that traditional public schools improve because of competition (Cordes, 2017; Lubienski, 2003; Terrier & Ridley, 2018; Winters, 2012). They contend that “charter schools generate competitive incentives for public schools to improve student performance” (Imberman, 2011, p. 1). The logic for this is fairly simple:

the open market creates more providers; because of competition, schools need to become more innovative, and the consumer decides who “wins” by enrolling their children in the school they deem best (Hess, Mehta, & Schwartz, 2012). Larry Cuban (2013) in his book, *Inside the Black Box of Classroom Practice*, says that the end result of charter schools should be higher achievement resulting from an innovative curriculum, parent choice, and stringent accountability. Yet, there is no conclusive evidence that charter schools outperform traditional public schools, despite numerous studies (Ballou, Teasley, & Zeidner, 2006; Berends, Goldring, Stein, & Cravens, 2010; Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, & Koedel, 2006; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Chudowsky & Ginsburg, 2012; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Want, 2011; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009; Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, & Witte, 2012).

Academic Impact

Studies comparing traditional public schools to charter schools present an array of findings (Ballou et al., 2006; Berends et al., 2010; Betts et al., 2006; Frankenberg et al., 2011; Hanushek et al., 2007; Scott & Villavicencio, 2009), and some indicate that traditional public schools perform better than charter schools (Zimmer et al., 2012). One study in particular compared students across the nation from charter schools and traditional public schools. This study was conducted by Chudowsky and Ginsburg (2012). They conducted an exploratory analysis of National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data comparing charter school enrollment and performance to that of traditional public schools. The NAEP is the largest uniform assessment given nationally for mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S.

history, and in Technology and Engineering Literacy (TEL). The test therefore provides a common metric among states across the country. The data that Chudowsky and Ginsburg examined was from reading and mathematics and from 2003, 2005, and 2011. The data indicated that students in traditional public schools have higher average NAEP scores than students in charter schools in grades 4, 8, and 12 in reading, math, and science. In fact, across all subject areas and grade levels, traditional public schools' scores were higher. Grade 4 math, grade 12 reading and math, and all science scores were significantly higher in traditional public schools than charter schools. Yet, this study indicated that in large cities, charter schools often outperform traditional public schools.

In North Carolina, charter school academic growth and traditional public school academic growth, as defined by the Education Value Added Assessment System (EVAAS), are comparable. According to NCDPI (2016), 50% of charter schools met growth, while 24% exceeded growth for the 2014-2015 school year. That same year 27% of charter schools did not meet growth. Forty-four percent of traditional public school students met growth and 28% exceeded growth for the 2014-2015 school year. That year, 28% of traditional public schools did not meet growth. Thus, there was only a 1% difference in the number of charter schools that met or exceeded growth versus traditional public schools. Also, about two-thirds of charter schools were comparable or exceeded traditional public schools in performance composite in grade level proficiency. In regards to School Performance Grades, charter schools had a higher percentage of schools with A's and B's but also had a higher percentage of schools with D's and F's.

These numbers again highlight that there is no conclusive evidence that charter schools outperform traditional public schools, including in North Carolina.

Providing more context for the comparison in North Carolina, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) conducted a quantitative study in order to determine if students in charter schools performed better than students in traditional public schools. The researchers primarily collected and assessed end of grade test scores from NCDPI and individual student panels gathered for five cohorts that were studied for 5 years. The students' end of grade scale scores in reading and math were analyzed from third grade to eighth grade. The data showed that traditional public school students performed better on the end of grade tests than charter school students. Students in charter schools were shown to gain on average .0062 of a standard deviation less in reading and .106 of a standard deviation less in math. The researchers found "students make considerably smaller achievement gains in charter schools than they would have in traditional public schools" (p. 52).

There are studies that also seem to show higher performance in charter schools than those in traditional public schools (Betts & Tang, 2008), such as the one conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO, 2013) which is based at Stanford University. This study is the largest study to date comparing the academic performance of charter schools to traditional public schools. This study examined charter schools in 27 states, one of which was North Carolina. The findings indicated that charter schools advance learning gains in reading more effectively than traditional public school and advance learning gains in math similarly to the results of traditional public schools. Yet, it was found that "charter school quality is uneven across the states" (p. 3).

Ultimately there seems to be no conclusive evidence that charter schools outperform traditional public schools in regard to student achievement despite many studies on this topic. Differences in state laws, tests, selection bias, and even analysis make comparisons difficult. Additionally, attrition rates can vary considerably and make it hard to analyze student achievement between traditional public schools and charter schools. Yet, an equally important question is how charter school competition impacts traditional public school performance. Is this competition that comes when families have more choices for the schooling of their children benefiting traditional public school students?

An argument by proponents of school choice is that competition will improve traditional public school performance (Winters, 2012; Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). This means that student outcomes or achievement will improve because the instruction and organization of these schools has changed as a direct result of outside competition. The argument is that school quality improves and resource allocation is managed more efficiently when public schools do not have a monopoly over the market. There have been fewer studies on this topic than studies comparing charter school achievement with traditional public school achievement.

Some of the studies have shown the positive effects of competition on student achievement in traditional public schools (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2008; Hoxby, 2003; Sass, 2006). One study indicating the positive impact of competition explored the effect of school choice on traditional public schools in Milwaukee and San Antonio (Greene & Forster, 1998). Some of the traditional public

schools in the study improved considerably in test scores with the introduction of competition from charter schools and or private schools. In particular, 10th grade students in Milwaukee schools saw test scores improve on average 3.5 points if the charter school was 5 km away from the public school and 9 points if the charter school was 1 km away.

One of the more well-known studies promoting the positive effects of school choice on public schools was conducted by Caroline Hoxby (2003). In her study, she showed that traditional public schools in Michigan and Arizona had improved academic achievement when responding to competition from charter schools. For example, fourth-grade students and seventh-grade students enrolled in traditional public schools saw improvements in math and reading scores on the Michigan Assessment of Educational Progress tests from 1992 to 2000 after facing charter school competition. These schools also made greater gains than those not facing charter school competition.

Still, researchers “understand very little about how competitive incentives actually play out in local contexts” (Lubienski, Weitzel, & Lubienski, 2009, p. 601). Many of the studies that have been conducted presented mixed results on how competition impacts student academic performance (Arsen & Ni, 2012; Bettinger, 2005; Winters, 2012). Even in North Carolina, studies have shown mixed results (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Holmes, DeSimone, & Rupp, 2006). Buddin (2012) states, “current research finds little evidence that charters are having a competitive effect on student achievement in traditional public schools” (p. 8).

One study indicating competition does not improve traditional public schools was done by Buddin and Zimmer (2009). Instead of analyzing only student data, the researchers surveyed administrators as well. They conducted research that included a survey of principals and their charter counterparts in California in response to charter school advocates who claim “school choice programs, including charter schools can create competitive forces to improve performance” of traditional public school students (p. 1). All of the principals were from six districts with many coming from Los Angeles Unified School District, San Diego Unified School Districts, and Fresno Unified School District, some of the largest districts in the nation. The survey consisted of nine questions in which principals were asked about the effects of new charter schools on the operation of the schools, and other questions about the broad impact of charter schools. On the survey, a large number of the principals stated that the charter schools had an effect on their operations. About one-fourth of the traditional school principals who were surveyed from the six specific districts said they had changed their professional development and instructional practices in the face of competition from charter schools. Less than 20% restructured hiring practices or changed the curriculum.

Additionally, student achievement data were analyzed from elementary, middle, and high schools for math and reading. The findings indicated that charter schools do not create positive academic effects via competition and that the only beneficiaries of charter schools are the students who attend these schools. The researchers also noted the different environments and locations in which these schools are located could alter the measurement of the competitive effects on the traditional public schools.

There have also been studies conducted on charter school competition and traditional public school achievement that have demonstrated negative results for traditional public schools. Yongmei Ni conducted a study in 2009 that indicated charter school competition could have a negative impact on traditional public school achievement. Ni analyzed a statewide longitudinal dataset of Michigan schools for 11 years beginning with 1994, testing the idea that competition improves traditional public schools. Ni shared that little research had been conducted that analyzed the impact of charter school competition on the efficiency of traditional public schools. The dataset included enrollment, demographics, and other factors from the Michigan Department of Education, the State of Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, and Common Core Data from the National Center of Educational Statistics. The analysis indicated that charter school competition could have a negative effect on student achievement, especially in areas with high charter school density. In fact, the negative effect of charter school competition occurred in math and reading for fourth and seventh grades. One explanation is that school choice "triggered a downward spiral in the most heavily impacted schools" (Ni, 2009, p. 31). Traditional public schools lost enrollment and therefore revenue declined. As revenue declined, money for programs dried up and these programs disappeared, which hurt students and caused more enrollment declines.

Fiscal Impact

Opponents of charter schools are concerned that these schools are also negatively impacting traditional schools in ways besides academic achievement. Tax dollars are the main source of funding for most charter schools. When a student leaves a public school

for a charter school, the per-pupil allotment is taken from the school system's budget. Thus, losing students can lead to decreased educational revenue and therefore resources. This makes it hard for school systems to continue funding programs and services. The per-pupil allotment can also vary based on a student's needs. A student with special needs would have a higher per-pupil allotment, and if that student leaves, the fiscal impact can be even greater compared to other students.

Proponents of charter schools emphasize that charter schools require no increase in spending. They emphasize that the money that is already allotted to a traditional public school is simply transferred to a charter school and that if charter schools are more successful with the same money, why should public education receive additional funding? The argument here is that charter schools can be successful at a fraction of what it costs to operate traditional public schools with money tied up in bureaucracy.

There are relatively few studies tracking the fiscal impact of charter schools on traditional public schools. Of these studies, most indicated a negative impact on traditional public schools. Only one study reviewed (Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2000) reported a minimal financial impact on public school districts. Bifulco and Reback (2014) studied the fiscal impact of charter schools on traditional public schools, largely because very little research had been conducted on this. In fact, the authors mention only one other study they found that addressed the fiscal impact of charter schools on traditional public schools. Buffalo Public Schools and the Albany City School District in New York were the two districts used for the study. These two school districts were chosen because 20% of students in Albany and 17% in Buffalo attend charter

schools. The researchers began by looking at enrollment impacts on traditional public schools and estimating the change in revenue and expenditures as a result of the enrollment changes. Like North Carolina, state law in New York requires districts to pay charter schools an amount equal to per-pupil operating expenditures for each resident student who enrolls in a charter school. Data accrued during this case study indicated that Albany City School District lost somewhere between \$23.6 and \$26.1 million and Buffalo Public Schools lost around \$57.3 to \$76.8 million in the 2009-2010 school year.

The fiscal impact of charter schools was also studied by the Ohio Department of Education. The traditional public schools in Ohio lost \$774 million to charter schools in 2012 (Innovation Ohio, 2013). Over 40% or \$326 million of state funding for charters in that year came from traditional public schools. Thus, charter schools had a negative impact on students who stayed in traditional public schools. Innovation Ohio concluded, stating, “unless the mechanism for funding them is fixed . . . charters will continue to unfairly drain away resources from traditional school districts” (p. 7).

Arsen and Ni (2012) studied the resource allocation change in Michigan school districts experiencing sustained charter school competition. They analyzed average class size, teacher salaries, and spending via a fixed effects model for the years 1994-2006. The results indicated a negative fiscal impact on school districts in Michigan. Also, research indicated that resources were not allocated to achievement areas because of competition from charter schools.

North Carolina has also felt the impact of charter schools on budgets. In 2015, approximately 5% of students attending public schools were enrolled in a charter school

and 11 new charter schools were projected to open in 2015-2016, adding an additional 3,793 students. This might not sound like many students, but the total financial impact on these school districts was over \$17 million. The amount of state funds allotted to charter schools increased from \$16,559,947 in 1998 to \$366,455,982 by 2015 (NCDPI, 2015). The percentage of funds used for charter schools of the state education budget had grown from .3% in 1998 to 4.2% by 2015 (NCDPI, 2015).

Cho et al. (2013) analyzed the impact of charter schools on traditional public school finances and demographics in North Carolina. The methodology for this study was to examine a sample of charter schools and traditional public schools in Durham and collect data on student demographics and per-pupil expenditure from DPI. Four charter schools were used in the study. Two were used in one set of comparisons and two in another set. They were studied over a period of 10 years. One set of public schools indicated consistent expenditure numbers despite the presence of charter schools, but the second set of public schools studied indicated that during the last few years, four of the five traditional public schools had negative changes in expenditure. One of the public schools in the second set had an estimated change in expenditures at negative \$514,000, while both charter schools had a positive expenditure of \$1.8 million and \$244,000. Still, further analysis would be needed to determine a clear effect.

Ladd and Singleton (2018) conducted a more recent study on the fiscal impacts of charter schools. They examined the fiscal effects of charter schools on six school districts in North Carolina. One of those districts, Durham County, is an urban school district. The other five school districts are non-urban districts. The other school districts

in this study were: Buncombe, Cabarrus, Iredell-Statesville, Orange, and Union. All six of the school districts had experienced a significant loss of students to charter schools, with Durham County having 15% of the district's students now attending a charter school. Most of the non-urban districts were seeing rapid growth from charter schools and two of the districts, Orange and Buncombe, had seen charter schools in their district double their enrollment in 2 years. The average percentage of students attending a charter school in most districts in North Carolina is around 5%.

In order to understand this fiscal impact, an analysis of net fiscal impact calculations occurred which was the dollar amount reduced per student that went to charter schools. These data were combined with different scenarios regarding student loss. The data came from the state on funding programs and expenditure reports. Items were categorized as fixed or variable costs which allowed for an estimate of a range of scenarios. Variable costs are expenditures such as the cost of teacher employment, while fixed costs are money spent on items like facilities and maintenance. The two primary revenue sources for charter schools in North Carolina are state tax and per-pupil local revenue from county taxes. When a student leaves a traditional public school district, that district reduces variable cost spending because fixed costs cannot be reduced. Thus, per-pupil spending is negatively impacted. The fiscal impact on a school district is related to its ability to reduce expenditures in order to compensate for a loss in revenue. Non-urban areas are more likely to have limited flexibility to adjust spending as well.

Limitations of the study were that it did not account for the possibility that charter schools may improve the efficiency of school district spending. Districts could reallocate

money to be more productive and reduce wasteful spending. The study also did not account for other financial losses to charter schools. Another limitation of this study was that a reduction in costs for facilities for school districts with less students was not included. Losing students could aid districts in having to build less and use less space. Lastly, the social value of charter schools was not explored in their study.

As part of their study, Ladd and Singleton (2018) found a significant impact on each of the school districts, although to varying degrees. They found that charter schools create a negative fiscal impact in which traditional public school districts cannot reduce spending on the same level with the losses they experience without impacting services to the remaining students. The negative fiscal impacts were great in Durham and two of the other school districts. In Durham County Schools the cost was estimated to be from \$500 to \$700 per pupil and a cost of about \$25 million. In Iredell and Orange, the net fiscal impact was projected around \$200 to \$500 per student. This burden was believed to expand as charter school growth increased in non-urban districts. Ladd and Singleton suggested the need for state policies that ease this fiscal impact on traditional public schools, much like the ones that the states of New York and Massachusetts have. Another alternative they proposed was to let North Carolina fully fund charter schools rather than pull money from local districts.

In reviewing these studies, it seems possible for a charter school to have a negative fiscal impact on a traditional public school. Given the relationship between enrollments and expenditures, no doubt some school districts across North Carolina and across the country are feeling the fiscal impact of charter schools. Still, the difference of

impact on non-urban traditional public schools and urban traditional public schools needs to be researched more thoroughly. Additionally, the impact seems to vary greatly depending on the school district and the charter school(s).

Demographic Impact

Proponents of charter schools have cited the importance of market competition in order to improve public schools. This often coincides with the argument that traditional public schools are failing. Since traditional public schools are perceived to be failing by school choice advocates, charter schools are expected to outperform traditional public schools. Charter schools must show how they are succeeding, and this is done primarily through test scores. Because all schools are held accountable for test results, recruiting high-performing students helps scores rise rapidly. Hess (2002) states, “schools can make themselves more attractive by accepting successful students and by screening out those with difficulties. In a competitive marketplace, individual schools have incentives to pursue promising or high-performing students” (p. 37). Thus, there could be the incentive to target the highest-performing students. This practice is referred to as cream-skimming (Fiske & Ladd, 2001). When recruiting high-performing students, parental participation and financial support from affluent parents would also give these schools an additional advantage.

Increased segregation based on ability level, race, and socioeconomic status has consistently been a concern of charter school critics since their inception. They cite evidence that charter schools are leading to increased segregation in schools (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Erickson, 2011; Garcia, 2008; Renzulli & Evans, 2005) and that unrestricted

choice can lead to further social stratification. Those who do not perform well on tests could be excluded or kicked out and some charter schools are not allowing students who have language barriers or special education needs because they are more expensive to educate (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002). Therefore, they posit that charter schools enroll fewer students with disabilities than traditional public schools (Jabbar, 2016).

Thus, traditional public schools could be left with fewer capable students, fewer active parents, and reduced financial resources. Traditional public schools would have the task of educating the costlier students and would lose parent advocates who could help advance the cause of public education. Higher-achieving students would leave for charter schools. These students would not only cost less to educate, but also hurt the test scores of the traditional public schools. A vicious cycle would continue in which public schools are continually painted as failing due to plummeting test scores and ultimately the disadvantaged would feel the impact most.

Some also question how open public charter schools are to all students when there are admission procedures and requirements not seen in traditional public schools. There this creates selectivity when these schools are supposed to have open enrollment (Forman, 2010). Access to admissions information for low-income parents can be more difficult to obtain when they have language or transportation barriers (Bell, 2009; Koedel, Betts, Rice, & Zau, 2009). Schools that do not provide transportation might elect not to in order to save money, but also could use this as a way to eliminate students whose parents do not have transportation (Ravitch, 2010). Privileged parents can generally

better navigate admissions procedures and access to information. Also, many of these schools impose a difficult application process that might involve a lottery, an admissions test, character references, etc., that charter school opponents say is intentionally selective (Welner, 2013). With these barriers in place, questions of equity arise.

Those who favor school choice see it as a leveling agent that fosters equity because of parent choice and a lottery that is used if the school does not have enough space—that any charter school cannot just select students based on ability level. They argue that traditional public schools segregate students because these students are forced to attend a neighborhood school. Low-income families are essentially trapped because they cannot afford homes in different neighborhoods or do not have transportation to take them to another school. Therefore, defacto segregation by class and race occurs in traditional public schools. Charter proponents emphasize that school performance rather than geography should be a deciding factor in determining where students attend school and that sometimes students are stuck in a neighborhood school that is a low-performing school (Kozol, 2005). They say that school choice gives parents an alternative to their neighborhood school.

Additionally, charter advocates state that there is a large amount of diversity among charter schools (Forman 2010; Sass, 2006) and that there is no evidence that charter schools pursue elite students (Lacierno-Pacquet et al., 2002) or push low-performing students out (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013). In reviewing national data in order to compare charter schools with traditional public schools, there are nonetheless demographic differences. Across the country there are over 50 million students enrolled

in public education with about 50% being White, while about 24% of charter school students are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Therefore, the proportion of minorities in charter schools is higher than in traditional public schools. Still, opponents of charter schools assert that data can hide segregation at the school level.

In North Carolina, charter schools are not inhibited by geographic restrictions, so the population of charters can include students from multiple areas. Because charter schools are mission driven, student populations can sometimes be targeted. In some cases, charter schools have a demographic of students in mind for their unique mission and community. The lottery, parent interest, and other factors all figure in to the demographic makeup of each charter school. Charter school demographics can be completely different than those of the school system in which they are located.

By 2013 in North Carolina, 55% of students in charter schools were White, compared to 51% of students in traditional public schools. About 30% of charter school students were Black in comparison to 26% in public schools. Hispanics made up approximately 6.5% of students in charter schools, while Hispanic students comprised 14.5% of enrollment in traditional public schools. In 2014, the percentage of students under the Exceptional Children's Program made up 13.3% of students in public schools and 10.6% of students enrolled in charter schools in North Carolina.

The greatest difference between traditional public schools and charter schools in North Carolina seems to be the percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Charter schools consist of about 38% of students who are classified as Economically

Disadvantaged (ED) while 60.9% of public school enrollment is ED. However, the percentage of ED students in charter schools could be inaccurate because charter schools do not have to participate in the federal lunch program and do not collect detailed household income information (NCDPI, 2015). Also, although there is a higher percentage of Black students in charter schools, Bifulco and Ladd (2007) state, “not only has North Carolina’s charter school program increased racial segregation, but it has also served to widen the black-white test score gap” (p. 27). As the numbers and enrollment of charter schools continue to grow, the impact on demographic distribution is concerning for all involved in public education. If schools become more segregated, the value of high-quality teachers will become even more vital.

Human Resource Impact

One of the most important resources in public education is the teacher. Teacher quality is one of the most powerful factors in student growth (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Haynes, 2014; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Studies have shown that high-quality teachers may offset racial and socioeconomic disadvantages (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2010). When a teacher leaves a school, it places a burden on the school and district to hire and train someone to take the place of that teacher who left. Hiring, developing, and retaining staff is vitally important for student growth and also costs school districts money. It often costs school systems thousands of dollars, but more importantly teacher attrition affects student learning outcomes (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Watlington, Shockley, Guglielmino, & Felsher, 2010).

In this new era of school choice, just as competition for students has occurred, so too has competition for teachers. I have witnessed this competition firsthand in my school district as the local charter school pulled teachers away from some traditional public schools. A few of my best teachers were recruited by the local charter school and one of my teachers left to teach at the charter school. Hiring quality teachers from traditional public schools is a way to improve performance and raise test scores quickly (Carruthers, 2012). Teachers with experience often know the curriculum better and have adapted and developed positive practices over time which can lead to better test scores (Rockoff, 2004). Experienced teachers are more likely to continue teaching and also require less professional development and training, costing the district less (Goldhaber, Gross, & Player, 2007). They also develop positive relationships with the community and it is common for parents to want specific teachers in schools (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2003).

Critics of charter schools cite concerns over higher levels of student and teacher turnover as charter schools open, and in doing so create an unstable environment in which to learn for the remaining traditional public school students (Ni, 2009). Schools facing competition from charter schools may have difficulty attracting and keeping good teachers as well (Jackson, 2012). Charter schools could pull away teachers, forcing public schools to hire new inexperienced teachers. Sometimes the number of new teachers might be limited because teachers often stay in the area they teach even if they leave their current position (Murnane & Steel, 2007). Thus, the size of the charter school and proximity could impact the traditional public school. Recruiting new teachers

becomes an even more important priority for districts, especially with areas facing teacher shortages.

Charter school advocates say traditional public schools have to work harder to keep and attract new teachers and that competition improves teacher performance, which in turn coincides with better academic performance (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2003). They cite that charter schools have more oversight as well as the potential for possible closure if performance or enrollment declines. Some charter schools have more discretion over their funding. As such, they have more flexibility with pay for teacher credentials and can reward good teachers on merit and quality, and teachers have the ability to negotiate pay with their principal. They often do not have to pay teachers the pay scale that is used by the state. Schedules can be made more appealing, and the curriculum can be adjusted easily. If teachers are not performing well, they can be terminated more easily.

A few studies have been conducted on the impact charter schools are having on traditional public school personnel (Baker & Dickerson, 2006; Podgursky & Ballou, 2001). Jackson (2012) studied charter school competition and labor markets using NCDPI data and Common Core data and found that teachers going to charter schools from traditional public schools have lower qualifications and that schools facing increased charter competition do not experience increases in teacher turnover. In this study, the teachers who left traditional public schools for charter schools had lower evaluations and value-added data than those who stayed in traditional public schools. Therefore, teacher quality did not decrease in traditional public schools. However, this pattern was reversed in traditional public schools that were hard to staff. In traditional

public schools that were hard to staff, there was a decline in hiring and teacher quality. Hard-to-staff schools can have unfilled vacancies and thus lower quality of instruction.

Carruthers (2012) studied teachers who were moving to charter schools to determine if charter schools draw good teachers from traditional public schools. Over 30% of charter school teachers previously worked in traditional public schools. Carruthers utilized a data panel from North Carolina that included teacher credentials, environment, and career paths over 12 years and found that not as qualified and effective teachers go to charter schools. Teachers going to charter schools also have less experience and are less likely to have a license, which is consistent with studies by Burian-Fitzgerald and Harris (2004) and Jackson (2012).

Traditional Public School Response

After a review of existing literature, it is evident that the growth of charter schools has impacts on traditional public schools, including academically, fiscally, demographically, and in terms of human resources. Yet, neither have all schools across the country felt this impact, nor have all schools been impacted in the same way. There are myriad factors that contribute to the effect of charter schools on traditional public schools, but it is clear that charter schools are growing significantly; therefore, more public school districts will continue to feel the influence of charter schools. In North Carolina, Watson, Flowers, Lyons, McColl, and Algozzine (2015) conducted a study examining the perceptions of North Carolina school superintendents on current educational issues. One of those current educational issues was charter schools. Sixty-seven of the 115 school superintendents in North Carolina participated in the survey.

Almost all of the superintendents (93%) stated that the growth of charter schools will hurt public school systems. None of the superintendents surveyed indicated that charter schools would help their school system.

Since charter schools are having an increasing impact on many schools, how are traditional public schools responding to this competition? There has been a small number of studies looking at public school response to charter school competition (Holmes et al., 2006). Most of the studies have been conducted using interviews. Existing research indicates that traditional public school districts respond in a number of different ways to competition, which is explained further in this study (Betts, 2009; Hess, Maranto, & Milliman, 2001; Rofes, 1998; Teske et al., 2000). Other studies find little evidence of school response to competition or significant improvements in traditional public schools stimulated by charter school competition (Berends, Cannata, & Goldring, 2011; Buddin & Zimmer, 2009; Davis, 2013; Ladd & Fiske, 2003; Wells, 1998).

In order to respond, school systems have to be cognizant of competition. They must see the need to respond before implementing change. If school districts feel no pressure from charter schools, they will be unlikely to respond. The way that school leaders respond is directly related to their perception and awareness of the competition and the impact of that competition (Holmes et al., 2006). Small school districts are more likely to see charter schools as competition (Linick & Lubienski, 2013). Hoxby (2003) states that 6% student attrition is the threshold of impact at which districts begin to respond. Is the competition something that they can respond to in such a way as to counteract the problem? This is a pressing question, as various factors might prevent a

school district from responding in ways that might stem the tide of students leaving for charter schools (Arsen & Ni, 2012; Lamberg, Tikkanen, Nokelainen, & Suur-Ikeroinen, 2009; Linick & Lubienski, 2013). The ability for public schools to respond depends on a range of factors. Does the school district have the funding to add additional programs or market themselves more effectively? Do they have the personnel to make substantial changes and will those changes be effective? Does the school district have community support?

There are different ways school districts respond to charter schools, if they respond at all. Competition pushes some schools to be more consumer-focused and concentrate on marketing (Ladner & Brouillette, 2000; Lubienski, 2007). A focus on marketing is the most common competitive strategy (Kasman & Loeb, 2013; Lubienski, 2005). Marketing could include signs, flyers, ads, and partnerships with local businesses. It might also include a revamped website, school logo, or simply a renewed focus on the student and family as consumers. Other school districts make small changes to the curriculum or allocate resources differently (Arsen & Ni, 2012; Goldhaber & Eide, 2003). Schools might offer niche programs such as language immersion programs or career and technical education programs. Others might add gifted programs or magnet schools while some schools add programs for advanced learners. Another strategy is to lengthen the school day or change the school calendar. Extracurricular activities such as athletic programs that might not be available to charter schools are also used to recruit or retain students (Jabbar, 2015). Charter schools might also cause school districts to try and become more cost efficient (Buerger & Bifulco, 2016; Terrier & Ridley, 2018).

Often the changes school districts implement are not large or sweeping. Teske et al. (2000) indicated public school districts make small changes when responding to competitive pressure from charter schools. They interviewed superintendents, school board members, principals, district level leaders, and charter school leaders in order to understand how districts were responding to charter school competition. These leaders were from school districts in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia. These interviews were combined with other data including test scores, enrollment information, and demographic information in order to gauge the impact of charter schools. The researchers indicated that charter competition did not induce large changes, but superintendents and principals did make changes designed to make schools more attractive and efficient. Public school leaders reacted when they felt threatened. Principals changed procedures, and school districts adopted new programs that parents wanted. A significant number of students in the studied districts did leave for charter schools. Therefore, in order to help with the loss of students, districts provided extra resources to schools that were shrinking in enrollment. District opinion also varied greatly on the topic of charter schools.

A similar study by Eric Rofes (1998) included 25 school districts in eight states (Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) and the District of Columbia. Researchers conducted over 200 interviews with superintendents, central office personnel, principals, and teachers in traditional public schools. Charter school administrators, founders, and advocates were also interviewed for the study, and over 75% of the interviews were conducted face-to-face.

A document review was also part of this study. Almost half of the school districts cited experiencing a strong or moderate impact from charter schools. Even in a single state, the type and level of impact varied greatly. The urban districts were less impacted than the rural or suburban districts. School district responses indicated that most of the districts made small changes that were done slowly. About a quarter of the districts implemented more large-scale changes. These changes included altering educational programs, copying of the charter school model, and the chartering of district schools. Some districts created thematic schools based on certain philosophies, such as a school of technology. Smaller changes included improving public relations, mounting an aggressive marketing campaign, and hiring a full-time communications director.

As stated earlier, when districts are under intense competitive pressure, they are more likely to respond (Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). Hess et al. (2001) studied four small Arizona school districts that had lost one-tenth to one-third of their enrollment to determine how district schools respond to competition when facing intense competitive pressure from charter schools. These districts were isolated and were not large school districts. The comparative case study consisted of more than 40 interviews with Arizona Department of Education officials, school district leaders, county-level school officials, journalists, parents, teachers, and charter school leaders. The district responses were found to vary based on size and resources. The context of each situation varied and thus the responses did as well. Factors that had an impact were district growth, the quality of the charter school, and the type of students targeted. Also, three of the four superintendents changed during that time, and two of the changes seemed to be related to

charter competition. Ultimately, the research indicated that traditional public school districts responded when they felt pressure. These districts felt intense pressure to respond when quality charter programs were competing for desirable students. School districts appeared to take small steps to counterthreats such as reforming the curriculum to please parents. However, the study was limited in that it focused solely on small districts facing severe competition.

Kasman and Loeb (2013) sought to examine the competitive pressures of school choice experienced by school leaders in Milwaukee. The researchers described the extent and variation of competition and the response of schools to the competition. In Milwaukee, families have a strong choice system that is very competitive. A survey was sent to traditional public school principals. The findings indicated that 25% reported using a great deal of marketing and advertising and 13% reported a large amount of instructional and curricular change in response to competition. Still, 15% reported not marketing at all and 30% reported no instructional or curricular changes. The competitive pressure varied greatly among school leaders, as did their overall responses to survey questions.

Further research on the relationship between traditional public schools and charter schools could lead to a variety of results given the variety of factors that impact how traditional public school districts respond. The amount of time the charter school has been in existence, existing policy, the quality of the charter school, and the resources available to the public school district all shape the response (Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). Still, given the small body of literature analyzing the response of traditional public school

districts to charter school competition, further study of this topic could be useful, especially for districts that are just now facing the influence of charter schools. Of the few studies conducted, most were done so over 15 years ago, and as I mentioned already, many do not provide conclusive findings. Recently, many more schools have been impacted by the charter school movement. Thus, further research might shed new light on the ways traditional public school districts are responding to charter schools. Like the study by Hess et al. (2001), a study of a few school districts impacted by one charter school would provide a more isolated context in which to gather research. The impact and response would therefore be more easily identifiable. Also, like the aforementioned study, the charter school in my study is in a rural area, and there are few studies on how school districts in rural areas are responding to charter schools.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I explored the experiences of two public school districts in North Carolina with a charter school, and ultimately what changes, if any, they implemented as a result of this competition. I interviewed traditional public school leaders to aid in understanding the factors that initiated these changes and how they viewed the results of those changes that were implemented. As the educational landscape has begun to shift in the era of school choice, school districts are faced with the increasing challenge of creating positive change in order to retain students. Other public school districts might glean insight from the perspectives of these educators in creating positive systemic change across a school district.

Research Questions

I framed my research around one principal research question and two sub-questions:

1. How are leaders in public school districts in North Carolina responding to charter schools?
 - a. What are the perceived academic, fiscal, demographic, and human resource impacts of charter schools on traditional public school districts?
 - b. What types of initiatives and policy revisions have been implemented as a result of competition from charter schools?

Research Design

I used qualitative methods for this study. Qualitative research is empirical research in which the data are not in numerical form (Punch, 2009). While quantitative research uses numbers, qualitative research uses words. Qualitative research is research in which the person conducting the study seeks to “describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 520). Qualitative research is more complex than a simple definition, much in the same way that the issue of school choice is more complex than the number of students leaving traditional public schools. “The qualitative approach to research is uniquely suited to uncovering the unexpected and exploring new avenues” (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p. 38). Creswell (2016) states that this process starts with a problem that the researcher is trying to solve and leads to the researcher developing a question that will help to answer that problem. Data are then gathered from people who can help answer the question. Often qualitative research is spurred on by the researcher’s direct experience and focuses on individuals, groups, processes, or organizations (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Creswell (2016) also identifies 11 different major elements aligned with the work that a qualitative researcher does:

- Report the voices of participants
- Go out to the (or context) to collect data
- Look at how processes unfold
- Focus on a small number of people or sites
- Explore in an open-minded way

- Develop a complex understanding
- Lift up the silenced voices of marginalized groups or populations
- Create multiple perspective or views of the phenomenon
- Contrast different views of the phenomenon.
- Study sensitive topics
- Reflect on our own biases and experiences (pp. 6–8).

A vital aspect of qualitative research is that it allows the researcher to view multiple realities or interpretations of a single event and helps understand the perspective of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This type of research focuses on understanding people’s perspectives on their unique experiences and the meaning they derive from those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In fact, for research to truly be qualitative, it “must include the perspectives of some audience” (Biklen & Casella, 2007, p. 6). This perspective also might be in contrast to that of the researcher. As the researcher learns from the perspectives of the participants, the research design changes and evolves (Creswell, 2015). In using qualitative research and interviewing key personnel in two school districts, I explored the perceived impact of charter schools on traditional public school districts in North Carolina and gave voice to the leaders from participating public school districts in order to understand their varying responses and perspectives on this issue as well as the changes they have implemented as a result of these experiences.

Research Setting

There are 115 school districts in North Carolina and 1,459,852 students attend traditional public schools (NCDPI, 2016). The 115 school districts are each governed by a local board of education with a superintendent handling the daily management of the school district. Charter schools are governed independently of a Local Education Authority. Traditional public school districts vary greatly in size. Wake County Schools is the largest with over 150,000 students. The smallest, Tyrrell County Schools and Hyde County Schools, each have under 600 students (NCDPI, 2016). Within the geographic boundaries of Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools, there are 25 charter schools, which is the most in the state. Over 50 school systems do not have charter schools operating in their respective counties. There are 77,791 students enrolled in 167 charter schools in North Carolina (NCDPI, 2016). The number of students enrolled in a charter school would make it one of the largest LEAs in North Carolina if it were a school district.

For this study, I used two different school districts that have been impacted by the same charter school. I name these City Schools and County Schools. These two school districts are located in the same county. In order for all participants to remain anonymous, I have replaced the names of the school districts, schools, and participants with pseudonyms. The county has a population of over 140,000 people according to the U.S. Census Bureau and is almost 90% White. The median household income is just under \$42,000, with about 14% of the adult population having obtained at least a bachelor's degree. Of the 100 counties in North Carolina, it is one the larger counties in regards to land mass. Many parts are still very rural and used for agriculture. In fact, the

county has over 1,000 farms with over one-fifth of the land used for agriculture. According to the U.S. Census population estimates, the county is considered rural because it has an average of fewer than 250 people per square mile. Because there are no major cities, there is not a large tax base in the county. The largest city in the county has fewer than 30,000 people.

City Schools resides in the largest city in the county, which is also the county seat. According to their website based on 2016-2017 school data, the district has over 4,000 students attending eight different schools. The school system has a diverse student body with 67% of the population being non-White. There are eight traditional schools in the district. City Schools employs over 600 people. About 74% of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch.

County Schools is the largest employer in the county. According to their website based on 2017-2018 data, the district has over 2,000 employees. County Schools has over 16,000 students, making it one of the twenty-five largest school districts in North Carolina. In regard to ethnic distribution about 72% of students are White and 28% are minorities. About 54% of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch. Expenditures last year were over \$140 million. It has seven high schools, seven middle schools, and 14 elementary schools.

The local charter school that draws students from both City and County Schools serves students in grades 6-12 and actually has a middle school and a high school. According to information on their website, the 9th-12th grade enrollment for the 2018-2019 school year was 1,700 students. The school profile on their webpage that was

updated in 2017 reads about 85% of those students are White and 15% are minorities. About 36% of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch. The charter school serves students from six different surrounding counties as well. Table 2 compares the three districts.

Table 2

District Profiles

	City Schools	County Schools	Forest Charter Academy
Enrollment	4,500	16,500	1,700
Demographic	35% White 65% Minority	73% White 27% Minority	85% White 15% Minority
Free/Reduced Lunch	73%	54%	36%
Transportation	Provided	Provided	Provided (Hubs)

I chose the two traditional public school districts for several reasons. First, both districts have been impacted by the same charter school. This charter school is the only charter school in the county. Both school districts reside in the same county and have never faced competition from a charter school residing in the same county before. The effects on both traditional school districts are more easily identifiable because school districts in isolated markets are more vulnerable to competition and therefore should be easier to study (Hess et al., 2001). Also, the charter school opened in 2013, thus the impact has been recent. Historically, these isolated markets were not accustomed to dealing with much competition. Because the charter school opened so recently, the leadership in both public school districts is familiar with what both school systems were

like before the inception of the charter school and how these traditional school districts have responded to this competition. Also, County Schools is much larger than City Schools. Though City Schools is much smaller, it is also in the city, is substantially more diverse, and has more resources available. I wondered if the district response would be different based on the size and resources of each district.

Data Collection

Prior to conducting research, I received approval through the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. For this study, I interviewed 20 public schools leaders. These leaders were superintendents, central office staff, and principals. I limited the sample size of leaders to allow time for in-depth interviews. I contacted these leaders via telephone, e-mail, or in person.

The data for this study came from personal interviews that I conducted with these public school leaders. The research interview is a conversation between two people about a theme of interest (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Again, I selected these leaders because of their role in the school district and thus their ability to influence change. Interviews are commonly used to conduct research and in qualitative research are frequently one of the main sources of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Interviews are necessary when it is not possible to observe or replicate information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, gathering information through interviews allows the researcher to better collect data based on those experiences. It allows the interviewee to tell his or her story. According to Seidman (2013),

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to 'evaluate' as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning that they make of that experience. (p. 9)

For this study, I decided that the best way to understand the effects and response to charter schools on traditional public schools was to interview the public leaders who might have been affected by the charter school. The interpretation or point of view that an interview provides often renders new insight into a research topic as well. As these traditional public school leaders were interviewed, I hoped they would be able to shed new light on their perspective and experience as leaders facing competition. Any response from these school districts would also have been initiated and/or informed by these school leaders. Therefore, this information could not be gathered in another way.

The interviews were semi-structured and took approximately one hour each. I also utilized an interview guide I created based upon my review of the literature comprised of open-ended questions. I conducted all interviews one-on-one and face-to-face, recording each on a digital audio device. The recordings were kept in a secure location. Prior to conducting the interviews, a consent form was signed by the interviewees in person. Before I began the interviews, I explained the nature and purpose of the study and why they were selected to participate. Additionally, I also recorded the name, date, time, and location of the interview. On a few occasions, I asked follow-up questions of participants via email. During the interviews, I used the semi-structured interview guide, but also asked follow-up questions based on the responses I received.

Interview Guide

I divided the interview guide I created into two sections. These involved questions about the impact on the school district and the district response.

Impact on the School District

1. What is your current position?
2. How long have you been in your district?
3. Tell me about the charter school in this region.
4. What type of impact has the charter school had on academics?
5. What type of impact has the charter school had on finances?
6. What type of impact has the charter school had on retaining students and student demographics?
7. What type of impact has the charter school had on teacher recruitment and retention?

District Response

8. How, if at all, has the district changed or added policy as a result of the charter school?
9. How, if at all, has the district changed or added instructional practices as a result of the charter school?
10. How, if at all, has the district changed or added curriculum as a result of the charter school?
11. How, if at all, has the district changed or added programs as a result of the charter school?

12. How, if at all, has the district changed recruitment, hiring strategies, and professional development as a result of the charter school?
13. How, if at all, has the district changed public relations as a result of the charter school?
14. What other ways, if at all, has the district responded to the charter school?
15. What else would you like to share with me about the impact of the charter school and/or the district's response to that impact?
16. Are there any questions that you have for me?

Participant Selection

In selecting participants for the interviews, I used purposive or deliberate sampling (Punch, 2009). I chose participants first and foremost because of their leadership role in one of the two school districts. In the districts, I interviewed the following people:

- the superintendent,
- executive director or assistant superintendent of human resources,
- executive director or assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction,
- executive director of student services or assistant superintendent of operations,
- finance officer,
- director of secondary education,
- director of middle grades education,
- director of CTE, and
- the public relations officer.

I also interviewed three principals from each district for a total of six principals. In total, I interviewed 20 people across the two districts.

I selected superintendents for this study because many school district decisions are led by the superintendent. While the school board influences policymaking, the superintendent is essentially the CEO of the school district. According to North Carolina General Statute 115C-276, the superintendent has many duties, including carrying out regulations of the school board, monitoring the conditions of school buildings, implementing policy, attending meetings, distributing information, recommending the hiring and firing of school personnel, and participating in budget and financing among many other duties. Yet, the ability to respond to change and promote it, though not mentioned implicitly in this statute, might be one of the most important aspects of the job.

I also interviewed district leaders in central services from both school systems. An interview with the executive director or assistant superintendent of curriculum was vital because that person directs the fiscal management of all aspects of the curriculum. The executive director of curriculum is familiar with key data points regarding testing. Also, the executive director of curriculum and instruction often presents curriculum related proposals to the board of education and coordinates professional development activities for the district. He or she participates in strategic planning along with the superintendent and other members of the leadership team. This could include creating and overseeing special projects because they are familiar with the newest educational research. The implementation of new programs in response to the charter school is a

significant part of this study, and the director of curriculum and instruction was the person who could speak to any such changes.

I interviewed the executive director or assistant superintendent of human resources in order to provide insight into recruiting and retaining educators because charter schools also compete with public school districts over staff. Several of the personnel for the charter school at one time worked for one of the traditional public school systems in the area. Districts spend a large amount of money to train new educators and that money is lost when those teachers leave the district.

Another key position that I interviewed was the executive director or assistant superintendent of student services for both districts. The person in this position supervises several areas including counselors, drop-out prevention advocates, social workers, health services, student assignment, and safety. In overseeing student assignment, the executive director of student services would have an in-depth understanding of those students leaving their school district and those students enrolling in their school district. This includes student assignment appeal hearings. In some districts, this person might also oversee operations and facilities and would have knowledge of how these resources have been impacted by the local charter school.

I also chose to interview the director of Career and Technical Education (CTE) for the two districts. The director of CTE is responsible for building and promoting these programs in order to help students maximize career choices. This includes partnering with local businesses and community colleges as well as developing innovative student opportunities for the future. The success of CTE programs is directly related to the

number of students choosing these pathways. Thus, when districts are losing students, CTE programs feel that impact as well.

I also interviewed the director of secondary education and the director of middle grades education in both districts. Directors of instruction work closely with principals and act as a liaison for the director of curriculum and instruction. My hope was that interviewing these directors might lend more insight into curriculum program implementation, as well as any changes over time, as directors often are responsible for working with schools to add new courses. Managing the budget for curriculum and coordinating research initiatives are also aspects of this position. In professional learning community meetings with principals, directors learn about the impact of charter schools on each school level.

I interviewed two public information officers, one from each district. The public information officer holds an important role for many reasons. This person is responsible for disseminating information out to the parents and community in a timely manner. Often, the public information officer will have a relationship with local media and will speak on behalf of the district. This could be during a time of crisis or for positive publicity. They also facilitate other ways of communicating with parents and the community such as through social media and the school district website. Additionally, some public information officers use television as a way to communicate information and can even provide their own programming. They might also use more traditional methods of communication such as bulletins, newsletters, brochures, and recorded voice messages. Now more than ever, the public information officer is responsible for helping the district

market itself. With parents having several school options, school districts must now promote their “brand.”

I also interviewed six principals in addition to the district office staff I listed above. These principals were purposefully selected because of the proximity of their schools to the charter school and the perceived impact of the charter school upon their schools. Implementing large initiatives in response to a charter school is likely beyond the control of the principal, but there are certainly things that school administrators can do in response to local interest in the charter school. Large scale change, however, would need the support of central office to be effective. Administrator interviews provided insight from the school level that might not be ascertained from central office administrators because the effect of a new charter school might be best understood by the principals who have felt the impact of losing students and teachers. Principals are the ones who have had the difficult conversations with staff who are being displaced. They have also watched as students have transferred and have spoken with parents about why they were leaving their school. Thus, their unique perspective was vital to this study.

Participant Profiles and Experience

Each of the school leaders interviewed provided a unique perspective on charter schools and several of the leaders had worked many years in public education. These school leaders had a variety of experiences and had served in various roles throughout their career. In this section, I share some background information about each of the school leaders I interviewed for this study to provide background context for the findings I share in the next two chapters. All names are pseudonyms.

City Schools Participants

Superintendent: Dr. Page had been in education for over 30 years and she had served in many roles during that time. She was in her fourth year as Superintendent of City Schools. She had started her career as a teacher and had worked as a principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She had also been an assistant superintendent and regional superintendent. Dr. Page had worked in several different school districts of varying sizes. She emphasized the importance of City Schools, “telling our story.”

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction: Dr. Cleveland had been with City Schools for 2 years. Prior to coming to City Schools, he had been in several districts and had served as a director, principal, and teacher over his career which had spanned about 20 years. Dr. Cleveland had been instrumental in helping start an early college and expanding dual language schools in the district.

Executive Director for Human Resources: Ms. Carlton had been in her current role for 5 years and had worked in City Schools for 17 years. Before taking the role of executive director for human resources, she had been the public information officer. As the public information officer, she had been part of implementing an innovative school model. Ms. Carlton had worked in a higher education at the community college level and in the private sector as well. She emphasized the many choices that public school systems like City Schools offered students beyond the traditional options.

Executive Director for Student Services: Dr. Yancey was in his second year as executive director for student services for City Schools and had been in public education

for 13 years. Prior to his time in City Schools, Dr. Yancey had been the director of elementary education in another district. He had also served as an assistant principal, social studies, and English teacher. Dr. Yancey shared his belief that public schools were doing great things but often did not do a good job in communicating those positive things to the community. He stated that the local charter school had been successful at attracting students because it was something new, and this newness had helped distract attention from their poor student performance on end of year tests.

Director of Secondary Education and Career and Technical Education: Dr. Julianne had been with City Schools for 10 years and the director of secondary schools for 7 years. Dr Julianne served as the director of career and technical education in addition to her current role as director of secondary schools. She talked about the various course offerings of public schools. She expressed concern that there seemed to be two sets of rules, one for the charter schools and one for traditional public schools.

Principal: Mr. Bagley was in his second year as the principal of the only high school in City Schools. He had been a principal at all three levels in the district and had been with the district for about 10 years. City High School was the largest school in the district with over 1,300 students and had a diverse student body. Mr. Bagley had lost students to the same charter school while he was a middle school principal. In the interview he talked about equity and the importance of letting the public know the great things happening in traditional public schools.

Principal: Mr. Mel was in his second year as the principal at Southern City Middle School and was in his 18th year in public education. He had started out as a

music teacher and became an assistant principal at the middle school level at a highly impacted school. Prior to his current role, Mr. Mel had been the principal of an elementary school. Mr. Mel had a family member who worked in a charter school. Mr. Mel believed that some positive things were happening in charter schools, but shared his concern that charter schools were often very segregated.

Principal: Ms. Fall was in her seventh year at Northern City Middle School and her 9th year in City Schools. Ms. Fall had 26 years in education and began her career as a physical education teacher. The school's student population was very diverse and often had some of the highest EVAAS growth in the state on the end of grade tests. She expressed that healthy competition with the charter school was not a bad thing and that she believed this competition was helping public schools improve.

County Schools Participants

Superintendent: Dr. Mike had been the superintendent of County Schools for six years. He began his career in a large school system as a high school math teacher and was an assistant principal at the same school. He had been a principal at the middle and high school levels. He had also served as an assistant superintendent of human resources in his career and an interim superintendent. Dr. Mike stated that our job is not to compete but to get better. He wanted County Schools to continue to move the needle forward because his goal was to see the district be the best it could be.

Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction: Ms. Cathy had been in her role in the district for about 5 years. Prior to assuming the role of assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, she had been a principal at an elementary

school in another school district. Ms. Cathy had also worked as an assistant principal at the high school level. Ms. Cathy had over 30 years of experience in education. She shared that public schools must tell their story or someone else will tell it for them and that public schools must continue to focus on helping each individual child.

Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources: Ms. Walton had 34 years in public education and 5 years in County Schools. She had been in her current role for 5 years. She had been the director of middle grades education prior to becoming the assistant superintendent of human resources and had also been a principal at the middle school level. Ms. Walton was familiar with charter schools because she had worked in another county where several charters schools were located. Ms. Walton shared her belief that the state needs to revisit licensure requirements for teachers. While the charter school does not have to have a completely certified staff, public schools still do. County Schools lost several teachers to the charter school because they could not pass state licensure.

Assistant Superintendent of Operations: Mr. Roy had been in County Schools for 26 years and had been in his current position for 10 years. He left County Schools and worked in another district before returning. Mr. Roy believed the charter school had been successful because of providing a smaller setting, food services that catered from popular restaurants, and school day flexibility that allowed students to get out early on Friday.

Finance Officer: Mr. Norman had been in education for 23 years and had been with County Schools since 2004. He had been in his current role since 2005 and had also

worked in City Schools prior to coming to County Schools. As the finance officer, he oversaw and managed the budget for the school system, which was about \$150 million. He shared that 80-85% of the budget was payroll. Mr. Norman said that his district loses \$1,240 every time a student goes to a charter school, but also shared that the school system also loses students to another charter school in the county as well as private schools and to parents choosing to homeschool their children.

Director of High Schools: Ms. Davidson had been in County Schools for 19 years and had been in public education for 30 years. She had been in her current role for 12 years. She also served as the director for ESL and in her career she had been a principal, assistant principal, and lead teacher, as well as classroom teacher. Ms. Davidson said public schools must continue to reflect on what they can offer based on student need and be more responsive to why students leave County Schools.

Director of Middle Schools: Dr. Coke had been the director of middle schools for 2 years. Additionally, he also was in charge of AIG, MTSS, Title II, and Title V for County Schools. Dr. Coke had also served as a principal at the high school and middle school levels and had been an assistant principal at the middle school level. He began his career as a teacher. Dr. Coke stated that the charter school had forced the district to reevaluate the way it did things but that County Schools was as innovative as any other school system.

Director of Career and Technical Education: Ms. Nash was the director of career and technical education and had been in her current role for 3 years. She also served as the director of technological and innovative school design. Ms. Nash had

served as a lead teacher and math teacher. During her career she had worked in three different school systems. Ms. Nash had been at the forefront of implementing a new school model at River Mountain School, which was comprised of grades 6-12. The school was originally a middle school that had seen enrollment numbers decline. The building had been half-empty until the re-design occurred, which transitioned the school into becoming a school that covered grades 6-12. A maximum of 75 students were allowed to enroll in ninth grade each year with the local school zone having first priority. Thus, grades 9-12 could eventually have 300 students and double the enrollment of the school. The school was innovative in that it had three different areas of focus and each student also had a chrome book. Additionally, the re-design also relieved crowding from the largest high school in the district to which River Mountain School fed.

Public Information Officer: Mr. Tom was in his fifth year as the public information officer for County Schools. Mr. Tom had worked in marketing and advertising his whole career but this was his first job in a public school district. Prior to coming to County Schools, he had worked for a local newspaper. Mr. Tom talked about the importance of County Schools sharing its own narrative and establishing its own brand.

Principal: Ms. Molly was the principal of Early College High School in County Schools. She was in her third year as principal of the school which had over 350 students. Before serving as principal at the school, she had worked as an assistant principal in two districts. Her career path began at the Boys and Girls Club and eventually she became the Gear-Up Coordinator before moving into public school

administration. Students who attended the Early College High School could earn a 2-year degree during their time in high school and graduate with both degrees. Like the charter school, this school was afforded calendar flexibility. It also had a later start time and dismissal time than other schools in the district. Students were selected through an application process and typically performed better than the other high schools in the district on end of course tests. Ms. Molly also shared that the school had a concentrated focus on admitting students who would be the first in their family to attend college.

Principal: Mr. Canton was the principal of South Middle School. South Middle School was about 10 minutes outside of town and demographically was about 71% White and 24% Hispanic. Mr. Canton had been at the middle school for 4 years in his current role after serving as an assistant principal at a middle school in another district. He began his career as a social studies teacher at a middle school. Mr. Canton shared that the charter school had a significant impact on his enrollment for the 2015-2016 school year when they lost 50 students. The next year they lost 15 students and in 2017-2018 lost nine students to the charter school.

Principal: Mr. Ridge was in his second year as the principal of River Mountain School and had 12 years of experience in public education. Prior to becoming the principal at River Mountain School, Mr. Ridge had been an assistant principal at a middle school in the school district. Mr. Ridge was excited about the re-design at his school. River Mountain School was in the first year of a re-design in which it would become a 6-12 school. The school had added ninth graders for the current school year and would add a grade level each year. Mr. Ridge hoped that his school would appeal to students who

were not interested in a traditional high school setting and believed that more parents were looking for individualized options for their children.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process that involves breaking down data into meaningful parts for the purpose of examining them. Once the school leaders had been interviewed, the recorded information was sent to a transcription service. After the interviews were transcribed, I then analyzed the data. I starting by coding, using some pre-determined codes (related to the categories I name in my research questions). As I analyzed the transcripts, I developed codes and looked for themes in order to answer the research question. Coding involves assigning a descriptive label that captures the meaning of data (Savin & Badin, 2013). Typically, the code is a word or phrase that summarizes the meaning (Saldaña, 2015). Codes are developed because qualitative data can be dense and has to be broken down in order to generate meaning. I coded the text looking for topics, keywords, and phrases. By coding, I generated a variety of evidences for themes (Creswell, 2016). I collapsed codes into categories and developed themes from these categories; these themes represent the primary findings in a study of this nature (Creswell, 2016).

In order to identify any additional information relevant to this study, I collected my own impressions, questions, and emerging understandings in a research journal. As I collected data, I took notes to capture the meaning I was making from my data (Saldaña, 2015). This involved writing notes about the research process but also notes about the participants on their roles and routines as well as reflections on issues within the study.

Information obtained during the interviews remained confidential and I replaced participant names with pseudonyms. I also sought to maintain district anonymity as much as possible. During the interviews, I protected the rights and privacy of each participant, and I complied with the IRB requirements. Participants also had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The goals of the study were clearly outlined for each participant prior to each interview.

Researcher Positionality

Every person is shaped by different factors that inform his or her view of the world. Thus, when conducting research, the researcher interprets the research through his or her own viewpoint—at least to some extent. The researcher’s own viewpoints will carry inherent biases because there are no completely unbiased or neutral perspectives from which to research. Kilbourn (2006) states, “a fundamental assumption for any academic research is that the phenomena (data) that we wish to understand are filtered through a point of view” (p. 545). Therefore, all research will have a degree of subjectivity.

In regard to positionality, my current position as a traditional high school principal is one that is important to acknowledge. My school has been affected in many ways by the charter school in my area and I have lost many students to the charter school since it opened. Several of my teachers have been displaced during this time because our enrollment dropped significantly. My school district has also been impacted. Both of the feeder schools in my quadrant now face competition from a new middle grades charter school. As a whole, the district has lost more students than my school has lost. Teachers

in other schools have been displaced and there are teachers who left our district to teach at the charter school. These negative experiences without a doubt could have impacted my research, particularly my analysis of the data. To try to minimize this possibility, I reflected on my assumptions and research as a way to help surface and mitigate biases and reflected regularly during each step of the study. I was mindful of my thoughts, interpretations, and feelings and was careful to acknowledge these—bracketing my own assumptions and experiences—as I made meaning of my data.

I have always worked in traditional public schools, so my experiential understanding of charter schools is limited. This is my 20th year of working in public education and my experiences have been overwhelmingly positive. Though far from perfect, I have seen the tremendous benefits that traditional public education provides to our society and believe that public education is truly the great equalizer because public education provides limitless opportunities for students. I have a deep loyalty to public education.

I am also a parent of two children who attend a traditional public school. Both have had a wonderful experience thus far, and I have been happy with their academic growth. They both enjoy school and I feel that as a public school employee, it is important my children attend a traditional public school. The traditional public schools where we live are among the best in the county and the schools where my children attend are exceptional. I know that is not the case of all traditional public schools. All parents want the best school experience available for their children so that they can be prepared for life after school. Parents should be able to send their child to whatever school setting

they believe is best, yet sometimes this is not possible. Sometimes there are no other options for students and parents.

I am also cognizant of the fact that charter schools are an aspect of public education that is only growing and will not go away. They too have the incredible responsibility to educate children. I realize that one unexpected benefit of the local charter school in my district is that it helped alleviate crowding at my school. The charter school also caused the leadership team in my school to think of different ways to market ourselves, create new course offerings, and provide a more flexible student-driven schedule. Last year I had the opportunity to visit the charter middle school that had just opened. During my visit, the administration was cordial and very transparent with me about their mission and beliefs. I came away seeing some similarities with traditional public schools. Along with the visit to that particular charter school, I have also learned more about charter schools through this study. Like traditional public schools, charter schools all vary in the quality education they provide. Some charter schools provide a better learning environment than others and the same can be said of traditional public schools.

Trustworthiness

By interviewing school leaders at various levels, I triangulated perspectives. I conducted the range of different interviews in order to gain these multiple perspectives on the perceived impact of charter schools and the changes that were wrought as a result. The totality of interviews helped provide prolonged engagement with this topic. I also used member checks with participants in order to ensure accuracy and credibility.

Member checking, also called respondent validation, involves getting “feedback on your preliminary or emerging findings from some of the people that you interviewed” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 246). Checking with some of the leaders I interviewed helped me to interpret their perspective more accurately. At the end of each interview, I also quickly summarized key points that I heard and shared them back with the participant to get immediate feedback. I also asked participants if they wished to clarify or elaborate on anything and/or add anything during the interviews. Additionally, I use thick, rich description in my reporting of the findings and my conclusions in the next three chapters. Through these strategies, I was able to establish the trustworthiness of my study.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of this study. One limitation of this study is that it was restricted to two traditional public school districts and one charter school. There are other neighboring school districts that have been impacted by this charter school, but due to time constraints, they were not involved in this study. Also, more traditional public school districts in different parts of the state have been impacted by charter schools. Future studies could be replicated that include several public school districts across the state or even region.

Another limitation of this study is that I interviewed several public school leaders in both school systems, but not all of them. There were more principals and district personnel whom I could have interviewed. I chose the principals I did because they seemed to have been impacted the most by the charter school and were in relatively close

proximity to the charter school. Other principals I was not able to interview were at schools that had also lost students to the charter school. Additionally, assistant principals and teacher leaders were not consulted in this study. These groups might have provided a unique perspective on the perceived impact of the charter school and the response.

Finally, in researching charter schools, I found only a limited amount of research on how public school districts are responding to charter schools. More information exists that compares charter school performance to traditional public school performance, as compared to studies that look at the multiple impacts of charter schools on the traditional school systems. Even less information was available that focused on the impact of charter schools on rural areas and the response. As charter schools continue to proliferate, I believe that more studies of this nature will occur in the future.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS—IMPACTS OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

The purpose of this study was to examine how traditional public school leaders respond to competition from charter schools. As stated earlier, I collected qualitative data through face-to-face interviews with traditional public school leaders from two public school districts impacted by Forest Charter Academy. Each school leader was given a pseudonym in order to remain anonymous.

In total, I interviewed twenty school leaders. Twelve of those school leaders were from County Schools and eight were from City Schools. The reason I interviewed fewer people in City Schools was because it is a much smaller school district and therefore several of their central office leaders held dual roles. For example, their secondary director, Dr. Julianne, was also the director of career and technical education. Additionally, there were a few people in City Schools I was not able to interview for various reasons.

By interviewing central office personnel from different departments, and administrators from different schools, I was able to garner a rich picture of the perception of both school districts. While the same topics were commonly discussed, each person I interviewed had a unique perspective on these issues. I learned about each school leader's perception of the various impacts of the charter school on his/her district or school. I organize my findings related to the impacts of charter schools into three key

sections: Demographic Impact, Fiscal Impact and Human Resource Impact, and Academic Impact.

Demographic Impact

During this study, my participants thoroughly discussed issues related to the demographic impact of charter schools. This impact relates to student attrition and how the charter school was able to attract students away from both school districts. There were several reasons given for student attrition, which I describe. I also discuss the types of students who were leaving these traditional public schools for Forest Charter Academy. I divide this section into two sub-sections: Student Attrition and Reasons for Student Attrition. Under Reasons for Student Attrition, I discuss the following: Smaller Learning Environment, Selectivity, Flexible Schedule and Lunch Options, Athletics, and Student Recruitment.

Student Attrition

Student attrition was one impact that school leaders talked about regularly in the interviews. Several people interviewed shared how their district or their particular school had lost students to the charter school. I was told that three of the high schools in County Schools had lost a total of 280 students, with South High School losing 146 students, Southeast High School losing 80 students, and Sophia High School losing 54 students. The middle schools had also felt the impact. Mr. Canton of South Middle shared how his school had lost 50 students to Forest Charter Academy 3 years ago. I was also informed that County School's enrollment was around 19,000 students at one time but was now under 17,000 students. Mr. Norman said that 602 previously enrolled County School

kids attend Forest Charter Academy. That was out of 814 total students attending charter schools that would be County School students. One other charter school was actually pulling about 100 students from the district as well. In total, 13 different charter schools were actually getting students from County Schools. There were also two virtual academies that were taking students from County Schools. Twenty-six students were in one and 14 in the other.

Although private schools, home schools, and charter schools were part of the reason for the enrollment dip in County Schools, I also learned that that an economic downturn had impacted the area as some businesses had closed. The area had relied heavily on textiles and furniture. Dr. Cleveland shared that the city “has taken a hit financially for a number of years with the textile industry and furniture industry being transitioned overseas and different places.”

Several school leaders in City Schools felt their district had been impacted by student attrition. Superintendent Page stated that about 200 of City School’s former students now attend Forest Charter School. The director of secondary education for City Schools, Dr. Julianne, explained, “where we see the bulk of our kids leaving is in middle school. We have some kids leave at high school, but the large bulk, and it’s more from one middle school than it is from the other.” One of those middle schools, Southern City Middle School, had lost about 40 students to the local charter school. Ms. Carlton shared that despite losing students to the charter school,

We haven’t been in the position to where we are not meeting our projections that we’ve had to send money back to the state. I think we’ve been able to manage pretty well, but every year it’s kind of the unknown and what’s going to happen.

With Forest Charter Elementary School opening in 2018, both districts could lose more students. The new elementary school could take as many as 350 students from County Schools, which had recently seen an increase in enrollment at the elementary school level. Last year, Forest Charter began with adding fifth grade, but will expand by adding kindergarten through fourth grade this coming school year. In reference to the new elementary school, Ms. Walton said,

I can tell you I went in and looked at every single child that has left us, went in Powerschool, and I clicked on every child because I was trying to trace back to what elementary school they came from so that I can project what happens when the K-4 opens next year, cause it's going to impact some elementary schools more than others.

Reasons for Student Attrition

The school leaders I interviewed in this study identified various reasons that students have left their schools and school districts. Having new facilities and being something new in the community was cited as a possible reason for students leaving traditional public schools and going to Forest Charter Academy. Ms. Molly pointed out that the charter school is new and “fresh, it's different, it's not what's already here, and maybe that's what's attracting our parents.” Mr. Canton stated that he conducted a few exit interviews with parents after they chose to enroll their child at Forest Charter Academy when the new middle school had opened. One parent had shared with him that the student leaving had a great experience in sixth grade. Reflecting on the reality of students leaving even when they are satisfied in the traditional public school, Mr. Canton shared,

If we were doing everything we could do, and a child enjoyed their experience, and they just made the decision to go, because it was something new, then we're not going to win that. We just have to continue focusing on the kids that stayed, and provide them with a better experience.

Similarly, in discussing the allure of "newness," Mr. Bagley of City High School shared,

Some of that is very difficult to prevent because we live in a society where when a new iPhone comes out, everybody wants it. So, the charter school was new and shiny. There were a lot of things presented to parents, I believe, in terms of smaller class sizes, getting out early on Fridays at 12:30 pm. That appeals to, certainly a lot of students, middle school students in particular, would love that.

School leaders also discussed the perception of some parents that Forest Charter Academy provided a better education through innovation and project-based learning. School leaders noted in multiple interviews that parents were excited about the project-based or problem-based learning that Forest Charter Academy supposedly provided. The traditional public school leaders knew that their schools also provided project-based learning and a host of other engaged instructional strategies and attributed families leaving their schools supposedly because of these strategies to the power of community perception and marketing. Mr. Mel discussed this, saying, "I remember hearing some teachers talk about how the charter school was advertising that they feature problem-based learning . . . that's what we do every day . . . that's what good teachers do." School leaders remarked that the charter school had done a good job marketing their school, which had resulted in the perception that Forest Charter Academy was innovative. Ms. Fall said, "The charter school has brought in the element of commercialization, marketing."

As I previously mentioned, and as shared by several of my interviewees, the performance of students at Forest Charter Academy on state accountability measures such as growth and letter grades was often not better and sometimes worse than the schools in both districts. One school leader I interviewed shared that a family member had chosen to send their child to the charter school because the perception was that they were better. Dr. Cleveland said that City Schools loses some great students and families because of this perception, even if it is not based in fact. The directors of secondary instruction for both districts attributed this to the fact that parents believed that the charter school was better and more innovative, despite school performance showing otherwise. Dr. Julianne shared, “It is concerning that their performance isn’t great, but the perception is that they’re greater. Because people don’t understand those grades anyway. That doesn’t register with folks, they don’t know what that means really anyway.” Ms. Davidson shared the same sentiment:

I think initially the perception, and perception is not always true, the perception was that there was more flexibility, more room for creativity, more room for trying new things at the charter things. I don’t necessarily think that there was more opportunity for that at the charter school. I just think that that was the perception.

New facilities and excellent marketing had helped the perception of Forest Charter Academy, thus resulting in attracting students. In conducting this study, I found several other significant reasons for student attrition. Those reasons were a smaller learning environment, selectivity, a flexible schedule and lunch options, athletics, and student recruitment. I discuss each of the specific reasons in the sections that follow.

Smaller learning environment. Another reason for students enrolling in the charter school was that parents wanted a smaller learning environment and believed Forest Charter Academy could provide a more personalized learning experience for their children. Participants shared that parents were concerned about their children transitioning to middle school or to high school. For example, Mr. Ridge stated, “they’re worried about middle school. There’s that middle school fear, you know the large high school size when they get to the ninth grade, sometimes.” Middle schools and high schools can appear daunting because of their larger enrollments and campuses. Similarly, Ms. Walton said, “a smaller school may be what some of the kids need” and Ms. Molly said, “Smaller community, project-based, yes, that’s what parents want to hear. They’re marketing to the parent, not to the student.” Ms. Davidson expounded on this, saying,

I think they’re looking for something to make their child successful, whether it be another environment, whether it be smaller class size, whether it be an innovative program that might be available at the charter school, or maybe it’s just something different that motivates their child in a different environment.

Ms. Nash, a key developer of the River Mountain 6-12 School and former teacher at an early college shared that the smaller settings allow for opportunities for school teachers and staff to get to know all the students and build positive relationships, while in a larger setting you might only know those who make good grades or who have discipline or academic issues. In talking with parents and family members who have a child at the charter school, trying to understand why they left the traditional public school system, she remarked that they focused on the importance of building relationships:

I've never once had the reply that they chose that for the academic opportunities that are there, which I think speaks volumes to the importance which I've always felt this way. I'm a huge of Capturing Kids Hearts and that training and just the idea of building relationships within the school community.

Having the ability to build significant relationships with students was important for student success and also made the student feel more comfortable in a new setting such as a high school or middle school.

Selectivity. Because of the number of students wanting to enroll, the charter school had to conduct a lottery each year to determine the students who would get in for the upcoming year. The lottery helped keep the number of students lower and therefore provided for a school with smaller numbers. Parents told the school leaders that I interviewed that because the lottery made the charter school more difficult to accepted, this gave it the appearance of exclusivity. This selectivity made the charter school seem more like private schools or colleges in that not everyone gained admittance, even if the lottery is supposedly random. One school leader said that the charter school also had certain students take a placement test while others did not have to take a placement test, but I was not able to verify this information. Additionally, there was a perception that the school leaders heard from some of the parents of academically or intellectually gifted students in City Schools that they felt that their children had to go to Forest Charter Academy in order to get advancement.

Flexible schedule and lunch options. Another reason given for student attrition was that the charter school had more flexibility in their schedule compared to the traditional public schools. School leaders described how the charter school was able to

provide flexibility in the length of their school day and in modifying their schedule, as well as in the way classes were arranged. Mr. Bagley reached out to as many parents as he could trying to learn their reason for leaving his school for the charter school. He said parents talked more about the great opportunity provided by Forest Charter Academy rather than something being wrong with his school and shared that “they mentioned Friday’s. They were pointing to things of that nature. I think they really had convinced themselves from an academic standpoint, their child would excel in that setting.” “They go four and a half days,” shared Dr. Julianne. Ms. Carlton also mentioned the allure of early release; she offered, “I think Friday afternoons out of school is attractive, and I think they’ve done a really good job at marketing themselves as the really exciting, different, place to be, and so because it’s new, people want to be there.”

Besides getting out early on Fridays, the traditional public school principals mentioned the allure of catered food to choose from for lunch. Some food choice options named were restaurants like Chick-Fil-A and Domino’s Pizza. The flexible food options were named by several leaders. Ms. Walton stated,

It’s the half day on Friday, the Chick-Fil-A at lunch, coming in later, that’s the kind of thing that I’ve heard. Do some families make decisions based on that? Probably. But I don’t . . . there’s got to be more reasons than that.

Here it seems like the attraction to the charter school was less about academics and more about flexibility and options that traditional public schools are not able to offer.

Athletics. Another issue discussed in relation to why some parents chose the charter school related to athletics. Forest Charter Academy High School was a small

school and therefore competed in athletics as a 1A school. Often the rosters for many sports are filled with the same number of students for a large school or small school. Therefore, the smaller enrollment also meant students had a better chance at making a sports team. Ms. Molly said that “on a smaller scale I guess it’s more appealing because I guess it’s a good chance you’ll make the team.” Similarly, Mr. Bagley believed that athletics now played a large role for some families in making the decision to attend the charter school. Mr. Ridge said that 3 or 4 years ago his school lost about 30 students, many of whom played soccer. The next year his small school could not field a soccer team. Superintendent Page recalled,

I will get information from families and I will talk with them about why they chose the charter school and some of the things that I’ve heard . . . folks have said that their children liked getting out a half day on Friday. Then most recently someone told me the reason that they were going was because . . . for baseball.

Sixth graders were initially allowed to play sports at charter schools before the traditional public school students were allowed to play as sixth graders, which was also a selling point for charter school athletics. Mr. Canton said,

The fact that sixth graders can now play sports in middle school [is an attraction]. But, that was a state change. That was not really a district change. However, I think that a lot of that was probably brought on by the fact that many charter schools, including Forest Charter School was broadcasting that, sixth graders could participate in sports.

The ability to transfer to a charter school for athletic purposes was also brought up during discussions. Some students transferred to the charter school for athletic purposes, it

seemed. Dr. Yancey worked closely with this because of his role over student services for City Schools. He monitored student transfers and appeals and shared,

Even though student transfer in district or from your district to ours or vice versa, a student can't leave due to athletics, but that doesn't apply to the charter schools. They don't have to have any reason to go to the charter school. They can just go. The charter schools can recruit students based off athletics. They don't have to release with a system, therefore it's a loophole that they can use to basically recruit athletes.

While I did not have any evidence that Forest Charter Academy recruited students to play on sports teams, the traditional school leaders I interviewed discussed this as a possibility, and feared it could become a bigger issue in the future.

Student recruitment. The demographics and academic ability of the students who had transferred to Forest Charter Academy were mentioned on several occasions as a potential issue of concern. Dr. Page stated, "I know that occasionally we will hear that someone is leaving us to go there and we know that some of our top students have been the ones who have left." Mr. Bagley said that when he was the principal at South City Middle School, 36 of the 37 students he lost to the charter school were high performing. He shared that from an academic accountability standpoint, "it was truly a loss because those students were predominately level 4 and level 5 students on their EOGs." Dr. Yancey shared the same perspective in discussing student transfers by saying, "It seems or would appear that they generally take students that consistently perform at level three or above." Given that it was often high-performing students leaving, my participants questioned the validity of the lottery system, especially when high-performing students were being recruited by Forest Charter Academy.

Another related concern in City Schools was that the charter school was recruiting students who not only performed well academically, but who also tended to be more affluent and White than the students who were not being recruited. Similarly, my participants believed the charter school was not recruiting students as heavily from City Schools if they had physical or intellectual disabilities or economic or language barriers. One principal shared that he had talked to Latino families who had initially enrolled in the charter school and then they left because they felt like they were not wanted. Dr. Cleveland voiced his concern on the issue, stating,

I'll tell you, at City Schools, 40% of our kids are part of non-English speaking families. So, 40% of our students go home every day to a household where English is not the first language. I can guarantee you those are not the students who are being recruited to go to that charter school. City Schools also has a fairly decent African American population. Those students are also not being recruited. So, I do think there are disparities that are created all around this part of our county because again, perceptions and some of the marketing and just different thinks tend to recruit and try to retain more traditional students who are White, upper middle, middle working-class families.

Alternatively, Ms. Cathy did not believe that County Schools had lost a large portion of high-achieving students and stated, "from a demographic standpoint, it's pretty much remained the same as far as our breakdown in the county across our 31 schools." Mr. Ridge commented, "it's been a variety of kids of achievement level" who have left to go to the charter school from County Schools. Mr. Canton shared that his school lost nine students to the charter school last year and three were academically gifted. Principal Mel believed that the loss of some students in City Schools was a result of White flight. White flight refers to the exodus of White students from schools that are more diverse to

schools that are more racially homogenous. Ms. Fall also shared her belief that South City Middle School had been impacted heavily by White flight, as did several school leaders in the district. White flight was not mentioned by those in County Schools.

Fiscal and Human Resource Impacts

The fiscal impact of student attrition was perceived in several ways by the educational leaders whom I interviewed for this study. When a student goes to a charter school, their money follows them to that school. Thus, student attrition can cause financial losses to a school district. Additionally, when a student leaves a district, there are also frequently teacher reductions since teacher allotments are often based on the number of students in a school. Also, the charter schools can recruit and attract teachers from traditional public schools. I talk about each of these issues in the following sections: Fiscal Impact of Student Attrition, Teacher Attrition, and Teacher Shortage.

Fiscal Impact of Student Attrition

Both school districts lost money because students were leaving for Forest Charter Academy. Dr. Cleveland stated that losing students had cost City Schools over one million dollars. He also shared that City Schools lost over \$2,000 per student and had lost 200 students to Forest Charter Academy. County Schools now had over 600 students attending Forest Charter Academy, which accounted for over \$700,000 of funding according to the finance officer, Mr. Norman. Additionally, he shared that virtual schools and charter schools from other counties also had a fiscal impact. The amount that follows each student varies depending on where they go. Superintendent Mike offered,

The best way to explain it is this; when kids go to the charter school, they take local money with them. So, they take the per pupil local money with them. The amount of money is \$790 when they go to one of the virtual charters, but when they go to the regular charter school, it's been . . . I want to say, two years ago, it was \$1,108. Now it's come down. It was \$1,124 last year was the amount of money they . . . \$1,120 for a kid when they went to a charter.

Mr. Norman expounded on this fiscal impact as well:

That's local money that follows that student over there. We do that in 10 payments. Basically, the way the process works is, the charter schools, wherever there's a County Schools student in whatever charter school, that charter school then is responsible for sending us a roster or billing. Then we verify that that student does reside in County School's district. Then between the others and then the virtual academies, we have a total of 814 (students). That's \$934,218 of local money that goes to charter schools. Though this is a small fraction of County School's total budget, which is around 150 million dollars, it comes from the low current expense which is about 20 million dollars.

The fiscal impact of losing students who had not attended public schools but chose to attend the charter school was mentioned by several of the school leaders as well. In fact, Mr. Roy mentioned, "the biggest impact that we might have is students that never really attended County Schools, and we've never really drawn down dollars for those students, really, state or local dollars." Though these students lived in the county, they had never attended a traditional public school, so when they enrolled in a charter school the school district still lost their funding. This was funding that the traditional school districts never really had in the first place, but still had to pay.

This impact was also felt in other areas such as in the Career and Technical Education program. Ms. Nash, director of CTE for County Schools, shared,

There's a significant loss to our school system. I lose money out of my CTE budget. So, I get state funds as well as Perkins and they don't get Perkins money from me because they don't participate in that, but they do get . . . I have to return state money to them. Certainly, there's a financial impact. I think we will see that level off. I think it's been really hard as the charter school has grown in terms of and at times adding even more than one grade level at a time. So, when they expanded up for high school and down for middle school, we go hit really from two ends. So, I think that's starting to happen that it will level off. We'll know what to expect. That was the hardest think in planning. You're working on your budget and you want to start thinking about purchases and programs that you want to enhance or expand or what you have and not knowing until numbers came in the middle of the Fall, October-ish, how much you were gonna lose.

A few of the school leaders expressed concern that charter schools might eventually get capital dollars or other resources from public schools. Capital outlay money is used for building, upgrading, repairing, and furnishing facilities. Dr. Page stated, "I am concerned about them having access to capital dollars and pulling additional resources away."

At the school level, principals perceived the fiscal impact due to the loss of students differently. In City Schools, Mr. Mel, Ms. Fall, and Mr. Bagley had not noticed a fiscal impact. Mr. Bagley shared, "Obviously we lose the per pupil expenditure for each of those students that goes there. But I have never as a school principal felt that loss, for whatever reason. I've felt like we've had what we needed." In County Schools, Mr. Canton also shared similar insight: "As far as resources go, I don't think we lost a lot in resources. If anything, it [the appearance of a charter school] kind of bolstered the community." Mr. Ridge talked about the athletic budget being impacted. He mentioned "the money we have for coaching supplements and equipment stuff goes down even

though we still have to provide eight sports on the middle school level and compete with other schools.”

Teacher Attrition

Another impact of student attrition was a reduction in teaching force. Schools are funded based on their student enrollment or average daily membership. As average daily membership (ADM) falls, the number of teaching positions allotted is reduced once it reaches a certain number of students. Mr. Norman communicated that “for about every 22, 23 students, we’re allotted a state teaching position, on average. If we lose 100 kids to the charters, let’s just say that equates to four teachers.” The difficulty in losing positions and having to displace teachers is compounded because sometimes it can be the loss of a few students from several schools.

In regard to the number of teachers lost, neither district reported huge overall losses. Ms. Carlton said the number of teachers lost in City Schools could be counted on one hand. She shared that one of the teachers who left to teach at Forest Charter Academy came back to City Schools after about 2 months. Ms. Walton said she had not noticed a difference in County Schools until this year. This year was different because K-6 teachers are required to pass Pearson tests and if they don’t pass, they cannot teach. In talking about the impact of testing in relation to teacher attrition she said,

The charter schools, you don’t have to be licensed to teach. So, some really well-trained teachers that we’ve hired, I think we’ve had two or three already leave us this year to go to the charter school, because they couldn’t pass the test.

Ms. Walton believed that North Carolina “needs to look at what their testing requirements are. There’s only four states in the nation that have that test as their testing requirement.” Additionally, she said County Schools had lost two teacher assistants from one elementary school who became teachers at the charter school. By transitioning into teaching, they could make more money and they could do this at charter school because they did not have to be certified.

Leaders indicated that they had lost good teachers to the charter school for various reasons. Ms. Carlton said “they do target our strong teachers and every year try to recruit them.” She recalled one good teacher in particular that she was sad to see leave the district. Superintendent Mike believed the flexibility with staffing could be enticing to some educators. Dr. Cleveland said, “They’ve been able to pull some of our, over the past 4 or 5 years, some of our better teachers because they have relationships with those folks.” He also mentioned class size and resources as possible reasons for teachers leaving.

At the school level, the impact of losing teachers varied. In County Schools, Ms. Davidson pointed out, “the first year we lost five teachers from one particular high school to that charter school.” She went on to say, “when you lose five teachers from one school to the charter school or to any school, it’s a huge blow to your staff.” Mr. Canton said he had not lost any teachers to the charter school until this year. In reflecting on the teacher who had left for the charter school, he shared,

I think that she had the perception of the charter school as, it was truly a school where kids wanted to be. Where one of the comments that was made to me was that she wanted to teach in a school where kids actually wanted to come to school.

Which, was tough because our sixth-grade students, in particular, are always . . . have a positive experience here. I've had numerous students tell me, they wish that I could hold them back just so they could have sixth grade over again.

In City Schools, Mr. Bagley said his high school had lost a total of around three teachers in recent years. One of those teachers was a math teacher. He said, "Math teachers are a little harder to come by, and one of the teachers that was lost before I got here was a math teacher." He continued, saying, "you don't wanna be losing math teachers because there just aren't enough math teachers to go around." Ms. Fall and Mr. Mel said they had not lost any teachers to the charter school. Ms. Fall shared that Forest Charter Academy had recruited some of her teachers though, and that a few of the teachers from the charter school had contacted her wanting to teach at her school, but they were not certified to teach. Ms. Fall said that her primary competition for teachers was not the charter school but a much larger school district that could pay more money. She said, "I've got about 12 teachers who live in a larger city nearby. I think that's a compliment to this school that they drive 20 minutes, and they're not getting that school system's supplement." She continued, saying, "I work hard at getting teachers. I work hard at keeping the ones who are doing the right thing. I don't work hard at keeping people who are not helping us."

Teacher Shortage

As the participants discussed teacher attrition and recruitment, they also brought up the topic of the current teacher shortage. Yet, the teacher shortage was not directly attributed to the charter school by the public school leaders I interviewed; rather, they discussed myriad factors that lead to a shortage of teachers in the state overall. Dr.

Yancey said, “I suppose that maybe the addition of charter schools around the state of North Carolina don’t help public schools recruit and retain good people but I don’t think they’re the reason that we’re having trouble getting teachers.” Ms. Carlton attributed the teacher shortage to 6 years of no salary increases on the beginning teacher salary schedule and taking away master’s degree pay. Though teacher pay has increased recently, she felt that school districts had not fully recovered from some of the state level policies surrounding pay for teachers. She said, “We need more teachers than what we are graduating and so to have another entity in the mix that we are having to compete with doesn’t help us.” She cited a recent teacher job fair conducted between two universities as evidence of fewer people entering the field of education. At one time, both universities had their own job fair.

Academic Impacts

Student attrition can also impact academic performance. This is especially true when high-achieving students leave a traditional public school for a charter school. At the same time, there is the possibility that competition from a charter school might actually result in the improved performance of traditional public schools. The public school leaders I interviewed shared their insights on the academic impact on their districts and discussed the extent to which they believed Forest Charter Academy was helping to improve their performance. Lastly, in this section, I describe the ways that the public school leaders talked about the need to reassess current programs, curriculum, and course offerings as an academic impact of charter schools.

Academic Performance

While City Schools had lost a number of high-performing students to the charter schools, several leaders from City Schools said that the academic performance of the district had not been significantly impacted. I learned during the interviews that City Schools had one of the highest graduation rates in the state and also one of the highest attendance rates. Also, every school in the district met or exceeded growth last year and only one of the eight schools in the district had a letter grade below a C. Mr. Mel stated that his school “lost about 40 students due to White flight and they were many of our high flyers in terms of achievement, and so, you know, we were kind of getting braced for a dip in our achievement.” Instead, he shared that his school actually performed better. Mr. Bagley had worked at South City Middle School prior to coming to the high school. He said,

I will say losing those students, the impact on the school . . . you really lose a lot of academic role models from your classes. From your school and your classes that are held. Students who know what learning should look like, who love to learn, you lose those students from your classroom settings so it impacts the students. Instead of the students that we having being impacted in a positive way by the presence of those students, those students are now removed from the setting and I think that’s one of the . . . and of course it impacts your End of Course test scores. As a school to lose those students, that was a big hit for that school.

Ms. Fall shared how North City Middle School has had high growth for the past 5 years and one of those years they had the third highest growth of all middle schools in North Carolina. Dr. Yancey did believe that the proficiency growth of City Schools had been hurt by the charter school but not academic growth. He said,

I don't believe that it impacts our EVAAS data, either county or city, because we will continue to teach and grow students. But I do believe that it has stunted our proficiency growth, so to say. Because what you're doing, even though we're getting growth out of our students, that growth, in order to raise proficiency, has to come out of students that were not proficient before. If you lose students that are already proficient, you have to grow that many that you lost, plus others, into proficiency to grow in that standard.

He also reflected on how poorly Forest Charter Academy was performing in regards to EVAAS data. He said that "given enough time of declining EVAAS data, it will begin to show itself in terms of proficiency data. Until they start getting and maintain a solid curriculum, they'll probably continue to suffer with poor EVAAS data."

In County Schools, school leaders did not perceive an impact on the academic performance of schools by the local charter school. Superintendent Mike said, "our student's performance has continued to increase. During the time of charter school's existence, our school system has gone from a composite score of . . . 41.7 to 56.1. So, academically, the performance of our students or our schools has not decreased."

Twenty-five of the 31 schools in the district met or exceeded growth and only three of the 31 schools had a letter grade below a C. At the school level, Mr. Canton shared how his school had improved in proficiency and school letter grade, despite losing students to the charter school. This comment, and some that I shared earlier in this section, point to the fact that competition from a charter school may have helped to improve traditional public school performance.

Impact of Competition

The topic of competition permeated some of the interviews. Did the competition for students that came about when the charter school opened improve the schools and

school districts? Perceptions about competition and the implications varied considerably. Regardless of the level of competition perceived, everyone interviewed was focused on the success of every child. Superintendent Mike, like others, emphasized the importance of continually improving. He said, “to have competition between school systems and schools, I don’t think that’s what public education, I don’t think that’s our role. I think our role is to help every kid move from where he or she is forward.” Ms. Carlton expressed this point of view, stating,

I don’t like to say the word that we’re competing because that implies that someone loses. We are all here to serve kids and so I think the biggest, the most important thing that we can do is focus on setting really high expectations and holding people accountable and giving kid’s opportunities and making sure that they have access.

Some school leaders talked about the new era of competition and commented that traditional public schools were “not the only show in town” anymore. This meant they need to reflect on what had been done in the past and improve in order to generate better student outcomes. Dr. Julianne iterated, “Competition is not a bad thing. Having competition requires you to think about the quality of the product or service that you’re providing and reminds you to do your best.” Dr. Cleveland explained that “from a competition standpoint, we realize that if we’re going to stay relevant and we’re going to stay vibrant, that we have to compete. And by competing, that means we have to have a stellar product.” Ms. Cathy said,

Anytime you have competing factors out there, I think you first and foremost are doing a self-inventory and a self-assessment, but then I think you can’t help but

naturally compare yourself to other schools, other school district, or looking locally. I think ideally you would hope that we will all continue to coexist.

While several of the school leaders discussed the charter school and how competition was not a bad thing, they were quick to point out that the charter school was not the only source of competition. Competition also came from homeschooling, private schools, and other charter schools in the area. Ms. Walton said, “We’ve always had competition with private schools and home schools. It’s just another choice. It’s the way of the times when you’re looking at vouchers and everything else. It’s just the direction that our society is going in.” Mr. Norman shared similar thoughts: “We know we’re in competition. It’s not always a charter school. It could be private. It could be home school.” He went on to say, “Our stance is, if your child, if you feel they can get a better education somewhere else, then that is totally fine because we do want the best for that child.”

Reassessing Current Programs and Course Offerings

Various leaders interviewed talked about the need for reassessing current programs and course offerings because of the new pressure felt by charter schools. In response, but also as part of continuous improvement in general, the traditional public schools developed new and innovative programs and courses to help students be more successful. These strategies could also help to reduce student attrition. In City Schools, Dr. Cleveland shared, “We have to be able to offer new programs, we have to be able to offer creative learning experiences and spaces for learning for all students.” He believed that his district had to improve because they did not want to be the school of last resort.

This required paying close attention to what parents were saying. Also, because City Schools was losing high-achieving students, they needed to look at the rigor of their classes more carefully. Mr. Bagley said it was important to offer a plethora of options for all students. Additionally, all of my participants felt that students needed to be prepared for the ever-changing workforce. Dr. Julianne stated that City Schools needed to make “sure we’re preparing our students for the current labor market demands.”

In County Schools, Ms. Cathy shared that Forest Charter Academy had “caused all of us to look differently as to why students would choose to leave the public school system. Is there something that we are doing, or something that we’re not doing?” Ms. Davidson shared these same sentiments saying she believed students left because a need was not being met. Therefore, the district was trying to become more attentive and responsive. Ms. Cathy said the school district is always evaluating what they are doing and “are looking at more innovative opportunities more intensely.” Mr. Canton said he believed the school district began to realize the importance of thinking outside the box as charter schools started coming into town. Additionally, the district had also looked at adding more course offerings including more opportunities for post-high school attainment. The school district also saw a need to further develop established programs. Ms. Cathy stated, “we have begun to look at trying to strengthen existing programs within the different regions in our county.”

Summary

In this chapter, I focused on the perception of public school leaders on the impact of the charter school on the traditional public schools in the district. Perceptions varied

as to the magnitude of the impact of student attrition on both districts and the contributing factors to student attrition. Student attrition was attributed to several factors and one of those factors was that Forest Charter Academy had brand new facilities. Other factors believed to contribute to student attrition were a smaller learning environment at the charter school and the belief that the charter school was more selective, and thus more like a private school. Additionally, a flexible schedule and multiple lunch options not available in many public schools were cited as reasons for students leaving to attend Forest Charter Academy. The ability to participate in a school sport was also noted. Leaders said that the smaller enrollment at the charter school made it easier to make an athletic team.

In discussing student attrition, the recruiting of high-performing students was mentioned several times, though my participants didn't have any concrete evidence of if or how this recruiting occurred. In City Schools, it was reported that higher-performing students had been recruited to go to the charter school and that some had left the district. Therefore, the question arose as to what type of academic impact this had on the school district. Most school leaders in both districts believed that academics had not been heavily impacted by student attrition, which may mean that the competition is indeed forcing the traditional public school to get better, or at least monitor their quality more carefully and consistently. Both districts cited improvements in several key academic areas. Teacher reduction and attrition was another topic of conversation during this study. Losing good teachers can impact a school and school district. Neither district had lost a large number of teachers, but had lost some quality teachers. Both districts had to

deal with a recent teacher shortage that was attributed more to the current educational climate across the state than the charter school. Fewer people are pursuing a career in teaching and one factor is certainly low compensation and stagnant salaries. Teacher pay has risen over the last few years, but prior to that had been frozen for several years during the height of the country's recession.

While most leaders perceived an insignificant academic impact on their district, they did share the belief that their school district had been impacted financially. Per-pupil allotment was discussed and explained by central office personnel and administrators alike. With the large loss in enrollment by both school districts, the financial loss had been around one million dollars for City Schools and about \$700,000 in County Schools. This meant a loss in resources for students. One interesting point was that the school districts also lost money for students who enrolled at the charter school even if they had never attended a public school before (e.g., they may have been home-schooled).

Throughout many conversations, the topic of competition was discussed by my participants. Some of those interviewed believed that competition from the charter school was a good thing. They felt that traditional public schools were no longer the only alternative. Traditional public schools now had to work harder to keep students, which meant schools would likely improve. Indeed, I found that the school districts developed several strategies for responding to charter school growth in their areas. For example, they worked more stridently on marketing and public relations. They also evaluated their

programs more regularly, held one-on-one meetings with families, and created new programs. I discuss these responses in detail in my next chapter.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS—STRATEGIES OF RESPONDING TO CHARTER SCHOOLS

Both school districts used various strategies to benefit all students and possibly to become more effective. With the amount of competition school districts now face, it is common for traditional public school districts to emphasize improving their marketing and public relations. Additionally, both school districts worked to expand and improve their course offerings. In this chapter, I organize my discussion of the strategies public schools used to respond to charter school competition into two key areas: Marketing and Recruitment, and Expanded and Improved Course Offerings. I further divide each of these areas into several key topics.

Marketing and Recruitment

A prominent theme throughout this study was the importance of marketing the school and school district, especially when faced with the fact that Forest Park Charter was heavily marketing their educational options in the district. This could be done in a variety of ways, for example, through the media and through face-to-face meetings. Additionally, a public information officer could be vital in establishing a positive media presence. The role of this office is, in part, to help districts share all of the great things that are happening in their school districts and to reach parents as well as recruit potential students. Additionally, both school districts marketed their school districts in order to recruit teachers. I organize my discussion of the marketing and recruitment strategies of

the traditional public school districts into several topics: Marketing and Public Relations, Public Information Officer, Media, Relationships and Recruitment, and Teacher Recruitment.

Marketing and Public Relations

Establishing positive public relations with school communities was paramount to both school districts. Many of the school leaders talked about telling their own story rather than letting their story be told. With the media sometimes painting schools in a negative light, several of the leaders mentioned the importance of getting positive information out about their schools and school districts. Superintendent Page said, “We felt like our teachers were doing really good work and that maybe we needed to focus more about telling our story.” This meant City Schools “started spending more time and energy on telling our story so that other folks knew what our students were accomplishing and what type of environment it was for our students,” she said. She cited the school districts high attendance rate as an example of something to celebrate. It had been the second highest of any school district in North Carolina, which helped show that students wanted to be in school. Yet, not all people in the community would know that City Schools was having this type of success and that students wanted to come to school unless they got the word out. So, they sent an annual report to everyone in the area, even to those who didn’t have children in school. They also sent out a monthly newsletter. Dr. Page stated, “People were choosing the charter because of thinking it must be better if it’s a choice and they marketed themselves that they were doing the latest and greatest things.”

Ms. Cathy also shared the importance of County Schools telling their story. She said, “If you don’t tell your story, and you don’t tell it accurately, someone else is going to tell it, and it may not be accurate.” Similarly, Mr. Tom said, “We decided that we wanted County Schools to shape its own narrative. Rather than having some media outlet talk about what we’re doing, or even other stakeholders in the community. We’re the ones who do this every day.” Superintendent Mike said that County Schools had “changed big time our public information and our public relations program” but that it was not as a result of the charter school. He went on to say, “I thought there was a lot of great things going on that needed to be showcased.” Many of those interviewed from County Schools said that the districts focus on public relations was not a response to the charter schools but rather a focus of Superintendent Mike since he had begun his tenure as superintendent. Ms. Walton said, “I think the improvements we’ve seen in that area weren’t related to the charter school, it was related to his leadership.” Mr. Roy also said that the improvements in public relations were a result of Superintendent Mike and that “it wasn’t anything as a result of a new charter school or a new charter plan in our county.”

From a school administrator perspective, Principal Canton said he had noticed at the district and school level a “greater awareness of needing to promote things.” In addition to promoting positive things, he also noted that County Schools had been careful not to talk negatively about the charter school. He said the school district had been “very consistent as far as not downing the charter school, not trashing it, not making bad comments about it.” Mr. Canton had been careful as well in not promoting negativity

about the charter school and shared, “my first line about the charter school here is that it is a viable option for certain students.” Principal Molly relayed that nothing she had done was a response to the charter school, but rather was part of her efforts to continuously improve as a school. She did believe that the charter school had helped school leaders realize the importance of celebrating the good things at her school and “to make sure we increased our marketability and our awareness in the community.”

Public Information Officer

One way both districts optimized promoting all the great things happening in their school districts was through a public information officer. Superintendent Mike restored this position within County Schools in his first year as superintendent. Ms. Cathy said that the County Schools realized that they were focusing a great deal of time on public relations “and realized that that was precious time that we needed to be devoting to the schools.” With a school district as large as County Schools, they needed someone to coordinate public relations efforts who had experience. Therefore, County Schools hired Mr. Tom. Mr. Tom described the purpose of his position, saying, “When Dr. Mike came here in July of 2013, one of his initiatives was to reinstate that position because he felt like it was critical that we have a public relations person on staff.” He went on to say, “We decided that we wanted County Schools to shape its own narrative. Rather than having some media outlet talk about what we’re doing, or even other stakeholders in the community. We’re the ones who do this every day.” Mr. Tom believed that his job was to celebrate the great things happening in County Schools and to get the community

enthusiastic about school. This also meant establishing a good relationship with the local news media as he shared,

I think we've developed . . . which has been another function of the Public Information Office, is to really foster healthy relationships with media. That's a big piece of developing a brand. You don't wanna have an adversarial relationship with local media. If they call us and they want answers to something, we really try to accommodate them because they can be our partners.

Mr. Tom also clarified that he did not believe his district had ramped up public relations as a result of the charter school, although it no doubt helped in retaining students in the traditional public schools. He said that the improved public relations was a result of the vision of Dr. Mike. That vision was to continue to develop the brand of County Schools. Still, he acknowledged that there was competition from the charter school. He shared,

I think it would never be the intent of the Public Information Office and the branding that we do, the PR that we do, the advertising that we do . . . it would never be our intent to denigrate charter schools. In other words, our messaging would never be to the extent of saying something negative about them. But we're cognizant that they're there and we cognizant that the PR that we put out there could encourage a family to select our school system over the charter school. Day to day, we know they're there and we know that we are competing with them. You really can't get around that term, there is a competition for that. But my philosophy, and I try to make it the philosophy of the Public Information Office is that if we're doing things well, and we're celebrating, and we're telling our story, then again it comes back to it really doesn't matter what they do.

Dr. Cleveland said that one of the first ways City Schools developed good public relations was through their public information officer. In talking about this position, he explained, "it's a cabinet-level position. So, she helps to write briefings and memos and

connect with the media, connect with the board. She helps to oversee our website, keep our website up to date, our Twitter feed, our Facebook feed.” Ms. Carlton said the position had taken on a new level of importance. She shared,

When I was a public information officer, there really wasn't a lot of competition. Today, there's competition and so we've got to approach things differently. You've got to have something to sell if you are going to have to sell it. Having really strong academics, both rigor in the classroom, and opportunities for kids to be successful. We want parents to want to have their kids come to our school. We want them to think they are special here, and not be looking someplace else. That's really a significant mind shift, and I think some of us shifted into that mindset faster than others.

Media

The ability to use media in order to improve public relations was shared by many of those interviewed. Both districts use traditional media and social media to share information and promote their schools. Twice a month, members of the local media were invited to dialogue with Superintendent Mike about the great things happening in County Schools. Mr. Tom shared that local media like to celebrate school successes. He said, “sometimes local media will give that image of they're just out to say bad things about schools and get ratings and sell newspapers, but we're discovering that they really like to tell good stories.” Once a month, Superintendent Mike and Mr. Tom do a video school update with a local television group, filming the clip from various school locations throughout the school district. This year Superintendent Mike began a monthly live, on-air interview with a local radio station as well.

Dr. Cleveland noted that because of the new level of competition, City Schools had worked to improve public relations efforts through various media outlets. Social

media and media outlets were ways that his school district had worked on marketing themselves. He shared,

We tried to, not create events, but when we have events in our schools, in our community, on the athletic field, when we have a performance, when we have arts, we try to be out there with a camera, we try to tweet that out, we try to Facebook that out, we try to showcase and leverage the real positive things that are happening.

Both districts also worked on improving their websites. In terms of improvements, Ms. Carlton said the district created more informational graphics. She said, “We’re trying to tell our story in photographs and in graphics.” Furthermore, she shared, “We try to make sure that our materials are really sharp and that we try to tailor them, if need be, to particular audiences.” County Schools added a new webpage host and increased the accuracy of the district webpage. County Schools also created Twitter and Facebook accounts several years ago as another way to showcase the school system. Mr. Tom said that the school district posts new information almost every day and has about 6,000 followers on their Facebook page now. He said, “Not only are we putting information out there, but we’re enhancing our brand by telling all the good stories of all the things that are going on.” Recently, he said the district had developed a promotional video that would represent all the schools in the district.

At the school level Mr. Bagley said he had noticed a change in the way the district communicated. He said that the school district had “become more aware from day one of the charter school’s existence that we needed to market ourselves significantly better than maybe we have before.” He said that City Schools had made a big push to use local news

coverage. Mr. Ridge said County Schools had arranged local news coverage numerous times this past year about their re-design and used social media frequently to showcase positive stories. He shared this experience in detail:

I know in the short time I've been the principal, roughly a year and a half now, is we really try to make an effort to share what we're doing. I know that with our process, I mean we've had numerous times where the district has the public information officer set up for the news crews to come out, we've had the local newspaper come out. We've had two different television news stations do stories just solely about the re-design but also about some of the new course offerings and technology. With social media, with Twitter and the website, we have a concerted effort to make sure that's kept up to date. And any time we have an opportunity to really showcase something positive, we really, we want to spread the word about that. And just let people see and know the great things that are going on. It's not necessarily some of these things have been going on for years, but, I don't know people just didn't, took it for granted or what. I think it's really just trying to make sure that we let people see what's going on, so when the time comes if they are making a decision on where they want to go, I mean they've known, they know what's going on and know what we're about, and what we have to offer and the good things going on in public schools.

Relationships and Recruitment

Building relationships through face-to-face interactions and meetings was also an emphasis of both districts. School leaders talked about the importance of establishing positive relationships and good customer service. This meant establishing open lines of communication with parents and the community. Talking with parents one-on-one and building trust was imperative especially with the role of social media and how fast inaccurate information can travel. In City Schools, Superintendent Page met monthly with various groups such as her Latino advisory board and her faith-based advisory council. She believed it was important to keep people informed and felt the school

district communicated well with teachers but needed to improve on communicating with the community. She said,

I think we're paying attention more to that we need to make sure that we are competitive and that we need to tell our story and we need to continue to make sure we have good things going on to talk about. Just in knowing that we need to make sure that we're listening to our families and just understanding our families have tons of choices and thinking about what is great for children and then also what are our families looking for and trying to make sure that we're thinking about our customers as our families, our children, our teachers, everybody we do business with, that everyone is a customer in how we treat people.

Ms. Carlton was the former public relations officer for City Schools before assuming the role of executive director for human resources. She mentioned that City Schools had really tried to improve relationships through family engagement nights, which they offered several times a year at each school. She said, "In part, it's just building relationships. That's another philosophy of having these open house days and having people come in and do the tours." Dr. Cleveland described these family nights and their role:

We have something called AFTT family nights four times a year. Academic family teacher team nights. We've created those, again, not from a response of competition, but we feel like it's a great way for us to showcase the work of the school and to better partner, better communicate with our families. So really, that's about parent engagement and family engagement. So, four times a year, families come out and instead of the traditional meal and the show and performance and things, we're actually talking about student data, we're talking about direction, we're talking about what's next. We're looking at some assessment strengths and what's next. We're also spending a lot of time listening, actively listening to what parents are telling us they need and what they believe their children need, because we want to believe our parents are our kids' first teacher and most important teacher. So, we want to be in partnerships.

In response to charter school growth, Principal Fall shared, “one thing that has changed is the increased focus and intentionality of communicating to the public who we are, and providing opportunities for the public to come in.” She also said that the “charter school has brought in the element of commercialization, marketing.” She has an open-door policy and provides tours for parents as ways to encourage communication and positive public relations. She also said that it is important to create your own brand. Principal Mel said City Schools had also done internal communication audits in order to improve in that area.

Dr. Mike had arranged regular meetings with a parent from every school and a teacher from every school. One month he met with the teacher leaders and the next month with the parent representatives. He said, “Every other month I meet with them to talk about big ticket things in the school system, global things.” This allowed for the district to disseminate information and provide more transparency. During the meetings concerns would also be shared. He stated that initially he did not know if he would “hear everything that the teachers were upset about or everything that the parents were upset about. But it turned out they shared their concerns and we have very good conversations. And it’s actually very enjoyable.” Ms. Cathy emphasized that effective communication is vital and shared, “in this day and age, effective communication is more important than it has ever been.” She said that good relationships with parents and students are at the core of good communication. Ms. Davidson shared this same perspective, stating,

I think our leadership has led us in that direction that we are a 24/7 spokesperson for our district. Not only for our schools but our districts. So, I think the public relations piece is huge, but it’s also huge because of what our overall mission is,

which is to provide the best school experience we can for our students. So that public relations piece and that vertical relationship piece that as a high school principal develops with the middle school principal, that and share with the feeder schools at the elementary level, that perception of a unified vision and goal has become more important.

At the school level, Mr. Ridge said he gave “probably four or five tours for parents who had an interest and wanted to come out and see and get a little better understanding face-to-face of how we would have the school set up.” He was able to show them around and make them feel more comfortable. He also provides information sessions for prospective students who are in their feeder pattern. These sessions give the school a chance to recruit students who might leave the school system before giving middle school a chance. He said, “I think recruitment, on the student end, we definitely put a lot of effort into it. One, as we build this new program with information sessions at all our feeder schools.” He thought it was important that these students at least visit the campus and see what they could be missing and believed that getting these students was not something that could be taken for granted now. He continued,

We have several events where we’ll go to those schools, host open information sessions in the evening for parents. We have those students come over and visit us in the fifth grade, tour our school, see our programs, see what we have to offer, and really get them excited and make it a fun experience for them.

Mr. Ridge said that during these information sessions he also has coaches come talk about athletics and students get to hear about elective course offerings. Additionally, they get to see their classes and walk the halls which makes students feel more comfortable since there is sometimes anxiety for students about going to middle school.

He shared that we have to “make them feel more comfortable to make that transition. Because it’s their first transition. If they’ve been at the same school since kindergarten, this is their first time going to a new school.”

Mr. Canton said that he has emphasized good public relations at his school since he became principal. He sends home a phone call to every student once a week to keep parents and students informed about what was going on at school and said the school sends stories to the local newspaper quite regularly. He shared,

One of the things that we know is important is perception. Is community perception. Which, that’s always been important to me. That was not necessarily a result of the charter school, but knowing that you have to compete with somebody, and knowing that kids have options available to them, actually makes you think a little bit more about, how you respond to kids, or parents. And, also how your staff members respond to kids, and to parents. Are they communicating with them enough? And, are they communicating the right things to them on a consistent basis? Do, parents feel like they can walk into your school and voice a concern?

Mr. Canton’s school holds transition nights, much like they do at River Mountain 6-12 School. These events give the students an opportunity to see the middle school within their feeder pattern before they make decisions. He noticed that students were leaving from the eighth grade and going to the charter school to start high school. He wanted to try and keep students in the district. He shared, “the one thing that we do that’s different from any other middle school is that we plan our transition nights much sooner in the year than everybody else does.” While most do their transition nights in April or May, his school does them earlier. He expounded on this:

I do mine in late February, or very early March and the reason I do that is because the charter school has historically had their lottery to determine who's going to go to the charter school, they've had that in mid-March to late March. So, I like to be able to talk to the rising sixth graders before they have an opportunity to make a final decision on where they're going.

Mr. Mel said that City Schools wanted to be ahead of the curve in recruitment efforts. "They really want to equip us as principals on the school level, you know, with social media outlets. We're doing tours and information nights all year," he shared. He held a meeting in September for the next year and surprisingly had over 40 families attend. This gave him a chance to share about their vision, as well as discuss programs and special offerings. After speaking about all of the opportunities the school offered, he gave the families "a chance to fire away with any questions and then we had some student ambassadors walk them around the whole school and gave them a tour."

Teacher Recruitment

Recruiting and retaining teachers was an important point of discussion during this study, especially as participants reflected on strategies for responding to pressure from charter school competition. In the previous chapter, I discussed the impact of losing teachers that was felt by both districts. Both districts had lost teachers, but not large numbers of them at this point. Yet, both districts shared that finding qualified teachers was more difficult now because of several factors. There were fewer candidates coming out of teacher preparation programs. This was attributed to the stagnant salaries of educators that pervaded education until the last few years. Dr. Coke stated, "I think that it is teacher pay, cutting benefits." Salaries had remained stagnant for several years, in

part because of the downturn in the economy in 2008. Dr. Yancey shared his prospective on this, stating,

We went through a few years where the legislators just really dogged education, and they cut and cut and cut. To the point where, even cutting the teaching fellows program. You had people, young kids that would be like, ‘why do I want to go into education? When educators are telling me, ‘don’t go into education.’ You had a lot of young kids, or kids that were currently in education classes that would switch majors during that time because it was just not a conducive environment. Now since then, I do fully believe that legislators have done a pretty commendable job in raising teacher pay and providing some accolades to teachers.

Ms. Cathy also believed the lack of teacher raises as well as changes to benefits had created additional turnover in education. She said,

Five years ago, and even four years ago, we were seeing some turnover. I think a number of teachers were concerned about just some rumors out there, and things that were happening as far as not receiving the pay for the masters, and some changes to retirement system, and concerns about pay raises. So, we were seeing some individuals leaving the field, just like all other districts happen to be, but we’ve been pleased this year with the area.

Salaries have improved in recent years, but an uptick in the number of prospective educators has not occurred yet. Ms. Walton said that the teacher shortage was “a burden nationally. It’s at a national level now. It’s been in North Carolina for a long time, but we were able to tap those resources.” She said that finding candidates in the northern part of the United States was getting more difficult and attributed it to charter school growth in that area. With fewer candidates available and more options for the candidates to choose, the market for finding prospective teachers had become more competitive. She shared, “I think more and more charter schools are opening up north, therefore

there's gonna be more teaching opportunities there, so it's harder to get recruits to come south like we used to be able to do." Ms. Davidson shared that the local charter school was "drawing some of our teachers, so we have to be even more attentive to try to make a good fit when we hire a teacher." For City Schools, Ms. Carlton said, "We need more teachers than what we are graduating and so to have another entity in the mix that we are having to compete with doesn't help us." She also added, "it is so competitive, it's not necessarily just charter schools, it's a shrinking pool all together."

One way both districts were working to attract new teacher candidates was through closer collaboration with local universities. Dr. Cleveland discussed this relationship:

We've tried to create partnerships with some of our colleges and universities locally so that we can be part of that pipeline. So, to do that, we host student teachers, we host young people who are interested in making a difference in public education and they can come down here.

Both districts worked to foster good relationships with student teachers; they felt this was a good way to showcase the positive aspects of working in their school districts. Ms. Carlton talked about the importance of these relationships, saying that City Schools was "doing a little bit more or something different to connect and really build relationships. I mean we count a lot on student teachers and being able to build those relationships." County Schools was also working closely with local universities to bring in new talent. Dr. Mike stated, "We spend a lot of time with our student teachers and college students in general at two of the local universities, we have a lot of connections." He continued, saying, "We welcome their student teachers. We get to know them. Recruiting happens

a great deal through the student teaching experience. I mean they like us, we get to like them, and then it winds up being a good relationship if it all works.” Ms. Cathy said that the school district had been able to hire many of their student teachers. She also shared that County Schools tries to “develop not only relationships with individual student teachers, but with the individuals in the colleges or universities who have teacher education programs.” These mutual relationships benefit both the school district and teacher preparation programs.

One way to keep skilled student teachers in the school district was to offer them early contracts. An early contract was a commitment to work for the school system prior to graduating from college. By offering student teachers early contracts, school districts would keep them from looking at other local education agencies for employment, including the local charter schools. Both City Schools and County Schools had pursued early contracts with talented student teachers in the past and were continuing to make that a recruiting strategy. Ms. Carlton said, “I look at that experience as they are applying for that job every day and if they’re really strong and really good, we’re going to go ahead and offer them a contract.” Dr. Julianne stated that City Schools was “offering early contracts, trying to get people to commit early, which is a newer thing over the last couple of years.” Ms. Davidson said that early contracts were important because teachers have options. Ms. Cathy said that County Schools had signed about five or six student teachers to early contracts last year. Dr. Mike said, “We’ve done some early contracts. We started that a couple years ago and we’re very careful with the budget in that not to put too many out there, but we started doing that.”

School-based administrators had seen their schools and school districts increase the focus on teacher recruitment as well. Mr. Canton said, “It appears as though the district is trying to make a bigger effort to work with local colleges and universities, as far as getting student teachers into our schools, so that we can, in turn, keep those folks.” He talked about the importance of collaborating with local universities, adding, “if you have contacts at the university level, and you also have people who have people who have been a part of that program, they can help tremendously, as far as, being one of your recruiting strategies.” He gave an example of how a positive relationship with a student teacher and local universities impacted his school. He said,

We have a student teacher right now who is an EC teacher and so she’s doing her student teaching in a functional skills classroom. And, she’s enjoyed her experience so much here that, A, she would like to be here if we have an EC opening next year, and B, she has also communicated with her university about them placing another student teacher with us next year. So, having a pipeline like that is very helpful, especially in a field like EC where there are so few candidates that have the necessary certification when they come out of college.

Mr. Ridge said that he did not think his school district had changed their whole philosophy on recruitment in the face of charter school growth, but felt County Schools had changed their recruitment focus due to the lack of qualified candidates coming into education. He felt that the lack of candidates rather than the charter school was creating a new system-wide concentration on quality recruitment. He also said that the increase in competition had made him quicker to act when there is a candidate that he wanted to recommend for hire.

Both districts said they attend recruitment fairs in order to find quality teaching candidates to work in their schools. Attending recruitment fairs was not a new strategy for either district, but both districts were selective in their approach. Dr. Julianne said City Schools was being more focused in their approach and stated,

They're doing recruitment fairs, they're hosting their own recruitment fairs rather than going out into . . . we used to go to all these recruitment fairs, which they still do some of that, but hosting things here, inviting people to come here to see the district, they're doing two of those a year.

Ms. Davidson felt that County Schools had “a more active recruitment process than we have in the past years.” She relayed that there was time when the district had teachers approaching them about possible jobs. She said, “we had multiple applicants for every job. Now we have to go to them. So, we do more on-site college recruitment fairs. We do more virtual recruitment fairs.” Superintendent Mike said County Schools sends principals and teachers to job fairs as well, and not just central office or human resource personnel. The Human Resources Division selects teachers and principals to represent the school system; this allows the school system to showcase the type of people that new teachers will be working with in County Schools. County Schools makes efforts to move these opportunities around so that the same principals are not always going to the job fairs. He said the school district sends “principals out, teachers out to visit job fairs so people at those events get to see the people they'll work with or meet some of the personalities that we've got, some great talented people.” County Schools had attended virtual job fairs in the past but chose not to this year. Ms. Walton said the school district

was looking at what was working in regards to teacher recruitment and what was not working. She said,

we looked at every college and university in North Carolina that has Teacher Ed programs, looked at how many graduates they have coming out, we've added a few universities and colleges to our job fairs, we're not going out of state this year, except for one. We're going to South Carolina. We haven't gone South before but we understand they put a lot of special education teachers out at the University of South Carolina, so we're going there.

Expanded and Improved Course Offerings

Leaders from both districts spoke at length about the changes in their course offerings and their creation of new programs, which was, at least in part, influenced by competition from Forest Charter Academy (and other charter schools coming into the area). For example, Mr. Yancey had worked in several school districts prior to coming to City Schools and said the school systems were very good in the county and that they “offer everything that kids could possibly want. From great athletics to early college opportunities to AP honors.” Dr. Cleveland shared that City Schools had tried to give families many options and that the charter school had “definitely impacted our instruction and course offerings.” This meant offering numerous pathways for students that might not be traditional and could provide ways for future success through high school and beyond. He shared,

It's important, it's imperative that we keep those options out on the forefront of our kids and give them every opportunity. So, what we're about is creating equitable and rigorous spaces, learning spaces, for all our kids, pre-K all the way through high school, where they can work towards being their personal best, being their absolute best each and every day. That's what we want for our kids.

In order to give students more options, the City School District moved up the application window for students to apply for transition to another school in the district. This allowed students to have access to programs of interest that are not offered at their zoned school. In doing this, City Schools hoped to encourage students to stay in the school system. Dr. Page said they had really tried to listen to the families within their school community in creating new programs as well. Dr. Julianne said that “programmatically we had some pretty cool offerings already.” She communicated about various programs the district has had or added that help prepare students for the current labor market demands. Some of those were robotics, STEM, Project Lead the Way, advanced manufacturing, and the early college program. She said these programs were also done to help City Schools “keep their students.” At the middle school level, principals said that City Schools had emphasized offering accelerated courses in math, English, and history.

In County Schools, Ms. Cathy talked about the various positive changes the district has made in regards to strengthening existing programs and adding some innovative programming. She said County Schools would have probably made many of these changes in regards to innovative design and college readiness even if the charter school had not opened. Changes were made that would benefit the students of County Schools. However, she did say that the district had made changes to retain students. Ms. Nash said that the district is being “reflective and intentional about what we currently have for our students and what’s missing and staying connected to business and industry leaders.” Ms. Nash said these changes are about County Schools getting better, but not

about what the charter school is doing or trying to copy them. She talked about the apprenticeship program and the re-design at River Mountain School as innovative changes the school district had implemented. Mrs. Davidson also talked about some of these programs saying:

We've restructured one of our middle schools to make it a 6-12 school. We've added certain programs, like an apprenticeship program and other CTE programs. We're looking at expanding, you know, our academy type philosophy to some of our high schools. Like one high school has the Academy of Hospitality and Tourism. We're looking to add additional advance placement courses for our schools. So, we're constantly looking at ways to personalize education to meet the needs of our students. But again, I don't necessarily think that it is in response to what the charter schools are doing. It helps us be more marketable, perhaps with the charter schools.

Because of the uniqueness of these offerings and the ways in which they help to provide a response to local competition from Forest Charter Academy (and other charters coming to the area), I discuss five key programs created by the traditional public school district in more detail: Dual Language Program, Early College, School Re-Design, Apprenticeship Programs, and Career Pathways.

Dual Language Program

Leaders in City Schools talked about the new dual language program which allows students to become fluent in Spanish while in elementary school. They also talked about how becoming bilingual provides additional opportunities for students in future career paths. Superintendent Page said that City Schools was "really thinking about the future and really giving our families opportunities, so we've added our early college high school as part of our high school program and we also added dual language programs."

Two elementary schools had become immersion schools within the last two years and the district was getting ready to expand to a third school.

The dual language program was started in 2016 with two kindergarten classes at a specific elementary school and had expanded. Superintendent Page stated, “we have told the staff that any other school that wants it, that we just have to make sure that at least 80% of the staff has bought into it. If staff members at other elementary schools decide they want it, the district will add the program there as well,” she said. Ms. Carlton said that the district has tried to provide more opportunities for students and a variety of options such as the dual language immersion program. She said that although new programs were created to be more competitive, they would have been implemented anyway and were not simply a response to competition. She said,

I think there’s absolutely some things that we’ve done to be more competitive. Like I’ve mentioned, like the dual language and the early college to expand our opportunities for kids and for families that may be looking for different things. I believe that would have happened anyway. I think most of them were a natural progression. It may have accelerated the level of interest or the speed in which they may have been implemented. I don’t think we’ve strayed from good instruction. I think we’ve tried really hard to be focused on good instruction and not shying away, not backing off from keeping high standards because we are afraid of anything.

Early College

City Schools also opened an early college last year. Dr. Cleveland said, “we’ve developed an early college that we’re really excited about where students can actually work towards an associate’s degree, do a lot of online work as well through canvas and other things.” He thought that it was important to offer multiple pathways rather than just

one traditional pathway and felt “the traditional comprehensive high school is gone.” City Schools was striving to offer multiple ways for students to graduate from high school. Ms. Carlton shared that the early college was “a totally different early college model” and that it was “more about giving a wide array of options to families that are in City Schools.” Students can still play football, participate in band, or be a part of a musical while attending the early college. She said that City Schools wanted to

make sure that students have every door open to them and that we’re not doing anything to close any door because so many kids have so many varied interests, that we want to try to nurture all of that and get them across that stage.

Within the first year, the early college had over 100 students and was housed on the campus of City High School. The principal of City High School, Mr. Bagley, offered that “we have strengthened programming here at the high school” and one of those ways was through the new early college high school. He thought that the new early college was in some ways a response to the charter school, but felt like it was probably more of a response to County Schools having an early college. He said that City Schools had lost students to the early college in County Schools for years.

School Re-Design

One of the new offerings mentioned regularly by County School’s leaders was River Mountain’s 6-12 School re-design. Answers varied as to whether River Mountain school had been re-designed as a response to the charter school, but most agreed that something had to be done because the school had declining enrollment and had lost students for several years. The school was under 50% capacity. Superintendent Mike

said, “we had a building that was about half full so we had a facility to do something creative with.” As the director of CTE and innovative school design, Ms. Nash had been heavily involved in the re-design of River Mountain School. In discussing the new project, she explained, “We knew we had to do something there because of declining enrollment. Certainly, that declining enrollment wasn’t just a result of the charter school. There were lots of reasons that school saw some decline in its enrollment over the years.” The charter school was one of several factors that had resulted in the loss of enrollment for River Mountain School. The school was in a geographically isolated area and the school had been built in an area that was anticipated to have growth. With the economic downturn in the mid to late 2000s, that growth never occurred and so the school had never acquired close to capacity. Dr. Coke said something had to be done because River Mountain School was a newer facility that was not being utilized fully and “one of the worst things would have been to have had to shut a facility down.” Ms. Cathy discussed the development of re-design project in detail:

We knew we had one school in the system that the enrollment was declining to a point where it was very concerning. We were not quite at the point that it would be financially difficult to keep this school, but we weren’t far. But students were leaving there, but they weren’t going to another public school. So, we looked at the geographic isolation of that particular school, to say well, does it have anything to do with childcare for the middle school aged students? Does it have anything to do with the distance to some of the other schools? And when you look at the size of the two elementary schools that fed into that middle school, they were tiny, so is it there’s a concern about going to . . . one of the things we heard from parents, they weren’t sure they wanted their child to go to a larger high school setting. So, we thought, well let’s see what will happen if we do a grade expansion here, not to hurt another school, but if we’re losing them anyway to charter and private and other settings, would they stay in County Schools if they had another option?

In the re-design, River Mountain School went from a 6-8 school to a 6-12 school. The school added a CTE component and three different “schools” of learning. The three different schools are public service, a school of technology and design, and a school of leadership and communication. Mr. Ridge shared,

The long-range goal is kind of like schools within a school. And as we would build, it allows kids to kind of explore and see how this curriculum, how can seventh grade math, for example, tie in to maybe some particular career interest that I have. And this is how I can actually use seventh grade math skills, if I had some interest in some medical field or some health science fields. And then continue with that career focus, and then the ones that elect to stay with us for the high school years, it may become, maybe we’ve talked about their 11th grade year, they stay in one of those three tracks or areas and it can get a little bit even more specific and maybe we can build to where their senior year, we can set up with internships or work-based experiences. Like, if they were in the school of public service, maybe with EMTs or with 911 or something, like an Urgent Care or medical facility or something like that, and they can actually gain some experience and actually explore.

The middle school, like the high school, operates on a semester schedule. In fact, it is the only middle school in the county that operates on a semester schedule. Electives are year-long so it is a very complex blended schedule. Ms. Nash said of the re-design:

It gave us the freedom to really think outside the box even when we decided were going to add grade level and make it a 6-12 school. You could have that in a very traditional way but we had the freedom to say, ‘What would make this really a unique learning experience for students?’ Add the CTE component by having schools, a public service and design and technology and leadership and communication and then teaching our curriculum sort of from that lens of what the student’s passionate about rather than just going into a room and, ‘Oh. This is English Language Arts and we’re gonna study this book.’ But instead thinking about that from a different perspective.

Additionally, reconfiguring the grades in the school relieved crowding from the high school that River Mountain students previously attended. River Mountain 6-12 School has open enrollment for those who attend a school in the district but priority goes to those who live in the school zone for River Mountain School. River Mountain 6-12 School keeps up to 75 students per year while the others follow the traditional feeder pattern. Each year a grade level will be added to the high school which began with ninth grade. In one year, the re-design added almost 100 students.

Because of the large school zone, when students left River Mountain 6-8 School to transition to high school, some students were driving a long distance to get to the high school. By making River Mountain School into a high school as well, students could stay in their local area. This made bus rides and car rides less time-consuming. Mr. Ridge spoke about this:

I think for some also there was a geographic side of stuff. They live near River Mountain, but if they were to go to the other high school, as their traditional feeder pattern, that's a long way away for them. So, I think some have liked the proximity, that they can stay in high school and they can stay close to home as far as transportation and travel in the morning time has been a selling point for some, that they like. Because they can still be a car rider because mom doesn't have to take them so far. Because if they became a bus rider, they were riding two hours in the morning. So some have liked that they can stay, we've had some that's what they talked about as an interest for them is they can stay close, or they had a sibling in the middle school, coming up in middle school. Like I can think of one specifically. So that was she can still take both of her kids to school, she wouldn't have been able to drop off both. So, that been a thing as well.

The smaller setting of River Mountain School was also attractive to parents. The high school that students typically transitioned to from River Mountain was the largest school in the district in regards to enrollment. This was a concern for some parents as

they worried about their children having to navigate a large new environment. Mr. Ridge said,

Some liked the smaller setting where they get a little bit more individualized attention. So, I think that appealed to quite a bit, and talking with our parents and students that chose to stay with us for the ninth grade, that was a big thing, is that they felt comfortable and they liked the smaller setting.

The school also has a one-to-one technology initiative, with each student being provided a Chromebook. River Mountain 6-12 is the first one-to-one school in the district. Students use them all day at school but do not take them home yet. They pick them up when they arrive each morning. Ms. Nash acknowledged that purchasing the Chromebooks was expensive, stating,

We're trying to be really intentional and careful and good stewards of our resources and they're expensive. Certainly buying 400 at once, we got a better deal than if you just bought a few at a time, but still that's a lot of money. The county commissioners really helped us get started there so we want to take care of that.

Principal Ridge believes the Chromebooks allow “for a little more individualized learning.” It allows students more autonomy over the pacing of lessons and helps the teachers to better facilitate the learning of each individual student. This pedagogical shift has also required professional development for teachers in order to use the technology most effectively. Mr. Ridge said, “not all teachers are as comfortable with Canvas or different programs, so that's been a focus of professional development this year.” Ms. Nash said the lead teacher was doing a good job of helping teachers learn how to use the

technology most effectively and that she had seen more teachers using Canvas at River Mountain 6-12 School than at other schools because of the accessibility. She shared,

They don't have to sign up for a laptop cart. They know the kids are going to have access because every kid is going to come to my class with their computer. So, you plan that way. We really burden teachers sometimes when we say, yeah, you have to use technology, but now to use technology you're going to have to sign up for a cart and hope that it's where it's supposed to be when you need it and hope that the last person plugged in all the computers. That gets a little stressful.

Apprenticeship Programs

Another opportunity mentioned by several of those interviewed was the apprenticeship program. One unique facet of this opportunity was that both districts had partnered in creating an apprenticeship program that was marketed to every student in the county. City Schools and County School had partnered with over 15 industry partners, the local community college, and the local chamber of commerce. Additionally, this past year the charter school also had an apprentice. In total, there were 17 apprentices this year with 15 coming from either City Schools or County Schools. Forest Charter Academy had one student and another student was homeschooled. Ms. Nash said they try to work and be good neighbors with all the surrounding schools, including the charter school and private schools. The apprenticeship program was “really initiated and spawned out of our system, but we certainly invited other people to participate in that. That’s an opportunity for all the students in our county,” Ms. Nash shared. In fact, it was marketed to every child in the county, not just to students from County Schools or City Schools.

The program itself allows students to get on-the-job training and earn a paycheck while earning an associate's degree through the local community college. It took several years for the program to get off the ground due to the amount of planning and preparation it took. The program was designed to provide opportunities for students and also expand the candidate pool for businesses in the area. Students could incur large amounts of debt by going to a 4-year college and this program allowed students to not only avoid incurring debt by not having to pay for school, but earning money in the process. Additionally, it helped students understand that a 4-year degree was not the only viable career path.

In order to get into the program, students have to meet certain selection requirements. The students have to be a high school junior or senior and have a certain grade point average. Attendance is also a factor and each student must have completed three levels of high school math. Students and parents attend information sessions that are conducted at different high schools across the county. The application window is typically in the early spring and is followed by an orientation week and interviews. Afterwards, the industry partners hold a 'draft' where they select certain students and the students go through a pre-apprenticeship which involves community college classes. Students then are offered contracts and have a signing day with the local businesses at an event held on the campus of the community college. Students have the chance to start their careers with their partners after completing the program. While this apprenticeship program has been opened up to charter school students, it was spearheaded in the

traditional districts and their students take the most advantage of it, providing a marketing tool for illustrating the good work done in the traditional schools.

Career Pathways

The Career Pathways Partnership was created as a joint collaboration between the local community college and the two school districts. The partnership was developed to generate educational pathways that provide a seamless transition from high school to the community college and into a career. The partnership has members from both school systems, staff from the local community college, regional universities, local business leaders, and government officials. Ms. Davidson said County Schools had “added more opportunities for students to explore careers through our Career and Technical Education programs, and we have also been very diligent in adding opportunities for post-high school attainment before they leave school.” Dr. Cleveland said City Schools had a robust CTE program that had “some really cool things” and mentioned the middle school offerings that lead into high school.

In the past the partnership created pathways for advanced manufacturing and health sciences. This year the partnership developed a new associate’s degree for an agricultural field offered at the local community college. Ms. Nash said these are “actual college pathways that students can engage in while they are in high school.” These pathways are open to charter students, home school students, and private school students, Ms. Nash said. Though they are open to all students, she said that Forest Charter Academy had not participated in the partnership, again providing the traditional public schools a marketing advantage. Mr. Bagley said,

At the high school, we were already a part of the career pathways program with the community college. We did advanced manufacturing the first year. We did health sciences the next year, and now we're in the career pathways for agri-science. These are CTE courses that are essentially a part of a six-year plan. You take this string of courses in high school, then you go to RCC for two years and then you can get local jobs in the community in these positions.

Last year the partnership received a grant worth over \$900,000. Ms. Kathy shared that a key piece of strengthening existing programs in County Schools was to add grants. Dr. Cleveland also believed in the importance of attaining grants for City Schools. He said,

Our connection with the community college and how we try to partner with them with grants and ways to support traditional, and more importantly non-traditional students. So, all of these things are great ways to reach and connect with kids and to compete and maybe to better compete, because we can say 'hey, we're working within the community to listen to the community about what the needs are in the community so that we can effectively respond to those needs.

The grant money was for funding advanced manufacturing and allowed for new and improved facilities.

New programs were also established at a few of the high schools. Dr. Julianne said, "We got a grant, along with County Schools and the local community college for just shy of a million dollars to add advanced manufacturing to our school." She said a portion of that money went to City Schools where "I spent just shy of, just right at \$200,000 on the new lab." This new lab was for the new advanced manufacturing program for the lone traditional high school in the district which gave students the chance to earn certifications. In County Schools, one school was able to update its metals program and one school was able to add a new metals program.

This expansion allowed for a large increase in the number of high school students in advanced manufacturing programs. Dr. Mike said, “we have really got a lot of CTE programs that kids are involved in.” He said the number of students taking courses through the community college had more than doubled in the past 2 years. “Our kids are taking a lot of advantage of taking courses through the community college while in high school, tuition free.” With all of these opportunities available for students, some of my participants believed the local charter school could not compete with the opportunities that the two traditional districts were offering students. For example, Mr. Norman said, “honestly, I think it would be hard for charter schools to compete with some of the things that we’re offering in the CTE area.”

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed several new program offerings that both districts had initiated in order to provide more options and pathways for student success, at least in part, in response to charter school competition. City Schools had introduced a new early college as well as a dual language program at two elementary schools. The early college had opened in the fall and added over 100 students. The dual language program was going to be added to a third school. County Schools had begun a school re-design, transforming a traditional middle school into a 6-12 school with a CTE component and three distinct schools of learning. The re-designed school was a one-to-one school in which each student had a Chromebook. River Mountain 6-12 School added almost 100 students in its first year. Both districts had collaborated with the local community college in creating an apprenticeship program. They had also worked together to develop career

pathways and secured a grant for nearly one million dollars for advanced manufacturing. While it is difficult to assess the degree to which these new initiatives are a direct response to charter school growth, my participants all indicated a desire to continuously improve their offerings and noted that competition provided greater impetus to make some of the changes they had been envisioning. In the next and final chapter, I draw some conclusions about the impact of charter school growth within these two districts, as well as reflect back on the findings from the overall study.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine how school districts are responding to charter school growth in North Carolina. I conducted a qualitative study of two school districts affected by the same charter school in order to understand how leaders of those schools perceived the academic, fiscal, demographic, and human resource impact of charter schools on traditional public schools and the types of initiatives, policy revisions, and strategies they have implemented as a direct result of competition with charter schools. Participants included superintendents, central office personnel, and principals. I interviewed 20 traditional public school leaders from the two school districts and analyzed their responses in the previous two chapters. In this chapter, I answer my research questions directly, reflect on the relevance of market theory for understanding my findings, make suggestions for practice and further research, and offer some final thoughts and conclusions.

Research Questions

As I reminder, in this study, I sought to answer one principal research question and two sub-questions:

1. How are leaders in public school districts in North Carolina responding to charter schools?

- a. What are the perceived academic, fiscal, demographic, and human resource impacts of charter schools on traditional public school districts?
- b. What types of initiatives, policy revisions, and strategies have been implemented as a result of competition from charter schools?

In the following sections, I answer each of the sub-questions directly.

Perceived Impacts of Charter Schools

In order to understand why traditional public school districts should respond to charter schools in their district, it was important to gauge how school leaders perceived the impact of these school on their districts. To respond effectively to charter school growth, school systems must be aware of the impact that charter school competition has created. They must first see the need to respond before they will work to implement change. The amount of competitive pressure districts perceive from charter schools will likely dictate their response to the impact. If they do not perceive a charter school as impactful, they will be less likely to respond.

In researching the impact of charter schools on traditional public schools, I noted four areas in which public schools could perceive an impact by charter schools. Schools could be impacted academically, fiscally, demographically, and through human resources. All of these areas four areas are tied to student retention and attrition. If students do not leave, funds are not transferred and resources are not lost. In drawing conclusions about the impacts of charter schools, I look at four areas: Student Attrition, Academic Impact, Demographic Impact, Fiscal Impact, and Human Resources Impact. I then summarize these impacts before moving on to answering Research Question 1b.

Student Attrition

It was clear from the interviews that I conducted during this study that both school districts had lost students to the charter school. County Schools lost many more students than City Schools, although it was also a much bigger district. At the same time, I learned that student enrollment in County Schools had been declining for several years. At one time County Schools had over 19,000 students and now had a little over 16,500 students. At one time the district had been projected to have more than 20,000 students. I reviewed the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's website which contained data and reports on student accounting. I found that County Schools had over 19,000 students in the 2007-2008 school year. Therefore, they had experienced a large decline in enrollment over the past 10 years, a decline that is unrelated to the charter school. The downturn in the economy had impacted the area and was one of several factors that might have shaped enrollment. An area that depended on textiles and furniture, among other things, had seen businesses close or downsize. With the loss in jobs, many parts of the county were not growing quickly. Figure 1 shows the declining enrollment of County Schools over the past 5 years.

Since Forest Charter Academy opened in 2013, County Schools experienced a 6% decline in enrollment, but not all of that decline was because of Forest Charter Academy. While County Schools lost 600 students to Forest Charter Academy, they lost over 200 more students to other charter schools. I was surprised to find out that another charter school in another county was pulling about 100 students from the school district. This charter school was close to the border of the county and was impacting one particular

school zone most heavily. With the anticipation of losing another 300 students to Forest Charter Academy Elementary School, the district would then have about 900 students attending Forest Charter Academy and over 1,100 attending all charter schools. Figure 2 shows the number of charter school students lost over the past 6 years and the number of students lost to Forest Charter Academy since it opened.

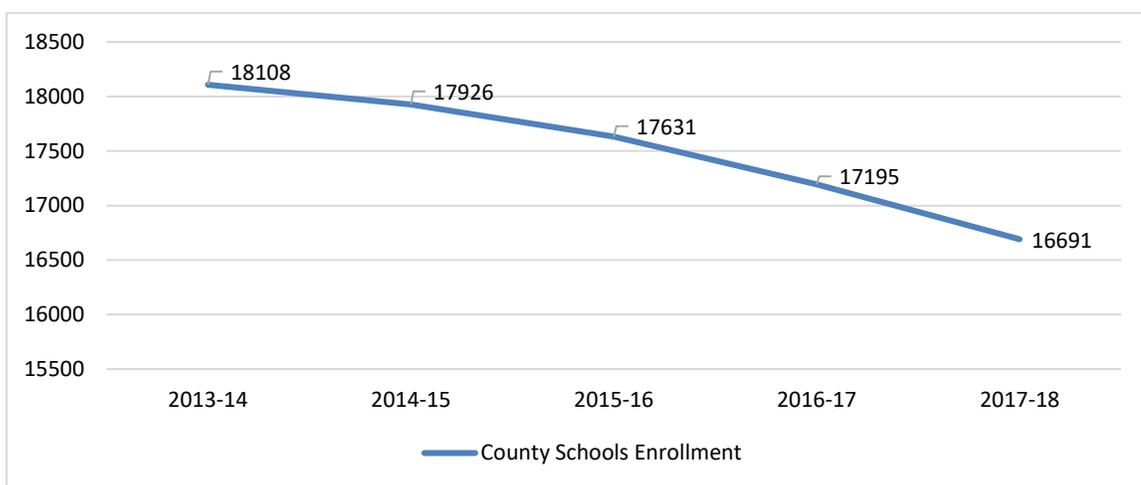


Figure 1. County Schools Enrollment.

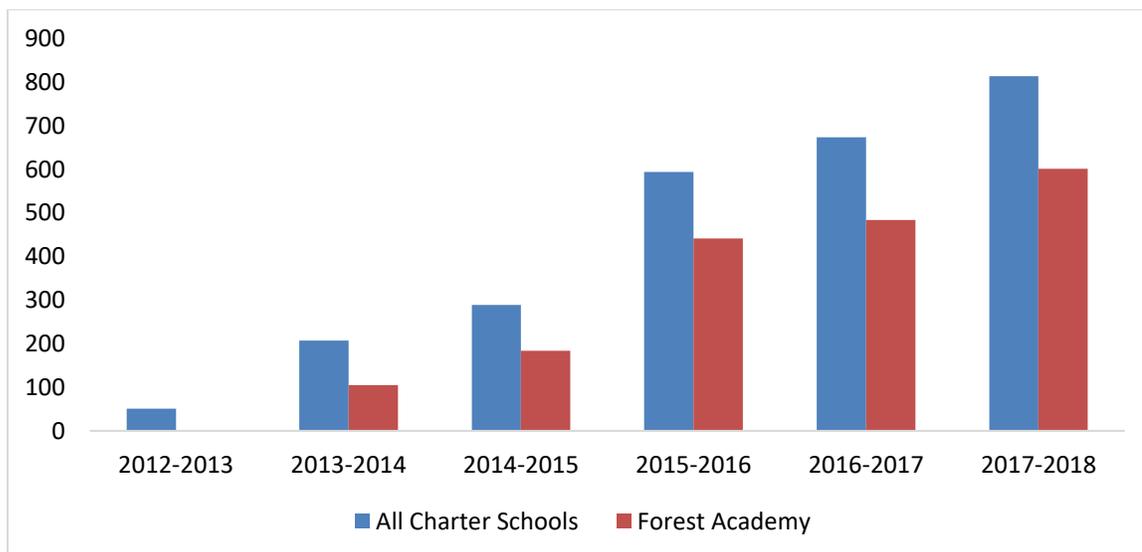


Figure 2. County School Students Attending Charter Schools.

As far as City School's enrollment goes, this has only decreased slightly in the past few years. The enrollment was around 4,500 students in 2017. When I reviewed their enrollment data through the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's website Student Accounting page, I noticed that City School's enrollment had peaked in the year 2014-2015 and was actually lower before that year. In fact, 10 years ago City Schools was just slightly smaller than it was at the time of this study. The school district has lost only about 200 students to the charter school. City Schools enrollment patterns are captured in Figure 3.

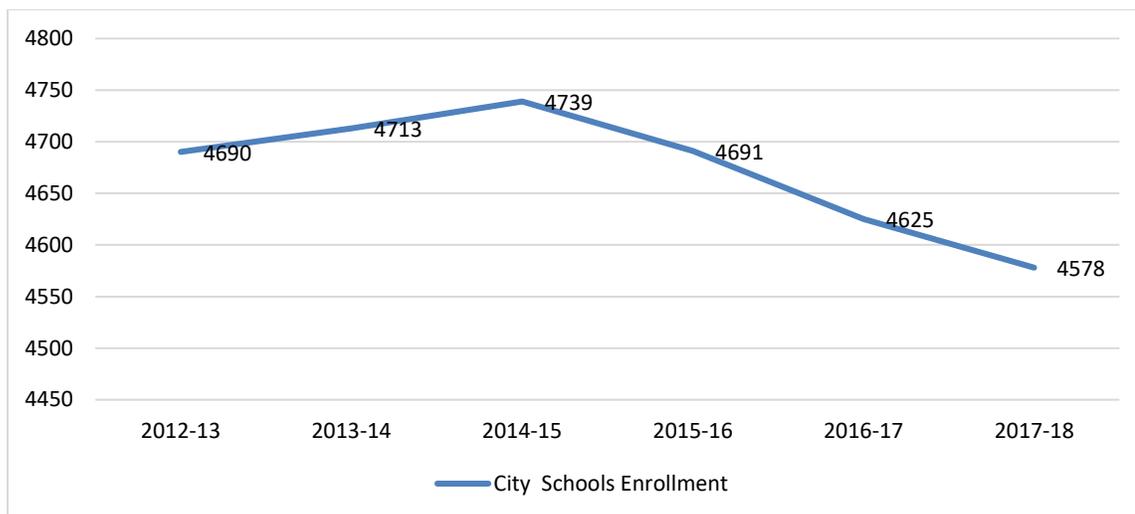


Figure 3. City Schools Enrollment.

There were many reasons given for the student attrition in both school districts, particularly attrition related to the charter. First, Forest Charter Academy was new and had new facilities, which attracted people. Second, the charter school did a wonderful job of marketing itself to the community. Flyers, ads, and word of mouth had parents believing that the charter school was the only school nearby offering project- and problem-based learning activities. People in the community believed that the charter school was innovative. The charter school seemed to do a particularly good job of marketing to parents of high-achieving students. Also, the charter school offered a smaller learning environment compared to the traditional public schools, which appealed to parents worried about their child attending a large high school or middle school. School leaders in traditional public schools heard from the parents of students who transferred to Forest Charter Academy that they were particularly strong with customer service and building relationships.

As I stated in my literature review, one of the factors that influences a school district to respond to charter schools is the loss of students; the more significant the numerical loss, the more likely the response (Teske et al., 2000). What qualifies as a significant loss of students? Hoxby (2003) suggests that 6% student attrition is the threshold of impact in which school districts begin to respond to competition. County Schools lost 600 students to Forest Charter Academy. That number would reflect an enrollment decline of slightly above 3%. If that number included all the charter schools impacting the district, that number would be around 4.5%. City Schools lost about 200 students to the charter school, which would account for about 4% of enrollment. Therefore, neither district met the threshold of impact Hoxby believed would elicit a significant district response. Still County Schools was projected to lose another 300 students with Forest Charter Academy opening their elementary school next year. With a loss of 300 students, County Schools would be within that threshold of impact. As the elementary school opens, I wonder if both districts will begin to perceive a greater impact in regards to student attrition and thus feel forced to respond in even more ways than I have already described.

In addition to losing students to charter schools, neither school district was growing. The growth rate of a school district can be a factor that influences whether a school district feels the need to respond to competitive pressure (Hess et al., 2001). When school districts are growing, charter schools might actually be a benefit in that they relieve crowding. They may help in the sense that growing districts might not have to add new buildings or employ new staff. With student enrollment declining in County

Schools and staying relatively stable in City Schools, both districts are not in the position to welcome student attrition.

Academic Impact

The overall perception I gathered from most leaders in County Schools was that their academic performance had not been impacted negatively by Forest Charter Academy. The superintendent pointed out that the school district's proficiency on end-of-grade and end-of-course tests had gone up 15 percentage points since Forest Charter had opened. Additionally, the school district had continued to improve in regards to academic growth with over 80% of schools meeting or exceeding growth for the 2016-2017 school year. This was an improvement over the previous 2 years. The number of schools with a D or F had also declined over the past 2 years. Scholarship money attained by students going to 4-year universities had also increased about \$16 million. While it is impossible to draw causal connections from the data that I have, there is some evidence that the competition from Forest Charter School may have actually increased the academic performance of County Schools.

In City Schools, perceptions were mixed about the impact of the charter school on academic performance. I learned that every school in the district had met or exceeded growth in the past year and that only one school had earned a letter grade below a C on the North Carolina School Report Card. The school district's graduation rate was about 94% last year, which was one of the ten best in the state of North Carolina. I was also told that the attendance rate for the district was the second highest for any school district

in North Carolina. Yet, there was a concern that losing high-achieving students could hurt the district down the road, even if there will little current evidence of that happening.

The perception of the school leaders in this study varied as to whether competition was good for their school districts. Most of those interviewed felt that their school district was facing competition not just from Forest Charter Academy but from other charter schools, home schools, and private schools, and that this competition had existed prior to the formation of Forest Charter Academy. Some school leaders felt that this competition was actually helping to improve their schools and school districts because they had to offer the best product for their students and to make changes in a timely fashion. They were striving to be more excellent in order to keep students, but more importantly for the benefit of each student. Both school districts were working very hard to create the most opportunities for their students. Reflecting back on my study, I noticed that participants in City Schools seemed more apt to view the Forest Charter Academy as competition than those interviewed from County Schools. I will discuss this issue in more detail later in this chapter.

Demographic Impact

While both districts had lost students, the impact was perceived as more pronounced in City Schools. Students who were high performing had left City Schools. In County Schools, this seemed to be less apparent based on what I learned from the school leaders in that district. According to Hess et al. (2001), school districts feel intense pressure to respond when quality charter programs are competing for desirable students. Additionally, smaller school districts are more likely to feel competitive

pressure from charter schools (Linick & Lubienski, 2013). The perception in County Schools was that Forest Charter Academy was attracting all types of students and not just high achievers. Many of the leaders interviewed from City Schools expressed concern that the charter school had pulled high-achieving students from their district or had targeted them via recruitment. Because City Schools is more diverse than County Schools, participants from City Schools noticed that most of the students who left to go to the charter schools were also White students. The superintendent of City Schools said, “What we found, so far for us, it has been our highest-performing students who have looked at going to the charter school.” She said that these students often return to City Schools after realizing that the charter school is not a better option for them. Reasons given for their initial attraction to the charter school include White flight and the perception that the charter school was offering more opportunities for high-achieving students.

Fiscal Impact

Leaders from both districts acknowledged a fiscal impact because of the charter school. As the school districts lost students, they also lost money. Although I was not able to interview the finance director for City Schools, I was told that during this study that City Schools had lost around one million dollars to Forest Charter Academy because of student attrition. This number was higher than that of County Schools, even though they had lost considerably fewer students. Yet, City Schools also has a higher per-pupil expenditure than County Schools, which means the charter school gains more money from them when a student transferred to the charter school. According to the finance

director for County Schools, the district had lost about \$726,000 to Forest Charter Academy because of student attrition. County Schools also lost a considerable amount to other charter schools and virtual charter schools, as show in Figure 4.

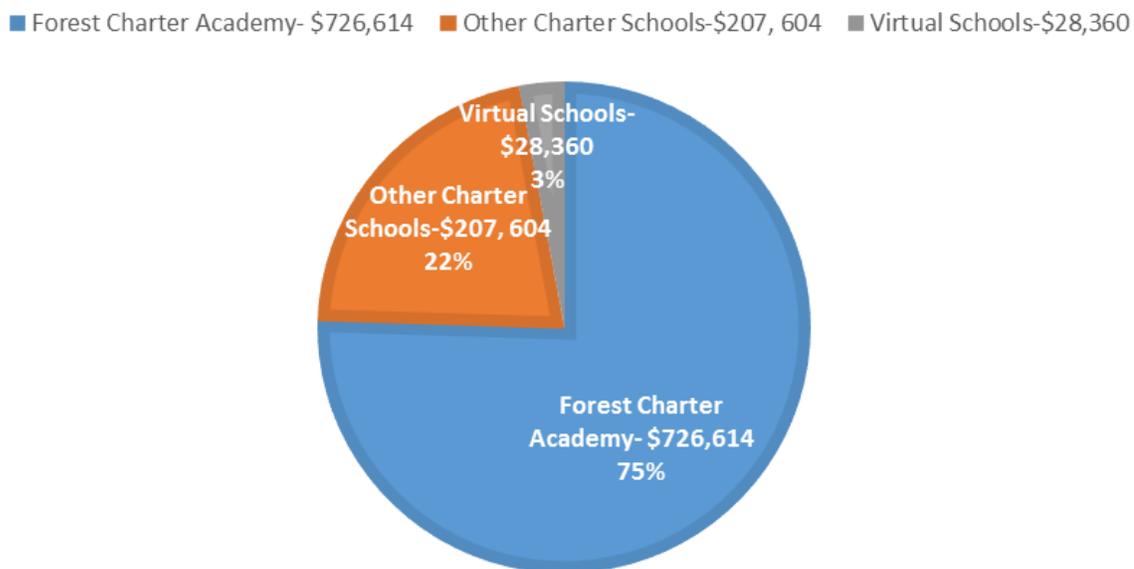


Figure 4. County Schools Fiscal Impact of Charters.

The money both districts lost to charter schools was a small fraction of their total budget. County Schools had a budget of over \$150 million and City Schools had a budget of over \$40 million. This impact also seemed more significant in County Schools because the rate of student attrition had risen so dramatically in a few years, thus leading to a sudden loss in finances. Additionally, non-urban school districts may have less flexibility to adjust spending when they lose students to charter schools (Ladd & Singleton, 2018). For example, while a school who loses a student means the district loses a certain amount of money for them, the bigger issue is fixed costs. The school district still has to pay teachers and principals, as well as for other things like utilities and

building maintenance. The superintendent of County Schools described the difficulty of assessing financial impact because as the district loses students, it is not an exact science. He said that you cannot just pull a teacher when you lose enough students. He gave the hypothetical example that if 24 schools each lose one student, which school then loses a teacher?

School leaders also shared that the school district loses funds for students who never attended a traditional public school when they enroll in a charter school. A student may have been homeschooled their entire educational career and then decide to attend a charter school. The school district now must pay the charter school for that student (whereas they did not have to pay for homeschooling). This is part of continuation costs and is something the districts and county commissioners work very hard to rectify.

While some central office personnel perceived the loss of resources in both school districts, for the most part, the principals did not notice a loss in resources at their levels. This could be attributed to the fact that either the loss of district resources had not been substantial enough to be felt at the school level or the school districts had done an excellent job of reallocating resources to limit the impact at the school level. It was apparent that both school districts worked hard to limit the impact on students.

Human Resources Impact

Both school districts acknowledged losing teachers to the charter school. County Schools had lost teaching positions because of student attrition. As student numbers dropped, so did the number of staff positions. Additionally, both school districts recognized a growing teacher shortage that was compounded by having to compete with

another school for teachers. One high school in County Schools lost five teachers in one year to Forest Charter Academy. The school district also lost two or three teachers this past year because of teacher certification requirements. These teachers were able to go over to the charter school to teach because the certification requirements are less stringent. These findings are consistent with current research that says teachers going to charter schools typically have less experience and are less likely to have a license (Burian-Fitzgerlad & Harris, 2004; Jackson, 2012). In City Schools, leaders guessed that they had lost five teachers at most to the charter school.

While neither school districts had lost substantial numbers of teachers to the charter school, school leaders nonetheless acknowledged losing good teachers. This was partially attributed to the charter school recruiting teachers. Both school districts had good teachers who had been recruited by Forest Charter Academy. One of the school leaders said that somehow the local charter school knew about the teachers who were doing a good job and would target them. Still, overall the impact did not appear to be vast according to the public school leaders I interviewed.

Summary of Impacts

Both school districts lost students to the charter school, although the extent of the impact on the districts is hard to assess from a qualitative, perception-based study. As I conducted this study, it seemed that some of the leaders in City Schools viewed the charter school as significant competition more so than most of the leaders in County Schools. One reason for this may be due to perceptions of White flight. Even though County Schools lost more students to Forest Charter Academy, the percentage of students

lost was slightly higher in City Schools. Still, City School's enrollment had remained quite stable while County School's enrollment had plummeted over the last several years. I believe there are several reasons for this slight difference in perception.

First, smaller districts are more likely to view charter schools as competition (Linick & Lubienski, 2013). City Schools had about one-fourth the enrollment of County Schools. All of the schools in the City School District were within the city limits. Therefore, City Schools was isolated to one city that was just a few miles from the charter school. Additionally, all of Forest Charter Academy's schools were near that same city. County Schools comprised schools from all around the county. As stated earlier, the county is geographically quite large and has several distinct school zones that were near various towns. The distance between some of the school zones was over 30 minutes by car. Therefore, most of those schools had not experienced much impact from Forest Charter Academy. Areas with larger amounts of students might not feel the impact when students leave because the effects are dispersed throughout an entire area (Linick & Lubienski, 2013). The school leaders at schools near the charter school were cognizant of the competitive effect of the charter school. Proximity seemed to correlate with the perceived impact (Cordes, 2017).

Second, districts are more likely to feel intense pressure when competing for "desirable" students (Hess et al., 2001). While both school districts lost students to the charter school, leaders from City Schools said their school district had primarily lost high-achieving students to the charter school. Consistently, they perceived that high-achieving students were recruited heavily by Forest Charter Academy. This is a common

practice of charter schools because it can bolster test scores quickly and consequently improve available resources and the reputation of the charter school. Perception also played a role, as parents of high-achieving students in the district believed that Forest Charter Academy would provide their children with more opportunities for academic advancement. County School leaders did not notice a larger portion of high-achieving students leaving the school district or being recruited by the charter school.

Additionally, leaders from City Schools noticed that White students were primarily the students who were attending the charter school. Recruitment and White flight were given as reasons for this occurring in City Schools. Non-White students, students with disabilities, and students with language barriers did not seem to be heavily recruited from City Schools. County Schools most likely did not experience White flight because the school district is significantly less diverse than City Schools. Over 70% of students in County Schools are White in comparison to 35% in City Schools. Also, 54% of students in County Schools are economically disadvantaged compared to 73% of students in City Schools.

The perceived quality of education Forest Charter Academy provided was mentioned by traditional public school leaders during interviews. While many of the school leaders were skeptical of the ability of Forest Academy Charter to provide the same quality education as a traditional public school, several acknowledged that they had done a good job marketing the benefits of their school. They had helped create the perception that the school provided a strong innovative educational experience in a smaller setting that in some ways resembled a private school. They presented this setting

as being safer and more personalized than traditional public schools. The perception of quality is important as charter school quality is one of the factors impacting traditional public school response (Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). Public school leaders also heard that Forest Charter Academy did a good job of establishing relationships with parents and understood the importance of good customer service. While the quality of education provided by Forest Charter Academy can be debated, they were successful in attracting students to their school. In fact, this charter school has become very large in comparison to most charter schools. This growth is likely aided by the fact that they have built, and are building, brand new facilities that seem appealing to the public. These new facilities not only look to be of good quality but also show that the charter school is now firmly established in the area.

Traditional Public School Response to Competition

Perspectives regarding competition with Forest Charter Academy varied a great deal among the school leaders participating in this study. Not all of the school leaders felt that they were in fact competing with the charter school, consequently, they did not see the need for a specific response. The way that school districts respond is strongly correlated to their perception of the competition they are facing (Holmes et al., 2006). Others believed that the charter school was having an impact on their school districts, especially schools in the closest geographic proximity to Forest Charter. However, competition was generally not viewed as something negative, but rather another reason to continually improve. This competition was seen as causing both school districts to reflect on their organizations and adapt in order to better serve and support students. They both

developed new programs and initiatives in response to this competition. Both districts have only felt the impact of the charter school for about five years. It will be interesting to track the difference in response over time. I organize my conclusions about the districts' responses in terms of Initiatives, Policy Revisions, Strategies, Teacher Recruitment, and Resource Allocation.

Initiatives

One way in which school districts respond to competition is through changing or adding programs to strengthen the curriculum (Hess et al., 2001; Kasman & Loeb, 2012; Rofes, 1998; Teske et al., 2000). Both districts in this study had implemented several initiatives in the past few years in order to bolster their academic offerings. These initiatives were described as for the benefit of the students, but also to help retain students in the face of competition. There were school leaders in both districts who acknowledged the charter school had caused them to look more closely at their course offerings. The assistant superintendent over curriculum and instruction for City Schools said that Forest Charter Academy had an impact on their instruction and course offerings. City Schools listened to their families so that they could give them a variety of learning options. The district offered accelerated courses for younger students, robotics, and STEM classes. They created a range of pathways to graduation and implemented a new early college program and a dual language school. The early college and dual language school were created to be more competitive. The early college allowed students to play sports and participate in the performing arts, which allows for more options for the students. While the school district leaders mentioned that they would have offered many of these new

programs regardless of competition, it seems that the charter school had accelerated the process of initiating them.

County Schools also had made great strides in their course offerings and programs over the past several years. The assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction said that the district made changes to keep students in the school district, but also noted that these changes would have likely been made had the school district not lost students. One of those changes was the creation of a 6-12 school. This school was unique in that it has features that resemble the innovation of charter schools, for example, providing three different schools of learning, an innovative schedule, and one-to-one computer access for each student. It might be argued that the innovation of charter schools in general influenced the design choices of this traditional public school. The charter school appeared to be just one of many reasons for the development of River Mountain 6-12 School. River Mountain was losing students to the charter school, most notably when parents claimed that they wanted a smaller setting for their students than would be the case if they attended the large traditional high school in the feeder pattern. The re-design met this need by providing a much smaller school in regards to enrollment and through providing features that resembled those of a charter school. Also, the traditional high school was a considerable drive for some of the students attending River Mountain. Those students could choose to stay at River Mountain for high school and therefore cut down on transportation time.

River Mountain School was originally a 6-8 middle school that served a particular school zone. After the re-design, students in that school zone still went to the middle

school, but instead of going to the traditional high school they could now stay at River Mountain through grade 12 and graduate. If River Mountain did not fill up with students in the attendance zone, students from other school zones could apply to attend at the school and thus the district allowed open enrollment in this situation, another practice that is in some ways modeled after charter schools. Allowing open enrollment or creating a magnet school are ways school districts can soften the impact of charter schools (Buddin & Zimmer, 2009). Though River Mountain 6-12 is not a magnet school, providing a specialized curriculum and open enrollment are hallmarks of magnet schools, and are also features of charter schools.

Policy Revisions

In an effort to combat charter school competition, school districts sometimes implement policies in order to respond to the impact (Linick & Lubienski, 2013). Neither district in this study responded with any policy changes other than City Schools making it easier for students to be more mobile within the school district. Specifically, if a parent wanted their child to participate in a program that was not available in their school zone, they could still have the opportunity for their child to participate in that program in another school zone within the district.

Participants in my study mentioned that the state of North Carolina had recently allowed sixth-grade students to participate in athletics, with the exception of football. Prior to this policy change, sixth graders in traditional public schools were not allowed to participate in school sponsored sports. In some charter schools, sixth graders were participating in sports, and therefore from the perspective of the state, changing this

policy was seen as leveling the playing field. Each school system was given the autonomy to choose if they wanted to allow sixth graders to play middle schools sports in their respective districts. City Schools and County Schools both approved the policy change at the district level through their boards of education, perhaps in part because 6th graders could play at Forest Charter Academy.

The only other policy change mentioned was the creation of Fund Eight at the state level. Participants described that Fund Eight was a result of a lawsuit that a charter school won against a large school district which enabled charter schools to have a portion of everything in Fund Two which housed current expense funds. School districts were then allowed to create Fund Eight which allowed traditional public school districts to spend money out of that fund and the money does not have to be share with charter schools.

Strategies

The most common way school districts respond to charter schools and competition is to focus on marketing (Lubienski, 2005; Kasman & Loeb, 2013). Often this is a quick and easy way to reach parents who are essentially the customer. Both school districts were working to improve in this area and felt that they needed to shape a narrative about their school and tell an attractive story about all the good that is happening within. All of the leaders in both districts felt pride about the many great programs and achievements in their schools and had begun working harder to make those achievements more widely known. The presence of charter school competition no doubt influenced some of this marketing effort.

One way both school districts were communicating with the community was through media. They used social media as well as traditional media to share positive things happening in their schools and also utilized a public information officer. Both districts were active on Twitter and Facebook and had improved their school district webpages. Additionally, they partnered with local television news for promoting positive news stories and also appeared on radio stations. City Schools sent out annual reports to all of the local community and County Schools filmed a video update monthly.

Additionally, both districts reached out more thoughtfully to parents in a variety of settings in order to provide information. School leaders emphasized good customer service and the importance of listening to parents and gaining feedback from all stakeholders. Both school districts utilized school tours to inform and also recruit students to their schools. Both superintendents had various parent groups who they met with regularly, as well as teachers, and valued the input of these groups.

While it was clear both school districts believed their school systems had improved in marketing their school districts, the impetus for this change was less clear. Opinions varied as to why they were trying to improve in this area. Most of those in County Schools did not believe the focus on public relations was a result of competition from Forest Charter Academy. They shared that it was a focus of their new superintendent who shared that he believed County Schools needed to tell about all the great things happening in the school district. The superintendent of County Schools said that the district had undergone major changes in the area of public relations, but it was not as a result of the charter school. While most of the leaders in County Schools did not

believe the district improved public relations because of the charter school, several did acknowledge the district was more cognizant of promoting the good things happening and that the district was aware of the increased competition.

Leaders in City Schools were aware that parents were choosing the charter school because of the perception that the charter school was better, which they believed had to do with the quality of Forest Charter Academy's marketing. These perceptions caused City Schools to work towards improving in areas such as marketing and to become more innovative. The superintendent acknowledged that the district was more focused on being competitive and sharing the good things happening in City Schools because of the influence of Forest Charter Academy. However, the main impetus for improving in the area of public relations was ultimately for the betterment of the student. City Schools wanted to let parents know about all the exciting opportunities that their school district offered in hopes that students would be successful in school and life.

Teacher Recruitment

Both school districts are dealing with a state-wide teacher shortage. Fewer educators are coming out of teacher preparation programs and now the charter school is also competing for those same teachers. Both districts were using strategies to recruit teachers to their respective districts. County Schools and City Schools were working closely with various university teacher preparation programs and finding strong candidates from among the students who completed internships and student teaching in their district. Having student teachers allowed both school districts to find solid

candidates and offer them early contracts. In fact, County Schools had offered five or six early contracts in the past year.

Both traditional school districts were also going to recruitment fairs as in the past, but were being more selective in the ones they chose to attend. They were also conducting research to find candidates. Finally, County Schools was beginning a pilot teacher preparation program called Future Teachers of North Carolina at one of their high schools, which was an enactment of Senate Bill 598. This program will allow juniors and seniors to take two different teacher preparation courses for college credit and will help aid in growing teachers from within the district. The first of these classes will help students learn about the role of a teacher and the licensure process among many other things. The second course would offer students opportunities to have real-world experiences in classrooms.

Resource Allocation

Another strategy that school districts use when facing competition is to reallocate resources (Arsen & Ni, 2012). Traditional public school districts might move more money into academic programs and away from other areas. Neither district in this study responded to the charter school through a change in the allocation of resources, at least not any changes that they shared in the interviews. When districts face competition for a short period of time, as both districts had, they are less likely to reallocate resources as compared to districts where charter schools are more established (Arsen & Ni, 2012). It will be interesting to see if these districts feel pressured to reallocate resources in the future.

Reflecting on Market Theory

As mentioned in the first chapter, I drew on market theory in trying to understand the influence of charter schools on public schools. Market theory is an outgrowth and logical extension of neoliberal ideology, which is an economic doctrine that espouses the belief that a free market of choice, in which the consumer is free to choose from among a range of options, results in better products for the consumer. Market theorists argue that the consumer, which in the case of education is parents and students, should have more choices available to them than just traditional public schools. Charter schools are one of those choices and provide a viable option for those who cannot afford private school but who want an experience different from the one that has historically been available to them. The logic of market theory is that if charter schools are more innovative and a better option, traditional public schools will lose students, which would result in the loss of resources. With the loss of resources, public schools will need to respond by trying to improve in order to become a viable option again.

In viewing this study through the lens of market theory, I have three key observations. First, traditional public school leaders would need to perceive an impact and competitive pressure in order to feel the need to respond to charter schools. For City Schools, this impact was primarily felt through the loss of high-achieving students and White flight. With the loss of high-achieving students, leaders felt the district would be impacted academically and lose parent resources. This loss, in turn, might create a perception that the school district was not effective in providing high-quality educational opportunities and a rigorous learning environment. For County Schools this impact was

through student attrition, which impacted only certain school zones in the district.

Through myriad factors, including the charter school, one school in that zone had become a concern because the building was half empty. The loss of students resulted in a fiscal impact on the district as well, although I am not sure how substantial.

Second, if market theory was correct, both school districts would try and respond to this competition. While both districts did improve in the areas of curriculum offerings and marketing, it is not clear if this was due to the charter school alone, although surely this was a factor. Competition in general, and the nature of public education in the 21st century, are entangled in any response. Both school districts were innovative and worked to create a multitude of exciting opportunities for their students. Still, it did seem like City Schools was endeavoring to get students back from Forest Academy, while County Schools was trying to slow the number of students leaving their district to go to the charter school and other alternatives to traditional public schools.

Third, consistent with this theory, we would expect both school districts to model the practices and innovations of the charter school. Based on the interviews conducted during this study, I do not believe either district was trying to emulate the practices of the charter schools, although River Mountain 6-12 shared some of the charter school practices and allure. For the most part, the school leaders in both districts did not believe the charter school was offering anything new or innovative that they were not already doing. This was consistent with Rofes's (1998) claim that public school officials do not believe that charter schools provide new ways of doing things, although admittedly Rofes was writing nearly 20 years ago. However, the school leaders in this study did not seem

to believe the charter school could compete with the amount of different options and offerings that were presented to students via public schools. Many of the school leaders acknowledged that the charter school had done a really good job of marketing themselves and creating the perception that they were the only ones offering innovative practices and programs. If there was anything that could be garnered from the charter school, it was their excellent public relations and marketing processes.

Suggestions for Future Research

In this study I explored the experiences of two public school districts in North Carolina with a charter school, and ultimately what changes, if any, they implemented as a result of this competition. As there are few studies on how traditional school districts are responding to charter school, I hoped that this study would aid in providing more insight into the impact of charter schools on rural school districts and their response. The participants in this study were traditional public school leaders including superintendents, central office personnel, and principals from two rural school districts. These participants shared their experiences with a charter school and possible strategies for competing.

This study was small and only included two school districts and 20 school leaders. It was also largely exploratory. Further studies replicated in rural settings could include more school districts and more school leaders. More types of these same studies could help to create a fuller picture and more complete understanding of the impact of charter school on traditional public schools in rural areas and how they are responding.

New studies might also focus solely on larger or smaller school districts or on the response to multiple charter schools. Additionally, it would be interesting to learn about

the perspectives of a variety of additional school personnel like school board members, assistant principals, and teachers. Studies could also be broadened to include stakeholders from the community such as parents and business leaders. While district leaders had thoughts about why parents were leaving their district, parents would be able to provide a much richer picture of the allure of charter schools, as well as what makes them remain in traditional public schools. Other school districts besides those in rural areas could also be studied. The impact on urban school districts and the responses of those leaders might be completely different. Another unique perspective might be to interview charter school leaders on this same issue, thus providing new insight into how they see their role in improving education overall in this country. Additionally, studies of a quantitative nature or mixed methods might lead to different results beyond just perceptions, showing measurable impacts in terms of achievement and shifting demographics.

Implications for Practice

For school administrators like myself, the importance of marketing a school stood out as key theme of this study. Students going to school today have a variety of options such as charter schools, homeschools, private schools, magnet schools, and virtual schools. In light of this competition, it is important to promote all the great things happening in public schools, not just because many great things are indeed happening. The charter school in this study did an excellent job of shaping perception through excellent marketing. Additionally, customer service in traditional public schools must be

inviting. It is important to ensure that when people call or visit the school, they are treated with respect and care.

One of the arguments made by charter school advocates is that they can enhance educational innovation. No doubt traditional public schools can do this as well, and it is incumbent upon education leaders to offer programs that are challenging, contemporary, and innovative. Programs and course offerings should give our students leverage in whatever field of study they might one day pursue. Students should want to come to school because there is something to pique the interest of each and every student.

Whether a student wants to attend a university, a community college, join the military, or begin working, we should have course offerings that propel the student in that direction.

The traditional public schools in the two districts I studied recognized this need and had developed and were developing new programs to meet this need. While there is no clear evidence that the charter school caused this change in thinking, it certainly helped the traditional public schools to put a greater emphasis on studying and updating their own programs and curricula.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

Although there is considerable research on charter schools, most of the research conducted has involved comparing the achievement of students in charter schools to their traditional public school counterparts. The focus has rarely been on how public school district leaders are responding to the perceived charter school impact on traditional public schools. As a principal who can identify with this topic, I know that there are other administrators, district level leaders, and stakeholders who would find a study of this

nature practical and relevant to their contexts and concerns. Through this research, they might better understand the impact they have experienced and plan their responses to that impact. Other leaders will benefit from the strategies and initiatives shared by public school leaders for the betterment of traditional public school districts.

I strongly believe in public education and that it should be the great equalizer. Public education is vital in affording all people equal opportunity, regardless of race, class, or gender or other such variables. As the school choice movement grows in North Carolina, charter schools will likely continue to be a vital aspect of this movement. School districts and educators can no longer dismiss charter schools as a passing fad. Thus, understanding how districts are responding to charter schools will no doubt benefit leaders of public schools. School systems are beginning to develop strategies in response to charter schools, but this topic is so new that there is little research published. While my study was preliminary in nature, I learned a number of valuable ways in which school districts could better market themselves in order to compete with the expanding array of educational options. Indeed, one of the biggest lessons is that traditional public schools need to take marketing seriously, something they rarely had to do when they held a monopoly.

Charter schools have continued to expand across our state and nation. In the mostly rural county that I studied in North Carolina, that expansion was occurring. Though Forest Academy Charter was the first charter school in the district, it was not the only one impacting the county. Other charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling all were shaping the changing landscape in both school districts. Parents

and students now have a growing range of options from which to choose. Still, Forest Academy Charter appeared to be having the greatest impact among the many school alternatives for students in this county. Parents were choosing the charter school and other options for a variety of reasons, often non-academic ones. For example, families seem drawn to the charter school because of their added flexibility, lunch options, and a greater chance for their children to participate in school athletics. The smaller setting provided by the charter school feels more personal and safer in contrast to larger middle and high schools. The charter school also had brand new facilities and marketed their school in a variety of ways. They had successfully helped create the perception of being a place for innovation and creativity. Although their academic performance is comparable to the traditional public schools, parents were not solely focused on academics and often parents do not understand all the accountability numbers associated with good school performance. Parents do remember how they are treated when they visit a school and the customer service provided to them.

As I conclude my research, I came away impressed with the leaders in both school districts and appreciated their candor and genuine concern for public education. I also thought about the students my school had lost to a charter school. As I conducted this study, I realized how important school perception can be. How were parents viewing my school? As I got further into this study, I saw that school academic performance was but one of the many factors about which parents were concerned. Parents wanted personalized learning in a safe environment. They wanted multiple pathways, opportunities, and options for their children to be successful. All of this is occurring in

traditional public schools and in my school, although at times we can do all of them better.

Conducting this study caused me to think about new ways to market my school more effectively and strategies to help my students become more successful, while also helping us to retain the students who are zoned for our school. Both school districts understood the power of perception and in telling their story. They understood that establishing positive relationships with our community and stakeholders has never been more important. I was also impressed that several of the leaders from both districts seemed to view competition as something that was good for their school districts and did not view the charter school as some bad entity out to destroy public education. In fact, both school districts were more focused on how they could improve for the benefit of their students. This was the defining aspect of this study for me: that no matter what, we must continue to serve our students better. As Mr. Bagley stated, “I firmly believe we are serving students in a better way because of charter schools.” If public schools are serving students better, then the charter school movement may not be as problematic as many perceive it to be.

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