

COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

**COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY ON  
A MICHIGAN CHARTER SCHOOL'S PERSPECTIVE**

**By**

**Tim Tenneriello**

**A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of  
Michigan-Flint in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the  
degree of**

**Doctor of Education**

**Education Department**

**Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Annie McMahon Whitlock**



**Dissertation Committee Member: Dr. Pamela Ross McClain  
Dissertation Committee Member: Dr. Sarah Pazur**

**University of Michigan-Flint**

**2022, May**

COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

**COPYRIGHT BY  
TIM TENNERIELLO  
2022**

## COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

### DEDICATION

There are four people I want to dedicate this work to. First, my dad, Chris Tenneriello. I could not have asked for a better example and role model in this life. The discipline and self-sacrifice that you live on a daily basis is a testimony to the heart and soul of who you are as a man, husband, father, grandfather, and pastor. It has been a privilege to learn from you and watch you walk the talk regardless of the cost to you personally. If I can be half the man you are I will consider that a life well lived. To borrow the analogy from John of Salisbury, I often feel like a dwarf sitting on the shoulder of a giant. It is not that I am able to see more and things that are more distant, than you did, not because my sight is superior or because I am taller than you, but because you raise me up, and by your great stature add to mine. Proverbs 20:7 says it best. “A righteous man who walks in his integrity – How blessed are his sons after him.” I love you, Dad!

Secondly, the next two people are my children, Soren Elise and Leland Fiske. You are my everything. You have each unlocked a part of my heart that I did not know existed. As imperfect as I am, please know everything I do in life is for you. My love for you could fill the oceans and the skies. While you were both too young to see the work and sacrifices made by both your mother and I in my pursuit of this accomplishment, I don’t ever want you to forget that you can accomplish anything you put your mind to. Establish your goals and priorities and then be relentless in the pursuit of them. Surround yourself with people that support you and your dreams, and who push you to always be better. I will always be by your side supporting you and cheering you on. Don’t ever forget that I love you fiercely and I am your biggest cheerleader.

## COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Lastly, I dedicate this work to me in 30 years. Future 63-year-old Tim, when you look back at this accomplishment, I hope you are able to see this as the base camp to your journey and not your summit. To most, the terminal degree is the finish line or the top of the mountain. You were just getting started. When you look back 30 years after this was written, I pray that you never coasted. I pray that you never rested on what you had done or accomplished. I pray that you relentlessly pursued greatness in all areas of your life. I pray you will have always held your head high because you did your absolute best. I pray that you always lifted up those around you. I pray that your goals, dreams, and ambitions never got small. I pray that you never settled for good enough. I pray you never got weighed down with self-doubt or anxiousness. Keep the most important things the most important things and walk in boldness that you can conquer anything that comes your way.

## COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are not enough words of gratitude to express the thankfulness in my heart to the many people that have helped me along my journey to get to this point. To my advisors throughout this process, Dr. Annie McMahon Whitlock, Dr. Pamela Ross McClain, and Dr. Sarah Pazur, I cannot thank you enough for your support, insight, and willingness to guide me throughout this crazy process. Dr. McMahon Whitlock, as my dissertation chair, I am so appreciative that you were willing to step in and fill the gap in less than ideal circumstances to lead the way towards helping me complete this feat! Your encouraging spirit met me at a time where I was considering giving up and thought that ABD might be my fate. Thank you for your encouragement and support to accomplish this goal of mine. Dr. Ross McClain, thank you for your pushing my thinking and writing. Your input pushed me to clarify and simplify my writing and my research. Dr. Sarah Pazur, I am grateful for your willingness to volunteer your time to be along on this journey with me. Thanks for being a sounding board and consultant during times of stress. I have so much respect for your insight, both as a practitioner and a scholar. One advisor I do need to acknowledge is my initial dissertation chair, Dr. Tyrone Bynoe. There were several times I did not think I had it in me to finish, but the moments along the way that you challenged my writing, thinking, and process I now see as a way of refinement that was preparing me to succeed all along. Thank you for your pursuit of excellence in me and my work.

There are also a handful of people that I am so fortunate to work with that have been a tremendous encouragement throughout the last three years during the completion of my dissertation. For starters, Chris Matheson. Chris, 15 years ago I, very randomly, invited you to

## COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

attend my high school open house because I was hoping to add another \$20 into my college fund. Little did I know that invite would blossom into 15 years of mentorship, friendship, and business partnership. People are drawn to you, in part, because you bring the best out of people by your mere presence. I am honored to be one of those people. Thank you, my friend...looking forward to celebrating both of our accomplishments in this program together soon. One other individual I am fortunate to work with that has been such an encouragement and cheerleader along the way of this journey is Dr. Ticheal Jones. As one that has gone before, thank you for your consistent encouragement to finish. Dr. Jones, the ultimate sounding board, thought partner, and confidante, I am so thankful for you and your listening ear.

In an effort to save the absolute best for last--my wife, Holly. You are the love of my life and my forever soulmate. I could have never, not in a million years, finished this without your love and support. Trying to write a dissertation with two small kids, navigating a global pandemic, acquiring a business, and remodeling a house is not for the faint of heart, but the only way those things are possible is if I am able to have complete confidence in you and all you do for me and our family. Your support of my dreams and ambitions gives me the confidence to take on the world, and with you by my side there are no limits to what we can accomplish!

## COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

### ABSTRACT

The performance of public education in Michigan has been significantly below average across the country for decades (US News, 2019). Lawmakers in Michigan sought to remedy this in the 1990's with the introduction of charter schools into the educational landscape. Throughout the years, there has been significant debate around whether charter schools have been effective. One of the central ideas behind charter schools is that the infusion of competition will raise the level of performance of public education across the board. This has not shown to be true as Michigan still is in the bottom half of performance across the country (Arellano et al., 2016). The possibility exists that while competition was infused into the market, it was never adopted by educators to improve practice. This case study explored how charter school administrators and board members viewed the role competition had on their decision making and how they described their competitive advantage. A single exploratory case study methodology was used to conduct this study. Findings indicated charter school educators and board members of the case school could identify their competitive advantages around three key areas: responsiveness to stakeholders, school safety and security, and school quality. The findings also indicated the pressure to balance academic rigor with student enrollment.

*Keywords:* Charter schools, competition, rigor, achievement, competitive advantage, choice

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

INTRODUCTION .....	1
Problem Statement .....	1
Research Questions .....	4
Conceptual Framework .....	5
<i>Substance</i> .....	6
<i>Expression</i> .....	7
<i>Locale</i> .....	8
<i>Effect</i> .....	8
<i>Cause</i> .....	9
<i>Time-Span</i> .....	9
Key Definitions .....	11
Summary .....	15
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	16
Background of Charter Schools .....	16
<i>Purpose</i> .....	16
<i>National History</i> .....	23
Effectiveness of Charter Schools .....	33
<i>Charter vs. Charter Comparison</i> .....	35
<i>Charter vs. Traditional Schools Comparison</i> .....	37
Chapter Summary .....	47
METHOD .....	50
Research Questions .....	50
Research Design .....	51
<i>Participant Sampling</i> .....	53
Delimitations .....	54
Data Sources .....	56
<i>Interview Questions</i> .....	56
<i>Field Notes</i> .....	57
<i>Document Review Form</i> .....	57
Research Techniques .....	57
<i>Participant Interview</i> .....	57
<i>Charter School Application Documents</i> .....	58
<i>Observation of School Board Meetings</i> .....	59
Data Analysis Techniques .....	64
<i>Participant Interview</i> .....	64
<i>Supplemental Data</i> .....	73
Research Ethics .....	73
<i>Informed Consent</i> .....	73



# COMPETITION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

FINDINGS .....	75
Demographics .....	75
Describing Competitive Advantages .....	76
<i>Substance of Competitive Advantages Is Homogeneous and Kinetic</i> .....	77
<i>Expression of Competitive Advantages Is Compound and Tangible</i> .....	80
<i>Locale of the Advantages Is Individual- and Firm-Bound</i> .....	83
<i>Effects Are Relative</i> .....	84
<i>Cause of Advantages Was Strategic but Shifting to Spontaneous</i> .....	85
<i>Time-Span of Advantages Is Temporal</i> .....	86
<i>Summary of Competitive Advantages</i> .....	87
Influence of Competition on Decision-Making .....	88
Influence of Competition on the Academic Program .....	91
Influence of Competition on Organizational Structure.....	94
Summary .....	98
DISCUSSION.....	99
Competitive Advantages .....	101
Imitation Rather than Collaboration .....	103
Imitation of Competing Schools' Less Rigorous Academic Programs .....	105
Operational Structure as a Competitive Advantage.....	107
Recommendations for Practice .....	108
Recommendations for Future Research .....	114
Conclusion .....	115
REFERENCES .....	117
APPENDIX A - INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....	136
APPENDIX B - INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	139
APPENDIX C - DOCUMENT DATA COLLECTION FORM.....	140
APPENDIX D - KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW AND DIRECT OBSERVATION NOTE- TAKING TEMPLATE .....	141

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1 - Participant Demographics .....	54
Table 2 - Example of Clustering of Open Codes Under an Axial Code.....	69
Table 3 - Modification of Open Codes Through Selective Coding .....	71
Table 4 - Organization of an Axial Code into Sub-themes Through Selective Coding .....	72
Table 5 - Clustering of Open Codes Under Research Question 2 .....	89
Table 6 - Clustering of Open Codes Under Research Question 3 .....	92
Table 7 - Clustering of Open Codes Under Research Question 4 .....	95

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1 - Ma's SELECT Framework for Competitive Advantage ..... 6  
Figure 2 - Illustration of the Charter School Concept..... 19  
Figure 3 - Williams and Moser Non-Linear Process for Qualitative Research ..... 65

## **Introduction**

This case study is designed to identify and describe the phenomenon of competition as experienced by charter school administrators and school board members of an urban charter school located in Genesee County, MI. Flint, MI has seen a dramatic rise in the placement of students into charter schools. Over half of the resident students in Flint are attending local charter schools (David, Hesla, & Pendergrass, 2017). As a result, it is important to identify and describe the role of competition in one of the high-performing charter schools that serves a large portion of the students that have chosen to leave the local traditional public district. Through the use of case study research design, this study explores the role competition plays in the decision-making and strategic process of a local charter school's bounded context. This approach gives voice to charter school educators in an under-researched and under-developed segment of the conversation regarding school choice as a public education reform strategy. This study has a significant impact on the very complex public policy of school choice.

## **Problem Statement**

Overall, the performance of public education in Michigan is dismal. In 2019, the US News and World Report ranked Michigan 37<sup>th</sup> in the country in overall public education performance. According to that report, Michigan was ranked in the bottom 50% of the United States in graduation rates, National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) performance in math and reading, and preschool enrollment. When assessing the longitudinal data regarding academic performance in Michigan, Michigan ranked 28<sup>th</sup> in the nation for fourth grade reading achievement in 2003 and declined to 41<sup>st</sup> by 2015 (Arellano et al., 2016). Based on this research, it has been projected that Michigan could fall as low as 48<sup>th</sup> in the rankings for fourth grade reaching achievement by 2030. Arellano, Bedi, and Gallagher (2019) show that math

performance results do not show as steep of decline, but the state did have a decline in math performance from 34<sup>th</sup> place in 2003 to 38<sup>th</sup> place in 2015. It has been projected that Michigan could fall as low as 43<sup>rd</sup> in the rankings for eighth grade math achievement by 2030. Michigan also ranks near the bottom of all states in the United States in academic outcomes for the most vulnerable students (Arellano, 2019). This research identifies the undesirable academic performance of public education in Michigan. It also highlights the need for drastic improvement for Michigan to have a competitive public education sector within the country.

In addition to Michigan's academic performance, funding is a major problem in Michigan. When accounting for inflation, Michigan has seen a 30% decline in overall K-12 education funding and a 22% decline in per-pupil revenue between 2002 and 2015 (Arsen, Delpier, & Nagel, 2019). Michigan ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> in the country in school funding equity in 2018 (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). This was down one place from the 42<sup>nd</sup> ranking in 2015 (Ushomirsky & Williams, 2015). School funding equity represents the disparity in funding between the state's highest funded and lowest funded districts when combining state and local revenues. This funding inequity is manifested in a gap of \$11,777 in teacher salary equity between the highest and lowest poverty districts (Arellano et al., 2016). The funding challenges in Michigan exacerbate the academic performance crisis in the state as schools have limited financial resources to address the problems they face.

Michigan is over 25 years removed from the opening of the first charter school and facing declining academic performance and funding. Choice theory in education, espoused by Milton Friedman in the 1950's, rests on the premise that infusion of competition into public education will increase educational performance. Charter schools have taken root as a primary school choice reform, not only in Michigan, but 43 other states and the District of Columbia

(Bradford, 2018; Bynoe & Armstead, 2018). Many studies have been conducted to evaluate the efficacy and efficiency of this school choice reform (Clark et al., 2015; Erickson et al., 2013; Larkin, 2016; Ross, 2010). The results from these studies are not conclusive in overall effectiveness of this reform across the country. There is some research that shows that some charter schools can provide increased outcomes for students that attend them (Angrist et al., 2013; Cohodes 2018; Denice, 2014; Gleason et al., 2010; Goodman, 2013; Ngubeni, 2016; Osborne 2015; Poole 2016; Sargard 2017; Schwalbach, 2019; Stone 2012; Wang, 2016; Winters 2012). but this is not found to be true with all charter schools (Grady, 2012; Ni, 2009; Orfield and Luce, 2016; Wall, 2011). The lack of conclusive evidence of effectiveness, as measured by academic comparisons between charter schools and traditional public schools, calls for a more nuanced exploration of the phenomenon of competition within public education.

Regardless of if either type of school academically outperforms the other, there is an assumption that educators from traditional public and charter schools view their work in a competitive fashion. This assumption has been challenged in several qualitative studies that have explored traditional public administrators' perceptions of charter schools (Jones, 2014; Parker, 2009). These studies address if those perceptions stir a competitive approach to improving their own academic programs or operational structures. Both studies showed that traditional public school administrators lament the loss of students and revenue to charter schools. They are not focused on learning from or trying to "beat" the charter schools with whom they are competing. These two studies showcase the value in engaging with practitioners when seeking to understand how a particular phenomenon is experienced in the field.

Qualitative studies exploring the role competition plays in public education are far scarcer than their quantitative comparison studies counterparts. Even fewer studies exist that

explore the idea of competition through the lens of a charter school educator. There have been no such studies conducted in this area within the state of Michigan. One of the foundational elements of charter schools is the promise to infuse competition into public education. This study brings charter school educators' voices to the forefront. The study takes an exploratory approach into a single urban charter school to identify and describe how the infusion of competition is perceived in these educators' setting.

### **Research Questions**

This case study will contribute to the existing literature by providing an exploratory search into the perceptions of charter school leadership (both administrators and board members) from a single urban charter school on the role competition plays within their work. This exploratory case study will seek to answer the following research questions:

1. Are charter school administrators and school board members of a single urban charter school able to identify and describe their competitive advantage?
2. How do charter school administrators and school board members of a single urban charter school identify and describe the influence of competition with surrounding school districts has on their decision-making and strategic processes?
3. How has competition influenced the academic program of an urban charter school?
4. How has competition influenced the operational structure of an urban charter school?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of charter school administrators within a mid-sized K-12 charter school in Genesee County, Michigan to have a better understanding of the perceived role that competition has played in their work and decision-making. This study moves past surface level acknowledgement of the role of competition, and closely examine how administrators and school board members in a charter school perceive their

competitive advantage, and if that advantage has driven change and innovation through their decision-making process. After gaining this understanding, the findings are evaluated through the lens of the SELECT Framework of competitive advantage and the methodological framework of the study as well as against the backdrop of the functions of charter schools (Ma, 1999). This study provides qualitative evidence by identifying and describing the infusion of competition on improving practices in a charter school located in Genesee County, MI. This contributes to the greater body of literature on how charter school administrators and school board members conceptualize the role of competition on their operations and decision-making.

### **Conceptual Framework**

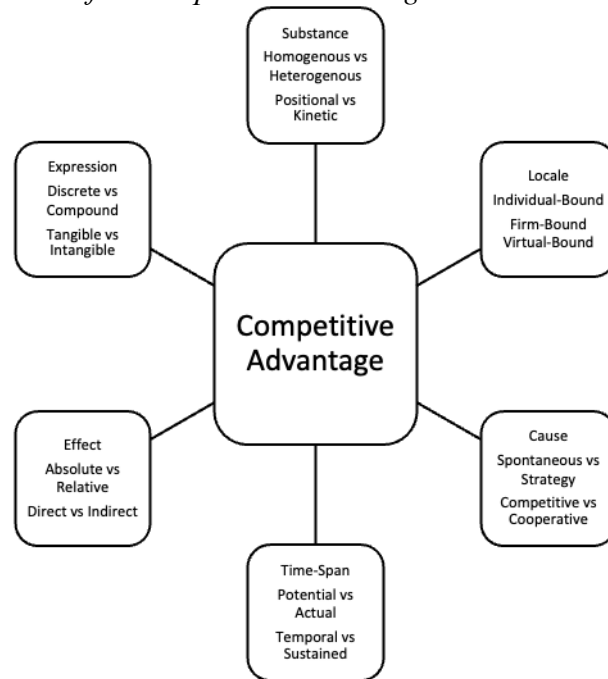
This study is designed through the lens of a SELECT framework for competitive advantage and through the lens of the researcher's goals and interests. The SELECT framework for competitive advantage is depicted in Figure 1 (Ma, 1999). The conceptual framework serves as the backdrop for the study. This study explores the phenomenon of competition by analyzing the competitive advantage within an urban charter school. School administrators' vision, strategic planning, decision-making, change management, and implementation processes are foundational to the competitive advantage of school. As such, this framework, along with the researcher's interests and goals, provide the blueprint for conducting the study.

At the foundational level, competitive advantage is how an organization creates more value than a rival organization, or how an organization contributes to their industry in a way that is exclusive and irreplaceable. This is the basis for Ma's (1999) work on a SELECT framework for competitive advantage as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1**

*Ma's SELECT Framework for Competitive Advantage*



Ma identified six elements of competitive advantage. These six elements are substance, expression, locale, effect, cause, and time-span. Ma believed that these six elements must be clearly defined when trying to understand the competitive advantage that is present within an organization. The six elements can lead to a greater understanding of the phenomena of competition within a single urban charter school by providing a framework with which to analyze the data collected. Ma identified two basic schemes to categorize the substance of the six elements of competitive advantage. The elements and basic schemes of competitive advantage as described by Ma will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

### ***Substance***

The substance of competitive advantage is comprised of evaluating the positional or kinetic advantages as well as the homogenous and heterogeneous advantages present within an organization. Positional advantages are derived from an organization's position in the market.

Examples of this could be company culture, size-based advantages, economy of scale, or talent within the organization. Kinetic advantages refer to the organization's ability to respond to market influences. Examples of kinetic advantages would be the ability to create or identify new market opportunities, mobilization of resources to meet a need for a consumer, or efficiency of processes within the organization.

The second basic scheme of substance advantages rests in the differences in homogenous and heterogenous advantages. Homogenous advantages refer to organizations that do the exact same thing, but which organization does it better. This advantage is built on superiority of efficiency in the way they conduct business. Heterogenous advantages are gained by either doing things completely different or changing the market to provide more value to the consumer. Heterogenous advantages are unique and difficult to replicate.

### ***Expression***

The expression of competitive advantage is the structural form of the phenomenon of competition. The expression shows how competitive advantage is observed. The expression takes form in either tangible or intangible advantages and discrete or compound advantages. Ma (1999) describes tangible advantage as an advantage that is readily observed in a visible form or data (p. 711). In the educational setting this could be academic accolades or facilities. Intangible advantages are often hidden or difficult to concretely describe. Intangible advantages can be found in things like reputation or organizational culture. Intangible advantages often are similar to heterogenous advantages as they are difficult to duplicate or replicate.

Discrete advantages often are found in positional advantages. These are advantages that singular and stand-alone in nature. A discrete advantage in schools could be the location of the school in relationship to the surrounding neighborhoods. Compound advantages are a series of

smaller advantages that work together to develop a superior competitive advantage. Compound advantages often are linked to kinetic advantages.

### *Locale*

The locale of competitive advantage is an important element to examine. The locale can be found at three different levels – individual, firm, or virtual. Individual-bound advantage is a competitive advantage based on a particular individual or asset. This could be an outstanding school leader or dynamic school board president. The advantage is found in a singular person or thing. The individual advantage is extremely difficult to replicate. A firm-bound advantage is shaped entirely by the organization. This could be organizational culture, programming, or philosophy that creates the competitive advantage. Lastly, virtual-bound advantages are comprised of outside influences that exert pressure in the marketplace that favor a particular organization. Typically, virtual-bound advantages are not in the direct control of the organization. As such, this advantage makes the organization less likely to benefit or gain from the competitive advantage over long periods of time.

### *Effect*

The strength of the effect of competitive advantage can be observed as either absolute advantage or relative advantage. Absolute advantage results from an overwhelming, insurmountable advantage. This could be seen by a large majority share of any particular market. Absolute advantages and tangible advantages are often interrelated. Conversely, relative advantages are smaller in nature and more nuanced. Ma (1999) also describes direct and indirect advantages as advantages that influence the competitive advantage of an organization (p. 713). Direct advantages contribute to the value provided by a firm in a direct manner. An example of a direct advantage could be a school's training and professional development system for teachers.

This direct advantage has a direct impact on the value created by the school. An indirect advantage is more intangible. Indirect advantages are often smaller in nature and indirectly impact a direct advantage by contributing to the direct advantage at some point along the value chain. Indirect advantages could be the flexibility in scheduling school staff workdays. This would indirectly impact a professional development system that would make it more conducive or give rise to that direct advantage.

### ***Cause***

The cause of competitive advantage can be categorized as either being spontaneous or strategic. Spontaneous causes could be perceived as luck or because of environmental changes that impact an industry, as was identified in the virtual-bound locale. Strategic causes are more of purposeful decisions that are derived from either cooperation or competition or a combination of the two things. Strategic causes generally are the result of deliberate action. The identification of the cause of the competitive advantage is imperative when determining the replication of success.

### ***Time-Span***

Lastly, the lifespan of an advantage is a critical element of competitive advantage. The time-span advantage is categorized in potential or actual advantages and temporal or sustained advantages. When evaluating a competitive advantage, it should be determined if the advantage is being actualized or is there just a potential for the advantage to materialize based on additional factors. The same holds true for the longevity of the competitive advantage. Is the advantage a phase or is the advantage under threat of being eroded over time? This element indicates the long-term sustainability of the competitive advantage.

As described above, the SELECT framework for competitive advantage provides the structure and rigor with which data will be collected, analyzed, and reported throughout this study. The SELECT framework provides a series of individual and interrelated elements that are a robust blueprint for exploring and understanding the phenomenon of competition, from the charter school perspective, within the public education market of Genesee County, MI.

### **Limitations**

This research study was established after a careful evaluation and review of the existing literature surrounding choice in public education and charter schools. Through this review, the study adopted a framework which would service as the foundation to address the research questions posed. As discussed in the methodology chapter, various measures of validity were used to establish a trustworthiness in the findings. Notwithstanding these strengths, there are several limitations that were present within this study.

One such limitation is subjectivity and bias. The research design in this study relied heavily on the researcher to collect and analyze the data. Subjectivity and bias are present in the collection, analyzing, and reporting of data, because researchers have their own experiences and opinions that can intermingle with the data (Maxwell, (2013). To combat this, as referenced throughout the methodology chapter, the researcher utilized several techniques to account for any potential bias and subjectivity. These techniques include the use of triangulation of data, journaling, field notes, and verification of accuracy of transcripts through member-checking.

Another limitation was the single site nature of this case study. The single site allowed the researcher to take a deeper dive into the data of the school that participated in the study. This singular deep dive does limit the generalizability of the findings present within the study. This study was not designed to provide a generalizing of the findings to directly dictate a particular

policy stance. If this study were to be built on by future researchers, they should consider a larger sample size to address the generalizability of the findings.

This study is relying on genuine and truthful responses from the participants. There is the potential that responses could be unauthentic due to concerns of retaliations from opinions expressed. The researcher took steps to combat this by ensuring the anonymity of participants, and regularly expressed to the participants that their individual responses will remain confidential and anonymous. This was done to build trust and rapport with each participant.

The final limitation is the broad nature of the concept of competition. All the participants come to the discussion regarding the role that competition plays in the work of managing and overseeing a school with slightly different perceptions of what that means and looks like. The lack of standardization of the concept with all the participants was able to be captured through the data collection, coding, and analysis process through the use of thick and rich descriptions.

### **Key Definitions**

As an educational leadership practitioner, it is important to acknowledge that the audience of this study may not have the same background knowledge on public education, education in Michigan, school choice, charter schools, or related topics. Therefore, this section provides key background information regarding words, terms, topics, or concepts to help the reader better understand the context of the study. This section has been updated throughout the study as new concepts were introduced to the researcher. These concepts are listed and defined in alphabetical order.

### ***Authorizers***

Each state's charter school statute references an authorizing body that is responsible for the oversight of charter schools. As a result, the authorizing body can vary from state to state.

These authorizing bodies can be individual state's Departments of Education, universities, local school districts, community colleges, intermediate school districts, or separate commissions that are set up by the state for oversight. In Michigan, according to the Revised School Code Section 380.502(4):

An authorizing body shall oversee, or shall contract with an intermediate school district, community college, or state public university to oversee, each public school academy operating under a contract issued by the authorizing body. The authorizing body is responsible for overseeing compliance by the board of directors with the contract and all applicable law (p. 1).

These authorizing bodies create a contract with the charter school that addresses academic, financial, and compliance tasks that the individual school board agrees to abide by pursuant to the charter contract. Universities and community colleges are the primary authorizers in Michigan.

### ***Charter Schools***

Charter schools are tuition-free, non-selective public schools. Charter schools in Michigan are often referred to as public school academies. In Michigan, charter schools are considered both individual schools and their own school district. Charter schools reside within local traditional public school district boundaries, but they do not have established district boundaries. Charter schools are required to have an appointed school board by their authorizing body. Michigan charter schools can be authorized by intermediate school districts, local school districts, universities, or community colleges. Charter schools can be self-managed, or the school board can enter into a management agreement with either a non-profit or a for-profit management organization (David, 2017).

***Competition***

Competition in education takes on various forms. For this study, competition will be defined as the effort of schools acting independently to secure the enrollment of students by offering the most favorable terms (Council of Economic Advisors, 2021). These terms can be described as academic outcomes, facility offerings, culture, programmatic structures, organizational elements such as school calendar or school day, extracurricular offerings, and/or before and after school programming.

***Competitive Advantage***

Competitive advantage is the basis for superior performance by creating more value to customers than rival organizations (Ma, 1999). Competitive advantage is defined by six primary elements – substance, expression, locale, effect, cause, and time-span. According to Ma, these six elements of competitive advantage are interrelated and understanding the interworking of these elements is essential to achieving superior performance. Ma's SELECT framework of competitive advantage serves as the conceptual framework for this study.

***Free Market Theory***

This is an economic ideology that is characterized by five major principles – private property, freedom of choice, motive of self-interest, competition, system of markets and prices, limited government. Adam Smith (1776/2003) espoused these economic principles in *Wealth of Nations*. This work has served as the basis for the capitalistic economy in the United States. These principles were then expanded to education by economist, Milton Friedman (1962) to create the birth of the idea of school choice in the 1950's. This theory is addressed in greater detail in the literature review chapter.



### ***Management Organizations***

Management organizations are private entities that enter into a contract with an appointed school board of a charter school to assume the responsibility of managing a charter school.

Management organizations are often delineated into two main categories – non-profit (Charter Management Organizations or CMOs) and for-profit (Education Management Organizations or EMOs). While they have differing tax structures and internal governance models, both groups operate in similar fashions (Bynoe & Armstead, 2019; Kaplan & Owings, 2018). By entering into a management agreement, charter school boards can benefit from economies of scale for back office supports like human resources, professional development, business office, networking, data analysis, coaching, compliance, and/or special education oversight.

Management organizations function like a central office in a traditional public school district by creating a network of charter schools. Some management organizations have specific models and pedagogical approaches that are uniform across all schools, and some management organizations support the autonomous nature of each individual charter school (David, 2017).

### ***School Choice***

School choice refers to an overall education reform that applies principles of a free market economy to public education. This reform was first espoused by Milton Friedman (1955) in his article, *The Role of Government in Education*. School choice has many different applications – charter schools, vouchers, inter/intra-district public school choice, education savings accounts, tax-credit scholarships, magnet schools, homeschooling, and online learning (DeAngelis & Erickson, 2018). These types of school choice are discussed in greater detail in the literature review chapter.

### ***State Assessments***

State assessments are standardized, summative tests that public schools across the country are required to give to their students. These tests are administered and scored to determine what a student has learned. When comparing charter school student performance to traditional public school student performance most studies use state assessment data as the primary or only data source (Flaker, 2014; Harvey, 2018; Martinez, 2014; Osborne, 2015; Winters, 2012). These state assessments have high-validity content as they often undergo a significant review process prior to adoption by the individual states. In Michigan, the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP) is the state assessment. This test is administered to students in grades 3-8 and covers Math, English, Social Studies, and Science.

### **Summary**

This study will take an exploratory look into the role competition plays in charter school educators and school board members decision making. The study will be comprised of several elements. First, an in-depth review of the available literature on the history of charter schools, the effectiveness of charter schools, and the criticisms surrounding charter schools will be conducted. Secondly, the methods and research design within the study will be clearly defined and clearly identified. Thirdly, the findings of the study will be presented against the research questions presented within the study. Finally, the summary of the findings will be linked to the recommendations and discussion to tie the research into practical application at the conclusion of this study.

## **Literature Review**

School choice is a widely debated topic that can be filled with emotional narrative and void of any hard facts and data (Raymond, 2014). This review of the literature will disclose findings, as well as gaps, by comparing charter schools to each other and comparing charter schools to their traditional public-school counterparts. The first section of this literature review will analyze and synthesize research surrounding the background of the charter school movement. This review will include research surrounding the purpose of charter schools, national and Michigan history of charter schools, and the dissenting opinion of charter schools. It is important to review the literature of authors that provide a critical review of charter schools to gain a full understanding of the polarizing nature of the topic of charter schools. The next section will analyze charter school effectiveness, including research that has been conducted comparing charter schools against each other. This will be done by evaluating student achievement data from charter schools. This section will evaluate schools that have school board approved contracts with both for-profit operators and non-profit operators. The next section will provide a similar analysis and synthesis with a focus on comparisons of student achievement between traditional public schools and charter schools.

### **Background of Charter Schools**

#### ***Purpose***

The United States has a rich history of understanding the value of good education. What is not as clear is how, as a country, we define “good.” The debate surrounding public education goes back as far as 1892, when a group of ten, primarily college presidents, were convened as a council to address the state of public education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (National Education Association of the United States, 1984). At the time, there were multiple competing philosophies

about education. The 1892 Committee of Ten members were tasked with figuring out how to standardize public education across the country. The debate and recommendations from this committee still influence fundamental elements of schooling in America today. The most apparent effect of this influence is the recommendation of eight years of primary schooling and four years of high school. The debate surrounding public education has not slowed. Whether it be the Russian launch of Sputnik I in the 50's to the reports of *A Nation at Risk* and the Carnegie Forum in the 80's, the general public has been told the state of public education is inadequate (Bynoe & Armstead, 2019; Ellisor, 2001). This level of scrutiny has created an environment where states across the country are wanting an educational reform policy that will make a difference in driving the quality of education forward.

The idea that students and parents could have any choice in their schooling was typically dependent on the income status of parents. School choice was not a reality for most students. Advocates of school choice argued that the infusion of competition into the market would allow for a greater match between family need and school services (Toma & Zimmer, 2012). Milton Friedman introduced the idea of school choice or choice theory in 1955, in his work, *The Role of Government in Education*. Friedman was an economist who advocated for the principles of the free market (Bynoe & Armstead, 2019). Friedman's work first pointed out that educational systems across the country were being run as monopolies and lacked incentive to improve performance. His vision for school choice was a robust voucher system. In voucher systems, money follows each student, and parents can choose the school that best suits their needs. This infusion of competition would raise the achievement and performance across the board (Friedman, 1962). As an economist, Friedman exposed schools to scrutiny from the economic perspective. Schools now had incentive to figure out how best to operate as efficiently as

possible. While Friedman's theory called for the use of a voucher system to implement choice theory, charter schools were the reform that eventually gained widespread support and grew from within the larger framework of school choice.

Charter schools grew to become more than just a reform; they became a movement (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). The purpose of charter schools is to provide parents, who feel their child is not being served by their traditional school, the possibility of a better alternative. Charter schools address the idea that one size does not fit all when it comes to the education of students (Betts & Tang, 2008). In addition, policy makers view charter schools as a lower cost alternative than increasing funding given underperforming traditional districts and schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). Improved student performance and increase efficient use of finances are central to the purpose of charter schools. These tenants drive the idea that the market can and will regulate school quality (Loveless & Field, 2009). Regulation is built into charter policy. Charter contracts of schools call for closure in the event they cannot sustain or achieve acceptable levels of academic performance. School closure plays a significant role in the reform model. Closure removes low performing schools from the results of charter schools, and closure signifies to other charter schools that their autonomy is tied to accountability (Fox & Buchanan, 2017).

While the central purpose of charter schools rests on academic improvement and financial efficacy, there are several secondary and tertiary purposes that further define charter schools. Stambach and Becker (2007) argued charter schools were designed to be new opportunities for local governance. They highlight democracy, freedom, and competition. They create more educational opportunities for children, parents, and educators. Charter schools have low rates of unionization (Reckhow et al., 2014). As a result, advocates argue charter schools

provide educators the flexibility and freedom to be innovative in pedagogical approach.

Timpane, Brewe, and Gill (2001) described charter schools as innovation incubators, since these schools provide an avenue for educators to be creative and have the ability to try new or different approaches. Gawlick (2016) contends the autonomy of leadership in charter schools is a significant benefit toward the improvement of public education. Local control is a core function of charter schools (Wells et al., 1999). The use of charter schools was designed to change the shape of public education by supplying resistance to the typical framework of public education (Wells et al., 1999). This resistance would force schools to adapt their practices to compete for students, thereby changing the monopolistic structure of public education.

The simplest and most direct way to explain charter school policy is to provide an illustrative model. Figure 2 highlights key structural changes to public education introduced by charter school policy and the outcomes those changes were intended to produce (Miron & Nelson, 2002).

**Figure 2**

*Illustration of the Charter School Concept (adapted from Miron & Nelson, 2002)*



This illustrative model demonstrates how the key factors in structural change will lead to the different opportunity space which will play a role on final expected outcomes. Figure 2 highlights three primary areas in which structural change has been made – Choice,

Deregulation/Autonomy, and Accountability. These structural changes are integral to the charter school reform.

**Choice.** Choice is the primary structural change as referenced by Milton Friedman's Choice Theory. Choice theory is an extension of Free Market Theory. Free Market Theory is the primary basis for the economic system known as capitalism (Amadeo, 2020). In order for a market to be considered a free market, there are several characteristics of that market that must be true. Amadeo identifies these five characteristics as private property, freedom of choice, motive of self-interest, competition, a system of markets and prices, and limited government (para 5). Private property allows the property owner to enter into contracts to buy, sell or lease property in order to profit from their ownership. Freedom of choice allows owners and consumers to freely produce, market, sell, buy, or exchange goods. Amadeo (2020) highlights the only two constraints on freedom of choice are price point and availability of product. This creates an efficient system of markets and prices where the market will automatically respond to the supply and demand present in the market. Everyone acts out of motives of self-interest by sellers trying to both sell an item for the highest price possible, and purchasers are trying to acquire goods at the lowest price. As a result, the theory argues the market will regulate itself, and this can all be done with limited government interference.

In 1776, Adam Smith (1776/2003) introduced the principles of free market theory in his work, *The Wealth of Nations*. Symanska (2019) refers to Smith as the father of modern economics. She notes Smith clearly supported the idea of competition as a regulator of performance in a free market. Adam Smith referred to this as an "Invisible Hand" that guides the market through corrections in supply, demand, and performance. Competition is the mechanism by which consumers can choose between distinct products and goods. As a result, suppliers had

an incentive to provide goods at cheaper costs, higher quality, or increased productivity. Overall, Adam Smith saw this invisible hand or competition as the function by which innovation and improvement in goods and services would occur. Baetjer (2017) describes this system of self-interest as a benefit to the whole because no one is obligated to purchase or acquire any specific product. It is on the purveyor of the product to give the most value possible.

From 1776 until 1955, the Free Market Theory was applied primarily to the business market or economic studies. In the 1950's, Milton Friedman applied this theory to public education for the first time. Friedman's work pointed out that educational systems across the country were being run as monopolies and lacked incentive to improve performance. This pointed directly to the lack of competition that existed in the field of education. As such, the invisible hand was unable to move on the market to drive improved performance. His vision for school choice was a robust voucher system. In voucher systems, money follows each student, and parents can choose the school that best suits their needs. Friedman believed this infusion of competition would raise the achievement and performance across the board (Friedman, 1962). Schools now had incentive to figure out how best to operate as efficiently as possible. While Friedman's theory called for the use of a voucher system to implement choice theory, charter schools were the reform that eventually gained widespread support and grew from within the larger framework of school choice.

**Deregulation, Autonomy, and Accountability.** Deregulation, autonomy, and accountability are all secondary structural changes that are present when the primary structural change of choice is implemented. Deregulation and autonomy are tied to accountability because the tradeoff for charter schools to have the autonomy and deregulation comes with increased accountability (Lewis, 2018). This increase in accountability comes from authorizing entities that



provide the contractual charter for the school to exist. Charter contracts have benchmark performance objectives that the charter school agrees to maintain as a minimum level of satisfactory performance (Zimmer et al., 2014). This agreement comes with the understanding that failure to meet the minimum level of satisfactory performance could result in revocation of the charter contract.

As the structural changes – choice, deregulation/autonomy, and accountability – begin to be enacted, there are some immediate goals and opportunities that charter schools are able to capitalize on. Teachers have more autonomy and flexibility in their classroom. Studies show this can lead to an increase in innovative practice in pedagogical approach that will increase student achievement (Gurganious, 2017). These immediate goals and opportunities serve to raise customer satisfaction with public education and increased student achievement. Customer satisfaction plays an influential role in charter schools gaining market share. Charter schools must satisfy the parents and guardians that choose to send their students to a school outside of their assigned traditional public alternative (Cheng & Peterson, 2017). The implications from this design are still a widely debated topic. The primary debate is the outcome area of increased academic performance.

Since the inception of charter schools in the early 1990's, the charter school movement has grown exponentially. Stoddard and Corcoran (2007) argued that public charter schools were the fastest growing education reform in the country. At the time of their research, they found charter schools grew in popularity within their first thirteen years of existence to 3,000 schools across the country serving 825,000 students (p. 28). As of 2018, there are 7,000 charter schools nationwide and over 3 million students in these schools (Bradford, 2018; Bynoe & Armstead, 2018). With this level of popularity and implementation across the country, it is imperative to

acknowledge the context which the charter school movement was born and flourished in across the United States.

### *National History*

The charter school concept surfaced in 1974. Ray Budde, a junior high school principal turned college professor, presented the idea of school district restructuring to the Society for General Systems Research (Kolderie, 2005). His primary basis was districts needed to decentralize control to the school level to allow for greater teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy was thought to be a key factor in driving student achievement forward (Budde, 1988). Ray Budde was ahead of his time. It took fourteen years before his idea would gain any traction.

As referenced earlier, the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and the report from the Carnegie Forum that followed shortly after drew intense public scrutiny to the state of public education (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). This public scrutiny was the opening that Ray Budde's concept needed to be considered a practical education reform strategy (Kolderie, 2005). In Budde's original concept, the goal was decentralized control for greater teacher autonomy. He imagined charter schools as a way for school districts to restructure themselves and to remove bureaucracy inside the district. He argued there is a four-level hierarchy present within the school system – School Board, Superintendent, Principals, Teachers (Budde, 1988). His original concept was for districts to create charter departments or charter programs in which teachers could organize within their own school, and they would interact directly with the school board (Kolderie, 2005). This idea gained momentum when Al Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, gave a speech at the National Press Club in 1988. In this speech, Shanker expanded Budde's idea by calling for teachers to organize and create a proposal for an entirely different model of school. Shanker empowered teachers to develop their own ideas of

what a new school be and how it could operate. He was inspired by his own observations of high performing German schools in which teachers were given a significant voice in their operations (Bynoe & Armstead, 2019). The idea of teacher autonomy and voice fit perfectly with the vision Ray Budde espoused years earlier. Shanker envisioned the teachers' proposal would go before the school board for approval. If approved, they would be free to operate as a separate school up to ten years without interference from the school board as the governing body. The idea continued to evolve. In 1991, Minnesota passed the first legislation to allow for the creation of charter schools (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). As the charter school movement began to take off, it was not lost on Ray Budde that his initial idea had grown into something that had the potential to change and improve public education across the country (Budde, 1996).

It has been 28 years since that first legislation was passed allowing for the first charter school to open. In that time, 44 states and Washington D.C. have adopted laws that allow for charter schools (Bradford, 2018; Bynoe & Armstead, 2018). Each state that adopted charter school legislation has a different approach to how the charter schools are enacted and fulfilled. Johnston (2015) highlights the many ways charter school laws differ depending on the state. One primary way charter schools differ across states is how each state chooses to authorize the charter. Authorizing entities, typically referred to as authorizers, are made up of school districts, colleges, universities, community colleges, state board of education, or independent charter commissions/boards.

States have numerous ways in which they fund school choice reforms. Charter schools are primarily funded through the per-pupil foundation allowance. There are several forms of funding school choice reforms that include vouchers, tax credit scholarships, education savings accounts, portability of federal funds, and the use of 529 accounts to pay K-12 education costs

(Kaplan & Owings, 2018). Vouchers are “certificates for a fixed amount of public subsidy that parents can use to enroll their child in any school the parents choose that accepts vouchers, including private and religious schools” (Kaplan & Owings, 2018, p. 204). Voucher programs exist in 15 states and the District of Columbia. Tax credit scholarships are available in 20 states. 529 accounts can be used across the country with the passage of the federal Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. Tax credit scholarships and 529 accounts provide funding by way of tax avoidance on the part of the tax-paying parent/guardian/donor (Kaplan & Owings, 2018). Education savings accounts, available in six states, and the portability of federal funds allow for money to be assigned and follow the student.

States also differ in how resource allocation is distributed across charter schools and districts in the areas of facility costs, transportation costs, and limits on the amount of charter schools allowed in a state (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012; Johnston, 2015;). For example, in Massachusetts, transportation costs are fixed at the district level, and the local district is responsible for providing transportation to students that have opted-in to a charter school that resides within the district limits (Pardew, 2016). This varies drastically from Michigan. In Michigan, charter schools are not required to provide transportation. If they do provide transportation, this cost will be allocated from general funds from the per-pupil foundation allowance (Mack, 2019).

Charter school laws also differ across states in capital facility financing. Michigan provides no funding to charter schools for building or facility capital expenses. Facility costs must come out of general funds from the per-pupil foundation allowance. Five states (Alaska, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Ohio) allow charter schools to access local property tax revenue for facility funding, and 16 states provide a per-pupil allocation for charter schools to

assist with facility costs (Grover, 2016). This per-pupil amount can vary between under \$350 per student to over \$1,000 in some states.

The per-pupil spending variability across states creates some environments where charter schools can grow and thrive, and where charter schools are not allowed to be created.

Washington D.C. is one area that has seen tremendous charter school growth and is in the top three cities, along with New Orleans and Detroit, for the highest percentages of students attending charter schools (Stein, 2016). These cities had various things in common that allowed for the proliferation of charter schools. Each city operates with a set of favorable charter school laws and historically poor academic performance. In fact, Michigan boasts one of the most expansive charter school statues in the country (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). Given this, it is prudent to analyze the history and journey of charter school legislation and implementation in the state of Michigan.

### ***Michigan's History with Charter Schools***

When reviewing the history of charter schools in Michigan, there is one man at the forefront of the research – Michigan's 46<sup>th</sup> Governor, John Engler. The charter school legislation became possible in Michigan because of Governor Engler's aggressive action toward reconstructing the way in which schools were funded in Michigan (Goenner, 2011). This aggressive change to Michigan's funding system came as Michigan garnered national attention in 1993 when a small rural district called Kalkaska was unable to pass a tax increase which forced the school to close two months before the end of the year. As a result, Governor Engler was able to seize this opportunity to change the way schools were funded by the passing of Proposal A. This school finance reform created the pathway for charter schools to exist and be funded as money then had the ability to follow the child rather than just staying in the local

school district (Goenner, 2011). Proposal A changed the funding structure in Michigan.

Michigan went from a power equalization model, in which individual districts were able to set and establish a tax base per pupil, to a redistributive model, in which funding moved from each local jurisdiction to the state. The state created a per-pupil foundation allowance that would fund the student and not necessarily the system the student was in thereby redistributing funds across the state. This funding structure sought to bring equity by spreading resources across the state instead of allowing it to be pooled in wealthy communities (Smart, 2019). Smart provides an excellent description of the change in Michigan's funding structure as described here:

Under the policy, the per-pupil modified foundation allowance, or a funding stream that supplies most funding resources to districts, could follow a student to his or her school of choice. The modified foundation allowance created three principal foundation allowances that include minimum, basic, and state maximum guaranteed foundation allowances to improve equity and lower property taxes for Michigan residents. The minimum foundation allowance regulates the minimum level of funding that no district can fall below, and the basic foundation allowance is calculated by making incremental dollar increases to the initial amount, with the state maximum being the amount that the state caps toward a district's per-pupil revenue when using the foundation formula

Interestingly, this legislation did not address capital funding for buildings for charter schools. (pp. 45-46)

Prior to the passage of Proposal A, there was no path forward for the funding of charter schools, as they operate and are viewed as individual school districts. They would not have had a tax base with which to raise funds and establish a per-pupil allocation. With the passage of Proposal A, Governor Engler instituted the practice of the portability of funding, and he was able to capitalize

on an education reform – charter schools. Charter schools are funded through the state provided per-pupil foundation allowance. Under this system, the money follows the student instead of staying within a specific locality.

Charter schools lag behind traditional districts in the area of capital funding for facility projects. Addonizio and Kearney (2012) argue the lack of capital funding caused the proliferation of for-profit education management companies (EMOs). EMOs have access to capital funding through private equity. This access allows EMOs to create and build a network of schools at a faster rate than stand-alone charter schools can acquire on their own. The university authorizers often forced schools into contracting with EMOs because of their financial stability that they could provide the schools when times were lean (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012).

After the restructuring of the school finance system, Governor Engler began pushing the school reform that would allow for school choice. Michigan's constitution has strong and unambiguous language that does not allow for the implementation of a voucher program. As a result, Governor Engler focused his efforts on charter schools (Goenner, 2011). Engler was able to sign Public Act 362 of 1993, which established charter schools. This was the start of an even greater battle within the court system challenging the legality of Public Act 362. This legal battle would last four years. The Michigan Supreme Court issued a six to one ruling in favor of charter schools on July 30, 1997 (Goenner, 2011).

In addition to the legal battle, charter schools still faced political opposition as well. The legislature put a cap on the number of charter schools that could be authorized in Michigan. This number was capped at 150 in 1999 (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). Charter schools countered with a loophole allowing Bay Mills Community College to bypass the cap legislation due to their

tribal status. The charter cap stayed in place until the legislation was lifted in 2011 (Goenner, 2011).

Charter schools have a long and rich history in the state of Michigan. With any new initiative, there have been issues to work out, but performance in Michigan has shown steady improvement (Addonizio & Kearney, 2012). The state legislature and the Michigan Department of Education view charter schools as independent school districts. As a result, some charter schools in Michigan do operate multiple sites (Wolcott, 2018). As of 2019, 297 charter schools are in operation throughout the state of Michigan, and over 150,000 students attend charter schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2019). Around one third (51,000) of those students come from Detroit and attend the 70 charter schools that operate within the Detroit city limits and surrounding municipalities (Coleman, 2019). Michigan has 45 of its 83 counties house a charter school within their county lines (Mack, 2019). At the end of 2018, 210 charter schools have been closed in Michigan since 1995 (Chambers, 2018).

### **Criticism of Charter Schools**

From the beginning, the school choice movement has been met with strong detractors. The advent of choice can appear to be an attack on public education. For many people, this attack is often viewed as a personal affront to either their own education or their life's work. As a result, this debate can become very personal. The detractors of the school choice and charter schools often use three primary arguments against the use of charter schools as an effective education reform model – misplaced focus, financial impact, and furthering racial/socio-economic segregation. These three arguments show up in a study conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 2002.



After 10 years of charter schools, the AFT study evaluated the performance and outcome of the charter school experiment. This report highlights the failure of charter schools in several areas, including the contribution to racial isolation, teacher quality, lack of economy of scale, stagnant academic performance, and lack of transferability in innovation. The AFT argued that charter schools damage school districts by diminishing enrollment, and they contend against the use of for-profit operators. This report calls into question the need to further expand the use of charter schools throughout the country. This study is interesting because it comes from the AFT, the same organization that Al Shanker was president of in 1988 when he gave the speech advocating for the use of charter schools.

Several pieces of literature argued that charter schools are the result of misplaced focus in the field of public education, and public policy should shift back toward focusing on strengthening local traditional public school districts (Cordrey, 2014; Jones, 2014; Paino et al., 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Strauss, 2018). Each of these studies or articles takes a different approach to come to the same conclusion. These studies identify ways in which charter schools do not meet the expectations of their intended purpose. Cordrey (2014) highlights how the legislation allowing charter schools to operate are misguided. He reviews the history of public education in the U.S. He argues charter schools should not be the final and only solution to fix public education as the effectiveness of charter schools appears to be varied. In Cordrey's opinion, charter schools will do little to drive public education forward despite the rhetoric surrounding them. Valerie Strauss and Diane Ravitch are staunch charter school critics. Strauss (2018) makes the case that choice is not a good enough reason to support the use of charter schools given the mixed results of performance. She takes issue with many of the points that school choice advocates make. She argues that the threat of closing schools is not a significant enough

accountability measure. The focus should be on improving our system rather than changing it. Charter schools are distraction from the goal of improving public education.

Similarly, Ravitch (2010) highlights how she changed her mind and approach when it came to the education reform policy of school choice. She argues that choice disrupts school communities, dumbs down schools, and undermines public education. She believes the emphasis should have been placed on supplying better curriculum that can address what students need to know. Paino et al. (2014) argue that the focus on charter schools is misplaced because of the rhetoric surrounding accountability. They contend that a primary argument for accountability in charter schools is the closure of underperforming schools, but they found that only 15% of charter schools had been closed in the first twenty years of charter school existence. They argued that this was not a result of significantly high performing charter schools or improvement over time in the sector. These closures were a result of offering a few extremely low performing schools to close so that the reform could continue to grow.

Jones (2014) conducted a qualitative research study for her dissertation that centered around the perception of charter schools within traditional public-school principals in North Carolina. She found that charter schools have increased hostility from parents and governmental entities towards traditional schools. Principals were focused on competing for students and marketing instead of learning from and improving district practices because of the increased options for schooling. The principals said that there is little to no collaboration between the charter schools and the district schools. This finding challenges the notion that charter schools will create and promote competition between charter and traditional schools, thereby increasing performance across all schools.

The second area that critics attack the charter school movement is regarding the fiscal impact to traditional public schools (Arsen et al., 2015; Griffith, 2014; Jones, 2014; Ravitch, 2018). Critics argue the impact that charter schools have on the enrollment of the traditional districts surrounding them is a cause for concern. In her column for the Washington Post, Ravitch (2018) does not hold back in her opinion that charter schools damage public education. She asserts that charter schools drain local resources, which often results in teacher layoffs, reduced offerings, and increased class sizes. She argues that charter schools do not get better academic results than public schools, and they should not be able to take resources away from local districts. She contends that the ones that do get better results, only do so because they control which students they recruit. She believes, in addition to charter schools taking local resources, they are often taking the top academic talent, as well.

Griffith (2014) studied the effects that charter schools had on the finances of surrounding school districts. He found that the four districts surrounding the charter school had declined enrollment. This negatively affects the types of programs that the district can offer students. He concluded that charter schools cause financial hardship on the local districts. He would recommend further study to affect the policy decision making across his state. Arsen et al. (2015) show that any increase in charter penetration of the market share has a negative effect on traditional public school district fund balances. This negative effect serves to further destabilize traditional districts that are already experiencing difficulty with funding as their student population is declining and their costs are continuing to increase. They found this was especially true when examining special education costs. As student demographics change with student transiency, they found that traditional districts were left with an increased percentage of special

education students, who cost more support. Decreased enrollment and increased rates of special education students pose a significant financial challenge for traditional districts to overcome.

The third criticism is centered on the role that charter schools play to further widen the segregation of public schools (McLaren, 2017; Riel et al., 2018; Wells et al., 1999). McLaren (2017) highlights that charter school enrollment often widens the segregation of schooling in communities. She makes the case that national data would suggest charter schools are more likely to be schools with high segregation. Wells et al. (1999) argues that:

Charter schools are not the cause of the rampant inequality in the field of education and the society at large; they are merely a symptom of the now-prevalent narrow and illogical thinking about how public policies might help us solve this inequality. (p. 157)

This is consistent with the Riel et al. (2018) research that shows charter schools contribute to racial and socioeconomic isolation. They believe that more charter schools will increase segregation within schools and increase marginalization of students based on race or socioeconomic status. They could not find conclusive evidence about charter school performance.

### **Effectiveness of Charter Schools**

Measuring the effectiveness of charter schools is an arduous task to undertake given the myriad of variables and factors that need to be considered. Targeting and ranking factors becomes an even greater challenge. There are additional factors hindering student achievement that are not addressed by simply examining organizational structure of a school as being charter or traditional public. Student mobility and attendance are important additional factors to consider when measuring school effectiveness, as these factors relate to the amount of instruction a student receives. Ingersoll, Scamman, and Eckerling (1989) highlighted student mobility and

attendance as being key measures in student success in Denver Public Schools. There is a belief that school effectiveness should only be measured at the teacher level and student level (Archibald, 2006). This argument is rooted in the understanding that schools are only as effective as the teachers they employ. Teacher quality and student backgrounds are key indicators for performance and achievement. Archibald (2006) claims these are central to driving achievement and public education forward. These factors are present regardless of the type of school. Cupidore (2016) argues the effectiveness of a school is in direct correlation to the effectiveness of the leader. In her dissertation, she identifies key leadership traits and characteristics that must be present for schools, regardless of type or structure, to be successful.

Although research shows there are other factors to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of schools, it is important to consider the role school type plays in measuring effectiveness. Margaret Raymond (2014) is the Director of the Center for Research and Education Outcomes at Stanford University. Raymond argues that charter schools have surpassed traditional public schools in academic performance. In addition, she found charter schools are outperforming themselves as time goes on. She believes charter schools are getting more effective. This improvement is a result of flexibility for programming and leadership to address the needs of students. At the onset, charter schools exchanged that freedom with accountability for outcomes (Kelly & Loveless, 2012). There is an added belief that charter schools will improve public education. As regulation is lifted, innovation will occur, and traditional districts will be forced to respond by matching or improving those innovations (Anderson, 2005). The following subsections will examine the effectiveness of charter schools by comparing charter schools to other charter schools and by comparing charter schools to traditional public schools.

*Charter vs. Charter Comparison*

When evaluating the charter movement, the debate begins with the simple question – What does effective mean? Stone (2010) wanted to find the differences between what is classified as effective and ineffective schools. He showed that the labels of effective and ineffective are vague since there are not any set criteria for either label. He proceeded to assess the academic performance of charter schools and their performance based on attendance, suspension, student-teacher ratio, and teacher quality to derive meaningful differences between superior and inferior performance in these schools. His findings were limited as there are multiple data sets that showed inconclusive results thereby rendering it impossible to make a blanket statement about a particular school being effective or ineffective. Goodman (2013) took a similar approach and bypassed academic advancements, but he also evaluated other metrics to gauge effectiveness including emphasis on social-emotional advancement. It is imperative to keep in mind that effectiveness cannot just be measured in test scores and academic data, but there are other factors that could illuminate the effectiveness of a school. These factors include student, parent, and teacher satisfaction, character building, or community need.

Within charter schools, there is a significant faction and division centered around the profit status of the companies that manage charter schools. The online publication Newswire (2008) announced the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation was conducting a comprehensive study on the efficacy of charter management organizations. This study was conducted by evaluating 33 Management Organizations (MOs) across 12 different states covering 60,000 students. The authors determined that MOs, regardless of profit status (for-profit [EMO] or non-profit [CMO]), are tasked with an extremely difficult role of bringing to scale effective education models to be replicated to spread success.

While the earlier study remained positive with either EMOs or CMOs, Hill and Welsch (2009) and Wood (2013) conducted similar studies and found that there was no statistical significance between student performance in charter schools with both EMOs and CMOs. They shifted their studies to address values. They explored the ethics of a corporation or business profiting off public funds within our educational system. Sargrad (2017) highlights that CMOs do provide an added 23 extra days of instruction than their EMO counterparts. Wood (2013) took a broad approach in his research and evaluated a sampling of MOs and charter schools across the country. Wood found inconclusive evidence that management type had an impact on the effectiveness of schools. Hill and Welsch (2009) took a more regionalized approach by comparing charter schools and management types in the state of Michigan. Their findings were inconclusive as well. As the educational landscape continues to shift, their study being conducted in 2009 provides a few issues for drawing conclusions that have real-time implications for today. The primary one is the state assessment used in 2009 is drastically different than what our students take now in 2022.

There have been studies to compare student achievement data between charter schools regardless of their relationship with a management organization. Malkus and Hatfield (2017) considered the composition of charter schools as being drastically different from one another. They found several models or niches that charter schools positioned themselves to fill. As a result, it could be difficult to compare results across the schools because their focuses are so different. The authors argued that the achievement is secondary to the fact that the charter schools supply a unique approach and perspective to public education. Malkus and Hatfield (2017) contend that conducting comparisons is nearly impossible due to the variability in each case. They believe the variability of demographics, socio-economic status, neighboring schools,

and differences in models are not enough control elements to measure the effects across each school. Roch and Sai (2015) appraise the autonomy present in CMOs, EMOs, and stand-alone charter schools. They find there is a negative effect on teacher autonomy within charter schools managed by EMOs. Often, EMOs run their schools based on a particular methodological approach or philosophy. This can often coincide with teacher voice and choice.

The Center for Research and Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University conducts studies comparing student achievement results. CREDO conducted a study in 2013 where they evaluated charter school performance in 27 different states. They broke down the study into student subgroups by evaluating the effects charter schools had within those subgroups. The CREDO report could be used to measure both charter school performance against other charter schools and against traditional public-school counterparts. This study concluded there is no statistical evidence of increased academic performance among schools based on profit status. These findings are consistent with Hill and Welsch (2009) and Wood (2013). The CREDO report also shows the vast differences in the organizational systems between charter schools. These differences include differing models, missions, and visions of forms of schooling. Moreover, this evidence is consistent with what Malkus and Hatfield (2017) found.

### *Charter vs. Traditional Schools Comparison*

**Charter Schools are More Effective.** Charter school and traditional public school comparisons have been a topic of conversation regarding school reform and educational policy since the early 1990's. Given this, many research studies have compared the good, the bad, and the undesirable of this educational reform. Many studies line the two sides against each other.



Studies do this by drawing a line in the sand either for or against the use of charter schools as an effective educational reform tool.

Poole (2016) argues that criticism surrounding charter schools is unfounded. He states more effort should be placed on improving the reform than criticizing it. He also contends the arguments against these schools are not directed at a sterile faceless object as there are teachers, students, and families behind these schools. He found that a local charter school supports 1.5 years of growth with students on state assessments. He emphasizes students come to the charter school in his study with significant deficits. In some instances, these students come three years behind grade level.

Booker et al. (2007) conducted a study where they evaluated students that attended a charter school and had low test scores in year one of their attendance in comparison to their traditional public counterparts. The study followed the same students over the next three years to track student performance on state assessments. The authors argued the longer students stayed in the charter school system, the greater likelihood they would outperform their traditional public counterparts. Likewise, Jinnai (2014) reasons that students that attend a charter school have a positive effect on achievement as compared on state assessments. Their attendance generates a rippling positive impact on overlapping grades. Jinnai broke down student performance into subgroups and compared those results between traditional and charter schools. This form of quantitative comparison analysis supplies strong data points from which Jinnai drew her conclusions.

In addition to academic results, parent satisfaction can and should be a measure of school effectiveness. Charter school parents are often pleased with smaller class size, individualized attention, and smaller environment (Greene, 2012). Cheng and Peterson (2017) found in their

national study that charter school parents report higher levels of satisfaction than traditional public-school parents, and they have slightly higher levels of satisfaction than parents of in-district school of choice students.

Charter schools are often located in urban and low socio-economic environments (Schwalbach, 2019). Many studies have found that charter schools had a statistically significant positive effect on low income and low achieving students (Angrist et al., 2013; Cohodes, 2018; Denice, 2014; Gleason et al., 2010; Ngubeni, 2016; Osborne; 2015; Wang, 2016; & Winters, 2012) Each study was conducted in different cities and localities around the country and took on slightly different approaches and utilized student achievement data from required state assessments. The Cohodes (2018) study included additional data from Advanced Placement (AP) exams and SAT results. Gleason et al. (2010) found that operational features of schools contributed to the creation of a foundation for success. These features include smaller enrollment, longer hours of operation, and ability grouping students. These factors played a role in having an overwhelmingly positive impact on student achievement for low income and low achieving students. Likewise, Cohodes (2018) shows that on average charter schools perform the same as traditional public-school districts; however, when accounting for poverty and minority students, charter schools significantly outperform traditional public schools. Cohodes (2018) finds that charter schools alone are not enough to close the achievement gap because the practices that make them successful need to be adopted from a particular setting and into the mainstream.

Osborne (2015) explored the educational reform that New Orleans underwent following Hurricane Katrina. Charter schools played a significant role in post-Katrina New Orleans. He highlights how experts believe that New Orleans experienced the most rapid academic

improvement in US History. Ten years after Katrina, 92.5 percent of public-school students in New Orleans attended charter schools (p. 66). Osborne references an economist from Tulane University, Doug Harris, as saying it was “the most radical overhaul of any type in any school district in the last century” (p. 66). Osborne notes 62% of students in New Orleans attended failing schools prior to Hurricane Katrina. After Hurricane Katrina, only 7% of students in New Orleans attend failing schools (p. 66).

In Angrist et al.’s (2013) study, the primary findings show urban charter schools outpace traditional public schools. They cite the distinct features within charter schools that account for the difference in the high need areas. These features include length of school day and school philosophy or ideology. The Center for Reinventing Public Education had commissioned a review of charter school achievement research in 2008, 2011, and 2014. Economists Julian Betts and Emily Tang were the authors commissioned to review the charter school achievement research. Patrice Denice (2014) brought their research together to summarize and measure the progress of charter schools. The findings show that charter elementary and middle schools outperform traditional districts in math and inconclusive results in English. Charter high schools perform at the same level. While studies were limited, Denice (2014) found examples of charter schools outperforming in performance of African American students, performing at the same level with Hispanic and Native American students, and underperforming with White and Asian students. Charter schools service at risk subgroups with the same level of effectiveness as traditional public schools.

Location plays a role in charter school effectiveness. Ngubeni (2016) found equivalent results that overall school type was inconclusive for effect on student achievement, while considering academic performance in Georgia. The findings did show that subgroups – female,

economically disadvantaged, black students – all showed significant gains in charter schools.

Wang's (2016) dissertation studied charter vs. traditional performance in grades five through eight in both math and reading. This descriptive research study added to the research that charter schools are more effective in math and reading. Wang focused a single urban school district in Georgia for his research. He noted given the small sample size this would not be a study that could be extrapolated to prove the effectiveness of charter schools at scale. While true, when included with the overall body of research on the topic, Wang's research adds much value to the belief in the effectiveness of charter schools.

Winters (2012) conducted a study of New York City charter schools. Winters found charter schools were outperforming the local district in New York City. His research focused on what happened to traditional schools that lost students to charter schools. As cited in the earlier literature, one critical argument made against charter schools is that they drain the local district of much needed resources and funds. Winters' study concluded that New York City schools which lose students to charter schools show a mild benefit in Math and English. He argues the improvement is because students are leaving their local districts to attend charter schools because they are underperforming and unsatisfied with their level of education or support they receive from the local district. Winters found no evidence that charter school attendance negatively effects traditional schools, academically. In fact, this study also indirectly addresses the narrative that charter schools take high performing students from local traditional public school. The work of Winters, Clayton, and Carpenter (2017) support this indirect finding. Winters, Clayton, and Carpenter (2017) challenge the notion that charter schools typically "counsel out" low performing students. They compare exit rates between charter schools and traditional schools in NYC and Denver. Their findings show students in both cities are equally as likely to exit their

schools. This would lead one to believe that student mobility has less to do with school type, and more to do with the nature of transiency within a subset of a school – namely the lowest performing students. This would follow the thought that low performing students are trying to figure out where they can be most successful. They are likely to continue seeking other school options.

While student achievement and academic data alone provides interesting results, it is equally important to assess student achievement considering the cost associated with that education. Several studies have been conducted that appraise the cost effectiveness charter schools supply when it comes to educating students. Martinez (2014), Harvey (2018), Winters (2012), and Flaker (2014) all point to the fact that charter schools are more efficiently providing public education, particularly in areas where public education could be considered underfunded. It is important to note that these schools outperformed their local district academically as well. Martinez (2014) studies the Los Angeles Unified Charter schools and finds their effectiveness in outperforming traditional public counterparts in Los Angeles and Oakland. His research highlights there are several factors to consider in addition to student performance. Financial health is one crucial factor. Harvey (2018) assesses charter schools in Alberta, Canada. Six and ninth grade charter school students outpaced all other types of schools, both public and private. Harvey highlights this achievement comes in spite the fact that charter schools cost significantly less money to operate. He finds that the government spends \$4,284 less per student for those attending a charter school. Winters (2012) found New York City charter schools are funded at 70% of the allocation given to traditional public schools, and as noted early, they significantly outperform their local traditional public schools academically. Flaker (2014) compares charter schools and traditional public schools in the state of Massachusetts. Not only did she find that

charter schools were outperforming the traditional public schools academically, but schools were also doing so at a significantly lower cost per pupil. Brittany Larkin (2014) conducted a similar study in the state of Florida during the same period as Flaker, and her findings were slightly different. Larkin found that there was no statistical significance between charter school and public-school students academically when comparing state assessment results. She did find charter schools receive and spend significantly less money than the traditional public schools. Interestingly, she argues that because charter schools are not outperforming the traditional schools, they should not receive fair funding.

**Comparisons are Inconclusive.** The charter school debate is so complex because the data sets are incomplete or inconclusive. Often studies find that charter schools outperform in one subject area and underperform in another. Another finding is charter schools work for a specific demographic group in a specific part of the country. This is evidenced in Zimmer and Buddin (2006). They reviewed charter performance on state assessments in two districts in California. They find that there are mixed results and cannot conclusively state that charter schools are promoting achievement. This manifests by increase performance in one academic area but not the other, and there is not any consistency across districts. The next several studies all concluded that charter schools and traditional districts have a complicated dynamic when comparing academic performance. One study, Clark et al. (2015) evaluated 33 charter schools across 13 states. They found that the impact of attendance at charter schools was not statistically significant to argue positive or negative achievement on state assessments in comparison with the traditional public schools in the same districts.

Erickson, Larwin, and Isherwood (2013) performed a similar study across the nation by focusing on primary and secondary schools and comparing their student performance on state

assessments. Their findings show students in charter schools are not performing as strong as the traditional schools in mathematics and reading achievement, but they found they were outperforming at the elementary and low-income student level. Larkin (2016) conducted a study on charter school performance in Florida. She found that there was no significant distinction in performance on state assessments between charter schools and the local district they reside. Her findings identified traditional public schools did allocate more money toward instruction than their charter school counterparts.

Studies also show that results can be mixed when it comes to areas outside of academic performance. Charter schools can hit academic performance benchmarks, but they can also do so with some unintended consequences that have the potential to detract from the movement. Brooks (2016) focused her research on a single-building, EMO-managed charter school. The study centered on how the strength of the network is cascaded down to the classroom level. She found the school operates well within the confines of the policies, but this is often done to the detriment of teacher satisfaction. Likewise, charter schools have been called into question for the high rates of segregation. Ross (2010) identified that charter schools play a significant role in the segregation and desegregation of schools. Specifically focusing on Michigan, she found that charter schools reflect the diversity of the district where they are housed.

Grube and Anderson (2018) compare Milwaukee Public Schools and charter schools within the district. They conclude that charter schools are underfunded, but they do not improve academic outcomes, when compared to the district on state assessments. They believe the inconclusive nature of the data surrounding effectiveness is because of the independence and variability between charter schools. They contend the variability makes it difficult to measure effectiveness as there are too many variables to pinpoint which ones drive effectiveness. They

point out that the advent of choice will likely cause re-segregation as families and communities naturally like to stick together.

There are two important recent studies to note the comparative performance of charter schools to traditional public schools in Michigan. Kirkland (2016) and Smart (2018) evaluated and compared performance of charter and traditional schools found in southeast Michigan. Kirkland appraises performance in 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and reading on the state assessment through the lens of Milton Friedman's work on Market Driven Theory. Upon his research, he does not find that there is a significant difference in performance when comparing academic performance. Smart (2018) takes his research a step further past comparing academic data, since he compares resource allocation by each district and charter school. Smart finds that charter schools do show better academic gains in achievement, and mixed results when measuring growth on the state assessment. His findings also show that charter schools are no more efficient in their resource allocation than traditional districts.

**Charter Schools are Ineffective.** When trying to establish the efficacy of charter schools, it is imperative to identify the places where the movement falls short in purpose or in outcome. Orfield and Luce (2016) assessed charter school performance in Chicago Public Schools. In data from state assessments between 2012-2014, they found that charter schools underperformed traditional schools in most measurable ways. Orfield and Luce (2016) add that charter schools are more likely to have self-selection by parents into their system and argue that charter schools should see increased performance due to an increase in parental engagement. Wall (2011) writes a rebuttal to a CREDO study. Wall (2011) reasons it is not feasible to take a national study to make determinations at the state or local level. Wall argues that the CREDO research is based on the equivalent of students answering one extra question right on



standardized assessments and is not statistically significant. Parham and Thomas (2017) also challenges the notion that charter schools outperform traditional districts. Her findings contradict several studies discussed previously that establish the benefits of charter schools to minority students. Her research showed that minority charter school students do not outperform traditional public-school students on state assessments.

There is a widespread availability of academic studies on charter school academic performance that both point to and away from the effectiveness of charter schools (Rabovsky, 2011). It is important to consider other means of effectiveness. One primary way to estimate charter effectiveness is measuring the financial implications charter schools create for traditional public schools. Ni (2009) has conducted several studies on the impact that charter schools have on traditional districts both in resource allocation and in performance. Ni's (2009) work focuses on the beginning of the charter school movement. He found that charter schools negatively affected traditional district performance, presumably because of decreases in funding that served to destabilized districts. This study challenged the notion that the advent of choice and competition will raise the performance bar across the board. Similarly, Arsen and Ni (2008) evaluate how charter and traditional school competition effect resource allocation. They base their study on the premise that the competition should drive each other to improve resource allocation to positively effect student achievement. When evaluating 12 years of data between 1994-2006, they find that charter schools do not stimulate that sort of resource allocation to effect student achievement. Their findings show that charter schools spend \$800 more on administration and \$1,100 less on instruction. Arsen and Ni's (2008) research contests the premise that traditional districts are full of top-heavy administrative structures and bloat. They also identify that charter schools spend significantly less on instruction. This reduction is often

from employing inexperienced staff that requires less money. When evaluating their original premise that charter schools create competition in resource allocation, they argue charter schools are ineffective in this endeavor. Grady (2012) presents a case that charter schools are a drain on resources without appropriate academic output and performance to justify the use as an education reform strategy. He believes the time, energy and resources should be put into traditional public schools that are underperforming instead of diverting resources to charter schools.

### **Chapter Summary**

The need for education reform in our country has been a long-debated topic. In the late 1980's, the charter school movement began. In 1993, charter schools show up in the educational landscape in Michigan. The debate surrounding the effectiveness of the reform has been constant, and the results have been consistently inconsistent. Much of the literature that focuses on academic data shows inconclusive results surrounding academic performance at scale. While some studies show that low income and minority students receive a higher quality education from their charter school than if they were still in their local districts, studies in different regions or during different time periods reveal the opposite. Given this discrepancy in results, it is not possible to label charter schools as either effective or ineffective. Instead, when measuring academic performance, it is evident that the effectiveness of charter schools should be broken down into regional or specific anecdotal instances of effectiveness.

There are still several ways that charter schools have not lived up to their expectations. This is seen primarily with the resource allocation within charter schools. It is also clear that charter schools have not lived up to the expectation that they would be a driver of competition and best practice sharing with local districts. An unintended consequence of charter schools is

the segregation of schools. Charter schools tend to be a community or neighborhood school. As a result, they can further the racial and/or class divide within our state.

There are some areas in which gaps in the literature are present. By nature, one such gap is the need for evaluating new data. While there are many studies comparing academic performance of charter schools, often these studies are done in a specific location at a specific time. More studies are needed in new locations and more recent times to identify any trends that could exist when measuring the performance of the movement.

There are also gaps in the evaluation of the secondary and tertiary purposes of charter schools. One key gap in the literature is in competition being a driver of innovation and improving best practices because of the infusion of charter schools into public education. One primary objective of charter schools was to bring about competition into the education space as students and families would have the ability to choose schools that met their individual needs. Several studies showed that traditional districts do not view charter schools as competition, and as a result, they do not pay attention to the different practices, programs, or approaches of the charter school within their district (Jones, 2014; Parker 2009). There are few, if any, studies that ask the reciprocal question regarding competition to individuals within the charter school industry. When evaluating the effectiveness of charter schools in relation to their intended objective, it is imperative to address this key gap by gaining the perspective of individuals in the charter school industry in the area of competition.

While these gaps in the literature exists, the debate that surrounds charter schools and school choice as an educational reform is not likely to dissipate soon. The use of competition as a driver of improvement was central to Milton Friedman's theory on choice within public education. As such, this research study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing the

charter school voice to the topic of role competition plays in operational and academic programming of charter schools.

### **Method**

Exploratory case study methodology is an investigation of an individual phenomenon within its unique and bounded context (Yin, 2018). This research design was selected to explore the phenomenon of competition on a single urban charter school design and administrators' decision-making process. This chapter is divided into six sections: problem-statement, research questions, research design, conceptual framework, research techniques, data collection sources and techniques, data analysis techniques, and research ethics.

### **Research Questions**

This case study will contribute to the existing literature by providing an exploratory search into the perceptions of charter school educators from a single urban charter school on the role competition plays within their work. This exploratory case study will seek to answer the following research questions:

1. Are charter school administrators and board members of a single urban charter school able to identify and describe their competitive advantage?
2. How do charter school administrators and board members of a single urban charter school identify and describe the influence competition with surrounding school districts has on their decision-making and strategic processes?
3. How has competition influenced the academic program of an urban charter school?
4. How has competition influenced the operational structure of an urban charter school?

**Research Design**

Creswell (2018) identifies that qualitative research is designed in such a way to answer broad and subjective questions and sub-questions about a specific area of inquiry. Yin (2016, p. 9) identifies five features of qualitative research. The five features are as follows:

1. Studying the meaning of people's lives, under real-world conditions.
2. Representing the views and perspectives of the people in the study.
3. Covering the contextual conditions within which people live.
4. Contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behavior.
5. Striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a sole source alone.

Yin describes qualitative research as a process of collecting data from a range of resources, evaluating that data, analyzing those evaluations to produce findings, then presenting those findings to contribute to the overarching body of research.

One specific design type within qualitative research is exploratory case study methodology. Stake (1995) describes case study research as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). This statement highlights several defining characteristics of a case. The case is specific, complex, and it is active. Stake credits Louis Smith, educational ethnographer, as the first to identify a case as a bounded system or context. Case study research investigates current phenomenon within its environmental context (Ridder, 2017). When seeking to answer questions of how and why, case study research is likely the most appropriate research designs (Ridder, 2017; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) details that case study research is imperative if the researcher is

focused on contemporary events and has little to no control over said events. One important element of case study research is that the case is often chosen as it has a particular interest to the researcher (Campbell, 2015; Ridder, 2017; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Stake (1995) describes this interest as an intrinsic case study. Case study research is a design that should be used when the interest rests in process over outcomes, context over specific variables, and discovery over confirmation (Campbell, 2015). In addition, case study research has a unique strength in that it can utilize a variety of evidence and data, such as documents, artifacts, interviews, observations (Yin, 2018). All these factors and elements of case study research provide evidence that the research conducted is best suited for case study methodology. This study is designed to use case study research to identify and explore the current phenomenon of competition within the context of a single, urban charter school in Genesee County, MI.

The case selected for this study is a large, urban charter school located in Genesee County, MI. This charter school has a Kindergarten through twelfth grade program and services over 900 students. As stated previously, Flint, MI located in Genesee County, MI has an extremely large charter student population. This highlights the fact that this charter school resides in an extremely competitive school choice market. This case was one of the first charter schools to be opened in Genesee County, MI. Since inception in 1999, this school has been awarded a US News and World Report Bronze Medal nearly every year. This award is given to schools that evaluates performance on state assessments, graduation rates, and college readiness preparation (Boyington, 2016).

As a high performing charter school, the research questions for this case study were designed to explore the context of competition within the decision-making process of charter school administrators. As with all qualitative research, this case study methodology is designed

as an iterative process. Several rounds of data analysis and refinement are expected to accurately collate the data collected to effectively answer the research questions contained within the study.

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) identify that the researcher's passion and interest will be captured in the conceptual framework. It is this passion and interest that helps the researcher identify what they are interested in studying (Campbell, 2015; Yin, 2018). The research site within the study holds significances to me because I started my career in the school. Having spent four years as a paraprofessional, dean of students, and coach, this school served as a foundation to my career. Being able to re-enter the setting from the perspective of a researcher has been an enriching experience.

Additionally, as a charter educator, the I have witnessed elements of the Free Market Theory and School Choice Theory at play and seen the benefits of those theories in the lives of students throughout Michigan. As a result, the researcher is interested in exploring how charter school educators in a competitive market approach their work in order to highlight and strengthen their competitive advantage.

### ***Participant Sampling***

This case study is based on purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is often the primary method used in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell describes four primary functions of purposeful sampling. First, purposeful sampling is used to allow for a specific representation of a setting or individuals. This allows for the certainty that the conclusions of the study represent the average members of the population involved in the study. Second, purposeful sampling allows to hear the voices of the entire range of variation in the population involved in the study. Third, purposefully selected participants in the study allow the researcher to examine critical theories that were either at the onset of the study or have emerged throughout the



research process. Lastly, purposeful sampling allows the researcher to explore comparisons in the differences between settings and/or individuals. Mack et al. (2005) describe purposive sampling as a pre-thought-out process at the onset of the research study. The researcher is to identify specific characteristics that participants should have to participate in the study. In my particular study, these characteristics are charter school building leaders in a highly regarded, urban charter school in Genesee County, MI.

The participants were a purposeful sample of five charter school administrators within a mid-sized K-12 charter school in Genesee County, Michigan. Table 1 indicates the relevant demographic characteristics of the individual study participants.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Current role	Years of experience	Area of specialization
P1	Male	Board Member	14	Facilities
P2	Male	Board Member	5	Finances
P3	Female	Administrator	18	Student Supports
P4	Female	Administrator	22	Academics
P5	Female	Administrator	23	Operations

**Delimitations**

The study was designed and developed with specific delimitations built in to define the boundaries of the research. Simon and Goes (2013) explain that the delimitations are made by the conscious exclusionary and inclusionary decision-making during the study's development process. The primary delimitation in this study is the research sampling. This study is confined to a single, K-12 charter school located in Genesee County. These delimitations were established

with manageability and feasibility in mind. The specific problem addressed in this study was identified and crafted in such a way that the concepts therein are embedded into the framework of the study. This specific problem was of great interest given the extensive nature of the researcher's career.

When exploring a phenomenon in a bounded context, it is important to define the number of participants to include in the study. A key component when considering who should participate in the study is also establishing how many participants should be involved with the study. Max van Manen is a leading authority on qualitative research. He argues that data saturation in qualitative research is not possible as it is "not a matter of filling up some kind of qualitative container until it is full or of excavating a data set of meaning until there is nothing left to excavate" (van Manen et al., 2016, p. 5). The nature of this type of research is that a researcher can never uncover enough data to say they have fully explored the phenomenon. As such, van Manen would not suggest any specific number for a data set. Instead, researchers should keep an open mind regarding how many participants to include while conducting their research. In this study, the researcher decided that five participants from charter school administration and the school board would be included in the study.

Lastly, both the research questions and the interview questions chosen are a form of delimitations. The research questions chosen are designed to provide discipline to the research study, overall. These questions had a strong determining influence over the creation of the interview questions. The interview questions, along with the interview protocol, were designed to elicit specific feedback regarding the phenomenon of competition in public education from the charter school educator and school board member perspective. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. The semi-structured format is important to maintain a systematic

approach to the alignment with the research questions but allow for some flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions to seek clarity or deeper understanding.

## **Data Sources**

### *Interview Questions*

When conducting these interviews, I used a set of pre-determined questions and allow for any follow-up questions to seek clarity or to gain deeper understanding. These questions utilized components of the SELECT Framework. By using the SELECT Framework, this kept the focus of the interview on topics relevant to the study. Any follow-up questions were documented as a part of the data collection process. These questions can be found attached to this study (Appendix A). These questions reflect the research questions and problem statement identified within the study. By using pre-determined questions, I was able to ensure the ability to compare the responses of different participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The interview utilized 10-12 open-ended questions. The researcher piloted interview questions with colleagues to gain their feedback on the construction and clarity of the questions. These questions were designed in such a way to not lead the participant to any answer. They were created with the participants' backgrounds in mind to try and account for any influence from their background that might occur. These questions focused on the specific and actual behaviors or thoughts rather than the abstract and hypothetical. In doing so, this encouraged the participant to identify more concrete examples to provide deeper, richer data than surface level responses gleaned from abstract or hypothetical questions.

These interviews were recorded with the participants' approval and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Throughout the process of conducting the interviews, the researcher was not just trying to collect facts, but, as Leedy and Ormrod (2015) describe, is collecting responses that

should be viewed as perceptions and opinions. These interview questions and responses were recorded using Google Meet Recordings for the virtual interviews or QuickTime Player on a MacBook Pro for in person interviews. The recordings were uploaded into REV.com, a transcription service, to assist with the transcription process. The transcription of each interview was created in Microsoft Word, and the transcription was uploaded into MAXQDA, a qualitative research analysis software program, to assist in the categorizing, connecting, and capturing process of the data.

### ***Field Notes***

In addition to the interview questions, I took field notes throughout the interview process to identify things that are pertinent to the study that are not able to be captured in the interviews alone. Researchers use field notes to describe behaviors, activities, and general thoughts that happen at the research site (Creswell, 2018). These field notes were typed into Microsoft Word in real time during the interview process.

### ***Document Review Form***

Document summary forms were utilized to help catalog documents to assist with the data analysis process. Document review can provide a rich context and historical perspective for the study and utilizing a specified approach like a document review form ensures consistency when organizing data (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell also described that document review forms assisted in the triangulation process when comparing data across research techniques.

### **Research Techniques**

#### ***Participant Interview***

This exploratory case study used in depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary research technique. The use of in depth, semi-structured interviews is the most appropriate

technique when conducting qualitative research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The use of semi-structured interviews allows for the interview to have a conversational approach that stays focused on the research questions of the study. In-depth interviews allow for participants to identify and describe their experience with the researcher. These interviews were conducted both in person and through Google Meet. In person interviews were conducted on location at the case study school. The researcher used a specific protocol to set up interviews with participants. This protocol is attached to this proposal (Appendix A). Once the interviews were set, the participants were given a document for informed consent to participate in the study. The informed consent form (Appendix B) was signed prior to the start of the interview. The informed consent form indicated the participants willingness to have the interview session recorded.

### *Charter School Application Documents*

Robust document review is an important research technique that can be used in a case study research design. Bowen (2009) describes five primary benefits of utilizing document review within a qualitative research design. Document review can provide background and context within the setting being studied. The background and context gleaned from document review can fill in some of the details that participants being interviewed may have forgotten or can serve to contextualize information collected during interviews or during direct observation. Second, documents can direct the researcher towards questions that need to be asked or situations that need to be observed. This benefit highlights the iterative and immersive nature of qualitative research. As the researcher enters and begins to understand the setting being studied, there will be elements of the study that will need to be changed from the initial study design and methodology plan. Document review is one of the ways in which a researcher can gain a better understanding of the context of the setting. This in-depth understanding can strengthen the study

as the researcher responds and reacts to the new information. Third, documents provide supplemental research data. This allows for data triangulation between other data collection techniques, such as interviews and direct observation. Fourth, documents create a timeline that can track changes and development of the setting over time. Lastly, documents can be analyzed to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources. The greater convergence of data from multiple sources is usually met with a higher level of trustworthiness of the findings.

Three documents were reviewed as a secondary data source for triangulation. The first was an Educational Program Review, 13 pages in length, dated October 2015. The second document was an Educational Program Review, 14 pages in length, dated March 2018. The third document was an Application to Charter, 263 pages in length, dated 1998. Document review form can be found in Appendix C. These three documents play a significant role in the schools historical journey. The Application to Charter is the founding document of the school. In the 263 pages contain all the information surrounding the initial purpose, plan and intent of the schools founding. The second two documents, Educational Program Reviews, are reviews conducted by the authorizer when considering the school for reauthorization. These two documents provide additional data and information regarding the progress of the school against the initial purpose, plan and intent of the school.

### ***Observation of School Board Meetings***

The use of direct observation as a data collection technique allows the researcher to observe participants in their natural setting in an unobtrusive way. Trochim et al. (2016) identify three distinct elements of direct observation. First, the researcher should not participate in the setting, but should remain as removed from the setting as possible, while still being able to make meaningful observations. Secondly, as a result of not participating in the setting, direct

observation should create a more detached perspective. Finally, direct observations can be either brief or extended in nature. Direct observation can strengthen qualitative research by adding in additional data that can be used to triangulate data across multiple data collection techniques.

When carrying out the study, the researcher conducted several direct observations of the natural setting within the site of the case study. There are two primary settings that were observed. The first setting is school board meetings. Attendance at school board meetings allowed for a greater understanding of the context of the setting. As an observer of school board meetings, the researcher had opportunity to see and record activities, conversations, and the decision-making process of the school in an environment that is non-threatening as the meetings are open to the public. The second primary setting the researcher observed is the leadership team interactions. Again, this provided an opportunity to watch, record, and document the decision-making process in action at the school. The field notes created from observing leadership and school board meetings allowed for triangulation of data between what is collected through the interview process and what is collected through the observation process. A field note template can be found in Appendix D.

### **Instruments and Protocols for Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative researchers are active participants in their study through their collection of data in a multitude of ways. These ways include interviewing, field notes, document review, and the observation of behavior. Qualitative researchers will use protocols to help collect and record data. Maxwell (2013) highlights the importance of the researcher recognizing and identifying the personal goals that drive and inform the research study. Maxwell argues the following:

Eradicating or submerging your personal goals and concerns is impossible and attempting to do so is unnecessary. What is necessary, in qualitative design, is that you be aware of these concerns and how they may be shaping your research, and that you think about how best to deal with their consequences. To the extent that you have not made a careful assessment of ways in which your design decisions and data analyses are based on personal desires, you are in danger of arriving at invalid conclusions. (pp. 219-220)

As a charter school educator for over a decade, this study is of particular interest to the researcher. As a practitioner, I am aware of the surface level acknowledgement that competition is a crucial factor in the work of charter school educators. Maxwell (2013) describes how researcher's personal goals, coupled with practical and intellectual goals, play a significant role in the creation and design of the study. On a personal level, the researcher cares about the charter school movement. The researcher believes in the foundational component of the movement – choice. This study has the ability to strengthen the movement by both highlighting how charter school educators are on mission and highlighting how charter school educators have lost sight of a primary component of their purpose. Maxwell (2013) distinguishes between practical and intellectual goals by defining practical goals as goals that seek to accomplish something and intellectual goals as goals that seek to understand something. This study is designed around the intellectual goal to have a greater understanding of the specific role competition plays in public education from the charter school educator perspective. As the key instrument to the study, the researcher understands his role in the creation of the interview questions necessary to push the participants past the surface level acknowledgement of competition in their work. These interview questions were designed to probe deep enough to draw out the perceptions and the practice of how charter school educators do their work.



The researcher is aware of any bias as the study was planned and was committed to keeping an open mind throughout each phase of the study. This open-mindedness is reflected in the review of literature. The review of the literature provides a balanced view on the performance of charter schools. Maxwell (2013) describes reactivity as the influence of the researcher on the individuals or setting that is being studied. As a charter school practitioner, I attempted to put aside his own ideas and opinions of the topic, as well as any pre-conceived notions of what he believes the participants may say. The primary way I bracketed my own beliefs and assumptions is through the use of memos as a reflective journaling technique. Prior to any interview, I wrote a memo identifying what his thoughts, opinions, preconceived ideas are regarding previous interviews, the participant, the participants setting, and his own experience. These memos served to create self-awareness as the researcher collected and analyzed the data, as he can refer back to his assumptions. This ensured the researcher did not allow his perceptions, ideas, or opinions to intermix with the perceptions, ideas, and opinions of the participants.

Trustworthiness is an important aspect of any qualitative research study. Creswell (2018) describes trustworthiness as the findings being “accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 314). Trustworthiness speaks to the validity, authenticity, and credibility of the study (Creswell, 2018). In qualitative research, there are many methods or strategies to test for trustworthiness. It is recommended that researchers utilize multiple methods to test for and ensure trustworthiness throughout their study. In doing so, the researcher can provide convincing justification to the reader of the reliability of the study. Creswell (2018) identifies triangulation, member checking, rich description, bracketing, presentation of contrary data, peer debriefing, and memos as forms of trustworthiness testing. In this study, several of these strategies were implemented. Triangulation of the data collected was

conducted as much as possible between the interview responses. In addition to the data collected through interviews, direct observation and document review played a significant role in triangulating data collected through the interview process. There are several documents that were important to review. The documents included school improvement plan, charter contract, charter application and strategic plan. As themes emerged through multiple data points this added to the validity within the study. Member checking was used as another trustworthiness function used to ensure the accuracy of the concepts and ideas discussed in the interviews. Member checking involved converting the data or transcripts from their raw form to a partially finished product through the categorizing, connecting, and capturing process. Then, taking this data back to the participants to provide feedback. All participants in the study were able to review this data and provide feedback on the accuracy of content and intent.

The researcher bracketed the bias brought to the study. This was done through a process of self-reflection that allowed the researcher to ensure that his own thoughts and feelings were not put into the data collected. Creswell (2018) does note that “good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background” (p. 315). The bracketing occurred using memos prior to and after the interviews. These memos were member checked as well to gain feedback from the participants. These memos allowed the researcher to better identify contrary information that arose. The purpose of this study was not just highlight prominent themes or ideas. By identifying discrepant information, the researcher provides a more realistic account and therefore increases the validity (Creswell, 2018). Lastly, I utilized peer debriefing. This individual was a charter school practitioner but did not have any other role within the study. As a charter school practitioner, this person has the background and cursory knowledge of the topic of the study to review and ask

questions regarding the study. As Creswell (2018) notes, this moves the interpretation process past the researcher and includes an external source which add validity to the study. These conversations were captured using memos detailing specific dates and times in which the peer debriefing occurred.

## **Data Analysis Techniques**

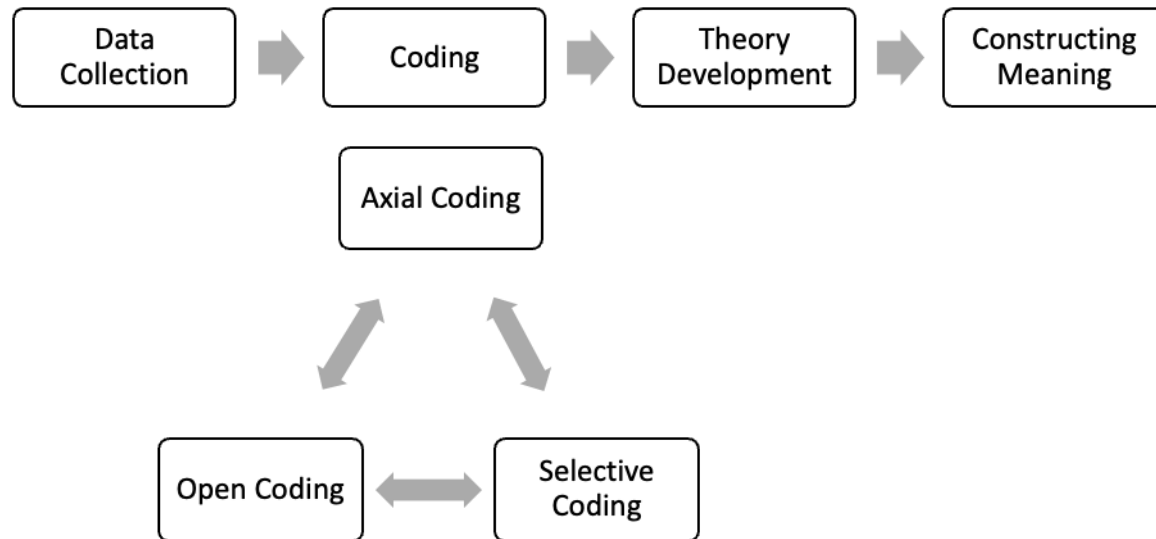
### ***Participant Interview***

The interview data was transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word documents using Rev.com an online transcription service. The documents were downloaded in portable document format (.pdf). The transcripts and documents were imported into MAXQDA computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The analysis procedure applied to the interview and document data was the three-cycle coding method (i.e., open, axial, and selective coding) described by Williams and Miller (2019), for the purpose of developing themes as described by Maxwell (2013). Throughout this discussion, findings associated with the first research question are provided as examples.

In a qualitative research design, data analysis is conducted throughout the data collection process (Maxwell, 2013). This approach allows the researcher to focus interviews and observations to continually test emerging conclusions. According to Maxwell, qualitative data analysis falls into three main strategies – Categorizing, Connecting, and Capturing. This study utilized all three methods through the use of several forms of coding – open, axial, and selective coding to accurately identify and report findings from the data that was collected. Coding is a cyclical process that does not just label data but helps to link data (Saldaña, 2016). Williams and Moser (2019) provide a figure for a non-linear process for qualitative research that is shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Williams and Moser Non-Linear Process for Qualitative Research*



As shown in Figure 3 above, the coding process is iterative. Open coding categorizes data by identifying broad emerging patterns, concepts, and themes. Axial coding begins to connect the emerging patterns, concepts, and themes into intersected and related codes. Selective coding is the refinement process by which the intersected and related codes become even more connected by generating cohesive and meaning-filled expressions (Williams & Miller, 2019). It is through this selective coding process that researchers can begin to develop overarching themes and construct meaning from the data.

The first step of the analysis, open coding, began with breaking the data down into the smallest chunks of text that contained sufficient contextual information to be meaningful when excerpted as standalone passages. Each of the chunks of text (phrases or groups of phrases) also had to be relevant to the perceived role that competition has played in work and decision-making at the case school. Once the data was broken down into the smallest meaningful and relevant chunks, the chunks of text were labeled. Labeling was conducted by assigning each chunk of text

to a code in the MAXQDA code system pane. For example, when asked whether the case school benefitted from its location, Mr. A answered in the affirmative, explaining in part:

Yeah, I think it does...The location, how close we are to the community as a whole, so it's easier for the parents to get the kids to school-the ability from a transportation standpoint to be in the center of the community enables us from a busing perspective to get the kids there faster and easier.

Mr. A's response was relevant because it indicated a competitive advantage that the case school derived from its location, and it was meaningful because it provided sufficient context in the form of an explanation of why the location was advantageous (i.e., a central location facilitated student commutes). This group of phrases was therefore excerpted from the transcript and assigned to a code. A total of 124 meaningful, relevant chunks of text were identified and excerpted in this way. However, the purpose of qualitative coding is not only to break the data down, but also to link the chunks of data inductively via the relevant meanings they express (Saldaña, 2016). Accordingly, different chunks of data that had similar meanings were assigned to the same code. For example, asked whether the location of the school was a competitive advantage, Mrs. C answered affirmatively and added, "Where we're located is a good spot. We're centrally located, so we can draw from all neighborhoods." Thus, like Mr. A, Mrs. C agreed that the location of the school was a competitive advantage because it was in the center of the community, making it easily accessible. Mrs. C's response was therefore assigned to the same code as Mr. A's. To indicate the relevant meaning of the data assigned to this code, the code was labeled, School benefits from location.

Categorizing strategies include open coding and conducting a thematic analysis of the data that is collected. The primary method of categorizing is done through open coding. Maxwell

(2013) makes a distinction between quantitative and qualitative coding. Maxwell contends that quantitative coding “consists of applying a pre-established set of categories to the data according to explicit, unambiguous rules, with the primary goal being to generate frequency counts of the items in each category” (pp. 236-237). He contrasts that to qualitative coding where the “goal of coding is not to produce counts of things but to ‘fracture’ the data and rearrange it into categories” (pp. 237). These categories allowed me to compare things within and between categories in the study. Throughout the study, it was prudent to ensure that the fracturing and coding of data did not lead to ignoring the connections that exist among the data. This is a common mistake that qualitative researchers make. To protect against this, it is important for the researcher to further breakdown the categories into specific themes.

Maxwell (2013) groups these themes in three categories – Organizational Categories, Substantive Categories, and Theoretical Categories. He defines organizational categories as subjects and issues that are pre-identified prior to the data collection. Organizational categories are often easily anticipated at the onset of the study. They function as larger themes that allow the researcher to sort the data for further analysis. Both substantive and theoretical categories can be subcategories to organizational categories. Substantive categories are descriptive in nature. This category describes the concepts and beliefs of the participant. Theoretical categories place the data into a framework. The framework used for this study is the SELECT Framework. As the data was collected, theoretical categories were placed throughout the SELECT Framework. Substantive and theoretical categories are helpful when researchers are dealing with large sets of qualitative data.

In this study’s design, I used open coding and categorizing strategies discussed to analyze the data that was collected through the use of in-depth interviews. Interviewing five charter

school practitioners, administrators, and board members, required strict adherence to a data analysis protocol to ensure that the researcher accurately captured and identified the emerging themes from the data collected. Once the researcher accurately open coded and categorized the data, he then moved into connecting strategies to begin a narrative analysis of the information.

As open coding progressed, axial coding was also conducted. Axial coding was used to assess the relationships between the open codes by identifying core, or axial, categories around which clusters of open codes could be arranged. For example, the code “School benefits from location”, was clustered with other open codes that identified competitive advantages of the case school. A total of 11 open codes were clustered around the axial code, Competitive advantages. Table 2 indicates the open codes clustered under the axial code Competitive advantages as an illustration of this process:

**Table 2***Example of Clustering of Open Codes Under an Axial Code*

<b>Axial code</b> Open codes clustered around axial code	<i>n</i> of interview participants	<i>n</i> of data chunks from interview s	<i>n</i> of document s	<i>n</i> of data chunks from document s	total <i>n</i> of data chunk s
<b>Competitive advantages</b>	5	73	3	16	89
Academic and safety reputations	5	7	2	4	11
Actualized advantage	1	1			
Advantages are strategic	3	4	1	2	6
Advantages are tracked through data	3	3	3	5	8
Advantages have eroded	5	13	1	1	14
College prep and safety	5	6	3	6	12
Greater responsiveness to stakeholders	5	12			
Individual and firm reputations	5	7			
Responsiveness	4	5			
School benefits from location	5	5			
Strategic advantages shifting to spontaneous	2	2			

Connecting strategies ensure that the researcher does not over fragment the data collected. Connecting strategies were done by utilizing axial coding and selective coding. This is the process of putting the data back together in a coherent way that accurately describes the phenomenon that has been explored by the researcher. In the process of connecting the data, the researcher examined and identified the relationships that exist between the coded and categorized data. The researcher examined how the individual; fractured parts create the whole idea. Maxwell (2013) identifies connecting strategies as case studies, profiles, narrative analysis, or



ethnographic microanalysis. While each strategy is unique, each of them seek to identify relationships that connect statements and events in a specific context into the whole. In this study, the researcher sought to connect themes that emerge within each participants thoughts and perceptions but also tried to connect themes that emerge across participants that were interviewed. This was done primarily using narrative analysis as a connecting strategy.

In cyclical, iterative fashion, selective coding was also conducted as the open and axial codes were further reviewed and refined. Through selective coding, the open and axial codes were linked both to the research questions and to the theoretical framework (the SELECT Framework). Through iterative open, axial, and selective coding, the open code School benefits from location was identified as a competitive advantage, and specifically as a discrete element of the expression of competitive advantage. According to Ma (1999), discrete advantages are singular and standalone in nature, like the location of a school. Ma (1999) defined discrete advantages as an aspect of the expression element of competitive advantage. Thus, the open code initially labeled, "School benefits from location", was clustered with other codes under the axial code, "Competitive advantages". Through selective coding, the axial code "Competitive advantages was identified as relevant to the first research question. The axial code Competitive advantages" was also broken down during selective coding according to the elements of the SELECT Framework. Table 3 indicates how the open codes were relabeled through the iterative, cyclical application of selective coding that related them to the theoretical framework.

**Table 3**

*Modification of Open Codes Through Selective Coding*

<b>Axial code</b>		<b>Axial code</b>
Initial open codes clustered around axial code		Open codes renamed through selective coding for relevance to theoretical framework
<b>Competitive advantages</b>	→	<b>Competitive advantages</b>
Academic and safety reputations	→	Relative advantages include academic and safety reputations
Actualized advantage	→	Actualized advantage
Advantages are strategic	→	Advantages are strategic
Advantages are tracked through data	→	Tangible advantages are tracked through data
Advantages have eroded	→	Actualized advantages have eroded
College prep and safety	→	Homogeneous advantages include college prep and safety
Greater responsiveness to stakeholders	→	Kinetic advantage is greater responsiveness to consumers
Individual and firm reputations	→	Advantages are individual- and firm-bound
Responsiveness	→	Compound advantage of responsiveness
School benefits from location	→	Location is a discrete advantage
Strategic advantages shifting to spontaneous	→	Strategic advantages shifting to spontaneous

Relating the axial codes to the theoretical framework resulted in breaking down the axial code “Competitive advantages” according to the elements of the SELECT Framework (Substance, Expression, Locale, Effect, Cause, and Time span) for greater clarity and theoretical cohesiveness. The other axial codes, which are discussed in greater detail in the Findings section of this chapter, were not broken down in this way because they addressed other topics. Table 4 indicates how the axial code “Competitive advantage” was broken down into sub-themes by relating it to the theoretical framework. Through further selective coding, the axial code

Competitive advantages was renamed Competitive Advantages Include Higher Responsiveness to Stakeholder Needs, School Safety, and Quality of Education to clarify its significance as a theme addressing Research Question 1.

**Table 4**

*Organization of an Axial Code into Sub-themes Through Selective Coding*

<b>Finalized axial code</b>	<i>n</i> of sources contributing	<i>n</i> of data chunks included
Selective coding sub-theme <i>Open codes clustered under sub-theme</i>		
<b>Axial code: Competitive Advantages Include Higher Responsiveness to Stakeholder Needs, School Safety, and Quality of Education</b>		
Sub-theme 1: Substance of advantages is homogeneous and kinetic <i>Homogeneous advantages include college prep and safety</i> <i>Kinetic advantage is greater responsiveness to consumers</i>	8	24
Sub-theme 2: Expression of advantages is compound and tangible <i>Compound advantage of responsiveness</i> <i>Location is a discrete advantage</i> <i>Tangible advantages are tracked through data</i>	8	18
Sub-theme 3: Locale of advantages is individual- and firm-bound <i>Advantages are individual- and firm-bound</i>	5	7
Sub-theme 4: Effect of advantages is relative <i>Relative advantages include academic and safety reputations</i>	7	11
Sub-theme 5: Cause of advantages was strategic but is shifting to spontaneous <i>Advantages are strategic</i> <i>Strategic advantages shifting to spontaneous</i>	6	11
Sub-theme 6: Time span of actualized advantages is temporal <i>Actualized advantage</i> <i>Actualized advantages have eroded</i>	6	15

*Note.* Sources ( $N=8$ ) include five interview participants and three documents.

### *Supplemental Data*

The last step in the process of data analysis was capturing the data that was presented. The coding process is used to develop a thematic analysis that provides in-depth descriptions that was used to capture the answers the research questions contained in the study. This work was done alongside the coding process through the triangulation of data by using the charter school application documents, along with direct observation of school board meetings. The use of memos was an effective data analysis tool to capture the researcher's thoughts on the subject throughout the interviewing, coding, reviewing, and observing. Maxwell (2013) describes how memos facilitate the thinking about the relationships within the data, and he encourages the researchers to write memos often to stimulate thoughts and ideas. In this study, I wrote a memo prior to and following each interview. The memo written prior to the interview was used to identify any preconceived notions or ideas that he may have had that could hinder or taint the data collection process. This process is referred to by Moustakas (1994) as bracketing. Following the interview, the researcher wrote another memo that captured significant thoughts and ideas that came from the interview itself. These memos served to keep the interview data organized and each interview distinctly separate. This assisted in the work of triangulation of data by assisting in keeping the information from the separate data points separated but allowed for an organized way to bring those data back together. The triangulation work will be described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

### **Research Ethics**

#### *Informed Consent*

When conducting research with voluntary human participants, it is imperative that the researcher gain their consent to participate in the study. The primary method for this is the use of

an informed consent form. This form is a written document that identifies the nature of the study and provides written permission allowing the researcher to use the participants. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) describe in detail what should be included in the informed consent letter.

A copy of the informed consent form for this study is attached as Appendix C.

The researcher carried out all research ethics with full fidelity throughout the course of this case study. The researcher practiced anonymity, consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and authorization through the use of summary and consent letters.

### **Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of charter school administrators within a mid-sized K-12 charter school in Genesee County, Michigan, to better understand the perceived role that competition has played in their work and decision-making. The participants were a purposeful sample of five charter school administrators and/or board members within a mid-sized K-12 charter school in Genesee County, Michigan. Three documents were reviewed as a secondary data source for triangulation. The following four research questions were used to guide this study:

1. Are charter school administrators and school board members of a single urban charter school able to identify and describe their competitive advantage?
2. How do charter school administrators and school board members of a single urban charter school identify and describe the influence of competition with surrounding school districts has on their decision-making and strategic processes?
3. How has competition influenced the academic program of an urban charter school?
4. How has competition influenced the operational structure of an urban charter school?

### **Demographics**

Table 1 indicates the relevant demographic characteristics of the individual study participants. Participants will be identified by the use of pseudonym to maintain their anonymity throughout the findings discussion. These pseudonyms are also listed within the following table.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Gender	Current role	Years of experience	Area of specialization
Mr. A	Male	Board Member	14	Facilities
Mr. B	Male	Board Member	5	Finances
Mrs. C	Female	Administrator	18	Student Supports
Mrs. D	Female	Administrator	22	Academics
Mrs. E	Female	Administrator	23	Operations

This presentation of the study findings is organized by research question. Under the heading for each research question, the findings addressing the question are organized by theme. The coding process through which Theme 1 was developed has been detailed as an example in the Data Analysis section and is omitted from this section to avoid redundancy in the presentation.

**Describing Competitive Advantages**

When asked to describe their competitive advantages over traditional public schools, three themes arose throughout the interviewing process. These three themes were responsiveness to stakeholder needs, school safety, and school quality. The participants in the study identified that, as a result of their size, school board engagement, and connectedness to their stakeholders that they are able to quickly adapt and respond as situations arise that impact their stakeholders – parents, students, and staff. Additionally, they have spent significant time and energy on ensuring the security and safety of the learning environment. They have received significant positive feedback from parent stakeholders that is a primary reason for parents sending their child to the case school. Lastly, the idea of a more quality academic program and instruction they view as a significant advantage. While this was identified as an advantage, it interestingly,

created a dichotomy between quality/rigor and the practicality of maintaining enrollment levels. This dichotomy will be discussed at length throughout the summary of the findings.

***Substance of Competitive Advantages Is Homogeneous and Kinetic***

Ma (1999) indicated that the substance of competitive advantage is composed of the positional or kinetic advantages and the homogenous and heterogeneous advantages present within an organization. Findings in this study indicated that the competitive advantages of the case school are homogeneous and kinetic. Ma (1999) defined homogeneous advantages as existing when all competitors engage in a given activity, but one of the competitors is superior at the activity. The homogeneous advantages participants reported were greater school safety, greater responsiveness to stakeholders, and a higher quality of education. Thus, while all the case school's competitors may be assumed to provide some education, some school safety, and some responsiveness to stakeholders, the five participants in this study believed that the case school was superior to its competitors in those domains.

In citing a higher quality of education as a homogeneous advantage, participants referenced the more rigorous nature of the curriculum, which was dedicated specifically to the goal of college preparation. It was notable in participants' responses that they described the curriculum as being in a transitional phase at time of study, with a previous curriculum being replaced by a new model that the case school had not yet had an opportunity to test. Thus, participants' responses describing the quality of education as higher than that offered by competitors referred to the previous curriculum, a factor that will be addressed under the Time Span element of the SELECT Framework. In describing the quality of education as higher at the case school, Mrs. C stated, "I think the curriculum was a huge piece that we could focus on and say it's strictly college prep, it's rigorous, it's gonna prepare [students]. So, I think that would



have been our advantage in the past.” Corroboration for participants’ perceptions was found through triangulation of the interview data with the document data. The Application to Charter (1998) indicated that academic excellence had been a goal of the case school’s leaders since the school’s inception, stating that the, education philosophy and methods...are based on the belief that all students can achieve high levels of academic progress if they have the desire to learn and learning gaps that invariably develop in the process of education are filled as they form. The college preparation goal of the educational program was sufficiently central to the case school’s mission that in 2015, the EPR document indicated that students were required to present a college acceptance letter to graduate (“students must receive a college acceptance letter as a graduation requirement”).

School safety was described as a homogeneous advantage because participants perceived discipline as being enforced more rigorously at the case school than at competitor schools. Mrs. D said that the level of discipline in the case school was high, and that discipline was maintained without an excessive number of suspensions, through positive relationships between faculty and students:

I think we're known as a safe place to go to school. So, I think when parents, especially middle school, and high school parents, are thinking about and looking at reputations of local schools, they know pretty much that our school is pretty safe, and that we really work hard to have those sorts of relationships with kids that we're not constantly suspending, and we don't have a lot of fights.

The third homogeneous advantage participants reported was responsiveness to stakeholder needs. This advantage was also kinetic, which Ma (1999) defined as the organization’s ability respond to market influences. An example of a kinetic advantage is the

mobilization of resources to meet a need for a consumer, and participants described the case school and its board as excelling in this respect. In describing the kinetic, homogeneous advantage of greater responsiveness to stakeholder needs, Mr. A explained that the recent transition in curriculum was undertaken because the company that previously managed the curriculum had been unable to meet needs for student success:

We had a management company that we saw some inconsistencies in the curriculum, and we saw that the students were not improving on their test scores. And the management company did a lot of hard work, and they tried, but they were not able to turn it around. So, we have flexibility because we're smaller to be able to change management companies, bring in a new curriculum, bring in new leadership as needed to try and solve problems quickly. I would imagine in a large school district, it would take years to get something like that done, versus making a decision locally and being able to do something in a couple months.

Participants' perceptions of school safety can be triangulated with document data.

Student behavior and discipline, a key factor in school safety, was referenced as a strategic goal in the case school's Application to Charter (1998). The Application indicated that a goal of the education program was to foster positive behaviors in students, or: "To empower students with the responsibility of leading many academic and non-academic aspects of the school, creating positive attitudes and behaviors, and nurturing responsible, capable leaders."

Notable in Mr. A's response was the perception that a large school district would be able to respond to student needs by changing the curriculum, but that it would likely take years to do so. Thus, a large school district would be able to meet stakeholder needs eventually, but the case school had the homogeneous, kinetic advantage of being able to pivot the direction of its smaller

organization more rapidly to address consumer needs almost immediately. Mr. A added of the case school's responsiveness that it was due not only to the organization's smaller size, but to the dedication of its board:

We have dedicated board members, who at the drop of a hat will come to a special meeting. If it's a disciplinary issue or a financial issue, or something needs to be taken care of quickly, we're able to get a quorum within less than a half of a day to put together a meeting, and sometimes shorter.

Mrs. E corroborated Mr. A's response in stating of the case school's kinetic advantage, "I think purely the fact that we're a charter, definitely now on a self-management level, we are able to act faster, quicker, and respond more appropriately." Thus, responsiveness to student needs was perceived as more rapid than the cumbersome administration of a large district would be able to achieve, in part because the case school was self-managed, and in part because the board was dedicated to responding to issues rapidly. Given that competitor schools may be assumed to be responsive in some degree to student needs, greater responsiveness was also a homogeneous advantage, as were greater school safety and a higher quality of education.

### ***Expression of Competitive Advantages Is Compound and Tangible***

Ma (1999) described the expression of competitive advantage as the structural form of the phenomenon of competition, or how the competitive advantage is observed. Participants in this study indicated that the expression of competitive advantage was compound and tangible. Compound advantages are a series of smaller advantages that work together to develop a superior competitive advantage (Ma, 1999). Compound advantages are often linked to kinetic advantages, as in the present case. Mr. B stated that the competitive advantages of the case school were compound because, "I think it's a whole bunch of little things that make us different

and give us that advantage. It goes back to; we don't have the one big difference.” Mrs. C specifically referenced the homogeneous advantage of a higher quality of education as having a compound expression:

We have this rigorous curriculum, they wear uniforms, they test four times a week, they take a diagnostic test to determine what grade they're gonna be in. I think parents like that, they felt like they were putting their kid at the superior choice. So, I think that definitely it was a system, and not just one thing.

Mr. A described the case school's kinetic, homogeneous advantage of greater responsiveness to consumer needs as having a compound expression, because it was based in part on the small organization's tracking of and sensitivity to several data points that could indicate a need for rapid change:

We track probably 15 to 16 different data points that we look at, and it provides us with a lot of information and provides the board with, I think, a better decision-making process as we move through the school year and enables us to not wait till the end of the year to try and make changes. So, we're able to, I think, move quickly, month over month, when we're seeing something glaring coming out that we're able to try and fix it.

Participants cited the school as having one discrete advantage in the school's central location in the community, which made the facility easier for parents and students from different parts of the community to access. As quoted previously, Mr. A and Mrs. C corroborated this point, with Mrs. C stating, “Where we're located is a good spot. We're centrally located, so we can draw from all neighborhoods.” The remaining three participants agreed with this response.

As a previously reported response from Mr. A suggested, the expression of the advantage of a higher quality of education was not only compound but tangible, because it was tracked

rigorously, using a variety of data points. Mr. B corroborated Mr. A's response and added of the tangible nature of the higher quality of education,

We look at that [authorizing university] report that provides us, and we see our students' testing, their growth is better than at [large school district]. Right? Our test scores are better than [large school district], our product, which is educated students, are better than [large school district].

Triangulation of document data with the interview data yielded corroboration for participants' perception that student success was tracked through tangible data points. A recent Educational Program Review (2018) stated that teachers met weekly to discuss student success as represented in data: "Leadership and staff focus groups stated that teachers and AQC's (Academic Quality Controllers) meet by grade level and/or subject area on a weekly basis to discuss curriculum pacing and student assessment data." Further review of the Educational Program Review (2018) also indicated a weakness in data tracking, the absence of comprehensive analysis of data to assess aggregate student and program success:

Limited evidence exists of a process to analyze schoolwide trend data to evaluate systems and structures. Therefore, the review team noted a lack of a comprehensive data culture that would serve to improve the academic achievement of all students. In essence, the data utilization is reactive rather than proactive.

Mrs. C reported that the advantage of school safety was tangible in part in the statistics regarding disciplinary incidents and the severity of infractions: "Our expulsion rates, compared to [large school district], we're almost zero. We don't have expulsions every year. We don't have huge suspensions every year." Thus, participants described the expression of the case school's competitive advantages primarily as compound and tangible. Higher quality of education had a

compound expression in the many factors that contributed to the tangible data points that marked the case school as superior in this regard to the large school district. School safety, a factor related to discipline, had a tangible expression in the comparison of suspension and expulsion data with the large school district. This data was triangulated through a document review of the 2020-2021 Crime and Expulsion reporting found on the transparency documents on the schools website. This document confirmed the belief of Mrs. C. Responsiveness to consumer needs had a compound expression in the board's dedication to acting quickly and in the tracking of the multiple data points on which the board acted.

### ***Locale of the Advantages Is Individual- and Firm-Bound***

The locale of an advantage can be found at three different levels – individual, firm, or virtual (Ma, 1999). Individual-bound advantage is a competitive advantage based on a particular individual or asset. A firm-bound advantage is shaped entirely by the organization. Mr. A provided a representative response in which he characterized the case school's advantages' locale as about half individual-bound and half firm-bound: "I would have a tendency to lean more toward the individual and the firm, about 50/50 of each." Mr. A believed that much of the school's reputation was bound up with the school's leader: "We have a very strong leader, and she's been with the school since the beginning...she has a great rapport with the community...she's highly looked upon from the administration, from the board, and from the teachers." Mr. A added of the firm-bound part of the case school's advantages: "The school as a whole, being in the firm's perspective, it's touted as a college prep school...the focus is really on getting ready for college and being prepared when they get to college." These findings were consistent with other responses from participants.

Mr. B believed that the case school's competitive advantages were primarily bound up with a handful of individual leaders who had worked with the school for many years and who carried much of the institutional knowledge that made the advantages possible: "Those long-standing traditions of that institutional knowledge of those individuals, and what's worked and what hasn't with these people, and what's changed over time. So, definitely, a huge part of [competitive advantages] is the people." Mrs. D corroborated Mr. A's and Mr. B's responses, stating that the educational and safety advantages of the case school were largely individual-bound: "I think it's individual because [leader] is a big part of the school's culture and decisions made by the administrative team that affect our kids and whether or not the school is safe and whether or not were successful." Thus, the locale of the school's advantages was viewed primarily as individual- and firm-bound.

### *Effects Are Relative*

The strength of the effect of competitive advantages can be observed as either an absolute advantage or a relative advantage (Ma, 1999). Ma describes absolute advantage results from an overwhelming, insurmountable advantage. Conversely, relative advantages are smaller in nature and more nuanced. The participants in this study described the case school's advantages as relative, in that they were small and nuanced. However, some participants suggested that the advantages of the case school had previously been absolute, but that their strength had declined over time. Mr. B expressed this perception in stating, "Early on, I think we had the advantage that we were totally different than [large district]. And over time those differences have been broken down and weaned away, and we've become very little competitive difference against any other school." Mrs. C corroborated Mr. B's perception that the advantage was relative in stating, "I think it's relative. It's definitely not absolute. Because someone on the outside may be like,

‘They're no different than the next charter.’” Mrs. D provided further corroboration, stating, “I would say it's relative, for the reasons that we don't have a lot of great-looking data right now surrounding us, whether it's behavioral, academic, whatever. So, I'd say that it's relative.”

### *Cause of Advantages Was Strategic but Shifting to Spontaneous*

The cause of competitive advantage can be categorized as either being spontaneous or strategic (Ma, 1999). Spontaneous causes could be perceived as luck or because of environmental changes that impact an industry. Strategic causes are generally the result of deliberate action. Mr. A described the board as taking a strategic approach at the time of the case school's founding to differentiate it from the competition through a strong focus on academics: “As a board, when the school opened, we specifically looked at what was missing and what void could we fill. And I think that it was very strategic, and that we focused on academics.” Mrs. C expressed a similar thought to Mr. A, stating, “It was strategic when they thought about opening up the school and the type of education they wanted to provide compared to the local district.” Mr. B also agreed, stating, “The school was founded to be significantly different than other alternatives within the area.” This response was focused on the intent upon the founding of the school.

However, Mr. B added that the case school's strategic advantage was wearing away as the strategic focus shifted away from differentiating the school from its competitors: “That [strategic advantage] was broken down, and now leaning more spontaneous, because decisions aren't made about what makes us different, decisions are made about, ‘How do we educate the child?’” Mrs. E expressed a perception similar to Mr. B's: “Up to this point, I think [the competitive advantage] certainly was more strategic. But in the past several months, I think it's certainly been more spontaneous.” Triangulation of document data yielded corroboration of



interviewees' perceptions that the case school's competitive advantages were initially strategic. The Application to Charter (1998), the case school's founding document, has been quoted previously as stating that a strong academic focus and a focus on positive citizenship behaviors among students were identified as strategic goals at the school's inception. The Application to Charter summarized these goals in stating that the goal of the case school was to, "Produce young men and women who are prepared intellectually, morally, and socially to succeed in college. It will foster a love for lifelong learning and encourage responsible citizenship." Thus, the goals of achieving a high academic and school safety or discipline standard were deliberately targeted.

### *Time-Span of Advantages Is Temporal*

The lifespan of an advantage is a critical element of competitive advantage (Ma, 1999). The time-span advantage is categorized in potential or actual advantages and temporal or sustained advantages. When evaluating a competitive advantage, it should be determined if the advantage is being actualized or is there just a potential for the advantage to materialize based on additional factors. The same holds true for the longevity of the competitive advantage. Is the advantage a phase or is the advantage under threat of being eroded over time? All five participants agreed that the case school's competitive advantages were actualized but were under threat of being eroded over time. Mrs. D explained that the competitive advantages were actualized because, "We still have the same mission and still keep true to what we want to do with the kids and how we want to grow good citizens and have a safe place to learn." However, all participants agreed that the actualized advantages were temporal in nature and were under threat of being eroded. Mr. A believed that any individual-bound advantages were under threat of being eroded through turnover among top leadership: "As it currently sits today, [competitive

advantage] is sensitive to that specific person, in my opinion.” Mrs. C referred to the precarious nature of individual-bound advantages in describing the case school’s competitive advantages as in danger of being eroded:

I don't think it's sustainable for people to just solely operate off, “I have faith in these individuals.” Because these individuals are going to leave at some point. So, the system needs to be set up in a way that they have faith in how we operate in general.

### *Summary of Competitive Advantages*

Participants described the competitive advantages of the case school as including higher responsiveness to stakeholder needs, school safety, and quality of education. Regarding the *substance* of the advantages, responsiveness to consumer needs was perceived as more rapid than the cumbersome administration of a large district would be able to achieve, in part because the case school was self-managed, and in part because the board was dedicated to responding to issues rapidly. This made responsiveness to consumer needs a kinetic advantage. Given that competitor schools may be assumed to be responsive in some degree to student needs, greater responsiveness was also a homogeneous advantage, as were greater school safety and a higher quality of education. Participants described the *expression* of the case school’s competitive advantages primarily as compound and tangible. Higher quality of education had a compound expression in the many factors that contributed to the tangible data points that marked the case school as superior in this regard to the large school district. School safety, a factor related to discipline, had a tangible expression in the comparison of suspension and expulsion data with the large school district. Responsiveness to consumer needs had a compound expression in the board’s dedication to acting quickly and in the tracking of the multiple data points on which the board acted.

Participants described the *locale* of the school's advantages as individual- and firm-bound, with most participants emphasizing the individual-bound component, which consisted of the institutional knowledge held by a few individuals in leadership that allowed the school to maintain its competitive advantages. The *effects* of the advantages were described as relative, in that they were small and nuanced. However, some participants suggested that the advantages of the case school had previously been absolute, but that their strength had declined over time. The *cause* of the advantages was initially strategic, because at the time of the school's founding, the board selected a strong academic focus as a means of differentiating the case school from its competitors. However, the advantage was seen as becoming more spontaneous as the strategic focus shifted away from differentiation. In relation to *time span*, the advantages were seen as actualized, but they were also perceived as temporal and even precarious because they were highly individual-bound.

### **Influence of Competition on Decision-Making**

According to participants, the charter school seeks to imitate, rather than collaborate with their competition. This theme initially emerged as an axial code labeled *Influence of Competition*, that was identified in the relationship between two open codes identified in the interview data. Through selective coding, the theme name was finalized as 'The influence of competition is through imitation rather than collaboration' to clarify its relevance to addressing Research Question 2. Table 5 indicates the open codes clustered under the finalized theme.

**Table 5**

*Clustering of Open Codes Under Research Question 2*

<b>Finalized theme</b> Open codes clustered under theme	<i>n</i> of interview participants	<i>n</i> of data chunks from interviews	<i>n</i> of documents	<i>n</i> of data chunks from documents	total <i>n</i> of data chunks
<b>The influence of competition is through imitation rather than collaboration</b>	5	12	-	-	12
Influence from competitors is through imitation	5	9	-	-	9
Minimal connection to large school district	3	3	-	-	3

The two open codes clustered under *The Influence of Competition is through Imitation rather than Collaboration* indicated two main points related to the influence of the competition on the case school leadership’s decision-making and strategic processes. The first open code indicated that there was little direct contact between personnel at the case school and personnel in the large school district with which they competed. Mrs. E indicated that a handful of administrators at the case school had working relationships with administrators in the public school district, but that those relationships were dependent on the individuals involved and constituted only a weak connection between the respective institutions:

When you think of a leadership team being comprised of six or eight strong people, when only two of those people or three of those people are able to pick of the phone and call and connect [to public school administrators], and the others have absolutely no

connection...and by choice, not necessarily any other reason...I think as a whole, it's a weakness.

Mr. B corroborated Mrs. E's perception, stating, "I don't think there's a whole lot of collaboration between administration and other competitor's administration." Mrs. D also expressed a similar perception, stating, "I think for me and for my teachers, there's not really any relationship." Mr. B expressed why the relationship was not collaborative in stating, "I'm not gonna collaborate with my competitors." However, Mr. B added a comment that was representative of other participants' perception of the nature of the relationship between the case school and its public competitors, stating that the case school's administrators were influenced by the public school district through, "using them as a resource."

The second open code clustered under this theme indicated that the case school administrators were influenced by the competition in their decision-making and strategic processes when they imitated their competitors. Mr. B explained that the administrators' process was to adapt competing schools' successful initiatives to the case school:

I don't think we look at the competitors in the area and say, "Hey, they're doing it this way. Let's go 180 degrees down the road." It's more of the fact that, "Hey, we wanna do this. Hey, has [competing school 1] done that, or [competing school 2] done that, or whomever in the area, have they done it that way?"

Mrs. C confirmed Mr. B's perception, and also attested to the indirect nature of the relationship between the case school and the competing school districts' administrations, in stating that her children attended a competing school, and that she worked to adapt initiatives she observed in her children's school to meet the case school's needs: "I live in [competing school's attendance zone], so I take a lot of things that I get as a parent from [competing school] and try

and tweak them so that we can incorporate it into what we do.” Mr. A provided partly discrepant data, stating, “We do a bit of collaboration with them [the competing school district],” but added as an example, “With COVID and from a health perspective, and even before that, we've looked for some of the decisions that they're making to try to learn maybe from some of their mistakes.” This example suggested, consistent with responses from the other participants, that the influence of the competing school district was through the case school administrators’ observation and adaptation of initiatives, rather than through direct, bilateral collaboration, as Mr. A initially indicated.

### **Influence of Competition on the Academic Program**

The pressure from student attrition is leading to imitation of competing schools’ less rigorous academic programs. Consistently, responses were centered around the original founding of the school was focused on a high level of academic rigor. Over the years, the school has experienced students leaving the program because the focus and demand for academic achievement was too strong. This created an issue of competing interests between student counts and maintaining a high level of academic rigor through their existing structure. This theme initially emerged as an axial code labeled, *Influence of Competing Academic Programs*, that was identified in the relationship between two open codes formed from the interview and document data. Through selective coding, the theme name was finalized as “Pressure from enrollment attrition is leading to imitation of competing schools’ less rigorous academic programs” to clarify its relevance to addressing Research Question 3. Table 6 indicates the open codes clustered under the finalized theme.

**Table 6**  
*Clustering of Open Codes Under Research Question 3*

<b>Finalized theme</b> Open codes clustered under theme	<i>n</i> of interview participants	<i>n</i> of data chunks from interviews	<i>n</i> of documents	<i>n</i> of data chunks from documents	total <i>n</i> of data chunks
<b>Pressure from student attrition is leading to imitation of competing schools' less rigorous academic programs</b>	5	13	2	2	15
Changing the academic program	5	7	2	2	9
Student attrition prompting discussions	5	6	-	-	6

The first open code clustered under Research Question 3 indicated that pressure from student attrition was prompting discussions about the academic program at the case school. Participants stated that attrition was occurring for several reasons, some of which were unrelated to academics. Student attrition was due in part to the declining population of the community in which the case school was located, but as Mr. A stated in a representative response, “I don't wanna use that as an excuse,” because exit surveys indicated that many students who left the case school were transferring to other schools in the community. Reasons for student transfers included opportunities in competing schools such as advanced placement classes, more extensive athletics programs, and a more typical large high school experience, which, “You just really can't replicate it when your high school is one hallway” (Mrs. D). However, exit surveys frequently indicated that students were leaving the case school to attend its competitors because the academic program at the case school was too challenging: “They leave because it's too hard here,

academically” (Mrs. D). Mrs. E stated that the “number one” reason why students left the case school to attend its competitors was, “Academics being too hard or they're failing.” Mrs. E estimated the proportion of student attrition due to the relative difficulty of the academic program at 90%: “Nine out of ten times, I would bet if we would look at exit surveys, it was the academic program. Too much testing, academic program was too hard.” Student attrition was an urgent problem for the case school because Michigan funded schools according to the number of students enrolled, such that, “We have a minimum number of students we have to have in the building in order to have a balanced budget” (Mr. B). Mr. A estimated that enrollment at the case school had declined more than 33% over the previous seven years, from 1,500 to fewer than 1,000, leading to a proportional decline in state funding. Triangulation of data from archival documents provided corroboration for participants’ perception that the academic program was excessively rigorous for some students. One document stated, “Some staff focus groups expressed concern that sometimes the students did not understand, but the pacing regulations required the teacher to move on and cover the next standard. Students who did not master the content would then require tutoring,” indicating teacher concerns that the pacing required by the curriculum was too fast.

Student attrition and concerns about students’ lack of success were why the case school administrators were abandoning the curriculum used in the school since its founding and developing a new academic program. Participants indicated that in developing the new curriculum, case school administrators would be using competing schools’ academic programs as models. Mrs. C spoke to this point in stating,

Now that we're moving away from [previous curriculum], there's a lot of things that we're probably gonna do that mimic the traditional public schools. We have [administrator’s



name redacted], who's working on the English curriculum. That's coming from her experience at [competing high school]. We're not saying that they're [competing schools] not doing anything right. It's okay to steal from them to implement and make it work for us the way we see fit. What they do or what they don't do that works, and we see, we try and implement, or tweak it so we can implement it.

Mrs. E said of seeking ideas from competing schools' academic programs that the case school's administration was, "Definitely looking at that, and not necessarily for competition, but more for what's in the best interest of the kids, so let's look at that...Like our special ed person reaching out to the local county." Mr. B also stated that case school leaders were deliberately looking for models in competing schools' academic programs: "Looking to say, 'Okay, well, the curriculum that's being used, and what programs are being used, and what methods are being used at other areas [schools]?" Mr. B added that case school leaders would be evaluating competing schools' academic programs to assess fitness for their own students: "What's the benefit of those [programs], and what's the repercussions of using those types of methods? So, there's definitely some of that during our evaluation process of what curriculum we're going to [implement]." Thus, participants consistently indicated that pressure from student attrition due to high academic rigor was one reason why case school leadership had jettisoned its traditional curriculum and begun to evaluate alternatives. The future influence of traditional public schools' academic programs on the academic program at the case school would occur through a process of observation, evaluation, and adaptation of those programs to meet case school students' needs.

### **Influence of Competition on Organizational Structure**

The charter schools' operational structure is designed to give the charter school competitive advantages over traditional public schools. As a smaller school than their

competitors, the responses were centered around their ability to respond to the wants and needs of their school community. This manifested in the school calendar, safety, and security concerns, and building upgrades. This theme initially emerged as an axial code labeled, Operations, that was identified in the relationship between two open codes formed from the interview data. Through selective coding, the theme name was finalized as “Operational structure is designed to give the charter school competitive advantages over traditional public schools” to clarify its relevance to addressing Research Question 4. Table 7 indicates the open codes clustered under the finalized theme.

**Table 7**  
*Clustering of Open Codes Under Research Question 4*

<b>Finalized theme</b> Open codes clustered under theme	<i>n</i> of interview participants	<i>n</i> of data chunks from interviews	<i>n</i> of documents	<i>n</i> of data chunks from documents	total <i>n</i> of data chunks
<b>Operational structure is designed to give the charter school competitive advantages over traditional public schools</b>	4	7	-	-	7
Maintaining traditional calendar	3	5	-	-	5
Superior safety and cleanliness	1	2	-	-	2

*Note.* Mrs. C did not contribute to this theme but also did not provide discrepant data. Her response to the relevant interview item referred to aspects of academic programming rather than operations.

The participants described aspects of the case school’s operational structure as designed to give the school a competitive advantage over traditional public schools. The aspect of operational structure that participants referenced most frequently was the calendar for school operations. Recently, the case school’s most direct competitor had switched to a balanced calendar, in which breaks were distributed throughout the school year rather than concentrated

primarily in a single, long summer break. The balanced calendar was intended to reduce the learning loss that was perceived as occurring over the long break. Three participants in this study indicated that the case school's leaders evaluated the calendar options and chose to retain the traditional calendar, with its long summer break. Mrs. E stated that school leaders surveyed staff and parents to assess whether stakeholders preferred retaining the traditional calendar or adopting the balanced calendar, and that the results indicated strong support for the traditional schedule of operations: "We did the surveys to parents, students, and staff. And overwhelmingly, it was not favorable [to changing to the balanced calendar]." Mrs. E added that leadership's decision to retain the traditional calendar was strategic, and that it was made in part to mitigate staff and student attrition by offering the preferred option: "Keeping in mind of staff retention specifically, as well as the parent feedback, [we] just didn't feel it was in the best interest [of the case school]." Mrs. D agreed, stating, "We actually did a poll of parents, do you want balanced calendar, or do you want to stick to traditional? And it was pretty overwhelming that our parents wanted to stay with traditional." Of staff responses, Mrs. D added, "A lot of teachers were not down with balanced calendar, and we already struggled keeping teachers. So, it was probably a little all of that that led to the decision. But it was definitely an informed decision." Participants stated that they believed retaining the traditional calendar gave them a competitive advantage over their school's competitors. Mrs. D stated, "A lot of the [city] schools are now on balanced calendar, which we have not gone to. It [our decision] was like saying we want to offer a different option." Mr. B explained why offering the traditional calendar was expected to give the case school a competitive advantage:

Our competitor [switched to the balanced calendar]. Does that give us a competitive advantage if we don't do it? Because [City] Schools is gonna start their students [three

weeks earlier], there's gonna be a number of parents that are gonna try to apply three weeks in, and if [City School] says, "No, thank you, we don't want you because it's three weeks in," "Hey, look, come on to [case school]. We haven't started yet."

Mr. A indicated that aspects of school operational structure related to security and custodial services were designed to give the case school a competitive advantage. Mr. A said of the security structure that it was designed to contribute to the safe school environment that participants identified as a competitive advantage:

We put in some very expensive security systems to make sure that the teachers and the children were in a safe environment. So, we have all kinds of lockdown capabilities. We have hundreds and hundreds of cameras throughout the campus. So, if an event does occur, there's very few areas that we're not able to pull the footage from the cameras to assist in making a determination about what actually happened, which has helped us out hundreds of times.

Mr. A also spoke of making expensive upgrades to the building's lighting and ventilation systems to contribute to the school's competitive advantage of a higher quality of education, because "There's been a lot of studies about learning from a lighting perspective and from a fresh air quality environment that makes it a better learning environment for the kids." Mr. A also spoke of investing in and changing cleaning services to ensure a clean environment as a competitive advantage: "We've wanted to make sure that it was a very clean, top-notch, beautiful facility for the kids to go to. And I think that that's been a separator between us and our competition." Thus, most participants cited the school's decision not to follow traditional public schools in changing to the balanced calendar as a strategic decision intended to realize a competitive advantage as an institution that offered a heterogeneous advantage in retaining the

traditional calendar. Security, custodial, and maintenance aspects of the operational structure were designed to give the case school a homogeneous advantage over competitors that offered these same services at a lower level of quality. In all of these instances, the operational structure of the case school was designed to give the school a competitive advantage over traditional public schools, such that the influence of competing schools' operational structures was that of a standard which case school leaders sought to differentiate their school from or exceed.

### **Summary**

This chapter indicated the results of the three-cycle coding procedure applied to interview and document data to address the four research questions. The findings indicated that the competitive advantages of an urban charter school in Genesee County, Michigan, were identified as higher responsiveness to stakeholder needs, school safety, and quality of education in comparison to traditional public schools. In relation to the theoretical framework (Ma, 1999), the case school's competitive advantages were described as having a homogeneous and kinetic Substance, a compound and tangible Expression, an individual- and firm-bound Locale, relative Effects, strategic Causes that were transitioning to spontaneous, and an actualized and temporal Time-Span. Findings further indicated that the influence of competition was through imitation on the part of the case school's leadership rather than collaboration. Participants also described pressure from student attrition as leading case school leaders to imitate traditional public schools' less rigorous academic program, and the operational structure of the case school as designed to give a competitive advantage over traditional public schools.

### **Discussion**

Educators from traditional public and charter schools are often assumed to view their work in a competitive fashion. This assumption has been challenged in qualitative studies that have explored traditional public school administrators' perceptions of charter schools (Jones, 2014; Parker, 2009). Those studies showed that traditional public-school administrators lament the loss of students and revenue to charter schools, but that they are not focused on learning from or trying to "beat" the charter schools with which they are competing. However, qualitative studies exploring the role competition plays in public education are far scarcer than their quantitative comparison studies counterparts. Even fewer studies exist that explore the idea of competition through the lens of a charter school educator. No previous studies of that kind have been conducted in this area within the state of Michigan. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the experiences of charter school administrators within a mid-sized K-12 charter school in Genesee County, Michigan, to gain a better understanding of the perceived role that competition with public schools has played in their work and decision-making.

To achieve this purpose, a qualitative, single-case study was conducted. The case school was a large, urban charter school located in Genesee County, MI. This charter school has a K-12 program and services over 900 students. The case school was one of the first charter schools to be opened in Genesee County, MI. Since its inception in 1999, this school has been awarded a US News and World Report Bronze Medal nearly every year in recognition of student performance on state assessments, graduation rates, and college readiness preparation (Boyington, 2016). The case school was in an extremely competitive school choice market, which has an extremely large charter student population. The following four research questions

were used to guide this investigation of case school administrators' perception of the role competition plays in their work and decision-making:

1. How do charter school administrators and school board members of a single urban charter school identify and describe their competitive advantage?
2. How do charter school administrators and school board members of single urban charter school identify and describe the influence competition with surrounding school districts has in their decision-making and strategic processes?
3. How has the academic program of an urban charter school been influenced by their competition with traditional public schools?
4. How has the operational structure of an urban charter school been influenced by their competition with traditional public schools?

Data collection was through one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with five case school administrators or board members and a review of archival documents. The analysis procedure applied to the interview and document data was the three-cycle coding method (i.e., open, axial, and selective coding) described by Williams and Miller (2019), for the purpose of developing themes as described by Maxwell (2013). Four major themes emerged during data analysis, as follows: (a) competitive advantages include higher responsiveness to stakeholder needs, school safety, and quality of education, (b) the influence of competition is through imitation rather than collaboration, (c) pressure from student attrition is leading to imitation of competing schools' less rigorous academic programs, and (d) operational structure is designed to give the charter school competitive advantages over traditional public schools.

Each section of this chapter is organized by finding, with a subheading for each of the four themes presented in Chapter 4. The findings are considered considering the previous

literature in preparation for making recommendations in the following two major sections of this chapter.

### **Competitive Advantages**

This theme arose out of my analysis of the first research question, which was focused on how charter school administrators from the case school identify and describe their competitive advantage. Competitive advantages were assessed according to the elements of Ma's (1999) SELECT Framework (Substance, Expression, Locale, Effect, Cause, and Time span). Participants described the competitive advantages of the case school as including higher responsiveness to stakeholder needs, school safety, and quality of education. Regarding the *substance* of the advantages, responsiveness to consumer needs was perceived as more rapid than the cumbersome administration of a large district would be able to achieve, in part because the case school was self-managed, and in part because the board was dedicated to responding to issues rapidly. This made responsiveness to consumer needs a kinetic advantage. Given that competitor schools may be assumed to be responsive in some degree to student needs, greater responsiveness was also a homogeneous advantage, as were greater school safety and a higher quality of education. Participants described the *expression* of the case school's competitive advantages primarily as compound and tangible. Higher quality of education had a compound expression in the many factors that contributed to the tangible data points that marked the case school as superior in this regard to the large school district. School safety, a factor related to discipline, had a tangible expression in the comparison of suspension and expulsion data with the large school district. Responsiveness to consumer needs had a compound expression in the board's dedication to acting quickly and in the tracking of the multiple data points on which the board acted.



Participants described the *locale* of the school's advantages as individual- and firm-bound, with most participants emphasizing the individual-bound component, which consisted of the institutional knowledge held by a few individuals in leadership that allowed the school to maintain its competitive advantages. The *effects* of the advantages were described as relative, in that they were small and nuanced. However, some participants suggested that the advantages of the case school had previously been absolute, but that their strength had declined over time. The *cause* of the advantages was initially strategic, because at the time of the school's founding, the board selected a strong academic focus as a means of differentiating the case school from its competitors. However, the advantage was seen as becoming more spontaneous as the strategic focus shifted away from differentiation. In relation to *time span*, the advantages were seen as actualized, but they were also perceived as temporal and even precarious because they were highly individual-bound.

The finding that a higher quality of education was a tangible advantage of the case school confirmed findings to the same effect by Martinez (2014), Harvey (2018), Winters (2012), and Flaker (2014), who added that charter schools often achieve better student performance at a lower per-student cost than public schools. This finding also identified the case school as an exception to findings by researchers such as Kirkland (2016) and Smart (2018) indicating inconclusive results in relation to the efficacy of charter versus public schools in promoting student achievement. Parham and Thomas (2017), Orfield and Luce (2016), and Wall (2011) indicated that charter schools are less effective than public schools in promoting student achievement. The finding in this study disconfirmed their finding in the instance of the case school, which data on student achievement was reported as being at least as effective as public schools in promoting student achievement.

It was notable that the proprietary academic program in the case school had previously been a heterogeneous advantage not offered in competing schools. A higher quality of education and increased student performance are central to the purpose of charter schools (Loveless & Field, 2009), and data in the present study indicated that the heterogeneous advantage represented by the proprietary academic program was significant in attracting (but not in retaining) students. However, participants reported that the rigor of the academic program in comparison to those offered in public schools was perceived by many students and families as excessive, leading to student attrition. A review of archival documents confirmed that teachers in the case school perceived the academic program as lacking sufficient mechanisms for addressing the needs of students who required additional help to master the material, with the result that some students did not succeed academically. Charter school teachers typically have more autonomy and flexibility in their classrooms (Brinson & Rosch, 2010). Studies have indicated that this increased freedom can lead to increased innovation in pedagogical approaches that will increase student achievement (Gurganious, 2017). However, the data in this study indicated that teachers in the case school did not experience increased freedom to innovate to meet student needs. Instead, they felt compelled by the pacing of the proprietary academic program to refer struggling students for tutoring rather than addressing their needs in the classroom. The finding by Gurganious (2017) may be taken as suggesting that the new curriculum being formulated at the case school at time of study should be developed to give teachers more freedom than the previous academic program allowed them.

### **Imitation Rather than Collaboration**

This finding arose from my analysis of Research Question 2, which was focused on how charter school administrators of a single urban charter school identify and describe the influence

competition with surrounding school districts has in their decision-making and strategic processes. Findings indicated that most case school leaders had minimal contact with their counterparts in the traditional public schools with which they competed for students. Findings further indicated that the influence of competition with traditional public schools on case school administrators' decision-making and strategic processes was through case administrators' observation and imitation rather than through direct collaboration or two-way communication. One significant problem with imitation in this instance is the imitation was for the purpose of reducing academic rigor and performance to remain attractive to lower performing students for enrollment purposes. Previous researchers have found that public school administrators neither actively compete with nor learn from the charter schools with which they compete for students (Jones, 2014; Parker, 2009).

Findings in this study contributed to addressing a gap in the literature by indicating that administrators at the case school do view public schools as competition and make active efforts (such as abandoning the old academic program) to position their school more advantageously in relation to its competitors. Findings further indicated that case school administrators were attentive to initiatives and innovations in public schools, evaluating them for their potential efficacy in the case school and adapting them when doing so appeared beneficial. Case school administrators' methods for staying abreast of initiatives and innovations in public schools were varied but tended to be indirect. One participant reported that she conducted web searches to learn about changes in public schools. Another participant reported that her children were enrolled in a public school and that she used her position as a parent to monitor that public school's efforts and innovations. Although none of the participants indicated that they collaborated directly with public school administrators, they stated that a handful of their

colleagues had contacts in public school administration with whom they sometimes exchanged ideas and advice. However, these instances of direct contact were cited as exceptional, and as dependent on the persons involved (individual-bound) rather than systemic and sustainable. Sustainability is often impacted when a process is dependent on people rather than systems surrounding it. This is important to highlight the need for strong systemic processes to drive continuous improvement through increased dialogue across traditional and charter school channels.

### **Imitation of Competing Schools' Less Rigorous Academic Programs**

This finding emerged through my analysis of data relevant to the third research question, which was focused on how the academic program of the case school has been influenced by traditional public schools. Findings indicated that pressure from student attrition had led to the rapid abandonment of the traditional academic program at the case school. Student attrition was attributed primarily to the difficulty of the curriculum and for insufficient allowances in the proprietary academic program for addressing the needs of struggling students in class. Students were leaving the case school because they were not succeeding there, and they expected the academic program in public schools to be less challenging. Participants indicated that in developing the new curriculum, case school administrators would be using competing schools' academic programs as models. All participants expressed uncertainty about the future of the case school's competitive advantage of higher education quality. In formulating a replacement for the previous academic program, case school leaders would be adapting public school academic programs, participants indicated.

Two of the case school's competitive advantages were implicated in these findings. First, participants expressed that case school leadership had responded rapidly to stakeholder needs for

a change to the academic program. The finding that the case school had the kinetic advantage of rapid responsiveness to stakeholders confirmed findings in the previous literature. Increased responsiveness to stakeholder needs and the ability to innovate rapidly are central to the charter school model. Stambach and Becker (2007) argued that charter schools provide educators with the flexibility and freedom to be innovative in their pedagogical approach. Timpane, Brewe, and Gill (2001) described charter schools as innovation incubators, given that these schools represent an avenue for educators to be creative and try new or different approaches. Gawlick (2016) contended that the autonomy of leadership in charter schools is a significant facilitator of the overall improvement of public education. Charter schools were initially conceived as a means of changing the shape of public education by supplying competition (Wells et al., 1999). Ideally, this competition would force public schools to adapt their practices to compete for students, thereby changing the monopolistic structure of public education. In this competition, charter schools are forced to satisfy the parents and guardians who choose to send their students to a school outside of their assigned traditional public alternative (Cheng & Peterson, 2017).

In the case school, competition with public schools for students exerted pressure to harness the higher adaptability of its autonomous leadership to implement a program of curriculum in which students would be more likely to succeed. This finding confirmed the contention of Winters, Clayton, and Carpenter (2017) that mobility between public and charter schools is primarily composed of unsuccessful students who are seeking a learning environment in which they can succeed, given that unsuccessful students accounted for an estimated 90% of the attrition from the case school. At time of study, case school administrators were in process of formulating a new system of curriculum to replace the former, proprietary academic program. It is noteworthy that if the outcome of this process is to reduce academic rigor, this will disconfirm

Friedman's prediction that the infusion of competition into education would raise the quality of education across the board (Friedman, 1962). Friedman appeared to assume that consumer demand in an educational free market would be for a higher quality of education rather than for an easier curriculum. The potential for competition for students to exert pressure on schools to reduce academic rigor would instead support the contention of Ravitch (2010) that school choice would result in the "dumbing-down" of academics across schools. The challenge the case school administrators faced at time of study was to preserve the higher quality of education that charter schools can provide while simultaneously reducing rates of student failure and attrition.

### **Operational Structure as a Competitive Advantage**

This finding arose from my analysis of the fourth research question, which was focused on how the operational structure of the case school was influenced by traditional public schools. The participants described aspects of the case school's operational structure as designed to give the school a competitive advantage over traditional public schools. The aspect of operational structure that participants referenced most frequently was the calendar for school operations, which was selected after a survey of students, staff, and parents to provide a more popular alternative to the calendar being offered in public schools. The security structure and custodial services in the case school were also described as designed to yield a competitive advantage over traditional public schools, in which these aspects of operational structure were perceived as inferior. As noted previously, researchers have found that public school administrators neither actively compete with nor learn from the charter schools with which they compete for students (Jones, 2014; Parker, 2009). This finding indicated that participants from the case school perceive themselves and their colleagues as actively competing with and learning from traditional public schools. In the domain of operational structure, participants described

themselves as strategically implementing the heterogeneous advantage of the traditional calendar, which had been superseded in competing schools by the balanced calendar. The homogeneous advantages of better security and increased cleanliness were also implemented strategically, based on a comparison with public schools.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

There are three recommendations that if acted upon could result in lasting impact on education both in Michigan and at the national level. These recommendations are in the areas of competition in public education, strategies for meeting the needs of underperforming students, and the public policy of school choice. These three things surfaced as a result of summarizing and analyzing the findings presented within this study.

First, it is recommended that all school administrators make additional effort to observe, evaluate, and adapt initiatives in surrounding schools (Allender et al., 2019). Findings in this study suggested that charter school administrators may be actively and strategically competing with public schools. Findings from Jones (2014) and Parker (2009) indicating that this competitiveness is not reciprocated suggest that charter school administrators may have the advantage of monitoring and learning from their competition, while public school administrators may not. Friedman (1962) indicated that school choice would provide public school administrators with the stimulus of competition, leading to a higher quality of education not only in the charter schools, but in public schools as well. Findings in this study and from Jones (2014) and Parker (2009) suggested that the school choice model and the competition it introduces into education may be having the desired effect on charter schools, but not on public schools, whose administrators may have little incentive to respond to the competition that was designed to force them to innovate. In fact, the findings in this study indicate that charter school administrators feel

the pressure from budget constraints from the loss of revenue from decreased enrollment when they maintain too high a level of academic rigor.

The first recommendation presented in this study is geared toward all educators. This recommendation involved all educators leaving their individual silos to engage in observation and learning from actual practice in surrounding schools' practice. Friedman (1962) and Budde (1988) both envisioned the reform of choice and competition as a way of infusing new and out of the box thinking to tackle the pressing issue of stagnation of performance of public education. Budde specifically believed that the use of charter schools could create these innovation centers that could be used to try cutting edge practices and were free of the bureaucratic and political pressures that existed in the traditional system. The idea was these schools could spur competition, but in a complementary way. The first recommendation to get educators engaged in each other's practice is just a recalling back to the foundational purpose of the use of choice and competition as a reform strategy.

The literature reviewed in this study shows that traditional public educators have not engaged with the charter schools surrounding them (Jones, 2014; Parker, 2009). They do not evaluate their performance or look to learn from their practice. This study showed that educators within the case study had to re-evaluate the high academic rigor and performance the school was initially founded on. In part, to compete from a student count perspective with local schools that are not as difficult. This highlights how this first recommendation is centered around competition among schools should be based around academic performance and not student counts. The impact of educators learning and growing from each other's day-to-day practice cannot be understated. This recommendation does not discount the fact that educators are regularly learning from each other. This learning is often taking place in the context of within the same



building, network, district, or at conferences. Charter schools should push past the traditional form of professional learning to include a more collaborate approach to engage, evaluate, and observe educators that are in a different environment of systems to spur educators out of their comfort zones to drive innovation for the betterment of the students in our collective care. The impact of this recommendation could impact educators around the state and country by exposing them to practices, systems, and ideas that they might not have ever had to wrestle with. It is this mental conflict between current practice and is there a better way that can have significant impact on our public education system forward in a way that improves outcomes for all students.

Second, it is recommended that administrators in the case school and in other charter schools undergoing academic program changes work to maintain their advantage of a higher quality of education while making generous provisions for meeting the needs of struggling students (Lake & Gross, 2019). If higher academic rigor in charter schools (Flaker, 2014; Harvey, 2018; Martinez, 2014; Winters, 2012) can lead to a migration of unsuccessful students to easier public schools (Winters et al., 2017), then the optimal situation for the charter school is to differentiate itself from traditional public schools with a higher quality of education while preventing attrition among unsuccessful students through provisions for ensuring their success. One such provision would be to allow teachers more latitude for innovating in the classroom to meet student needs, an advantage that is typical of charter schools (Stambach & Becker, 2007), but which was precluded in the case school during most of its existence by the rapid, rigid pacing of the proprietary academic program.

The second recommendation's impact is centered on focusing on competition from a student performance standard instead of a student count standard. This recommendation is a good reminder that all schools encounter students that struggle to perform against typical grade

level standards. Charter school educators in high performing schools should focus significant resources and energy to developing systems and practices to address the needs of all learners that they encounter. This can be done in two primary ways to have the highest impact – Teacher autonomy and strong intervention systems.

The school that participated in the case study sought to address the area of autonomy by changing their curriculum and program to allow for educators to have more latitude in their sequencing of the curriculum to address the needs of all learners. Stambach & Becker (2007) highlighted that teacher autonomy is a key tenant of charter schools that can assist in addressing the needs of a diverse learning population. The impact of teacher autonomy is directly tied to the idea that has educators grow, learn, and develop, they have the autonomy and flexibility to implement the necessary changes in their classroom to impact the learning of all students in a positive way.

The second way charter educators can have tremendous impact through a renewed focus and emphasis on strong intervention systems to address the needs of a diverse learning population. As charter school educators in high performing schools devote the necessary time and resources to address the needs of their struggling performers, they can impact their program in multiple ways. Primarily, their student achievement as an aggregate will improve. As their bottom thirty percent of students improve their academic outcomes, it will inherently improve their entire overall performance (Deslauriers et al., 2012). In addition, there is no longer the competing interests of student counts and reducing academic rigor and performance. In the instance of the case study, they received feedback from their authorizer that there was a lack of comprehensive data culture that would serve to improve the academic achievement of all students. They found that their data utilization was reactive instead of proactive. A strong

intervention system is rooted in the ability to assess and aggregate student and program successes. This further highlights the need for administrators in high-performing charter schools to have a comprehensive intervention program that staff is fully trained to implement.

Charter school educators in high-performing schools that place an emphasis on teacher autonomy and student intervention systems can have tremendous impact on the performance of the school's academic achievement (Stambach & Becker, 2007). In addition, this can have additional benefits of stabilized enrollment which allows administrators to spend more time focusing on improving the quality of instruction and pedagogy in the classroom. This contrasts with the case study school that felt the pressure to reduce the rigor in the classroom to meet the needs of struggling learners.

Third, after a review of the findings in the study, it is recommended that public policymakers intervene to prevent the failure of the school choice model that appeared to be occurring in the case school at time of study. Consumer demand for an easier academic program and competition with public schools that offered easier programs was exerting pressure on case school administrators to dumb down (Ravitch, 2010) the curriculum, which had previously been distinguished from the curricula in competing schools by the higher level of academic rigor it demanded. Administrators in the case school may succeed in implementing a rigorous curriculum that makes adequate provisions for unsuccessful students, thereby decreasing student attrition while maintaining a comparatively higher academic standard. However, the development of pressure arising from consumer demand to reduce the rigor of academic programs may point to a systemic flaw in the school choice model that only public policy can correct (Disare, 2016; Golann, 2015). Instead of increasing or maintaining high levels of academic rigor as one might expect a charter school to do, this study found that in an effort to

maintain viability the case school choose to make changes to its academic program to better meet students where they were. This was done in part to reverse the trend of losing students to competing schools. It is recommended that public and charter schools alike be offered monetary incentives in the form of additional federal or state funding to maintain or increase academic rigor, as measured by a comparison between schools of student growth on standardized tests. Other variables may also be considered to provide a more holistic perspective on student achievement, such as number of scholarship dollars awarded to members of a graduating class, employment rates and wages among graduates who transition directly into the workforce, and performance in interscholastic academic competitions at all grade levels (Kamenetz, 2015; Strauss, 2016). If this recommendation is not viable, it is recommended that policymakers develop other means of compensating for the downward pressure that consumer demand may exert on academic rigor across schools.

Lastly, the impact of the final recommendation if acted on can dramatically shift the nature of the reform of school choice as a matter of public policy. By incentivizing academic performance, lawmakers and policy experts could address the flaw in the system that has the potential of pushing schools towards the lowest common denominator versus the aspirational goal of being the highest performing school in their area. If the incentive for performing well is great enough can lead administrators to pursue that goal instead of trying to mitigate the risk of losing students. These incentives could have a weighted scale that allows for a greater incentive for taking a historically low performing student and making the necessary gains to achieve at or above grade level. This not only addresses the student performance issue but could potentially protect against schools “counseling out” low performing students (Ravitch, 2010).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The present study has indicated lines of inquiry that future researchers may find fruitful. First, evidence has been found in this study of a potential systemic failure in the school choice model, represented by the potential for competition for students to incentivize the dumbing-down (Ravitch, 2010) of curriculum. It is recommended that a quantitative correlational study be undertaken to indicate the extent to which this pressure may be active in the educational marketplace. It may be sufficient to track year-over-year enrollment in competing schools and measure the correlation, if any, between enrollment and measures of student performance and achievement. High student achievement and performance in combination with declining enrollment may, as with the case school in the present study, indicate the existence of pressure to reduce academic rigor. A pattern of student migration from higher-performing schools to lower-performing schools, if pervasive across a large set of schools, might be evidence of a systemic failure in the school choice model that public policy would be needed to correct.

Comparison of the findings in this study to those of researchers such as Stambach and Becker (2007) suggested that charter schools can excel in meeting student needs through autonomous leadership and teacher autonomy. It is recommended that future researchers undertake mixed-methods case studies to explore the effects of teacher autonomy specifically on student success in charter schools. Levels of teacher autonomy will vary across charter schools, or within the same school at different times, as with the case school in this study. Specifically, participants reported low teacher autonomy under the former academic program and the potential for significantly higher teacher autonomy under the program being formulated as a replacement. While teacher autonomy has been cited as a general advantage of charter schools (Stambach & Becker, 2007), it may be instructive to explore, through multiple sources of evidence and across

several charter schools, how variations in teacher autonomy influence student success, particularly the success of at-risk students.

### **Conclusion**

While this study provides an in-depth look into a small microcosm of the charter school sector in one state, the impact of this study could have a significant impact on public education. The findings that charter school educators are potentially de-incentivized to continue driving towards high performance standards should be concerning and alarming. In addition, through the research presented, there is the potential that we have missed the mark of the intent of charter school movement in the first place. This study can serve as a reminder for educators in charter schools to return to the roots of the movement, and hopefully provides some insight for traditional educators that there are schools and systems that can spur innovative and creative insights that differ from the traditional model of education. Too often the idea of competition is just based on a student count perspective. The potential impact of this study is in the re-framing of competition in education to be more of a performance perspective. Just competing and “stealing” students from each other does little to advance public education, but healthy, collaborative competition that is centered on student outcomes and needs has the potential to raise the tide that will lift all boats.

The findings presented from this study have the potential to profoundly impact educational policy and school choice movement. While the findings cannot be generalized across all charter schools or the school choice movement, they do present some unique areas for further study and research. It is important to look at the potential impact of the recommendations that have been offered in the context of both the literature reviewed and how they could influence

public policy through further study. In addition to the potential impact of the recommendations offered, there is potential impact on public education as a whole.

The findings in this study contributed to addressing a gap in the literature by indicating administrator perceptions of competition with traditional public schools at one charter school. Findings indicated that the participants did think of their school as competing with traditional public schools, and that they actively, strategically monitored, evaluated, and adapted public school initiatives for use in their school while seeking to differentiate their school from its competitors in its academic and operational aspects. A potentially important implication of the findings was that the school choice model may be stimulating competitiveness and innovation in charter school administrators but may be failing to do so in the much larger domain of traditional public schools, which the school choice model was developed to improve through competition. Another potentially important implication of the findings was that the school choice model may have effects contrary to its purpose of improving the quality of education, such as pressure from consumer demand to make academic programs less rigorous. A means of maintaining academic rigor while meeting consumer demand for student success may be to provide teachers with more autonomy to meet the needs of struggling students in the classroom. Further research was recommended to assess these implications in a more targeted manner. Intervention by public policymakers may be needed to calibrate the school choice model to ensure that competition leads to a race to the top rather than the middle.

### References

- Addonizio, M., & Kearney, C. P. (2012). *Education reform and the limits of policy: Lessons from Michigan*. W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.
- Allender, S., Browning, A., Chait, R., Dwyer, C., Keirstead, C., & Nabors, A. (2019). *Fostering collaboration between district and charter schools: A toolkit for state and local leaders*. San Francisco, CA: WestEd.
- Amadeo, K. (2020). *How the U.S. Constitution protects America's market economy*. The Balance. <https://www.thebalance.com/market-economy-characteristics-examples-pros-cons-3305586>
- American Federation of Teachers. (2002). *Do charter schools measure up? The charter school experiment after 10 years*. American Federation of Teachers AFL CIO.
- Anderson, A. (2005). The charter school initiative as a case of back to the future. *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, 19(1/2), 33-50.
- Angrist, J., Pathak, P., & Walters, C. (2013). Explaining charter school effectiveness. *American Economic Journal*, 5(4), 1-27. <http://seii.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Explaining-Charter-School-Effectiveness.pdf>
- Archibald, S. (2006). Narrowing in on educational resources that do affect student achievement. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81(4), 23-42.
- Arellano, A. (2019, May 26). Michigan has messed up education but it's not too late to fix it. *Detroit Free Press*.  
<https://www.freep.com/story/opinion/contributors/2019/05/26/michigan-education-reform/1226760001/>



- Arellano, A., Bedi, S., & Gallagher, T. (2016). *Michigan's talent crisis: The economic case for rebuilding Michigan's broken public education system*. The Education Trust – Midwest.
- Arsen, D., Delpier, T., & Nagel, J. (2019, January). *Michigan school finance at the crossroads: A quarter century of state control*. Michigan State University, College of Education.
- Arsen, D., Deluca, T.A., Ni, Y., & Bates, M. (2015, November). *Which districts get into financial trouble and why: Michigan's story*. Michigan State University, The Education Policy Center. <https://www.educ.msu.edu/epc/>
- Arsen, D., & Ni, Y. (2008). *The competitive effect of school choice policies on performance in traditional public schools*. Education Policy Research Unit. <http://eps1.asu.edu/epru/documents/EP1SL-0803-261-EPRU.pdf>.
- Baetjer, H. (2017). *Economics and free markets: An introduction*. Cato Institute.
- Betts, J. & Tang, E. (2008). *Value-added and experimental studies of the effect of charter schools on student achievement: A literature review*. National Charter School Research Project.
- Booker, K., Gilpatric, S., Gronberg, T., & Jansen, D., (2007) The impact of charter school attendance on student performance, *Journal of Public Economics*, 91(5–6), 849-876. ISSN 0047-2727, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2006.09.011>.
- Bowen, G.A. (2009) Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27-40.

Boyington, B. (2016, April 19). *Best high schools breakdown: Who gets gold, silver and bronze.*

US News. <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/articles/2016-04-19/best-high-schools-breakdown-who-gets-gold-silver-and-bronze>

Bradford, D. (2018). Strengthening the roots of the charter-school movement. *Education Next*

18(3), 16-24. <https://www.educationnext.org/strengthening-roots-charter-school-movement-how-mom-and-pops-help-sector-diversify-grow/#:~:text=While%20the%20charter%20sector%20is,slowed%20dramatically%20over%20the%20years.&text=Student%20enrollment%20in%20charter%20schools,just%207%20percent%20in%202017.>

Brinson, D. & Rosch, J. (2010) *Charter school autonomy: A half-broken promise.* Thomas D. Fordham Institute.

Brooks, E. L. (2016). *When profit meets practice: Working at a network charter school*

(Unpublished doctoral dissertation). North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.

Buckley, J., & Schneider, M. (2007). *Charter schools: Hope or hype?* Princeton

University Press. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu>

Budde, R. (1988). *Education by charter: Restructuring school districts.* The

Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast & Islands.

Budde, R. (1996). The evolution of the charter concept. *Phi Delta Kappan,*

78(1), 72-73.

Bynoe, T., & Armstead, M. (2019) American charter schools and British academy trusts: A comparative perspective on the school choice movement since the 1990s. In V.A. Storey (Ed.), *Leading in Change: Implications of School Diversification for School Leadership Preparation in England and the United States* (p.47-60). Information Age Publishing.

Chambers, J. (2018, November 14). Michigan charter school closures fire up education debate.

*The Detroit News*.

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/education/2018/11/14/michigan-charter-school-closures-fire-up-education-debate/1588646002/>

Cheng, A., & Peterson, P. (2017). How satisfied are parents with their children's schools?

*Education Next*, 17(2), 20-27. <https://www.educationnext.org/how-satisfied-are-parents-with-childrens-schools-us-dept-ed-survey/>

Clark, M., Gleason, P., Tuttle, C., & Silverberg, M. (2015). Do charter schools improve student achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(4), 419-436.

Cohodes, S. (2018). Charter schools and the achievement gap. *The Future of Children*, Winter

Issue, 1-16. [https://futureofchildren.princeton.edu/sites/futureofchildren/files/resource-links/charter\\_schools\\_compiled.pdf](https://futureofchildren.princeton.edu/sites/futureofchildren/files/resource-links/charter_schools_compiled.pdf)

Coleman, K. (2019, February 12). How 25 years of charter schools have changed Detroit.

*Michigan Advance*. <https://www.michiganadvance.com/2019/02/12/how-25-years-of-charter-schools-have-changed-detroit/>

Cordrey, R. (2014). *Legislating innovation: Why charter schools can't fix public education*

(Unpublished master's thesis). The University of Texas, Arlington, TX.

Council of Economic Advisors. (2021) *Economic Report to the President*. White House

- Creswell, J.W. & Creswell, J.D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Sage Publications Inc.
- Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). (2013). *National charter school study 2013*. Stanford University
- Cupidore, C. (2016). *Exploring the effectiveness of leadership practices in urban charter middle schools* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Walden University, Minneapolis, MN.
- David, R. (2017). *National Charter School Management Review*. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. [https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-06/napcs\\_management\\_report\\_web\\_06172019.pdf](https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-06/napcs_management_report_web_06172019.pdf)
- David, R., Hesla, K., & Pendergrass, S. (2017). A growing movement. *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 12*, 1-19.
- DeAngelis, C.A., & Erickson, H. H. (2018). What leads to successful school choice programs? A review of the theories and evidence. *Cato Journal, 38*(1). 247-263.  
<https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/serials/files/cato-journal/2018/2/cato-journal-v38n1-chapter-13.pdf>
- Denice, P. (2014). *Are charter schools working?* Center for Reinventing Public Education. University of Washington.  
[https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/CRPE\\_Are-charter-schools-working\\_brief.pdf](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/CRPE_Are-charter-schools-working_brief.pdf)
- Deslauriers, L., Harris, S., Lane, E., & Wieman, C. (2012). Transforming the lowest-performing students: An intervention that worked. *Journal of College Science Teaching 41*(6), 80-88.
- Disare, M. (2016, March 07). No excuses no more? Charter schools rethink discipline after focus on tough consequences. *Chalkbeat NY*. <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2016/3/7/21095867/no-excuses-no-more-charter-schools-rethink-discipline-after-focus-on-tough-consequences>

Ellisor, S. B. (2001). *A history of the ideas behind Texas charter schools* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Erickson, M. J., Larwin, K. H., & Isherwood, R. S. (2013). Examining a decade of reading and mathematics student achievement among primary and secondary traditional public school and charter school students: A meta-analytic investigation. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (Online)*, 10(4), 213.

<http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu/docview/1442467387?accountid=14584>

Gleason, P., Clark, M., Tuttle, C. C., and Dwoyer, E. (2010). *The evaluation of charter school impacts: Final report*. National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED510573.pdf>

Golann J. W. (2015). The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School. *Sociology of education*, 88(2), 103–119. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040714567866>

Grover, L. (2016). Facilities funding for public charter schools. *National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*.

[https://www.publiccharter schools.org/sites/default/files/migrated/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/facilitiesfundingsnapshot2016\\_FINAL9262016.pdf](https://www.publiccharter schools.org/sites/default/files/migrated/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/facilitiesfundingsnapshot2016_FINAL9262016.pdf)

Gurganious, N. J. (2017). *The relationship between teacher autonomy and middle school students' achievement in science* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Walden University, Minneapolis, MN.

- Flaker, A.,(2014) School management and efficiency: An assessment of charter vs. traditional public schools, *International Journal of Educational Development*, 39(1), 225-236. ISSN 0738-0593, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.07.001>.
- Fox, R. & Buchanan, N. (2017). *Wiley handbook of school choice*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Friedman, M. (1955). *The role of government in education*. Rutgers University Press.
- Friedman, M. (1962). *Capitalism and freedom*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gawlik, M. (2016). The U.S. charter school landscape: extant literature, gaps in research, and implications for the U.S. educational system. *Global Education Review*, 3(2), 50-83.
- Grady, D. (2012). Charter school revocation: A method for efficiency, accountability, and success. *Journal of Law and Education*, 41(3), 513.
- Greene, D. (2012). *Factors that influence parents to choose charter schools* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN.
- Griffith, B. (2014). *Financial impact of charter schools' enrollment on traditional public school expenditures, resource allocation and programming* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA.
- Grube, L., & Anderson, D. (2018). School choice and charter schools in review: What have we learned? *The Journal of Private Enterprise*, 33(4), 21-44.
- Goenner, J. (2011). *The origination of Michigan's charter school policy: An historical analysis* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.
- Goodman, J. F. (2013). Charter management organizations and the regulated environment. *Educational Researcher*, 42(2), 89-96. <https://doi:10.3102/0013189x12470856>

Harvey, P. (2018, September 20). Alberta's charter schools are working - and it's time for more kids to have access to them. *Calgary Herald*.

<https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/column-albertas-charter-schools-are-working-and-its-time-for-more-kids-to-have-access-to-them>

Hill, C. D., & Welsch, D. M. (2009). For-profit versus not-for-profit charter schools: an examination of Michigan student test scores. *Education Economics*, 17(2), 147-166.

<https://doi:10.1080/09645290801977017>

Ingersoll, G. M., Scamman, J. P., & Eckerling, W. D. (1989). Geographic mobility and student achievement in an urban setting. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(2),

143–149. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737011002143>

Jinnai, Y., (2014) Direct and indirect impact of charter schools' entry on traditional public schools: New evidence from North Carolina, *Economics Letters*, 124(3),

452-456. ISSN 0165-1765, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2014.07.016>

Johnston, J. B. (2015). *Resisting the market: A comparative analysis of charter school policy development in the U.S., 2002-2012* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

Jones, A. S. (2014). *North Carolina traditional public school principals perspectives about charter schools: A qualitative investigation* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC.

Kamenetz, A. (2015). *What schools could use instead of standardize tests*. NPR Ed.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/01/06/371659141/what-schools-could-use-instead-of-standardized-tests>

Kaplan, L.S., & Owings, W.A. (2018). Funding school choice: Implications for American education. *Journal of Education Finance*, 44(2), 199-217.

Kelly, A. P., & Loveless, T. (2012). Comparing new school effects in charter and traditional public schools. *American Journal of Education*, 118(4), 427-453.

<https://doi:10.1086/666370>

Kirkland, R. (2016). *A study of the effect of school management upon 4th and 8th grade math and reading results in relation to market driven theory*. (Publication No. 1801941455) ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu/docview/1801941455?accountid=14584>

Kolderie, T. (2005). *Ray Budde and the origins of the charter concept*. Education Evolving. <https://www.educationevolving.org/pdf/Ray-Budde-Origins-Of-Chartering.pdf>

Lake, R. & Gross, B., (2019). Some charter schools use their flexibility to serve students with disabilities. Our new report shows how more schools can do the same. *Center for Reinventing Public Education*. <https://crpe.org/some-charter-schools-use-their-flexibility-to-serve-students-with-disabilities-our-new-report-shows-how-more-schools-can-do-the-same/>

Larkin, B. M. (2014). *The effects of autonomy on Florida public schools: A disaggregated comparison of charter schools and traditional schools* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.



- Larkin, B. (2016). The relationship between Florida's traditional schools, education management organization charter schools, and hometown charter schools fiscal revenues and instructional expenditures on student achievement. *Journal of Education Finance*, 42(1), 79.
- [http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=http://go.galegroup.com/libproxy.umflint.edu/ps/i.do?p=LT&sw=w&u=lom\\_umichflint&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA468852314&sid=summon&asid=ef679f04eef8368c28d2f11c4738c866](http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=http://go.galegroup.com/libproxy.umflint.edu/ps/i.do?p=LT&sw=w&u=lom_umichflint&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA468852314&sid=summon&asid=ef679f04eef8368c28d2f11c4738c866)
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2015). *Practical research: Planning and design* (11th ed.). Pearson/Prentice-Hall.
- Lewis, A. (2018, March 7). *Fulfilling the charter school promise: Accountability matters; so do freedom, fair funding, and strong operators*. The 74 Million.
- <https://www.the74million.org/article/fulfilling-the-charter-school-promise-accountability-matters-so-does-freedom-fair-funding-and-strong-operators/>
- Loveless, T., & Field, K. (2009). Perspectives on charter schools. In M. Berends, M.G. Springer, D. Ballou, H.J. Walberg, & A. Primus (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on School Choice* (pp. 99–114). Routledge Handbooks
- Ma, H. (1999). Anatomy of competitive advantage: A SELECT framework. *Management Decision*, 37(9), 709-718.
- Mack, J. (2019, November 6) Everything you need to know about Michigan's charter schools. *M-Live News*. <https://www.mlive.com/news/2019/11/everything-you-need-to-know-about-michigans-charter-schools.html>
- Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K.M., Guest, G., and Namey, E. (2005). *Qualitative research methods: A field collector's field guide*. Family Health International.

Malkus, N., & Hatfield, J. (2017). Differences by design? Student composition in charter schools with different academic models. *AEI Paper & Studies*. American Enterprise Institute.

[http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=http://go.galegroup.com/libproxy.umflint.edu/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&sw=w&u=lom\\_umichflint&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA485672695&sid=summon&asid=9055f2af446861edfca3d5a1f193d53e](http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=http://go.galegroup.com/libproxy.umflint.edu/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&sw=w&u=lom_umichflint&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA485672695&sid=summon&asid=9055f2af446861edfca3d5a1f193d53e)

Martinez, E. (2014). *The charter school project* (Master's thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Database. (10185341)

Maxwell, J. (2013). *Qualitative design: An interactive approach*. Sage Publications Inc.

McLaren, M. (2017, May 16). New charter schools debate: Are they widening racial divides in public education? *The Washington Post*.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/new-charter-schools-debate-are-they-widening-racial-divides-in-public-education/2017/05/16/2f324676-0d78-11e7-9d5a-a83e627dc120\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/new-charter-schools-debate-are-they-widening-racial-divides-in-public-education/2017/05/16/2f324676-0d78-11e7-9d5a-a83e627dc120_story.html)

Michigan Department of Education. (2019). Number of public school districts in Michigan.

[https://www.michigan.gov/documents/numbsch\\_26940\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/numbsch_26940_7.pdf)

Miron, G., & Nelson, C., 2002, *What's public about charter schools? Lessons learned about choice and accountability*. Corwin Press.

Morgan, I., & Amerikaner, A. (2018, February 27). *Funding Gaps: An analysis of school funding equity across the U.S. and within each State*. The Education Trust.

<https://edtrust.org/resource/funding-gaps-2018/>

National Education Association of the United States. (1894). *Report of the committee of ten on secondary school studies: With the reports of the conferences arranged by the committee*. American Book Company

Newswire, (2008, Mar 17). Mathematica policy research and center on reinventing public

education selected to lead national research study on charter management organization effectiveness. *PR Newswire*.

<http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu/docview/448699187?accountid=14584>

Ngubeni, L. (2016). *Traditional and charter schools: A comparative analysis of student achievement* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Capella University, Minneapolis, MN.

Ni, Y. (2009). The impact of charter schools on the efficiency of traditional public schools:

Evidence from Michigan. *Economics of Education Review*, 28(5), 571-584.

<https://doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2009.01.003>

Orfield, M., & Luce, T. (2016). An analysis of student performance in Chicago's charter schools.

*Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(1), 111. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.2203>

Osborne, D. (2015). How New Orleans made charter schools work. *The Washington Monthly*,

47(6-8), 65-73.

Paino, M., Renzulli, L. A., Boylan, R. L., & Bradley, C. L. (2013). For grades or money?

Charter school failure in North Carolina. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(3), 500-536. <https://doi:10.1177/0013161x13505289>

Pardew, C. (2016, December 5). Charter and district transportation schedules: Commonwealth

charter schools get preferential treatment. *Boston Teachers Union*.

<https://btu.org/charter-district-transportation-schedules-commonwealth-charter-schools-get-preferential-treatment/>

- Parham, K. S., & Thomas, A. (2017). *A real choice? Examining the effectiveness of charter school alternatives to traditional public schools among economically disadvantaged elementary school students in Ohio* (Unpublished master's thesis). Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
- Parker, A. (2009) *North Carolina charter schools: School administrators' perceptions of competition in K-12 Education* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of North Carolina, Charlotte, NC.
- Poole, A. (2017, November 2). Don't throw out charter schools. *The New Zealand Herald*, p. 22.
- Rabovsky, T. (2011). Deconstructing school choice: Problem schools or problem students *Public Administration Review*, 71(1), 87-95.
- Ravitch, D. (2010, March 09). Why I changed my mind about school reform; Federal testing has narrowed education and charter schools have failed to live up to their promise. *The Wall Street Journal*.  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704869304575109443305343962>
- Ravitch, D. (2018, June 22). Charter schools damage public education. *The Washington Post*.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charter-schools-are-leading-to-an-unhealthy-divide-in-american-education/2018/06/22/73430df8-7016-11e8-afd5-778aca903bbe\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/charter-schools-are-leading-to-an-unhealthy-divide-in-american-education/2018/06/22/73430df8-7016-11e8-afd5-778aca903bbe_story.html)
- Ravitch, S. M., & Riggan, M. (2017). *Reason & rigor: How conceptual frameworks guide research*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Raymond, M. E. (2014). To no avail: A critical look at the charter school debate. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(5), 8–12. <https://doi:10.1177/003172171409500503>

Reckhow, S., Grossmann, M., & Evans, B. C. (2014). Policy cues and ideology in attitudes toward charter schools. *Policy Studies Journal*, 43(2), 207-227.

<https://doi:10.1111/psj.12093>

Revised School Code of Michigan. Act 451 of 1976. Section 380.502(4).

[http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(rpupzlkfa2x0edrxcgtkw0sk\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-380-502](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(rpupzlkfa2x0edrxcgtkw0sk))/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-380-502)

Ridder, H. (2017). The theory contribution of case study research designs. *Business Research*, 10(1), 281-305.

Riel, V., Parcel, T. L., Mickelson, R. A., & Smith, S. S. (2018). Do magnet and charter schools exacerbate or ameliorate inequality? *Sociology Compass*, 12(9).

<https://doi:10.1111/soc4.12617>

Roch, C. H., & Sai, N. (2015). Nonprofit, for-profit, or stand-alone? How management organizations influence the working conditions in charter schools. *Social Science Quarterly*, 96(5), 1380-1395. <https://doi:10.1111/ssqu.12200>

Ross, K. E. (2010). *Charter schools and segregation: The cases of Michigan and North Carolina* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

Sargrad, S. (2017, June 30). What matters for charter performance. *US News and World Report*.

<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2017-06-30/3-hidden-findings-from-credos-charter-school-performance-study>

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications Inc.

Schwalbach, J. (2019, May 20). How charter schools empower inner-city children to escape failing public schools. *The Heritage Foundation*.

<https://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/how-charter-schools-empower-inner-city-children-escape-failing-public-schools>

Shanker, A. (1988). *National Press Club Speech*. Speech presented at American Federation of Teachers, Washington D.C.

<https://reuther.wayne.edu/files/64.43.pdf>

Simon, M.K., & Goes, J. (2013), *Dissertation and Scholarly Research: Recipes for Success*. Dissertation Success LLC

Smart, R. (2018). *Comparing resource allocation* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Michigan, Flint, MI.

Smith, A., & Cannan, E. (2003). *The wealth of nations*. Bantam Classic.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage Publications Inc.

Stambach, A. & Crow Becker, N. (2006) Finding the old in the new: On race and class in US charter school debates. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 9(2), 159-182. doi:

[10.1080/13613320600696730](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320600696730)

Stein, P. (2016, November 20). D.C.'s public charter school system turned 20 this year. Now what?: A look at the history and future of charter schools in the District. *The Washington Post*.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dcs-public-charter-school-system-turned-20-this-year-now-what/2016/11/20/c0d3a706-adaa-11e6-a31b-4b6397e625d0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dcs-public-charter-school-system-turned-20-this-year-now-what/2016/11/20/c0d3a706-adaa-11e6-a31b-4b6397e625d0_story.html)

- Stoddard, C., & Corcoran, S. P. (2007). The political economy of school choice: Support for charter schools across states and school districts. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 62(1), 27-54. <https://doi:10.1016/j.jue.2006.08.006>
- Stone, C. L. (2010). *What are the differences between effective and ineffective charter schools in North Carolina?* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of North Carolina, Charlotte, NC.
- Strauss, V. (2016, October 05). Beyond test scores: The right way to assess students and schools. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/10/05/beyond-test-scores-the-right-way-to-assess-students-and-schools/>
- Strauss, V. (2018, November 09). Linda Darling-Hammond vs. Diane Ravitch and Carol Burris. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2018/11/09/linda-darling-hammond-vs-diane-ravitch-carol-burris/>
- Symanska, A. (2019). Free market economy and capitalism. *International Journal of Tax Economics and Management*, 2(11), 29-41.
- Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. Public Law No. 115-97, USC Sec. 11032, 529 Account Funding for Elementary and Secondary Education (pp. 28-29). LegiScan, <https://legiscan.com/US/text/HBI/2017>
- Timpane, M., Brewer, D., & Gill, B. (2001). *Rhetoric vs. reality : what we know and what we need to know about vouchers and charter schools*. RAND Corporation. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu>
- Trochim, W.M., Donnelly, J.P., & Arora, K. (2016). *Research Methods: The essential knowledge base*. Cengage Learning

Toma, E., & Zimmer, R. (2012). Two decades of charter schools: expectations, reality, and the future. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(2), 209-212.

<https://doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.10.001>

US News, (2019). Where does Michigan place in the U.S. News best states rankings? *US News*.

<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/michigan>

Ushomirsky, N., & Williams, D. (2015, March). *Funding Gaps 2015: Too many States will spend less on education students who need the most*. The Education Trust.

[https://edtrust.org/wp-](https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGaps2015_TheEducationTrust1.pdf)

[content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGaps2015\\_TheEducationTrust1.pdf](https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FundingGaps2015_TheEducationTrust1.pdf)

van Manen, M., Higgins, I., & van der Riet, P. (2016). A conversation with Max van Manen on phenomenology in its original sense. *Nursing and Health Sciences*, 18, 4–7.

Wall, J. K. (2011). Search for success. *Indianapolis Business Journal*, 32(5), 1.

[http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-](http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu/docview/862259425?accountid=14584)  
[com.libproxy.umflint.edu/docview/862259425?accountid=14584](http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu/docview/862259425?accountid=14584)

Wang, J. (2016). *Comparison between charter schools and traditional schools that are located in proximity* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Capella University, Minneapolis, MN.

Wells, A. S., Lopez, A., Scott, J., & Holme, J. J. (1999). Charter schools as postmodern paradox: rethinking social stratification in an age of deregulated school choice. *Harvard Educational Review*, 69(2), 172-205.

<https://doi:10.17763/haer.69.2.k34475n478v43022>

Williams, M. & Moser, T. (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International Management Review*, 15(1), 45-55.

<http://www.imrjournal.org/uploads/1/4/2/8/14286482/imr-v15n1art4.pdf>



- Winters, M. A. (2012). Measuring the effect of charter schools on public school student achievement in an urban environment: Evidence from New York City. *Economics of Education Review*, 31(2), 293-301. <https://doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2011.08.014>
- Winters, M. A., Clayton, G., & Carpenter, D. M. (2017). Are low-performing students more likely to exit charter schools? Evidence from New York City and Denver, Colorado. *Economics of Education Review*, 56(1), 110-117. <https://doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.12.002>
- Wolcott, R. J. (2018, August 3). Will East Lansing parents embrace new charter school? *Lansing State Journal*. <https://www.lansingstatejournal.com/story/news/local/2018/08/03/east-lansing-parents-charter-school-cole-academy-east-central-michigan-university/869831002/>
- Wood, R. C. (2013). *Do profits incentivize academic performance? Estimating the relationship between profit status and student test scores in charter schools*. (Publication No. 1353191494) ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. <http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.umflint.edu/docview/1353191494?accountid=14584>
- Yin, R.K. (2016). *Qualitative research from start to finish* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Yin, R.K. (2018). *Case study research and applications*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Zimmer, R., & Buddin, R. (2006). Charter school performance in two large urban districts. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 60(2), 307-326. <https://doi:10.1016/j.jue.2006.03.003>

Zimmer, R. W., Gill, B., Attridge, J., & Obenauf, K. (2014). Charter school authorizers and student achievement. *Education Finance Policy*, 9(1), 59-85.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273583945\\_Charter\\_School\\_Authorizers\\_and\\_Student\\_Achievement](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273583945_Charter_School_Authorizers_and_Student_Achievement)

### Appendix A - Interview Protocol

“Hello. My name is Tim Tenneriello. I am from University of Michigan, and I am conducting a study concerning charter school educators’ perspectives about and experiences with competition in education. I was given your name as someone who may be willing and able to contribute to my study. Are you willing to set up a time to be interviewed?” If no, “Thank you for your time.” If yes, “Great! I am asking that you set up an interview time with me so that we will have uninterrupted time to talk about your perspectives about and experiences regarding competition and public education. If you have any concerns about this process, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Annie Whitlock, at [awhitlock@umich.edu](mailto:awhitlock@umich.edu).”

Once a time is set up, I will come to the participant’s requested location and ask him or her to read and sign the informed consent form (Appendix B). I will use the interview questions as a *guide* and digitally record the interview.

- How many years of experience do you have in the charter school sector? How many years of experience do you have in your current role?
- How would you describe competition within your setting? Who do you compete with? In what ways do you compete?
- How do you define your competitive advantage?
  - Substance
    - Positional - Does your position in the Flint Market have an impact on your competitive advantage...if so, how?
    - Kinetic - How do you describe your ability to respond to market influences? How do you think that compares to Flint Community Schools?
    - Homogeneous – All schools educate kids, in light of that, would you describe any of your practices or programs as better than Flint Community Schools?
    - Heterogenous – Are there any ways that you have differed to offer a different value to your community base?
  - Expression
    - Tangible – Can you describe what data points that you use to express that you have a competitive advantage?
    - Intangible – Are there any intangible expressions of your competitive advantage that are not readily identified through data?
    - Discrete/Compound – Do you identify the things we have discussed as being singular in nature (one-off) or is it a compilation of all the little things that make up your competitive advantage?
  - Locale

- Individual/Firm/Virtual – When identifying your competitive advantage, how would you describe the source of that advantage? Individual, firm or virtual? Explain?
  - Effect
    - Absolute/Relative – Would you describe the effect of your competitive advantage as an absolute advantage or relative advantage? Would others outside your school agree?
  - Cause
    - Spontaneous/Strategic - Would you describe the cause of your competitive advantage as a spontaneous phenomenon or strategic phenomenon? Would others outside your school agree?
  - Time-Span
    - Potential/Actual – Are all the things we discussed actively being taken advantage of? Or is there just the potential for these things to have any impact? Examples?
    - Temporal/Sustained – How would you describe the longevity of your competitive advantage? Is it sustainable? What factors lead to that? What are the dangers of it eroding?
- Tell me about the relationship between you/your team and the traditional public schools.
  - How have you/your school attempted to compete with the LEA or district schools?
  - How has your school/schools cooperated and/or learned from the traditional public schools in your district?
  - How have you or your organization encouraged cooperation between traditional public schools and your charter school/s?
- What academic changes (policies, curriculum offerings, education program, pedagogical approach, etc.) have you made at your school in response to the local traditional public district?
- What operational changes (policies, school calendar, strategic planning, marketing, etc.) have you made at your school in response to the local traditional public district?
- Think about a student who left your school to go to the traditional public school. Tell me about that student.
- How has the loss of students to the traditional public schools effected your decision-making?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of charter schools?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of traditional public schools?
- Any other experiences or perspectives you would like to share on this topic?

“Thank you for participating in this study.”

**Appendix B - Informed Consent Form****Consent to Participate in a Research Study*****Charter School Perspectives of the Role of Competition in Public Education***

You are invited to participate in a research study about the perceptions of charter school educators on the role of competition in public education. This study will explore the perceptions of charter school administrators in how they experience competition with traditional public schools in their everyday work.

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to provide your own experience of the phenomenon of competition with traditional public schools.

This study is being conducted within Michigan. This study will be beneficial in exploring the charter school perspective of the role that competition plays in the decision-making process of charter school educators around the state.

There is no compensation being provided to participate in this study.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to share particular details for any reason.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Dr. Annie Whitlock, Dissertation Chair at the University of Michigan – Flint at [awhitlock@umich.edu](mailto:awhitlock@umich.edu).

*I understand the interview will be recorded and I agree to participate in the study.*

---

Signature

---

Date



**Appendix D - Key Informant Interview and Direct Observation Note-Taking Template**

Date:

Location:

Name of Activity/Interaction Observed:

Start Time:

End Time:

Duration:

Purpose/Description of Activity/Interaction Observed:

Case Participants Involved:

Research Question(s) Addressed:

<p><b>Descriptive Notes:</b> Detail what occurred and describe what was observed.</p>	<p><b>Reflective Notes:</b> Describe Experiences, Hunches, and Learnings—inferences made beyond the data.</p>



**Appendix E - Not Regulated Status Letter from IRB**

