


2017

# Local Parents' Perspectives on Choosing Charter Schools Versus Traditional Schools

Jeffrey Lawrence Litel  
*Walden University*

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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

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by

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MS, National University, 1998  
BS, University of California, Riverside, 1990

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

April 2017

## Abstract

Recent charter school enrollment trends suggest that a growing number of parents have opted to transfer their children from neighborhood public schools into charter schools, despite data indicating public school achievement equal to or above charter schools. This trend encourages school leaders to examine parent choice. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather perspectives from parents in the study community who chose to enroll their children in charter schools instead of public schools and identify reasons parents chose charter schools. The humanistic theories of Maslow and Rogers, which emphasized the importance of choice, creativity, values, and self-realization as considerations for parent choice, formed the conceptual framework. Qualitative data were collected through an electronic questionnaire from 84 parents who have chosen 1 of 2 charter schools, designed to gather demographic information as well as perceptions about the processes and determinant factors involved in making school enrollment choices. Individual semi-structured interviews using a purposeful sample were conducted with 7 parents to determine their perceptions about choosing charter schools instead of traditional public schools. Data analysis included open coding and identification of emergent themes. The findings suggested criteria that parents considered in addition to standardized accountability measures as part of the school choice process. The resulting project included a professional development seminar for public educators in the local community to understand the public school choice marketplace, a marketing plan for their school, and follow-up implementation coaching. This study may contribute to social change through educators' increased understanding of competition in public education and the development of best practices to improve public schools and student enrollments.

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## Dedication

This project study and my doctoral journey are dedicated to a number of members of my family and for different reasons.

To my grandfather, Gerald F. Litel, an educator all of his life, including the time he spent with me walking in his beloved Chino Hills sharing his philosophies, and his hope that I would choose education as my career.

To my wife, Jill Traina Litel, because the Lord has blessed me with a number one fan who tells me how proud she is of my work and to be my wife. That alone has been the most important thing in my career, my studies, and my life. I love you!

To my children, Anderson and Christina, I love you, and I have wanted you to have everything in your life including a chance to watch me as I studied and worked for the privilege of reaching the highest point available in my career. I hope you will do the same. I love you both beyond measure.

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Finally, I thank anyone who picked up slack for me while I have been working on the doctoral journey and the project. I appreciate each of you and consider your contribution, no matter how small, to be an important part of making sure the project has been successfully completed.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

Growing numbers of parents are opting to enter their students in charter school enrollment lotteries. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2014), charter school enrollment throughout the United States has quadrupled over the last 12 years from 448,343 in the year 2000, to 2,057,599 in 2014, the last year for published statistics. Understanding the factors involved with parent satisfaction with their children's school has become increasingly important for public educators' practice and policy because of several trends. These trends are based on (a) government legislation, (b) emergence of consumerism and quality, and (c) the United States Supreme Court decisions that authorize parents to make decisions about their children's school (Bejou, 2012).

According to school choice advocates, parents will gather information about school options and then make objective, data-driven decisions based primarily on test scores (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012). Some parents, however, appear to make their school choices based on factors other than academic quality indicators alone. Sixty percent of parents ranked test scores as a primary factor in choosing a school; then, the majority of these parents picked a charter school with lower average test scores than the traditional public school their child exited (Butler, Carr, Toma, & Zimmer, 2013). Parent satisfaction has become a more important indicator of high-quality education than traditional indicators such as test scores (Johnson & Lindgren, 2010). The challenge, addressed in this study, is for public school educators to ascertain which factors parents

use to decide if charter schools provide a better education than traditional public schools at a level that would justify parents choosing to leave traditional public schools for charter schools. A study of New Orleans families in a system of choice, instituted after Hurricane Katrina, indicated that even with basically free choice to attend any school they wanted, large numbers of parents said that location, school climate, and a school that reflected their values were more important to them than test scores (Zimmerman & Vaughan, 2013). Research from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes indicated that, while there were outlier schools, most charter schools underperformed and/or performed on average at about the same level as most of the surrounding public schools (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010). Swalwell and Apple (2011) found 1 out of every 5 charter schools performed higher on student learning outcomes than their traditional public schools counterparts; however, charter schools were more segregated than the public schools.

Historical assumptions have indicated that schools of choice provide competition and require public school administrators to take opportunities to improve schools and further describe how parents will make rational, data-driven decisions as to which school they choose (Davis, 2013). Davis (2013) found that

By allowing citizens to start new public schools with this kind of autonomy, making them available tuition-free to any student, and holding them accountable for results and family satisfaction, proponents hope that this new mix of choice and accountability will not only provide students stronger learning programs than local alternatives, but will also stimulate

improvement of the existing public education system. In theory, the competitive pressure generated by charter schools is meaningful to traditional public school organizations because a major motivation of the charter school movement focuses on improving upon and oftentimes deviating from the traditional practices and programs utilized by regular public schools to educate students. (p. 4)

According to Davis (2013), *institutional isomorphism* assumes that market pressure caused by charter schools will cause traditional public schools to mimic them in order to compete, assuming that public educators can be driven by traditional market pressure and competition. Additionally, Davis purported that, in the face of competition, school administrators will make healthy choices for their schools. In New Orleans, the school choice program was based on the premise that parents would select the highest quality schools, and the low-performing schools would close due to declining demand (Zimmerman & Vaughan, 2013).

Arsen and Ni (2012) wrote the following:

From the perspective of economic theory, if families have diverse preferences regarding alternative types of schooling services and the competing schools have an incentive to serve niche markets, then quite dissimilar shifts in resource allocation are possible among schools in a given local market. (p. 2)

There appears to be a need for research examining economics and client management in a school choice marketplace.



Literature reviewed for this study of school choice did not include alternative reasons for choice in favor of the commonly accepted measurement of test scores and other accountability program measures. Recent research indicated that as school choice options have developed, understanding which factors affect family enrollment decisions is important (Butler, Carr, Toma, & Zimmer, 2013). The tendency to assume that parents will use traditional indicators in their decisions may be a key to public school administrators' challenges over how to stop the outward movement from high performing schools. Historically, research on school competition described a contentious relationship between charter schools and public schools (Viteretti, 2010). Parents identify the individual needs of their child opposed to public school administrators' commitment to the community as a whole (Viteretti, 2010). Additionally, there is a common perception that parents may lack information to make informed choices. Kisida and Wolf (2010) found

parents who are offered school choice initially possess more accurate information about their child's school than do control group parents, and their accuracy advantage appears to grow at least somewhat over time as they extend their experience with school choice. (p. 17)

The tendency of public school practitioners to doubt whether parents can make informed choices, based on asking the right questions about quality, might connect to their initial perceptions about parents' enrollment decisions.

Identifying values that drive parents to choose a charter school, when by all measures the current public school is an equal or better academic choice, is an important

topic to investigate. While consideration of academic quality issues is important, competition in the marketplace appears to require consideration of other factors when accountability indicators are strong and the students are still leaving traditional public schools.

Understanding the parental decision making process may guide administrators to better predict how public educators need to react in a competitive marketplace.

According to Jennings (2010), organizational personnel cognitively struggle to make sense of the environment, filter different signals, and make choices in the context of the perceived opportunities and constraints. In a study of New York's Small High School Choice initiative in the early 2000s, Jennings found that instead of using the choice program to improve the schools, principals gamed the system using loopholes and nuances in the laws to recruit and retain students. Even though principals were not allowed to know about academic levels of students in the application process, many principals would actively seek out academically gifted students who would help their school to be successful within the quantitative-based accountability system. School choice advocates indicated that principals identifying high academic achieving students for admission was not the goal when they sold the virtues of a system of choice to raise the quality of New York schools (Jennings, 2010). Loeb, Valant, and Kasman (2011) considered the use of school choice in Milwaukee public schools and whether competitive markets drove school improvement. They found few actual legitimate differences between choice schools and traditional public schools in meeting students' idiosyncratic needs. Rather, they found some schools were simply more effective than

others, and, as expected, concerned parents in their study preferred these schools, all else being equal, over schools that were less effective in meeting student need (Loeb et al., 2011).

In this qualitative case study, I examined a suburban school district on the west coast of the United States where district administrators identified a trend of parents choosing to send their children to charter schools over traditional public schools. Because charter schools are not limited by district boundaries, some of the charter school growth is due to students from surrounding school districts. Although one of the charter schools is a district-sponsored charter school, it is included to show a trend from traditional public schools toward charter school growth. In this study, Charter 1 (C1) is an independent charter school and Charter 2 (C2) is a district cooperative charter. Although unable to limit growth of the independent charter school, the district administration has limited growth of the district cooperative charter. Both charter schools have students on their waiting lists to fill at least one additional class per grade level.

The role of public education leaders in a competitive marketplace appears to be shifting to marketing services to attract and keep clients. Having been traditionally trained to teach content, public school educators seem to get out of their comfort zone when venturing into the world of brand-messaging, marketing, and business strategy.

There appears to be an increasing demand by parents that is beyond selling education. Educators need to consider a wide range of strategies that take education to potential new participants, while tailoring programs and systems to meet parents and students' needs rather than the needs of the institutions. According to Foskett (2002),

“Widening participation requires institutions and their staff to modify their culture and sometimes their values, and provides a good example of marketing acting as a catalyst for cultural change” (p. 247).

A recent trend in the school district in this study involved students leaving high performing schools for charter schools. Specifically, the problem was that declining enrollment, almost directly proportional to the number of students leaving the district for charters, was having a negative effect on district funding. School leaders have continued to work on academic performance as a way to ensure that parents make the decision to keep their students in traditional district schools. However, the problem has persisted. With each open enrollment lottery, public school students chose to leave district schools for one of the two charter schools. Shrinking enrollments have had an impact on the district as reduced funding negatively affects the district’s ability to offer quality programs. This trend can lead to reduced enrollment and employees being laid off. Additionally, improved professional development programs based on study data might help district personnel to understand school choice and the challenges that come with a shrinking student population.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to help public school educators by identifying and analyzing parents’ perceptions about the local school choice marketplace and the opportunities the current situation provides for leadership and improvement. Through this qualitative case study, I identified insights about professional development opportunities that might help public schools compete and win clients in competition with charter schools in the district.

### **Definition of the Problem**

This study focused on the perceptions of parents about charter schools in one upper-middle-class, suburban school district on the west coast of the United States. I selected the district because currently there are two relatively new charter schools, one independent and one district affiliated, that have been attracting many students from traditional elementary and middle schools within the school district that encompasses two middle- to upper-middle-class communities. Three years of data for each charter school showed that while school academic rankings were somewhat higher than other district schools, academic performance did not appear to be the driving force behind parent choices.

The initial actions of district officials have been a traditional focus on program improvement changes to stem the movement of students to the charter schools, but both charter schools continued to have long waiting lists. While competitive pressures were embraced in spirit, little was done to have a measurable effect on the school choice trends, which still favored the charters (district superintendent, personal communication, June 16, 2015). Lubeinski (2013) studied the dramatic disconnect between those who value social equity in schooling and those who value the “private school characteristics” of charter schools, and he concluded that markets will provide services demanded by participants without judgment and can distribute resources, power, and opportunity in different ways depending on demand. Instead of responding to consumer demand, schools who are successfully competing for students are not simply responding to, but often are shaping consumer preferences with targeted and specific messaging and

branding (Lubeinski, 2013). Further, charter schools, because of their natural position of being new and agile, have an advantage in the marketplace (Lubeinski, 2013). This research was designed to study the perceptions of parents who had chosen in favor of charter schools and to extend the work of researchers who found that, for real positive change to occur in public schools as a result of school choice, a true understanding of factors influencing parent choice is necessary.

### **Rationale**

#### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

In California, public schools receive funding based on the number of students who are enrolled at a rate for elementary students of just over \$8,000 per student to the general fund. Middle school students bring slightly less than that amount at \$7,400 per student (California Department of Education, 2016).

General enrollment numbers for all public school districts ebb and flow with economic and migratory patterns. School districts must adjust for changes in enrollment, which can usually be covered with regular staff attrition rates but from time to time require hiring or layoffs to meet the demands. Table 1 shows the enrollment patterns for the subject school district starting in the year 2000 and continuing through the current year.

Table 1

*District/Charter Enrollment Trend Information*

Year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
District	10,023	9,894	9,856	9,759	9,190	9,013	9,087	8,207
C1	199	247	314	483	660	756	829	1,400
C2	0	0	0	0	465	650	675	675

*Note.* This table was developed from the data provided by the California Department of Education, 2015.

The subject district is a middle-class to upper-middle-class suburban district where over the last 7 years almost 18% of students have left six traditional elementary and two middle schools for two newly opened charter schools in the district. As seen in Table 2, both charter schools (C1 and C2) were performing significantly higher than the traditional elementary (E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, and E6) and middle (MS1 and MS2) schools in the district on the academic performance index (API), which was the official measure of school performance in California.

Table 2

*API Comparison, District Level Report*

School Name	2011 API	2012 API	2013 API
E1	779	773	756
E2*	843	842	834
E3	770	798	730
E4*	857	847	820
E5	772	765	718
E6*	838	842	837
MS1*	787	800	819
MS2	798	758	813
(C1)	896	881	878
(C2)	888	888	881

*Note.* This table was developed from the Academic Performance Index (API) data published by the California Department of Education, 2012.



Both charter schools have a theme, C1 being a leadership academy and C2 offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years and Middle Years Programs.

C1 is operated independently of district influence, with the exception of charter umbrella approval, and offers a shortened academic day, after which students can choose from a number of electives including Mandarin Chinese and Tae Kwon Do. In addition, there is a monthly leadership theme. They offer the Program for Accelerated and Clustered Education (PACE) program in which students can advance at their own pace through elementary and middle school classes by being assigned to instruction based on ability level instead of grade level. Class sizes are limited to an average of 25 students per teacher. Recently, C1 announced the opening of a high school program, which will have a Middle College theme and will allow students to take college-level courses during high school with the possibility of graduating with an Associate of Arts degree at the same time a student receives his or her high school diploma.

C2 is a district cooperative charter developed by the district as an innovative program and is an IB school, serving kindergarten through eighth grade. C2 offers the 6-year, Primary Years Program through Grade 5, and the first 3 years of the Middle Years Program ending in Grade 8. As part of the program, all students receive instruction in Spanish as well as English and have a limited class size of 25 students per teacher, which is three students fewer than other elementary schools in the district, and seven students fewer than the district's middle schools. C2 is the only IB school within the neighboring three school districts. C2 requires uniform dress and has a school of choice honor code that governs student behavior and academic progress as requirements for continued

enrollment. Both charter schools use a lottery system for initial enrollment, and both schools favor siblings as having priority for enrollment although they must be in a lottery to determine order of admission. Both charter schools maintain a waiting list of about 30 students per grade level each year. District officials continue to be challenged with the question of how to get parents to exercise choice but still choose to keep their students in their traditional public schools.

Declining enrollment in the subject district began in conjunction with the opening of C1 in the 2009 school year by almost exactly the number of students attending the charter school. According to meeting minutes from the district board of education from 2010 through 2016, while C1 also drew students from neighboring communities, the vast majority of students there would attend regular public schools in the subject district if they did not attend the charter.

In 2011, the subject district opened C2 in an attempt to stem the flow of students from traditional district schools and stop the growth of C1. The purpose of C2 was to attract students from outside of the district to the program. Immediate effects of the decision seemed to show that the growth rate of C1 was slowed. At the time of this study's completion, according to its enrollment records C2 had 106 students who were currently attending from outside of the district boundaries who could do so freely because of the school's charter status. C2 is a cooperative charter with the district, so the students at the school are considered part of the district's overall enrollment numbers. However, as a charter, the accounting mechanics for the school are that of a separate entity that must stand on its own.

The district superintendent (personal communication, June 16, 2015) voiced her hope that the competitive nature of the school choice environment created by the two charter schools could be a launching point for a vigorous competition for students that would foster strong school improvement efforts. She expressed hope that, in defense of their students and families, site administrators, teachers, and classified employees from the different schools would use the opportunity to improve their schools so that, given the choice, families would forgo moving to the charter schools and either stay in their traditional school or enroll in another school within the district (district superintendent, personal communication, June 16, 2015). So far, the data have been mixed as to whether the strategy is working. Families did move to C2, but so far no significant data had been gathered as to why. The majority of those families left the highest performing schools for the completely unknown waters of the new charter schools that had no track record for them to even measure in their decision making process.

In conversation about school choice and charter schools with the district superintendent (personal communication, June 16, 2015), she voiced that she would like to renew the challenge of the previous district administration to not only successfully market the district and its schools, but to ensure the brand message matched the brand quality. She said that while she could see evidence of a will to compete, there was not much evidence of an attempt to understand why C1 and C2 were successfully growing while the traditional schools continued to have declining enrollment. To stop this trend,

I believe we must understand why parents are making the choices they are making about which schools are the best for their kids, and adjust what we

do so that making the choice to enroll in our traditional public schools is easy for our parents. Let's stop wondering what is so good about the charter schools that attract parents, and do what is necessary to not only market our schools, but to improve them as well, to serve the demands of our community. (district superintendent, personal communication, June 16, 2015)

The superintendent's challenge to district administrators framed the issue for this project.

### **Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

To compete with charter schools, public school educators should begin to pay attention to brand messaging, marketing, and business strategy similar to charter school peers (Ellison, 2012). Spence (2009) emphasized that language from the business world provides a foundational conceptual framework regarding the adoption of a clear direction, free flow of information, and fast decision making, which add up to an agile organization. DiMartino and Jessen (2016) considered that agility, speed, flexibility, anticipation, adaptability, and a strong sense of urgency throughout the organization are required to survive in business today, and public school organizations appear to be struggling in most, if not all, of these areas. The need to compete effectively in the marketplace encourages school leaders to shift their focus from data-based decision making for school improvement to data-based decision making for competitive purposes. Carpenter and Peak (2013) found the changing roles often prove to be a challenge for educators who are not accustomed to working in competitive situations. In comparing the role of school level administrators, charter school administrators reported a much different approach to

leadership than traditional principals. Carpenter and Peak posited that while the role of the principal of a traditional school has evolved to becoming an instructional leader, with the superintendent doing much of the community outreach and budgeting work, the role of charter school leaders includes all of the community work and budgeting traditionally assigned to the superintendent in addition to the instructional leadership.

In a west coast school district, students have been leaving high performing traditional schools for charter schools. Specifically, declining enrollment, according to district and charter school enrollment data, was almost directly proportional to the number of students leaving the district for charters and was having a negative effect on district funding. According to the 2015 enrollment report from the district, while work on academic performance in the district was improving, the district was still in declining enrollment while the two charter schools were either expanding their enrollment, their waitlists, or both. With each open enrollment lottery, more students were leaving district schools for either of the two charter schools. The negative enrollment trend influenced the district as reduced funding was negatively affecting the ability of the district to offer quality programs and avoid laying off employees. For this study, I attempted to provide an understanding of the challenges of school choice and charter schools to traditional public school by identifying and analyzing parent perceptions of the local school choice marketplace and the opportunities that exist to improve public schools.

## Definitions

The following terms and definitions were utilized throughout this project study:

*Academic performance index (API):* The schools' statewide ranking, which summarizes a school's academic performance and progress on statewide assessments in English language arts and mathematics. The report includes information from standardized scores in English language arts and mathematics by recognized subgroups of students. While currently suspended, members of the district have expected this measure or a version of it to remain the accountability measure by which California schools are rated for academic progress (California Department of Education, 2015).

*Charter school:* A school located within the subject school district that is approved by the local school board but governed by a charter document. Charter schools are publically funded, initiated by interested parties, legislatively authorized, limited in scope and term, and either independent of or cooperative with the public school district in which it operates (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1995).

*Common Core State Standards:* The Common Core State Standards Initiative is an educational initiative in the United States that details what kindergarten through 12th grade students should know in English language arts and mathematics at the end of each grade (National Governor's Association, 2015).

*Competitive public school marketplace:* Charter schools are public schools that depend on parents exercising free choice to enroll their students. Traditional school boundary policies and processes dictate which school, absent parent choice, a student will attend. Charter schools are not connected to school district boundary decisions and

generally have their enrollment determined by lottery. Once a decision is made to place a student in a public charter school, the funding associated with the student's school attendance follows the student, which causes the local education agency to experience reduced funding proportional to the number of students who disenroll from public schools operated by the district (California Department of Education, 2015).

*Parent choice:* The ability of parents to choose to enroll their child in any available traditional public school or charter school without limitation from the school district, state, or local government (Beabout & Cambre, 2013).

*Traditional public school:* The school that students are assigned to attend based on local school board adopted geographical boundaries. These traditional schools may have unique programs but are otherwise very comparable in demographics and attendance rules. Parents are not required to choose these schools and all services are free (U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).

### **Significance**

A growing number of parents are choosing charter schools even when the public school that the student would attend appears to be equal to or better on traditional accountability measures. Most literature pertaining to school choice has focused on academic criteria used in school choice decisions, and there is an apparent void in research as to other significant reasons parents weigh in their decisions. This study may fill the void within the literature as I sought to understand perceptions of parents and to understand why increasing numbers of them are choosing charter schools. In addition, I hope to use the information to help improve and preserve traditional public schools.

Although this study was limited to one suburban school district, school choice is becoming normal operating procedure in many school districts. Results of this study may provide the district superintendent and the board of education information and strategies necessary to help one school district identify possible paradigm shifts necessary to operate successfully in a competitive marketplace connected to school choice. Study information and results may also be a guide for other school districts faced with similar challenges.

This qualitative case study identified and analyzed the perceptions parents hold that drive their choices in a public school choice marketplace. Knowledge of the marketplace is important to education practitioners who want to help traditional public school organizations compete when charter schools are having success in drawing students who historically attended traditional public schools. Movement toward charter schools is clearly affecting public school funding levels and thus programs. According to yearly reports to the board of education, when over 2,100 students who would otherwise attend district schools attend charter schools, the district experiences a decline in funding of just over \$15 million on average each year (Assistant Superintendent, Business Services, personal communication, June 16, 2015). Based on this information, the board of education voted to close one school in 2010 and two additional schools in the district in 2011. This trend within the district has required the closing and boarding up of school facilities, the discontinuation of programs in visual and performing arts, and other extracurricular programs around the district. Additionally, declining enrollment has had a negative effect on the district's ability to maintain and upgrade technology in classrooms



and stressed district maintenance budgets as revenue has declined. Staffing levels, including teacher to student ratios, have been raised, and academic support positions have been eliminated as a result of revenues following students to charter schools, according to the district's monthly quarterly budget reports from 2010 through 2015.

### **Guiding/Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to collect and analyze data on the reasons parents of public school-aged children choose charter schools and to understand what challenges exist in a school choice marketplace. The goal was to determine which factors are most important to parents who are choosing to enroll their students in charter schools versus local public schools in order to help public educators understand the challenges to the current public education system.

I employed a qualitative research design to answer the questions and supporting subquestions. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are charter school parents' perceptions about school choice?

RQ2: What are the determining factors that affect parental choice to enroll their student in a local charter school instead of the traditional public school he/she would otherwise attend?

RQ3: What challenges does a competitive school choice marketplace bring to traditional public education?

### **Review of the Literature**

This section provides an overview of the challenges to public schools associated with school choice and charter schools, and the perceptions of parents about charter

schools. To obtain the most recent and relevant peer-reviewed information, I searched the databases from the Walden University Library including *Education Research Complete*, *SAGE Premier*, *Oxford Educational Bibliographies*, *ProQuest Academic Search Complete*, *Business Source Complete*, *Market Share Reporter*, and *LexisNexis Academic*. I used a combination of the following key search terms: *school choice*, *charter school*, *traditional school*, *parent choice*, *academic data*, *public school marketplace*, *private school education*, *student success*, *charter school history*, *public school funding*, *alternative education*, *school marketing*, and *school brand messaging*, *market share studies*, *brand messaging*, *competitive markets*, *marketing*, and *consumer demand*. From this thorough search, I found that while educators can successfully address academic proficiency as a determinant factor in school choice, more study is necessary to identify additional perceptions and factors used by parents to decide which school their child will attend.

While academic proficiency appears to be important in the process of school choice, it is not the only factor used by parents when choosing a school in a school choice marketplace. According to literature, parents' school choice behavior does not always reflect rational choice theory, and many parents trust informal social networks or "grapevines" more than official school information, which makes it hard for school officials to react (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012).

Throughout the review, I focused on evidence from relevant articles, related to school choice issues as they pertained to information and experiences parents used to

make enrollment decisions for their children. I formed themes and subtitles that contain the most prominent themes identified in the research.

Inclusion criteria used in this literature review included articles and studies published in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals. The review included seminal articles relevant to the historical perspective of the school choice movement. Articles that were based on opinion, lacked relevant themes or data, or appeared to be biased for or against charter schools were excluded. As part of the review, I examined the bibliography of each article in order to search for additional information that would add value to the project. Saturation was reached at the point when the same practitioners authored articles and studies and data results provided the same trends and themes.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Humanism formed the conceptual framework for this study. An increased emphasis on choice, creativity, values, self-realization, and belonging, espoused by Maslow (1968), appears to be changing a system of education that over recent years has become based on equality of access and academic success defined by formulas (Ediger, 2012). Additionally, Ediger (2012) noted Maslow's hierarchy of needs, especially the need to belong to a family of learners, as one of the most important factors for student achievement and success in school. Humanism emphasizes the study of the whole person, motivation, acceptance, and belonging within the learning community as necessary for students to meet personal goals (Rogers, 1951). Huitt (2001) found that humanists believe in a focus on human freedom, dignity, and individual potential. In humanism, learning is student centered and personalized, and the educator's role is that of facilitator. Today this

translates to students learning how to learn, and the feeling that the experience is personalized just for them. It shows a shift from a focus on specific proficiency outcomes to a focus on students gaining experiences that lead them toward self-actualization.

Rogers (1951), one of the most noted proponents of humanist thought, wrote about self-concept and the journey to self-actualization. Humans experience and behave in ways that are consistent with their self-image and that reflect what they would like to be like: their ideal-self. The closer individuals get to self-image and ideal-self, they become more consistent or congruent individuals, leading to a higher sense of self-worth (Rogers, 1959). Rogers's (1959) attention on self-image, self-worth (esteem), and the ideal self are concepts teachers strive toward. With the current school accountability system, a consistent focus on English language arts and math standards are at the forefront of in American classrooms. Maslow (1968) emphasized choice, creativity, values, and self-realization as the most important indicators of human potential and dignity. There was evidence in the literature that parents are demanding that schools focus on the personal needs of students as well as academic instruction to meet academic proficiencies (Foskett, 2002; Loeb et al., 2011). Schools too heavily calibrated to academic needs are not always readily equipped to meet the personal needs of all of their students. Charter schools that can create learning communities designed to meet personal humanistic needs of students appear to be capturing the attention of an increasing number of parents and students. This study was designed to explore factors connected to defining personal needs as determining factors for parents in school choice.

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 set the standards by which government and education leaders have defined success. Through law, good schools are narrowly defined as the schools that have a high success level with all students in learning literacy and mathematics skills. Because schools are rated based on student proficiency, parents may use these benchmarks in making school choices for their children's attendance.

After over a decade of these measures, some parents might be changing their focus. Parents who encourage a humanist approach want educators who value individual needs and personal growth experiences as well as subject area proficiencies. A shift in educational approach requires a wide range of strategies, which take education to potential new participants, tailoring programs and systems to meet their needs rather than the school's needs (Foskett, 2002). DiMartino and Jessen (2016) posited that a focus on reflection and change pushes schools to be more responsive, potentially opening up a traditionally closed system. Loeb et al. (2011) wrote that some schools are simply more effective than others, and educators would expect concerned parents to prefer these schools, all else being equal, over less effective ones.

In the subject school district, quantitative and qualitative data indicated parents were not using only common accountability API, state level scores, and adequate yearly progress, or federal level scores to make their school choices. Instead, parents appear to be moving to new charter schools for other reasons. Because parents are leaving traditional public schools with relatively high achievement scores, and putting their students in charter schools, public school administrators are beginning to give more attention to what Maslow (1968) referred to as self-actualizing success for a more

fulfilling school experience. Ediger (2012) included Maslow as one of the leading American educational psychologists. Maslow's hierarchy of needs helps define humanism as the desire to meet the needs of individuals from basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, through emotional and physical safety, and the need to feel as though individuals belong to a family of learners. Parents appear to be placing increased importance on the humanistic aspects of schooling. School district enrollment data showed a shift away from schools that define student success in measurable, tested formulas, to schools that cater to the experience for their students and the culture of the school to teach children, not standards.

### **Factors Involved in Parental Choice**

Charter schools have three key features: choice, autonomy, and accountability, which proponents argue make them better able to cater to the wants and needs of parents and students (Linkow, 2011). Choice proponents argue that competition among schools for students will reduce the inequities by forcing weaker schools to improve, and allowing parents to choose school options for their children will result in their choosing good schools (Chubb & Moe, 1988). Ellison (2012) wrote that the popular discourse of education reform constructs a marketplace model of education that conjures up utopic visions of competition, innovation, excellence, and choice working together to create ideal outcomes for students. Stein, Goldring, and Cravens (2011) noted that parent choice might be at odds with efforts to improve the public school system academically, as parents do not always choose schools of higher academic quality than the schools they are leaving. Ertas (2013) found that while proponents of choice might think that parents

choose schools based on academic reputation, actually parents cite a variety of reasons such as peer group characteristics.

According to Ertas (2013), most surveys showed that all parents value academic quality but there were a number of other factors that influenced parental decisions on school choice. Trivitt and Wolf (2011) found that parents engaged in informal research and relied on personal relationships, while choice decisions were often predicated primarily on vague perceptions that charter and private schools are simply better than public schools. Karanovich (2010) found in a number of Illinois charter high schools that graduates showed less academic growth than comparable traditional public school, yet parents still opted to enroll their students, and politicians continued to tout charter schools as drivers of school improvement. Olson Beal and Hendry (2012) referred to parent comments that emerged during a 1-year case study of a foreign language immersion magnet school program to indicate that parental participation in school choice works in complex ways not necessarily consistent with the basic premises of school choice policy. Trivitt and Wolf touted nonacademic factors such as parent communication, small school size and class size, strict discipline, and school location and general parent knowledge of the school brand as commonly cited considerations for parents making school choices. DiMartino and Jessen (2016) cited the importance of branding and marketing as on the rise as parents seem to be weighing them heavily in their decision making process. Parents, looking for the best fit for their family, may be susceptible to a good branding and advertising campaign whether or not the school has the best test scores.

To measure the importance of schoolwide and individual academic proficiency in the school choice decision making process, Beabout and Cambre (2013) studied parent selection processes in post-Katrina New Orleans where school choice with charter schools and private school vouchers were used to rebuild the education system. While 63% of parents ranked academics as a high consideration, only one third of the sample group enrolled in a school that had made adequate yearly progress in the prior year (Beabout & Cambre, 2013). However, an equal number of parents chose a school that was lower performing than their current school. Beabout and Cambre concluded that although past research had been quite useful in developing a list of school choice characteristics, more recent evidence showed that all factors are of differing importance depending on family demographics, feelings towards a currently enrolled school, school marketing efforts, and the composition of the local educational market. Villavicencio (2013) found parents chose the school based on the best fit for their student and how they thought the school could help fulfill the academic needs of their child rather than test scores. Olson Beal and Hendry (2012) found more than a school with high test scores, parents wanted to choose a school with an academic curriculum that would prepare children to operate in a global economy, learn foreign language, and utilize technology. Bossetti (2004) found that while all parents mentioned concern about academic reputation, many were looking for a particular kind of school experience for their children, specific program offerings, teaching styles, smaller class size, and a school community that reflected their values. “Parental choice is not simply a rational matter based on empirical data and in-depth research of options but it involves a mixture of



rationalities related to values, preferences, child rearing practices, social networks, and aspirations for their children” (Bosetti, 2007, p. 107).

The studies included here were relevant to this study as their results seemed to question the assumption that academics are the most important factor in parental decision making. After controlling for demographic differences in population, Lubienski (2013) found, in large-scale empirical analysis, charter schools did not boost student achievement any higher than traditional public schools. Charter schools often reflect a tension between two impulses, offering equality of opportunity to those who are assigned by boundary to failing schools and in some instances offering a consumer choice and open entry into the education market for providers to offer better opportunity (Lubienski, 2013). Immelman and Roberts-Lombard (2015) conducted a study of parents in South Africa’s school choice marketplace and found that, while connected to academic success, the most important two factors parents noted were class size, pertaining to the ability of the teacher to give individual attention to their student, and the parents’ personal knowledge of the quality of the educators working in the school. Results from this study showed that how parents feel about the personalization of the school should be used in the marketing and branding campaign to attract learners (Immelman & Roberts-Lombard, 2015). Johnsson and Lindgren (2010) listed factors that research had shown to be of importance to parents:

locality and reputation, good exam results, preferences of the child, good pupil behavior, teacher quality, shared values and beliefs, teaching style, for the child to

feel better in school and for the child to develop its creativity, and or a special interest. (p. 175)

According to the literature, it appears academic proficiency, defined by test scores, is not the only factor used by parents to choose a school.

### **Competition and Marketing**

That charter schools will promote competition and therefore improvement in public schools is a common argument made by charter school advocates. Davis (2013) argued that as competitors, charter schools threaten to take clientele from traditional public schools, therefore the public schools might mimic them in order to compete. Public K-12 schools are relatively new to concerns about a competitive market. Johnsson and Lindgren (2010) concluded the reforms related to school choice have opened up an arena for communication between schools and families where families are in need of information about alternative schools, while the schools must market themselves to attract new consumers and keep the ones already enlisted. Sferle, Garden, Gudei, and Geangu (2012) defined school marketing as “the means by which a school actively communicates and promotes its purpose, values, and products to learners, parents, staff and the wider community” (p. 769). Blythe (2013) described the key concept of marketing is customer centrality and to realize this goal, service providers have to understand customer decision making: how consumers choose between different offerings and how they experience and evaluate the service offerings.

While a relatively new challenge for K-12 schools, competition is not new at the collegiate level. Clayton, Cavanagh, and Hattche, (2012) referenced the importance of

branding to universities, public and private, as they work to brand their schools to attract students who have choices when choosing a school to attend. When marketing the school, differentiation from other schools is critical in positioning the brand recognizing the importance of focusing on non-academic attributes of an institution, which help define the college experience. Duesterhaus and Duesterhaus (2014) posited that to operationalize a brand, schools need to recognize that there are many factors that affect the decision to choose one brand over another, and understand the emotional and rational components that parents and students use to make their decisions.

The literature reviewed for this study contains the theme of the growing importance of branding for K-12 schools that are increasingly operating in a school choice marketplace. Beneke (2011) stated that it is imperative to approach student recruitment as a crucial component of the organizational strategy, because, if students are the lifeblood of the school, success with relationship marketing is crucial to the progression of the institution. According to Duesterhaus and Duesterhaus (2014) the consumer creates the brand based upon their own experience which points to a possible necessary paradigm shift for K-12 institutions that, in the past, paid little or no attention to the building market-based relationships and creating a branded experience in order to recruit and retain students. Relationships and experience can be more important than academic results in parent choice situations.

While studying post-Katrina school choice in New Orleans, Beabout and Cambre (2013) concluded that Catholic schools were the most successful based simply on their brand. Beabout and Cambre stated rather than specific characteristics, the function of the

historical image of failed public schools, and the general stereotype of Catholic education were attractive to parents. The conclusions underscore the findings that parents simply felt they were choosing a slightly better school for their child, not running away from a bad public school. The individual parental decisions did not appear to be about saving students from failing schools, or about seeking social justice through choice, the data showed that parents were simply making the choice that they thought was best for their family and their beliefs (Beabout & Cambre, 2013). Sandel (2012) stated the results from a post-Katrina study seem to challenge the thought that the market offered students and families fairness in education, rather the marketplace simply reflects choices made by parents to help distribute resources, power and opportunity in response to demand without regard for equity and fairness. When given the choice, parents appear to use their beliefs, values, and what they think they know about the schools they are choosing, instead of being concerned about equity or academic proficiency results. Sandel posited, for those operating in a competitive marketplace, learning to package beliefs, values and experience into a saleable brand seems more and more important in attracting parents and students. Udell (2014) described how education should be both an art and a science, and marketers should take advantage of the data and analytics available to them to better understand how consumers actually behave. Understanding why parents make the decisions they make about where to enroll their children for school is crucial to the process of operating in a competitive school choice marketplace.

Results from a 2014 Phi Delta Kappa International/Gallup poll conducted by Bushaw and Colderon may help explain why parents choose charter schools over local

public schools. Across political and social spectrums, Americans support charter schools when operated independently and free from government-imposed regulations (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014). Approximately 70% of respondents on the PDK/Gallup poll favor charter schools, which are exempt from many state regulations imposed on the public schools (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014). Of the 70% respondents favoring charter schools, 59% felt that students would get an equal or better quality education than a traditional public school (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014). In a school choice environment, parents may choose charter schools over traditional public schools because they feel charter schools operate independent from government policy and oversight.

### **Agility in the Marketplace**

Strike (2010) studied charter schools and distributive justice, defining distributive justice as providing students with what they need to be college and career ready. In questioning the preoccupation with test scores, Strike argued that students deserve an education that sees them as more than employees, an education rooted in helping them flourish. In positing that test scores are allowed to dominate policy making, “public schools are constrained by policy to an extreme focus on testing and academics, while charter schools, free of many of the policies, are free to be more communal, and focus on the personal needs of their students” (Strike 2010, p. 68). According to Strike (2010) as a society, test scores may be a dominant force in policy making for public schools. A proclivity toward test scores as a primary measure of school effectiveness does not well serve the economic objectives for schools. As parents are deciding to leave public schools for charter schools that are more focused on personalized student experience, they are

taking with them the funding tied directly to their student (Strike, 2010). Additionally, according to Strike the singular focus on test scores as indicators of quality may contribute to making public schools alienating places for parents and students. Policies which require public schools to focus most strongly on test scores, may give an advantage to charter schools who are not working under such limitations in an emerging marketplace where choice options require schools to compete for students.

While public schools appear to focus on federal and state accountability as indicators of success, charter schools are seemingly freer to focus on marketing the school experience to parents. Tedin and Weiher (2011) studied *social capital*, which simply summarizes the parent involvement measures affecting the experience that the parent as well as the student has at the school. Because they have a choice, parents may have an investment of their own social capital in the school and are therefore, more involved in the community as a whole. To build social capital, institutions may require a marketing strategy. The idea of a competitive marketplace is relatively new to public schools that are part of the public sector and thus have had students assigned to attend. Charter schools, from their inception have to focus on convincing parents to enroll their students and marketing is built into the development process.

Not specifically focused on public schools, Kirovska and Simonovska (2013) focus on public sector branding, arguing that while it is new, it is not different from private sector branding. “The branding strategy, when implemented successfully, promotes and presents recognition by the general public, creates a reputation and positive image, focusing directly on consumer satisfaction” (Kirovska & Simonovska, 2013, p. 2).

When parents have a good experience, they are more likely to recruit their family, friends, and others to the learning community. In essence they become the marketing arm of the charter school, and it gives the school a distinct advantage in a competitive marketplace over schools that do not have the parental social capital (Tedin & Weiher, 2011). Public schools are part of the public sector, and now that they have competition with charter schools, there appears to be a new imperative through branding to build social capital.

To the extent that public school policy and actions are dictated by a policymaker focus on the improvement of test scores as a measure of school quality, public schools may struggle to compete in a choice marketplace where parents are focused on other measures as drivers of choice. Free to understand and focus on the key factors that parents maintain matter to them; traditional public schools may have a much better chance to compete in the school choice marketplace.

### **Implications**

The information obtained from the study will be shared with the school district administrators as part of evaluating student enrollment, retention, and district/school marketing policies designed to help personnel in district schools compete with two local charter schools that are attracting district students. At the end of each school year, administrators gather to create the professional development plan for the next school year. Findings from this study will be presented as part of the 2017 Planning Conference. Data gathered about factors parents use to make enrollment decisions might be used by the district for the purpose of the development of policies that improve traditional public

schools' ability to offer programs that focus on personal needs of students as effectively as local charter schools. Findings may help local public school officials formulate professional development for public educators that may make public schools more competitive in the school choice marketplace. Although information from the proposed study is specific to the school district involved, the findings may also help to contribute to the body of literature that examines the impact of charter schools on public schools for increased understanding of how to improve public education.

The data gathered and analyzed as part of this project might be generalizable to other public school districts that are experiencing competition and challenges to stable enrollment levels by charter schools. When market choices are better understood, policy choices might be made to help improve public schools so that they can be competitive with charter schools in a school choice scenario.

### **Summary**

School choice and charter schools are having a profound effect on our nation's public schools. The public school system was designed for equity and equality in the finished product, and was designed for the masses. To date, the public school system in the United States has served the original purpose. The definition of success in public schools for students and schools has been tied to the number of students who have been able to prove proficiency in language arts and mathematics on standardized test scoring (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Consequently public educators have focused on test scores as the way to show their students and their schools are successful, and the



historical assumption by many of them has been that parents will use test scores as a determining factor as to which school to choose for their student.

However, it is evident in literature that increasingly often, parents are making the choice to enroll their students in charter schools that perform at the same or sometimes lower on academic accountability measures than the public school that they would otherwise attend (Bushaw & Calderon, 2014). A review of literature on school choice shows that despite the school academic levels, parents are looking to other factors to help them make the choice to enroll in charter schools.

This qualitative case study examined the perceptions of parents about the role of charter schools in public education. The results may fill a void in the literature regarding educator knowledge of the market and parent perceptions, which might lead to policies and actions that help public schools compete in the school choice marketplace.

The following section will explain the methodology, procedures and processes used in this study. The methodology section outlines the chosen research design, the study participants, all ethical considerations, data collection procedures, instrumentation, and analysis of data. The role of the researcher and the limitations of the study will also be discussed.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

This section contains the methodology for the study. An overview of the study will be provided. Research design, participants, ethical considerations, data collection analysis, findings and conclusions will be discussed. The section will conclude with an explanation of assumptions, scope, study limitations, and delimitations.

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions of parents who have chosen to enroll their children in charter schools and to explore the reasons they made their enrollment choices, in one school district on the west coast of the United States where two charter schools have opened in the last 6 years. District records indicated that approximately 2,100 students from district average daily attendance numbers have left traditional public schools for the charter schools. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

RQ1: What are charter school parents' perceptions about school choice?

RQ2: What are the determinant factors that affect parent choice to enroll their student in a local charter school instead of the traditional public school he/she would otherwise attend?

RQ3: What challenges does a competitive school choice marketplace bring to traditional public education?

The results of the study could be used by public educators in the subject district to better understand parent perceptions of traditional and charter schools and to implement

policies, based on improved understanding, that help traditional public schools be more competitive with charter schools in a school choice marketplace. Additionally, I hope to add to literature on the effects of charter schools on public schools, other than test scores, that drive parental choices regarding schooling for their children.

### **Research Design and Approach**

A qualitative case study approach was appropriate to explore the perceptions of parents about charter schools and school choice. Merriam (2009) explained that most qualitative researchers are interested in conducting basic qualitative research to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. While there are different kinds of qualitative research, Merriam purported that the most often used is basic qualitative research, in which data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. In this qualitative collective case study, subjects participated in an initial questionnaire and were asked to participate in semistructured one-on-one interviews. Jacob and Furgeson (2012) stated that, by design, the nature of qualitative research is emergent. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) posited that qualitative research demands everything be examined assuming that everything is a possible clue that could unlock a better understanding of what is being studied. Data gathered from questionnaires and interviews were transcribed, analyzed, coded, and themed. Insights gained from questionnaire data were used to develop interview questions. Data yielded common themes from which interview questions were derived. Seven parents were interviewed using the informal protocol found in (Appendix F).

A qualitative collective case study was conducted with parents who have opted for charter school enrollment. Creswell (2009) wrote that interviewing a number of different people with different perceptions and points of view is important before drawing conclusions from the data. Creswell (2012) believed research questions should be sufficiently open-ended and few in number in order to elicit views and opinions from participants. For this study, an electronic questionnaire was used to ascertain demographic information along with participants' basic perceptions about school choice. Questionnaire answers were analyzed and seven of the participants were interviewed. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described good interviews as interviews that produce rich, thick data and are filled with words that reveal the respondent's perceptions. The purpose of the interviews was to allow participants to elaborate and add insight into initial responses in order to gain a strong understanding of perceptions that drive enrollment decisions. Data analysis occurred concurrently with the data gathering process and was used to structure of the final report (Creswell, 2009).

The qualitative approach to this study, including open-ended and follow-up questions, was designed to gain insight into participant perceptions (Creswell, 2009). The results provided information about working with educators and parents to increase the quality of our public schools.

Alternative methodologies were considered for this study. An explanatory mixed-methods design in which quantitative data would be collected and followed with qualitative data was considered (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). A process review during the methodology selection process indicated that while a questionnaire was

appropriate, the stated goal of the study of finding participant perception required open-ended responses and excluded the value of quantitative survey data (Lodico et al., 2010).

Case study was selected because it involves small groups or individuals within a group and documentation of their experience in a specific setting (Lodico et al., 2010). In this case, all participants were parents from one of two charter schools in the subject district who were participating in a single district school choice marketplace. Participants responded to open-ended questions designed to elicit a full understanding of their perceptions, which best fit a qualitative case study.

### **Access to Participants**

Accessing participants for this study required three levels of permission. The first level of permission was obtained from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval ensured that this study met the ethical standards of Walden University and provides adherence to federal research standards. The IRB ensures informed consent, equitable procedures, minimized and reasonable risk to participants, and acknowledges the potential benefits of the research when compared to the inherent risks associated with this type of study (Walden University IRB for Ethical Standards in Research, 2014). An application was submitted to the IRB outlining the research questions, data collection procedures and tools, potential concerns, and a plan to share the research findings.

The second level of permission was obtained from the school district superintendent, the principal of the cooperative charter school, and the president of the independent charter school. All three were provided a formal introduction of the

proposed study (Appendix D) and a request to conduct the study (Appendix D), which specifically outlined the purpose, procedures, goals, and benefits the study may provide. The request included my intent to question and interview parents who, if not for the charter schools in the study, would likely place their child(ren) in traditional district schools. I fully explained my role as the researcher and as a current district level administrator and the plan I used to ensure full disclosure and transparency in the process.

All potential participants received an e-mail (Appendix E) that provided specific explanations of the roles and responsibilities of the researcher as well as the purpose, benefits, risks, procedures, and a guarantee of confidentiality (Creswell, 2009). The third level of permission consisted of gaining informed consent of proposed participants. Informed consent was included with the e-mail asking for participation, which also included a link to the electronic questionnaire (Appendix E). Participation constituted informed consent. At the conclusion of the electronic questionnaire, participants could agree to participate in a follow-up interview.

### **Protection of Participants**

For the purposes of this study, I followed the ethical guidelines of the Walden University IRB, guide for Archival Researchers, and the Research Ethics for Educational Setting guides. These guides contain specific guidelines for Walden University researchers when conducting a research study on behalf of the university and when reviewing and analyzing data to be included in the study.

Only I know the identity of participants who voluntarily shared their information. The information has been saved on a password-protected flash drive, which is located in a locked cabinet. Direct quotes used in the analysis of information have been attributed to anonymous sourcing and will be held in a secured digital format as back-up material for 5 years from the completion of the study. All information is being stored on a password-protected computer, flash drive, or in a locked secured file cabinet to maintain the safety and confidentiality of all study participants.

### **Setting and Sample Participants**

The subject school district is located in suburban area. Within district boundaries, there are two charter schools currently enrolling 2,100 students. An e-mail containing an explanation of the study, informed consent information, and a link to the online questionnaire was e-mailed to a population of 816 parents of students who have already been enrolled in charter schools to conduct the questionnaire. The sampling consisted only of those parents included in the population who have an e-mail account as part of the school database and voluntarily followed the link signifying their consent to participate. The sample was purposeful because the parents were chosen specifically after enrolling their child(ren) in charter schools, which gave insight into the central phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012). The sample was homogeneous because the parents share the common attribute of having already made the choice to enroll their child(ren) in a charter school as a result of school choice. The sample population included the parents/guardians of 2,100 students who are enrolled in either C1 or C2 and have an e-mail account in the school database.

### **Sampling Technique**

"Case study is defined by individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used" (Stake, 1995, p. 236). The local school district can be considered a single case. Purposeful sampling was implemented to select each participant for this qualitative case study. Purposeful sampling was used because it allowed participant selection that informed the overall understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2013). For this study, parents who have already made the choice to enroll their child(ren) in one of the charter schools were asked to participate. To maintain complete confidentiality, I worked with each school to provide digital materials necessary to the study. I requested that school personnel use their e-mail database to send an e-mail explaining the purpose of the study, informed consent, and a link to an electronic questionnaire. Although I only have access to the e-mail accounts of those who voluntarily replied, I have included in my report the number of families from the total population who received an e-mail. According to Royse, Thyer, and Padgett (2010), to include as many stakeholder perspectives as possible is important. However, qualitative research typically involves only a few individuals or cases to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

### **Data Collection**

For this two-step qualitative study, participants completed an electronic questionnaire (Appendix C) designed to gather demographic information as well as perceptions about the processes and determinant factors involved in making school enrollment choices. Questions were carefully designed as open-ended in order to elicit as



thorough and thoughtful information as possible. Eighty-four questionnaires were started and completed. Seven participants agreed to participate in one-on-one semi structured interviews designed to probe questionnaire responses more deeply. Participants were given the option of participating in either a face-to-face or telephone interview. Follow-up interviews took place at a location of the participants' choice to support their comfort level in the process. Of seven total interviews, six took place via the telephone for the participants' convenience, and one was face-to-face.

Walden IRB approval was granted on May 25, 2016 (#05-25-16-0356215), the district superintendent, and school administration approvals were granted, the participants were contacted, and I began data collection with the electronic questionnaire. All interviews took place within a few days of the participant returning the electronic questionnaire. I used semi structured interviews of parents in hopes of drawing information to build on the information gathered from the survey (Creswell, 2012). This process was designed to help gather thick, rich descriptions of parent perceptions of school choice. All participants were assured of confidentiality and told that the interview could be stopped at any time (Creswell, 2012). Interviews were all 15 to 30 minutes in length.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In order to maintain full disclosure, credibility, and ethical standards expected by Walden University, I fully explained my role as the researcher. I have been an educator for 23 years. For 16 years, I have served in various administrative capacities in two elementary schools, one middle school, and one K-8 charter school in the district that is

the subject of this project. I currently serve as the district director of special projects. With my past experience, the possibility exists that I have had a supervisory role over some of the participants in this study. My current role includes no supervisory duties, and as director of special projects, helping to make our district school competitive with charters and private schools in the area through positive public relations is part of the my job description.

Merriam (2009) stated the importance of recognizing potential bias, assumptions, and dispositions of the researcher. It is important to fully reflect on and acknowledge bias before the study begins in order that the results have credibility (Merriam, 2009). My experience with school choice, while influencing my interest in the project, was carefully avoided so as not to be inserted into the findings in the study. The importance of understanding the issue is more important than my personal feelings on the subject. I have provided full disclosure of my role within the school district to the Walden University IRB and with any relevant party who was part of the process for gaining permission for the study or the process of gaining access to the participants.

Member checks were used to confirm with participants that possible researcher bias is being avoided in data collection and analysis (Lodico et al., 2010). Interviews were transcribed and each participant was provided a copy to check for accuracy. In addition, researcher biases and assumptions were made part of the report so that readers can be assured that they have not influenced the conclusions of the study.

### **Use of Data**

Lodico et al. (2010) noted that qualitative data analysis process includes gathering data, coding data, and constructing thick, rich descriptions from people which is coded into categories and themes to be interpreted and reported. For this study, data analysis was conducted on questionnaire data and follow-up interview transcripts.

Creswell (2009) defined coding as the organization of data into segments to formulate meaning by noticing categories and themes as they develop. I organized questionnaire data into categories based on answers provided by the participants, as it is one important step to understanding the market. Demographic information such as age of parents, political and, religious affiliations were reviewed as it might help provide an explanation of trends found in the decision making process. Open coding was completed to determine the frequency with which parents offered certain factors as important to their decision making process. Data themes were derived from the factors, the reasoning offered by multiple parents on individual questionnaire responses, and in connection with the research questions that were guiding the study.

In reviewing data, I concluded that although a number of factors were only listed once, they were main stream in nature and should not affect the outcomes, therefore no others were identified. The constant comparative process, a process by which researchers compare data as it is gathered, was used to help describe and classify data into codes and themes. Constant comparative analysis helped me determine developing trends in the data and what if any information needed to be further probed during the interview process. I determined that it was important to show interview participants the frequency list of

factors as gathered from the completed questionnaires as their reaction to the list could yield valuable discussion. Additional information gathered from interviews was included in the study conclusions (Creswell, 2009). Demographic data was gathered as part of the questionnaire, which contributed to the understanding of the school choice marketplace. The demographic data were not correlated with the coded factors found in the report. Further investigation as to which factors are most important to each demographic group might be an excellent next step in the research to probe the marketplace even more deeply.

Coded information from questionnaires and transcribed information and notes from interviews were kept in a research log and reflective journal. The qualitative research process includes a journal of data collection and reflective journal for thoughts and reactions to information and themes that may emerge in the course of the research process. Lodico et al. (2010) stated that reflective research logs are necessary for the documentation of researcher's own beliefs, values, and feelings that may impact the research. During data collection and analysis, I used research logs to record my personal reaction to the data as it was being collected. I also used the reflective log to record personal opinion about what the data was telling me, and how challenges presented in the data could be effectively handled. Information from the reflective research logs was used to help create the professional development seminar. Based on the data collected about factors affecting parent choice, the current policies in public schools, and the need for policies to be updated for a competitive education marketplace, I included my thoughts and ideas for effectively addressing the challenges.

### **Accuracy and Credibility of Research**

Merriam (2009) recommends the use of multiple sources of evidence and data to confirm emerging themes and findings. For this study data collected from questionnaires and interviews of 84 participants were analyzed, coded by themes, and placed in the proper category which corresponded directly to one of the three research questions that formed the basis for the study. In addition, member checking (Creswell, 2012) which included using participants to confirm the credibility of interview transcripts before data are included in the study was employed. The interview data, once transcribed, were provided to each interview participant for their review and confirmation of accuracy (Appendix G). Feedback from participants was reviewed and there were no necessary revisions to the transcripts. To add credibility, information described by Lodico et al. (2010) as discrepant information or information gathered that is contradictory to emerging categories and themes, was included and fully explained in the study findings. Information that appeared to contradict the main findings of the study was included to increase confidence that the researcher was not biased and was giving full disclosure to all findings.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Two major assumptions were made regarding the study. First that parents understand the importance of the information to the improvement of public education, and they participated fully and honestly with the research process. Second, all participants understand that my goal as the researcher was to gather information that can

be used for the betterment of all schools through a strengthened understanding of the perceptions of all stake holders in the school choice marketplace.

### **Limitations**

A number of limitations exist regarding the findings and outcomes of the study. The study is limited to a relatively small sample of parents in one situation. Although qualitative research is not always considered generalizable, the district may potentially use the results to adjust practice. Public school choice is often a politically charged issue, and although this study gathered important information, there are no guarantees that those with the ability to effect positive reaction to the data will use it for a positive purpose.

### **Scope**

The scope of the study focused on parents of students enrolled in charter schools who would otherwise attend assigned traditional schools within the school district. The participants were chosen for their connection to school choice as parents who have exercised their right to choose a school. Of 816 invitations, 84 parents, just over 10%, chose to participate in the questionnaire after receiving the unsolicited initial invitation in their e-mail, and then two reminder e-mails throughout a 14-day questionnaire window. From that group seven parents expressed willingness to be interviewed.

### **Delimitations**

The study focused on the perceptions of parents who have participated in school choice within the school district. The study did not include student perceptions, which might have some influence on parental choices as well. The study only focused on parents who have made the choice to enroll in one of two district charter schools and did

not include a number of parents who have made the choice to enroll their student(s) in private schools or home school programs. The study was designed for use by local officials to respond to the challenge of declining enrollment at a local level.

### **Data Analysis**

Data for this study was gathered using an electronic questionnaire and follow-up interviews with seven participants. Analysis took place as data were being gathered during a 14-day questionnaire window. Possible participants were sent two reminders to participate during the 14-day window. Immediately following the close of the questionnaire window, final open coding and data themes were completed. Data found regarding factors important to parents in choosing a school for their child was then used as a basis for the interviews conducted in the second part of the study.

All study participants were invited to be interviewed. As part of completing the questionnaire participants were invited to provide contact information if they were willing to be interviewed regarding their answers. Interviews were all personal in nature, given the opportunity, seven total participants willingly participated in the interview process.

### **Questionnaire**

An electronic invitation was sent to parents who have elected to enroll their students in one of two local charter schools within the district boundaries. To insure privacy of participants, the e-mail was sent through school administrative staff. I was only made aware of the identity of the participants if they voluntarily offered their contact

information and expressed a willingness to participate in a follow-up interview if further information was needed for the research.

Of 816 possible participants, 84 completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire gathered demographic data, as well as perception data that was gathered, coded and themed as part of data analysis for the study. If the participant indicated a willingness to be interviewed, I provided them with a copy of their individual report, and a perception/factor frequency list for their reference during the interview.

All other questionnaire responses were only used as part of the overall group report. Because the individual reports contained computer IP addresses through which a participant might be identified, after the final report was compiled, saved on a password protected thumb drive, and only used on a password-protected computer, the online data were deleted and the temporary account established for the purpose of conducting this research was closed.

The electronic questionnaire included demographic information for participants. Demographic data were compiled for the final study analysis, but were not directly connected to the open-ended questions designed to identify factors important to parents in choosing a school within a competitive marketplace. Further research might include this correlation.

Each of the open-ended questions were directly correlated to the three research questions that guided the study. Information is contained in the final group report and was coded using open coding to establish emergent themes. Because questions were purposely open-ended they resulted in different wording being used by different



participants. To avoid bias, I determined a coding category for each response and then I had my decisions reviewed by a colleague who had completed the doctoral research process, so that the coding process yielded accurate information. From this point, Table 4, including a list of factors and the frequency with which they appeared in the data was completed.

### **Interviews**

Seven of 84 study participants were interviewed. Of all study participants, nine included permission to contact them for an interview. Of the nine, two changed their minds and were not interviewed. Although IRB approval granted my discretion in choosing which participants to interview, because of the relatively small number of participants, I decided to interview all of the participants who had accented to be interviewed in order to avoid the appearance of research bias.

Each participant was provided with their individual questionnaire report for their reference during the interview. In addition each was given the list of factors included by all participants in order by the frequency with which they appeared. All participants were asked to comment on the factor frequency list and to comment as appropriate to their thoughts about the list. In addition participants were asked to review their personal questionnaire data and comment further on any of the answers, which were important for them. Specifically parents were asked to comment on the relatively low frequency of high test scores as compared to other factors on the list. To end each interview, participants were asked to add any thoughts or questions that they thought might add to the quality of the research.

To protect participant rights, and insure the accuracy of the research, each interview participant was provided with a copy of interview notes/transcription to review for accuracy of information. There were no changes suggested by any of the participants. All files are securely stored on a thumb drive dedicated to this study.

### **Outcomes**

Data from the questionnaire and interviews were analyzed using an inductive process, which allowed multiple themes to emerge (Creswell, 2012). Analysis revealed distinct themes that were easily categorized around their association with the three research questions on which the study was based. (Creswell, 2009) described the process of analyzing data as making sense out of text and data, preparing data to be properly analyzed, and then conducting analyses that moves deeper and deeper into understanding, representing and interpreting data to make larger meaning (Creswell, 2009).

I sorted the data into themes connected directly to the three guiding research questions. The first category and identified themes were connected to the first research question (RQ 1): What are charter school parents' perceptions about school choice? The second category and identified themes were connected to the second research question (RQ 2): What are the determining factors that affect parent choice to enroll their student in a local charter school instead of the traditional public school he/she would otherwise attend? The third category and identified themes were connected to the third research question (RQ 3): What challenges does a competitive school choice marketplace bring to traditional public education?

The goal of this qualitative case study was to understand parent perceptions and factors that drive decision making within a public school choice marketplace. Data were categorized around the research questions that guided the study, and provided the three main themes of the research findings.

### **Results of the Study**

#### **Demographic Data**

To establish a context for understanding basic characteristics of the marketplace, demographic data were gathered from study participants. Table 3 shows the major demographic categories for parents from both charter schools involved in the study.

Table 3

*Study Demographic Data*

<i>Demographic</i>	<i>Raw Response Numbers</i>	<i>Percentage of Total Responses</i>
<b>Age Range:</b>		
25-35	14	17%
35-45	59	70%
45+	11	13%
<b>Gender:</b>		
Male	14	17%
Female	70	83%
<b>Political Affiliation</b>		
Democrat	9	11%
Republican	42	50%
Not Affiliated/Other	33	39%
<b>Religious Affiliation that affects decisions:</b>		
Definitely yes	13	15%
Probably yes	44	53%
Might or might not	15	18%
Probably not	12	14%
Definitely not	0	0%
<b>Education Level:</b>		
High School	7	8%
Some College	28	33%
College Degree	24	29%
Some Graduate Study	14	17%
Graduate Degree	11	13%

Demographic data indicate that a heavy majority of parent participants were female, within the 35-45 year old age range, and consider themselves to be conservative or independent politically. The majority, 49 of 84 study participants have a college degree or higher. Just over half of the study participants consider themselves as belonging to a religious denomination that affects decisions they make for their family and their children.

After demographic data, participants were asked two questions to gauge their level of understanding of school funding and how charter schools compare with traditional public schools. I wanted to see if parents were aware of the fiscal implications of their enrollment choices, and whether or not that had an apparent effect on their decision making process. Although 50%, felt that all schools were funded at a per pupil amount \$3000-\$6000 less than they actually receive, 67% understood that charter schools are funded at the same levels as traditional public schools. Participant responses indicate that parents are not concerned about funding for the schools they do not choose to attend as part of their decision making process.

The remaining questions were specifically designed to gather data to answer the three guiding research questions. Data were organized in three categories with a number of emergent themes in each category, correlated to the guiding research questions.

**RQ 1: What are charter school parents' perceptions about school choice?**

The six most commonly held perceptions related to this research question were: (a) teachers are doing a good job, but the system they work in does not serve our students, (b) traditional public school class sizes are too big for students to get the personalized services they need, (c) public schools have too much of a focus on tests and not enough focus on children learning, (d) the majority of participants gave traditional public schools a B when asked to give a letter grade, (e) when asked to explain their grade, a majority of participants again credited individual teachers for the experience of their children in spite of working in a system that does not favor personalized attention,

and (f) not enough emphasis is given to individual student learning with too much emphasis on standardized outcomes for groups of students and schools as a whole.

Teachers are doing a good job, but the system they work in does not serve our students. Of 84 respondents, 53 mentioned that they believed the teachers who had worked with their students were doing their best in a system does not serve their student(s). Responses reflected a belief that public schools are part of a huge system that is not serving individual students well. Conversely, participants appeared to believe charter schools are smaller in nature, work outside of the large impersonal system, and are better able to serve students personally. Interview Participant 3 recounted a specific example,

When I went to school to try to talk with the teacher about my student's reading level, all she could talk about was some program that was based on a computer test he took that told her where he scored within their system. She ended up telling me all about a bunch of meaningless (to me anyway) percentages and explained something called "response to intervention" and even talked about special education. What? I just wanted to talk about how I could help my son read, he was only a second grader. After I told her that, she calmed down and agreed to talk to me weekly and send home some books to read. The experience reminded me that tests and percentages might be good for the "system" but they aren't good for my kid.

Interview Participant 5 agreed about the issue of personalized attention, stating,

Three times each year I get a report card from the school. It has a number from 1-4 and my kid seems to always get 3's. I guess those are good scores but how do I know? Then I get this report about state tests that ranks my kid against all the other kids and surprise she is always high average. She is now in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and she is involved in all kinds of cool things at school. Before she came to the charter, all she talked about was practice test this, and practice test that, it seemed to me that the school was way too concerned about how they looked, and not about whether my daughter was happy, interested in learning, and having a great school experience.

Interview participants stated they believe that the public education system is such that to support student happiness takes the individual effort of each teacher. In interview answers they stated they believe that the experience one has, either positive or negative, does not depend on the system but on which teacher their student is lucky enough to get. Parents came to the charter school in search of a place that is the opposite of the large, impersonal, public education as they perceive it.

Traditional public school class sizes are too big for students to get the personalized services they need. The two charter schools in this study both have a self-imposed class size limit of 25 students in all grade levels, kindergarten through eighth grade. Schools within the school district have class size limits of 24 in kindergarten through third grade, and 36 students per class in fourth through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Thirty-eight of 84 participants mentioned class size in their answer listing things that need to change for

traditional public schools to provide students with the skills and knowledge they need in today's world. Forty-five percent of study participants included class size as an important change needed for traditional public schools to better serve students, 38 of them listed it as a major factor in making the decision to enroll in a charter school.

Schools have too much of a focus on tests and not enough focus on children learning. Fifteen of 84 parents mentioned No Child Left Behind specifically for contributing to their frustration with traditional public schools, Interview Participant 1 stated,

I am a teacher in another district beside this one. I always thought the argument that by 2014 everyone (100%) of students would be proficient in reading and math was not realistic. When I went to the meeting about the charter and they said they would be teaching for learning and they believed the test scores would "take care of themselves if our kids gained competence and confidence" I knew this was the school for my kids. I wish I could work there but I would lose too much of my paycheck.

None of the participants mentioned the fact that charter schools are public schools and as such are just as associated with No Child Left Behind/Every Student Succeeds Acts as other public schools.

Not enough emphasis is given to student learning with too much emphasis on standardized outcomes for groups of students and schools. Of 84 participants, 37 mentioned an emphasis on testing and how it made the school look to the public, instead of what the results meant for students. While a smaller number mentioned the law



explicitly, the theme of over emphasis on school results instead of individual learning was included in the follow-up interviews. The results indicate a connection of No Child Left Behind/Every Student Succeeds Acts to the “systems” theme, and the lack of focus on the individual seems to be the driver for this emerging theme. Interview Participant 3 stated,

What they did not seem to understand at his old school was that I did not particularly care about the schools composite, formula scores. I really do not understand them anyway. I want to know about my student, I want to talk about what I can do to help my student. While I love all of the kids, when it comes to test scores, I want the school to pay attention to his needs individually.

Interview Participant 1 shared the same concerns, adding,

I understand that schools have to pay attention to the overall numbers to compare themselves to other schools. I am a teacher who does it all the time. But the message that sends is that the individual does not matter. At the charter school meeting, the principal said, “If we pay attention to the individual student, the school scores will take care of themselves.” That statement right there told me that these people care about my baby as an individual. Any school can do that, it does not have to be a charter school!

These statements further reinforced the theme that parents want schools where people care about their students more than they care about how the school looks publicly.

Parents believe that caring about students instead of scores is in the best way to insure students will do well on accountability measures.

Sixty-eight of 84 participants gave traditional public schools a B when asked to give a letter grade. When asked to write a short explanation of their choice the most common phrase was, “our schools are good but they are not great”. Another common phrase was, “our public schools are just as good as those in surrounding districts”. A majority of participants credited individual teachers for the experience again in spite of working in a system that does not favor personalized attention. Fifty-three of 84 participants credited one or more of the teachers their student had with providing excellence while still showing distrust for the traditional public school system.

Even though participants have made the decision to enroll in a charter school, parents in this study do not think the public schools are terrible. The majority score them with a solid B while searching for something better.

**RQ 2: What are the determining factors that affect parent choice to enroll their student in a local charter school instead of the traditional public school he/she would otherwise attend?**

Question 10 of the questionnaire was used to create a list of all possible factors parent participants listed as important to their enrollment decisions. The question was purposely open-ended in order that participants not be limited to a certain number of factors, or a list where they might just check off factors suggested by the researcher. Participants were asked to list their factors in order of importance. While all factors listed are included in Table 4, the level of importance to each individual participant was not considered in the analysis. Because the question was purposely open-ended, participants used different terminology in some of their answers. I used my best judgement to include

every answer in a group even though the actual response was worded differently. If there was any doubt about the meaning of the response, I made a new grouping. Because participants were allowed to list as many factors as they wished, 84 participants produced 379 responses in 27 factor groups. Three factors included in Table 4 are known to be specifically connected to one of the two charter schools included in the study. Those factors are denoted with a (C2) in parenthesis.

Table 4

*Research Question 2: Factors That Affect Charter Parent Enrollment Decisions*

<i>Factors Affecting Decisions</i>	<i>Frequency in Study</i>
Enrichment Opportunities	39
Small Class Sizes (25/K-8)	38
Rigorous Teaching	34
Individualized to meet my student's needs	32
Possible IB High School Program (C2)	28
K-8 Campus	26
Parent/Family Involvement and Commitment	24
Quality Teachers	16
Technology	14
Family Orientation	13
Classes stay together in Cohorts (C2)	12
Small Learning Community (whole school)	11
Word of Mouth Friend's Experiences	10
Conservative Families	9
Quality Leadership	8
IB Curriculum (C2)	8
High Test Scores	6
Community Service for Students	6
Not pleased with the (traditional) public school in my area	5
Security/Safety	3
Common focus through all grade levels	2
Great Kids/Great Families	2
Atmosphere	1
Strict Discipline	1
Personally responsive school administration	1
Student Uniforms	1

The research proposal referenced the creation of a separate file for outlier answers. The purpose of this file was to help organize single answers which appeared to weigh heavily in the decision making process of the parent who included them in their answers. In the review of individual questionnaire reports, none of the factors only appearing once were found to be the first listed, or the only listed answer to the question. Because this was found to be the case, and because none of the four appeared to me to be

true outliers, I did not create a separate file for outlier answers. They are included on the list as factors that only appeared once.

Each of the seven interview participants were shown Table 4 with factors shown in order of frequency gathered from the entire pool of study participants. Participants were asked for a reaction to the list compared to the factors they had listed on the questionnaire.

Interview Participant 7 reacted by stating,

I am surprised that technology was only mentioned by 14 people. I know I was impressed by the initial meeting where they said that every student was going to have a computer, they weren't real laptops they were those Neo2 things, but I was impressed. That didn't last long though, the company that provided them went out of business and now the school has laptops just like every other school, not one on one. If they would not have mentioned that at the information meeting we probably would have left our son where he was. I was right on with the rest of the crowd with the enrichment opportunities being very high on my list. My kid loves robotics and this school has two teams. He works on his robot all year in order to be ready for robot season. I have noticed that once we had a team all the other schools in town are getting them to. I guess that is a good thing.

It is evident that Participant 7 is still interested in the enrichment opportunities being offered at all schools. She acknowledged disappointment at the level of technology was not what the school had originally said they were going to offer, even saying she would have left her student in the public school they left because of the technology. Her answer

shows a sense of pride in the enrichment program her son had chosen and acknowledges that it is a good thing that her school is leading other schools to increase their services by adding robotics teams.

Interview Participant 6 reacted to the factors list by saying,

My top two factors are at the top of the list. Most important to me is the K-8 Campus. I went to Catholic school and I believe it is much better to have your middle school students in a K-8 instead of a middle school. Middle schools are trouble, I am very happy they made this school because I cannot afford private and this is just like a private school. My second factor was rigorous teaching. I love the IB program and I think it should be used everywhere! The kids learn so much, technology, languages, art, how art works with science, it is really neat. My kid works really hard to get through this school and I think that is great. Third I listed strict discipline and I can't believe I am the only one. I am going to have to talk to these people (laugh).

Interview Participant 5 again credited one teacher for the decision to enroll,

I have to be honest, Mrs. C. has taught every one of my kids and when we heard she was transferring to the charter school that was the decision maker. I am sure you listed my answer under quality teachers. I have to say that she (daughter) only had Mrs. C. for her first year and now she has had a number of excellent teachers. She loves the school and my wife and I love the other families. You might have put my second choice under Great Kids/Great Families, I don't know but I can tell you it is true. Many of these people belong to our church (Mormon)

and this school is talked about all the time at church. I am surprised that high test scores ranked so low on the list, only 8 people thought it was important. Well, since we have had the highest scores in the district ever since we opened, I guess people just take it for granted now.”

After reviewing the list of factors, Interview Participant 4 offered,

My first factor was class size. Having 32-36 kids in a middle school class is just too big and I was really happy to hear about class sizes capped at 25. My second factor was quality leadership. It is odd to me that only 8 of us thought that was important enough to make a decision. I knew the guy who started the charter and when he told me he was doing a Leadership Theme and that my students (2) would be released in the afternoon, I was hooked and I know he is a smart, quality guy. We love the school!

In arguing that class size was the most important factor, Participant 4 revealed that he knew the founder of the school and that he really likes having his student out of school in the afternoon. C1 in this study releases students at noon to be with their parents who they as an organization believe are the primary educator of students to take trips, have enrichment family time, or other activities. Early release was not mentioned specifically in the list of factors (Table 4).

Interview Participant 3 said,

I was one who said I was not happy with the public school in my area. I like them but all they did was get kids ready for state testing. When I went to the informational meeting about this school the founding director said his philosophy

was to help the students do well in class and let the test scores take care of themselves. That is why we are here. My second thing was individual attention and I see that was important to a lot of the people. The list might be a little misleading because I think everything on the top of the list contributes to the personalized treatment I want and I think a lot of parents want.

Programs individualized to meet my students' needs, was very high on the factor frequency list in fourth place compared to enrichment opportunities, small class size, and rigorous teaching, in that order.

Interview Participant 2 reacted to the frequency list, saying,

Uh oh, I am the only one who mentioned uniforms? Wow! I think they look sharp and the kids know they are there to study and not goof around. I am with the top group on enrichment opportunities. My son was so unchallenged and bored with pre-school I was scared to death that he would be disruptive in the classroom and drive the teacher crazy. My third was class size so I see the others agreed with me on everything but uniforms. I am also one of the "word of mouth people" as people at my church camped out to get in. I was a year behind them but I will tell you that camping for the night in the cold to get their kid in this school I think has really affected their dedication to the school. Whenever we have any event it is packed, you can tell this school is important to the parents.

Student uniforms are very popular at the charter school that has them. In the spring of 2016, the other charter school in the study has been considering possible uniforms for the



coming school year. In the research for this study, only 1 of 84 participants thought uniforms were important to their decision making process.

Interview Participant 1 was the only one who specifically mentioned the importance of academic rigor,

I agree almost completely with this list and the order. The only thing I question just a little is I think rigorous teaching should always be at the top. I had my kids in both lotteries and the thing I liked was before I entered the lotteries I was able to look at the Leadership curriculum and the IB curriculums as a parent so I could know that no matter which school we got into our kids would be challenged. We ended up winning both but chose the Leadership program simply because at the time the school had already been operating and we thought it was better established at the time. We have friends who went to the other school and have loved it.

Of all of the factors found in the study, high test scores, a topic arguably front and center in most analysis of the success of the American K-12 education, was listed by six parents as a factor in their decision to enroll in a charter school. Interview participants were asked for their reaction to high test scores appeared to be low on the list of priorities for charter school parents in this study.

Interview Participant 1 didn't agree with the notion that tests scores were not important,

I don't think that means that good test scores are not important for parents. I think parents understand that doing well on tests is important but if you look at

the things that are important to parents, all of those things will help students score well on tests. But, tests are only one measure of success, remember that.

Interview Participant 2 agreed by adding,

I think that parents expect that their kids will do well on the state tests. I think it is a matter of timing of this study and the fact that test scores have not been published like they used to be for two years now.

Interview Participant 3 had a similar response, stating,

This does not mean that test scores are not important. Of course they are important but, I think parents want their students to have personal attention, which will help their student(s) be successful on the tests. If you look at all the top things they all make it easier for students to be excited about learning, which will help them do better on tests. Like I said, tests are ok but they are not the only thing and traditional public schools are paying too much attention to scores and how it makes the school look.

Interview Participant 4 believed differently about test scores, stating,

Exactly! I think that tells you just exactly that parents are not as concerned about test scores as the state and federal governments are.

Interview Participant 5 acknowledged the role of test scores by adding,

Well, I guess this says that there are a lot of things that are important to parents before you get to test scores. I do think though that doing well on tests might be hidden in the “rigorous teaching” answer but we should not put words in peoples’ mouth I guess.

Interview Participant 6 offered a different perspective on why scores were not a concern, stating,

As I think about it, test scores have never been an issue for my kids so I really didn't think about it. Maybe the other parents in the study are in the same situation. I am not sure you can look at the results of the study and say for sure test scores are not important, clearly they are, and clearly our school does really well with test scores. I think it is interesting that the two charter schools traditionally have higher scores than all of the other schools.

Interview Participant 7 has a disdain for test scores, and said,

Oh yeah, those pesky test scores. Who cares? (laugh) Those things are used by the government to beat up on schools! If you can't tell, I am with the parents who don't think they are important at all. I remember taking those things when I was in school, I didn't think they were important then and I have not changed my mind.

As traditional public schools begin to look at how to compete with charter schools for enrollment, the traditional approach to the importance of test scores, public accountability rankings, and how the school reacts is important. Participants in this study were not as focused on test scores as on other factors those parents believe address the process of making students proficient with state testing.

**RQ 3: What challenges does a competitive school choice marketplace bring to traditional public education?**

Questions 11-15 on the electronic questionnaire were targeted toward Research Question 3, an analysis of the answers produced themes relevant to the study, and informative answers for public educators who are operating in a competitive school choice marketplace.

Answers to Question 11 revealed that even though they had chosen a charter school for their students, parents in this survey did not characterize the local public schools as “bad”, they just felt the charter school was a better option. One parent stated,

While I am pleased with their school, I still consider every year if we should just move back to our neighborhood public school. So far we just stay because our kids love it here. I don't think it is any better or any worse than the other school when it comes to academics.

When asked if there were actions that could be taken by public schools to make them consider enrolling there instead of the charter school (Q 12), four clear themes came from the answers: (a) Show they care about students, (b) Personalize services in a rigorous curriculum, (c) Offer smaller class sizes, and (d) Work on their public image, true or not, people think the charter is better.

Asked about school choice within the traditional school system, parent participants overwhelmingly said they had not considered moving to different schools other than the charter schools. A number of parents reported coming from private schools to the charter schools. Of those parents, they cited economic reasons for the change but

only one of those who answered said they did any level of investigation into the traditional public schools. Participants answered, the enrollment lottery was daunting.

One parent wrote,

I knew I wanted to change (from private school) and if I had to go to the public school I would only accept one school. That school was totally full so we entered both lotteries. We went to the lottery because we felt we had no other “real” choice.

Answers to Research Question 3 seem to indicate that parents are amenable to being persuaded if traditional public schools decide to do so. While public schools have a long tradition of showing school pride, aiming to be the best they can be, and looking good for the public, results from this study seem to indicate, that to be competitive, they have to learn to sell themselves, their people, and their services in competition with the charter schools.

To attempt to sum up parent perceptions about public school choice, I asked each of the seven interview participants this closing question: You are part of a group of parents who have chosen a charter school over a traditional public school for your children. You can see in the questions on the electronic questionnaire that I am trying to obtain information as to why, in a district like this one, when traditional public schools are above average, parents like you are making the choices you made. Can you give any further insight for me to consider in my research?

Interview Participant 1 replied,

I appreciate being asked to share what is important to me in making the decisions I made about school enrollment. With more and more freedom to choose being given to parents, I think it is becoming a very interesting and competitive system. I think that is good for our schools and will help to improve them.

Interview Participant 2 commented,

I think this study is definitely interesting. I believe that the answers you got to your questions would vary by area so I am not sure you can make the assumption that because these factors are important to this group they would be important in other communities. I would think you would have to repeat the same study with a different group to see what is important to them in order to make good decisions. I still don't believe nobody but me cares about uniforms (Laugh).

Interview Participant 3, not as positive about the process, added,

I doubt the public schools will be able to take this information and do much to change. The system is just way too geared for equality of opportunity instead of quality of outcomes. I realize the history of public education has demanded equality of access, but when parents have choice they are going to go for personalized over good for the masses every time. It is certainly an interesting thing to watch.

Interview Participant 4 acknowledged the power of parent choice, answering,

This is a small town. Word of mouth spreads like wildfire at the baseball field and the truth is these two schools have a very good reputation. I think people want to get in just because they think it is better, even if they don't know why it

is better. It is a consumer society, when the crowd finds something it likes, everyone hears about it and runs to get their fair share.

Interview Participant 5 again referenced the importance of high school scores and personalized services for students, adding,

The truth is, this data shows that parents really want a good experience for their kids, and they don't think you measure that with test scores. However, if the school has substandard test scores, you can bet a bunch of them would start thinking about taking their kid out. So while it is legitimate to use this information, you better still get good scores.

Interview Participant 6, while participating in a charter school, still worries about all public schools, stating,

This is really interesting. I think it will benefit all schools if people will just look at the information and not try to make it say what they want it to say. The public school system is a system that is full of tradition, and that will be very hard to change. I do worry that if something is not done that all of the kids left in the traditional public schools will be the ones whose parents don't make the effort to help them get into the better schools.

Interview Participant 7 in a warning to practitioners using this study data to help them make decisions, offered,

I think this research is only valid for a small group of people. If you want to know why parents in other places are making the same decisions, I think you

need to ask them. Don't just assume that they would come up with the same answers we did.

Data from the questionnaire and follow-up interviews give a clear picture of the demographics of parents who have chosen a charter school for their students, the factors that are most important for them to include in their decision making process, and their reaction to the information gathered from all of the other participants in the study. The information contained in the data was very important to the planning of the professional development seminar and will be used by district and school site leaders in developing a plan to help their schools compete in the school choice marketplace.

### **Conclusion**

RQ1: What are charter school parents' perceptions about school choice? By their actions, study participants clearly feel that school choice is an important power for parents to hold. Study data showed that while parents appreciate the job being done by teachers, they feel that the good work teachers do on an individual basis is in spite of what they feel is a non-responsive system of public education not because of it.

Participants of this study gave their public schools rather high marks, but still chose to place their students in charter schools which they feel better meets the individual needs of their students. Study participants also felt that class size matters. They connected larger class size with the issue of personal attention, which they feel charter schools can more easily offer their students. Finally, participants feel that public schools emphasize testing and accountability to the detriment of the individual learning experience. They stated



they are looking for schools that better meet the individual needs of their students instead of the systemic needs of the school.

RQ2: What are the determining factors that affect parent choice to enroll their student in a local charter school instead of the traditional public school they would otherwise attend? Study participants gave their local public schools a grade of B on a common A-F grading scale. Clearly the schools in the subject district are not struggling with issues basic to student safety, achievement, or poverty like schools commonly referred to in charter school vs. traditional public school discussions. Study participant questionnaire responses indicate a focus on the individual experience of their student(s), high quality teaching and learning, a demand for personalized services, and enrichment opportunities. As evidenced by their enrollment choices, participants feel the charter schools involved in the study are a better option for their students.

RQ3: What challenges does a competitive school choice marketplace bring to traditional public education? Data gathered from the questionnaire and interviews designed to address Research Question 3 reveal that parents who participated in the study feel empowered by the school choice marketplace to make demands of schools that want to compete for their students. This parent empowerment evidenced in their answers as to the demands they insist be addressed before they consider a school, points to the challenges the marketplace brings to public education. The monopoly which public schools used to enjoy, is broken when parents are given the ability to choose. School choice, once reserved for people who could afford to make the choice to enroll in private schools, has now been given to everyone. Charter schools are public schools, and as such,

parents can decide without any financial consideration, to choose a school that best fits the needs they perceive for their children. The fact that parents can make these choices, and the state and federal funding associated with their students automatically follows their student, has injected competition into the system. Competition injects the need to focus on marketing, brand messaging, and quality program delivery. Data from the study confirm a need for traditional public school educators to pay close attention to the perceptions and demands of parents and families who now have options.

### **Summary**

Section 2 described the research methodology for the study. This study attempted to build understanding of factors that are important to parents who are involved in a school choice marketplace within one public school district. A qualitative case study was used to gather information about the perceptions of participants from a purposeful sample consisting of parents known to have connection to school choice. The study included the perspectives of 84 parents, in one district, who have exercised school choice based on factors that they feel are important to consider in choosing a school for their children. Additional perspective was obtained from seven study participants who agreed to be interviewed. To deepen the analysis of important factors, interview participants were shown their answers, and were asked to compare and comment on the compiled frequency list of all study participants. This contributed to a deeper understanding of the perceptions of the entire study participant group.

Section 2 also explained that a member checking strategy was used during data collection and analysis. Data were coded, categorized, divided into themes, and analyzed

more deeply as a part of the interview process, which helped the development of study findings and conclusions.

Although this study was limited, it is evident that the factors considered important to parents in the choice process are representative of charter school parents in this district. While caution should be used in attempting to apply these outcomes to all similar situations, the information gathered in this study appears to be very helpful to this district. After developing a report of the findings, a project that consists of a professional development plan to help public school educators understand parents' perceptions in order to improve public schools has been undertaken (Appendix A). The research conducted for this project supports the idea that it is important for educators to understand the needs of their clients, and build schools and programs that meet those needs. Part of that process is in branding and marketing their school to compete with charter schools. Marketing in public education has long been a function of the higher education realm. The growing need for marketing strategies at the K-12 level is foreign to public educators. While constant attention must be given to the school's image, the freedom given to parents to choose which school they support and attend adds a whole new dimension to the work of building, maintaining, and filling, good schools. Policies and practices that might improve public education in the district may be implemented as a method of positive social change.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

Not accustomed to operating in a market-based, client-service system, traditional roles of public school educators are being challenged. The evolution of school choice now gives parents the right to make choices for K-12 schooling, which has created a marketplace in which traditional public schools find themselves having to compete for enrollment.

According to Dictionary.com (2016), a marketplace is any place where services, products, ideas, or creations compete with others for recognition and, in the case of business, for support and trade. The study connected with this project examined factors that are important to parents in making schooling choices for their children. The fact that as a parent one can choose which school they wish their child to attend, and the funding associated with their student automatically follows, has thrust public schools into a marketplace where they must now compete for the interest of the parents in their programming, institutional quality, student, and family services. Additionally, institutions built for the masses, in order to compete, must retool for the demand of personalized service.

The challenges for public schools in the competitive market are many. Public educators must understand and acknowledge that parent perception, backed by the power to direct the money associated with their student, requires them to learn how to create a good image for their school. It requires that teachers, and all school personnel, not only master the art of teaching, excellent pedagogy, and curriculum, but client care and

customer service as well. While undertaking activities, and changing cultures to become much more like competitive industry, they must satisfy the needs of their community, while remaining compliant with state and federal education laws that require adequate yearly progress as measured by those standardized tests that many parents say they dislike.

The qualitative case study for this project examined a problem in a west coast school district that is experiencing declining enrollment almost directly proportional to the number of students who are enrolling in two local charter schools. Data from the study revealed specific factors important to parents who chose charter schools over traditional public schools. If perceptions (factors) determine choice, then the way to positively and proactively change choices is to change perceptions. Wickenden (2013) wrote that if people hope to change something, they have to first understand the person, what drives them, what gets through to them, what engages them, and what disturbs them, then they must deliver their services to those needs.

### **Description and Goals**

The west coast school district involved in this study is comparable in nature to many school districts across the nation. The district had been experiencing challenges because of school choice being introduced into the community. This injected competitive pressures and created a marketplace in which schools were forced to compete to fill classrooms with students whose parents now have choices for their schooling that did not exist before. The competitive system was causing a decreasing enrollment and thus loss of revenue that was negatively affecting district and school operational budgets.

The project includes published research findings from the qualitative study, historical information chronicling the evolution of charter schools, and the competitive nature of the new K-12 education model. It will include market-based strategies to support public educators in becoming and staying competitive in the quest to improve the entire education system one school, and one district at a time. A 3-day professional development seminar program is suggested for district and school site leaders based on the findings of the research study. The first goal of the professional development seminar is to help them understand the evolution of the school choice system and their changing role in leading traditional public schools within the system. The second goal of the professional development seminar is to help participants design a marketing strategy for the district as well as individual schools. The third goal is to help devise specific strategies to apply the study information to change the culture of district and school employees to a client/customer service orientation in order to meet the needs and demands of parents and students.

I conducted a qualitative study consisting of an electronic questionnaire and follow-up interviews designed to understand parent perceptions about school choice and the factors that are most important to parents in making decisions about the school in which they will enroll their children. The results present a challenge to traditional public educators who find themselves in a competitive marketplace in which parents have the role of examining the situation and directing their children and the funding associated with them to the school they choose. This is a change from a system where parents did not get to choose anything. Students were assigned to a neighborhood school, and parents

were expected to accept the program as it was offered and make sure their student got to school. The professional development seminar will help educators understand the change, adjust policies, and take positive actions to grow and maintain quality competitive programs.

### **Rationale**

In a business model, understanding and serving the demands of a market determine the level of success or failure of the organization. This study was designed to help public educators understand why parents make the choices they make. I hope that public educators might successfully use the data to improve public schools, increasing their ability to attract and retain families who now have enrollment choices. Charter schools come about, and are successful, when there appears to be a void in a local market. Charter petitioners make a plan to fill the void and convince enough parents that they are best suited for the job. By failing to understand parent perceptions and address them, public educators are allowing the voids to form.

The professional development project was designed around four distinct steps. Step 1 is theory and context. Step 2 is demonstration of a model process. Step 3 is time to apply new knowledge to the current situation. Step 4 is planning, coaching and follow-up.

In Step 1, theory and context will be established by the data from the qualitative research. Parent participants provided data on the factors they considered when exercising school choice. In addition, participants shared perspectives about school choice and traditional public schools. In this context, the professional development seminar was written to focus on the data.

Step 2 is a review of the marketing triangle model. Research involving effective strategies for marketing, brand-messaging, and brand delivery will be used to address the process by which K-12 educators can affect the mind shift necessary to move their organizations to a model that addresses parent needs.

Step 3 will help participants begin specific planning to react to the data this study has collected about the district. It is planned as time where district and site staff can dig into the data on factors important to the parents. The goal is to begin to create district and school site policies and strategies to address the factors and perceptions found in the research.

Step 4 is designed to help district and school site leaders to begin the processes to change the culture of district schools. The goal is to move from a culture of service to the masses to a culture of customer and client service that offers the personalized service that parents are looking for in order to enroll or stay in the district public schools.

### **Review of the Literature**

Findings from the study were used to explain the need for public school personnel to focus on competition for student enrollment in a school choice marketplace. To understand what consumers (parents) want, how to build programs, and market schools around consumer market research was the first step in the process of completing this project. I examined the perceptions of parents in one educational marketplace and created a project to help public educators make their schools competitive.

The theoretical framework guiding the project was based on the success of the branding-marketing model used by the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter



management organization. KIPP is a highly visible national organization a charter management organization, a franchise or loose network of schools in which individual schools subscribe to the KIPP instructional model philosophy; however, schools are otherwise free to devise their own marketing-branding policies and processes (Lake, Dusseault, Bowen, Demeritt, & Hill, 2010). The KIPP instructional model has proven successful based on the growth of the KIPP organization and the ability of KIPP schools to compete for student enrollment in many educational marketplaces across the country. DiMartino and Jessen (2016) discussed the importance that the business sector model of market-based reforms and the application in the education marketplace. Silk (2006) found that marketing is the process by which one creates value for customers. Schools that find themselves in a competitive school choice marketplace thrive when engaged in market-based reforms driven by parent choice. DiMartino and Jessen proposed that understanding marketing practices is very important, and the information that is provided to parents has an important impact either enhancing or inhibiting the choice decision-making process. This project was designed to understand parent perceptions of the school choice process in one school district on the west coast of the United States. I used research data to help public school educators formulate programs that meet the needs of district students and families, as well as improve the image and branding of their schools based on market research. Foskett (2002) posited that when policy makers focus on marketing practices to positively influence competition and choice, the increased awareness of branding and marketing brings with it the attention needed to develop strong, shared organizational vision and goals, and ultimately improves school programs.

Foskett argued, “All aspects of an organization’s vision and strategy are linked to market analysis” (p. 248). Additionally, selling education often requires a change in culture and sometimes values to tailor programs and systems to meet the needs of consumers rather than the needs of the institution. Harvey (1996) wrote that the process of understanding the marketplace forces schools to view students and their families as perspective clients and develop programs, products, and services to meet their needs.

Smith, Wohlstetter, Farrell, and Nayfack (2011) undertook a detailed look at research on charter schools in general. The purpose of the research was to go beyond ideological warfare and have an unbiased look at research and the actual effect charter schools were having on the system. The data showed that while charter school outcomes have been unevenly examined, much of the focus has been on studies of student achievement; not as much has been done to include the local and state contexts in which charter schools operate and the interplay between these factors (Smith et al., 2011). The conclusions from the Smith et al. study inspired me to create a study that goes beyond the common approach and incorporates branding and marketing as strategies for success in a competitive education marketplace (Farrell, Wohlesteller, & Smith, 2012). I set a goal to gather perception data parents have about charter schools and school choice in one west coast school district in order to better understand factors that parents use to make enrollment decisions, to help schools devise effective marketing-branding campaigns based on what parents want and need for their students.

The project was designed to help public school educators learn about the marketing-branding process, base decisions on solid market research, and create and

implement a plan to actively participate in a competitive school choice marketplace. McGrath (2014) recognized growth in marketing efforts in the not-for-profit school sector has been recognized as a major new trend. A critical part of the marketing plan is the research regarding parent perceptions about how well the brand of the school being studied actually performed (McGrath, 2014). Savage (2012) described how charter schools often adopt particular curricular approaches, school models, or missions that appeal to the different interests of families. The process of determining which programs or models should be offered includes a need to understand what interest the target audience has toward education. Wilson and Carlson (2016) suggested that marketing happens at the school level; however, a systemic effect also occurs. Marketing materials make different appeals to different families, depending on the unique, competitive features of the learning community. Williams (2012) believed that successful marketing hinges on the interplay between customer (parent), firm (school), and employee perceptions and actions.

DiMartino and Jessen (2016) posited that, to sell the school effectively, principals and teachers need to be attuned to the needs of the consumers, which is a different way to look at parents who have been given the power to choose with charter school choices. A school's brand as represented in its marketing efforts influenced parents' perceptions of and interest in enrolling their children in that school (DiMartino & Jessen, 2016).

DiMartino and Jessen called the world of branding and marketing in the public sector *emergent*, and noted that educators, parents, and students are still in the process of

learning how to incorporate the information with the structures of school choice and public education as a whole.

The goal of this project study was to understand the phenomenon in one public school district on the west coast of the United States that has average to above average public schools but is still losing students to charter schools. To explore the phenomenon of student attrition, I asked parents who have made the choice to enroll in local charter schools the specific reasons they made this choice. The study data from Section 2 revealed specific reasons parents were choosing charter schools. Therefore, I have proposed a comprehensive 3-day professional development seminar for district and school site leaders to include opportunities to understand the context and realities of the local marketplace to identify parent characteristics and parent perspectives that can predict which enrollment choice parents will make. During the 3-day professional development seminar, educators learn about models for success in the competitive marketplace, create marketing strategies, and devise specific implementation strategies for the district and individual schools.

### **Context and Realities of the Marketplace**

A competitive school choice marketplace exists when charter schools enter a community and offer parents alternatives. Jabbar (2016) posited choice policies are designed to give parents, not schools, power in selecting a school for their child. The ability to choose which school to enroll in, now held by parents, requires school leaders to not only focus on internal school-improvement efforts, but to simultaneously manage their external relations, image, and market share in order to survive in the competitive

environment (Oplatka, Hemsley-Brown, & Foskett, 2002). Campitelli (2013) believed that schools have never really considered it part of what they do to ensure there are actually children to teach. The *build it and they will come* approach has dominated school thinking because until relatively recently, schools have simply been places of education where students were assigned and the job was to teach those who came without worrying about where they came from. Campitelli further added that although educators may feel uncomfortable when students and families are seen as customers and clients, in the current marketplace that is how families are seeing themselves. Families increasingly perceive schools as other businesses they patronize. This shift in thinking by parents may require educators to honor their perceptions, and compete for the families' business by telling the school's story, selling the advantages for attending, and making the actual educational experience match what is promised. Baber and Upadhyay (2014) found that a focus on market orientation helps the organization create a superior product for consumers and thus maintain superior performance. Williams and Omar (2014) said that ongoing brand management with a service organization is critical to preserving the brand identity that is consistent with the perceptions held by stakeholders (consumers) of the brand. This creates a new demand placed on schools that are competing in the school choice marketplace and is addressed in the professional development.

As stated by Jabbar and Li (2016), before public school administrators can operate in a competitive marketplace, they need to understand the environment. In New Orleans, a well-established competitive marketplace, administrators did not see competition as important so they failed to compete (Jabbar & Li). In the district involved

in this study, competition has clearly caused administrators to take notice. Unlike New Orleans where school choice is part of the culture, administrators in the subject district definitely see the need to understand the school- choice marketplace. The first part of the professional development seminar will provide participants with the opportunity to understand they are operating in a competitive marketplace. I will include time for them to work together with colleagues to identify the context, and realities of the local school choice marketplace, and begin to use the research data from this study to analyze the marketplace in relationship to their role in the district or school.

### **Understanding the Competitive Marketplace**

According to Wickenden (2013) if people want to change someone or influence their choice they first must understand their motivations, what drives them, what gets through to them, what emotionally engages them, what disturbs them, and then they must deliver to those needs. To begin the process of creating a service and marketing the service, Wickenden (2013) suggested the following questions at the beginning of the process: What does the person already believe? What are they afraid of? What do they think they want? What do they actually want? What is their source of urgency – how long will it take to change their perspective? After they change, what will they tell their friends?

After completing the 2011 Parent Motivations Study for the National Association of Independent Schools, McGovern (2012) said there are four different types of parents to whom schools must market their services. *Parents who push*, represent the group who cares about test scores, and at the same time demand individual attention for their student.

*Success driven parents* want their student to attend a top-tier college, and they look to the success of the whole school and the unique features of the learning community as a whole. *Special kid parents* look for rigorous instruction and high academic standards to challenge their above average student, and they expect everything to be of the highest quality. *Character building parents* want to see and understand your enrichment activities, they value a focus on behavior and citizenship and the best overall experience their child can possibly have. Immelman and Roberts-Lombard (2015) found that parents in South Africa had a comprehensive set of choice factors they use to choose schools, and that it is important for schools to have a strong understanding of them before they develop and design individual market strategies when recruiting new learners. Part two of the professional development will help focus our school leaders on getting to know, and understand their parents before deciding how to create a marketing campaign to keep them in their schools.

In this part of the training, perspective results from the qualitative survey conducted in the district for this project, will be reviewed and incorporated into the newly forming plans for the district level and school sites.

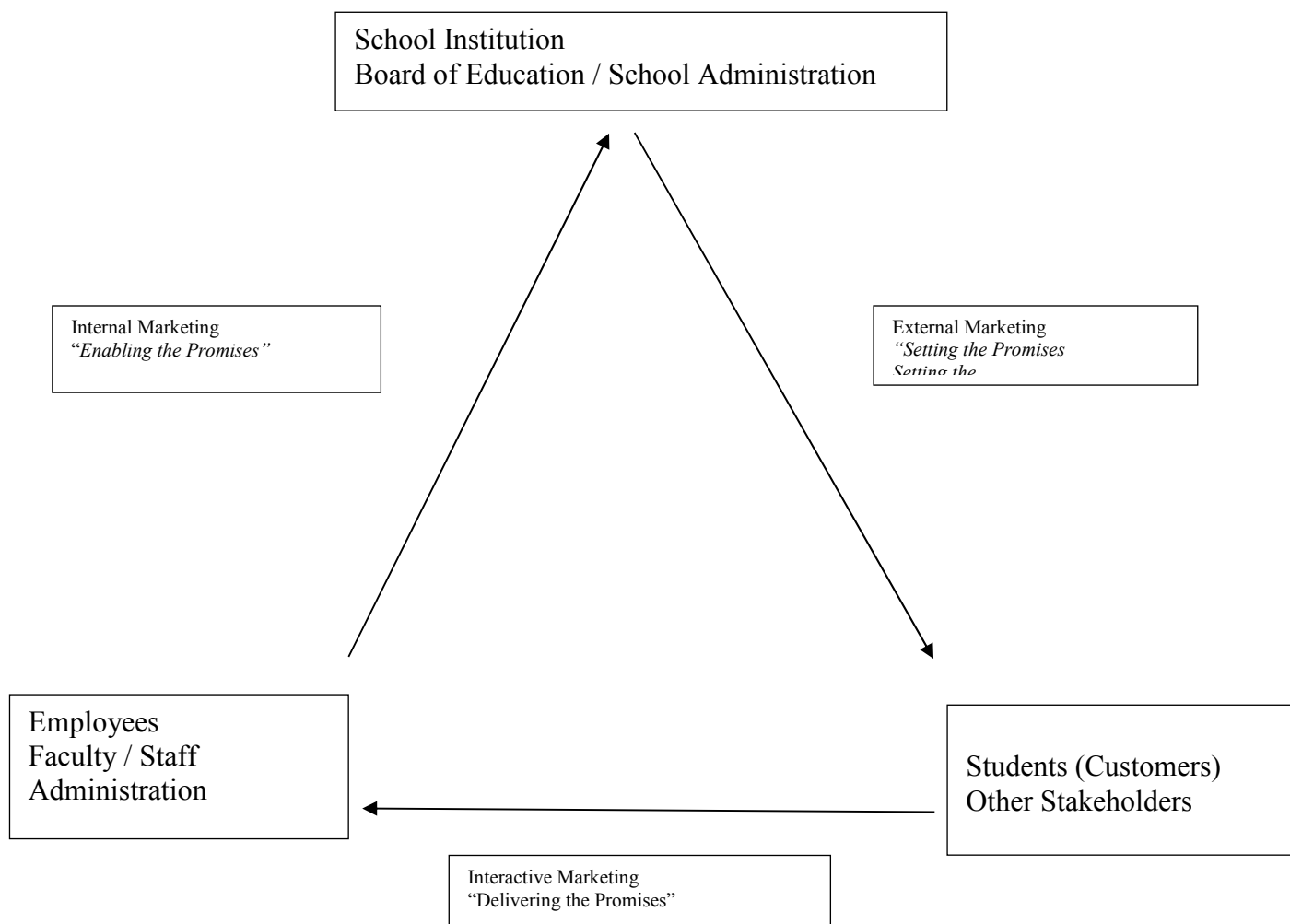
### **Models for Success, Implementing the Marketing Triangle**

Alhakimi and Qasem (2014) said that marketing is the cornerstone of the business world but is still controversial and less understood to education. Kotler and Armstrong (2012) argued that market positioning is arranging for a product or service to occupy a clear, distinctive, and desirable place relative to the competition in the minds of target consumers. When competition is present in the marketplace, building relationships with

consumers in the marketplace, understanding consumer motivation, and need is imperative for success (Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elshanouby, & Elshrnouby, 2016). I have chosen a model for marketing school services based on the work of Forsyth (2004) with the 5 C's forming the necessary elements of a sustainable program: (a) client-focused, (b) continuous, (c) coordinated, (d) creative, and (e) culture oriented. In session three of the professional development seminar, participants will be asked to use the market data specific to the district study and begin to formulate a specific plan for the district or their individual school which account for Forsyth's 5 C's.

Sferle et al. (2012) contend that marketing activity in the field of educational services comprise of three levels of relationships between school administration, families, and employees of the school. Figure 1 below illustrates the *Marketing Triangle for Educational Services*.





*Figure 1.* Marketing triangle for educational services. Adaptation from Mamilla Rajasckhar, M. Muninarayanappa, and S.V. Subba Reddy (2009)

The final part of the training will result in participants applying Forsyth (2004) 5 Cs of marketing to each of the three points of the marketing cycle. At the end of the seminar participants will have an understanding of their local education marketplace based on parent perception information gathered in the qualitative study. They will also have a marketing plan that contains the essential elements from Forsyth's 5 Cs, and how they apply to External, Interactive, and Internal marketing activities found in the

marketing triangle. Hoover (2016) said about education marketing that it is important for educators to understand (a) perceptions matter, find out what they think and listen to what they want; (b) not all students are alike, consider individual differences and (c) tailor your message and actions to meet their needs.

### **Effective Professional Development and Coaching Model**

Merriam and Bierema (2014), listed assumptions about adult learners: the learner's self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, problem-centered orientation, internal motivation, all must be considered when planning effective professional development and project implementation processes. The research connected to this project, was designed to give context to the need of public educators to learn about and plan for participation in a new competitive marketplace situation. The professional development opportunity was written for adult learners with the assumptions about adult learning theory included in the planning process.

Adult learning theory suggests that professional development is more successful when it involves not only theory and knowledge gained from seminars, but active coaching after the initial training. Spelman, Bell, Thomas, and Briody (2016) posited that professional development models should include not only theory and demonstration, but also practice, feedback and coaching. Klarin (2015) suggested that coaching is a goal-directed, result-oriented, systematic process in which one person facilitates sustained change in another individual or group through fostering self-directed learning and personal growth. The professional development opportunity in this project was designed

so that teams could complete their plan within the three- day seminar and then participate in a coaching model over the first year of implementation.

Voogt et al. (2015) found that individuals differ in their ability to face change, and groups vary as to how they address change. Bowles and Hattie (2013) identified three groups: (a) stabilizers, (b) adaptors, and (c) innovators, who can have positive or negative effects on needed change. The professional development plan for this project was designed to recognize the perspective of the individuals and groups of individuals involved. To help public school educators deal with a changed environment in which they find themselves focused on marketing, branding and sustained work to recruit and retain students who now have free choice. The seminar and follow-up coaching plan for this project was written in consideration of overcoming these variables with adult learners thrust into unfamiliar territory.

### **Implementation**

This section describes the resources needed for the implementation of the professional development seminar, existing supports available, and potential barriers. It includes the steps that need to be taken leading up to the seminar, the proposed schedule for the three-day meeting, and roles and responsibilities for all participants in the professional development opportunity.

#### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

The leadership, including district administration, and the board of education, are excited about the process of making the district more innovative, unique, and competitive

in the changing education marketplace. They have taken the first step in recognizing that the marketplace exists, and they need to participate.

The resources needed for the project are professional development facilities, which will be supplied by the district. Technology including computers, projection equipment, software and materials such as chart paper, markers, hard copies of the seminar materials, will be supplied by the professional development center.

The seminar presentation will be implemented using PowerPoint (Appendix B). Each session of the three-day seminar will be planned to move straight through the PowerPoint presentation which will include context and study data, marketing plan materials, and step-by-step planning and implementation materials for each participant.

Each day of the seminar will include an evaluation form. As with all professional development each participant will be asked to complete the form before leaving the session. The forms for days 1-2 will specifically ask participants to include information for which they need more explanation, and helpful items, which could be included in the day 2-3 presentations. On Day 3 participants will be asked how they would like to schedule follow-up one-on-one sessions (required), and will ask for specific areas in which the participant needs follow-up training or discussion.

Each participant will leave with a completed template for year 1 activities, which will include specific actions they will take to implement the *Marketing Triangle* with each of their stakeholder groups, and how they will measure success in the implementation process.

### **Potential Barriers**

Information from the study might show that parent perceptions about school choice indicate some negative perceptions of our local, traditional public schools. Public educators who may have different perceptions about the local schools may not share the same parent perceptions, which could create a political issue in a system where status quo can be seen as the safe alternative to the discomfort of change.

An additional potential barrier to implementation could be the lack of follow-up through the school year. Once administrators leave the training, their work will be monitored and supported by the district office. While increasing enrollment is necessarily important to district revenue, the pressure to operate within status quo is overwhelming once the school year begins, and there exists students, teachers, staff, and parent communities demanding time from school leadership.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

The research study was completed during the last two weeks in June 2016. During the initial discussions regarding study permissions, the superintendent expressed an interest in school choice be the topic for the leadership seminar for all district administrators. All district and school site leadership teams will participate in the professional development in spring of 2017. The planning and implementation of the School-Choice Market Plan will be developed throughout the 2017-2018 academic year with one-on-one coaching, and monthly General Council meetings, which include one hour of professional development/collaboration time, that will be dedicated to this project throughout the year.

## **Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others**

Site Administrative Teams are key personnel for the development and implementation of the school choice marketing plans that should participate in this professional development seminar. The Administrative Team will complete the three-day seminar with the plan and tools to begin implementation at their school site.

As the professional development facilitator, my job is to insure that all participants understand the project requirements and district expectations for planning and implementation of the plan. In addition, I will work with each site administrative team on the specific implementation of their school level plans. I will also work closely with district administration on a district level marketing plan, based on the study data, and in support of each of the school level plans.

Administrators at the district level need to support the planning and implementation processes by voicing their support with school level administrators, directing necessary resources to the project, and insuring that the members of the board of education are informed and publicly supportive of the work.

## **Project Evaluation**

The evaluation plan for this project is outcome-based. The expectation for the three-day professional development seminar is for each participant to complete a plan for competing in the school choice marketplace by marketing and implementing a quality school program. The completed template plans will be used to measure the outcomes of the seminar.

In addition, each day participants will be asked to fill out an evaluation of the seminar itself. The Day 1-2 forms will be used to modify the presentation as it proceeds, to help produce desired outcomes. The Day 3 form will be used as a basis for one-on-one follow-up sessions with each school site plan, and ongoing professional development during monthly Administrative Council meetings for the entire year following the initial training.

I will be able to measure success of the project when each school site and the district have adopted and are operating School Choice Marketing plans. I believe that after the initial process of creating these plans, they will become part of normal operating procedures at all district schools, and will become part of the administrative evaluation instrument to insure the work remains a priority for the district.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

#### **Local Community**

The goal of the subject school district is to always seek improvement, and search for quality practice, to help give graduates the knowledge and skills they need to have choice to do what they want to do when they graduate. Public school or charter school practitioners have a duty to always make quality education and experience their first priority. They are challenged to provide for peoples' needs, know who they are, what they need on a personal level, and how to meet their needs while holding to quality minimums for instruction and student performance. The implications for social change in the subject school district and community are that if parent perceptions about school choice and charter schools can be understood, especially factors used in making school

choice decisions, they can be addressed by traditional public school educators in order to meet parents' needs in public schools, and improve public education in the district.

### **Far-Reaching**

The number of charter schools and students who attend them, who would otherwise attend public schools, continues to grow. Understanding parent perceptions may improve the ability of traditional public schools to provide services for students so that the number of parents who will choose to keep their children in responsive public schools grows. Educators, parents and students may learn to work collaboratively to improve public education. Others might use this research as a starting point for further study of the effects of charter schools on public education.

### **Summary**

Sections one through three of this doctoral project presented a problem that exists in one local school district, and is becoming a common challenge in many public school districts. Section three proposed a final project based on data and findings from the qualitative research study. Section 4 will outline strengths and limitations of this study, make recommendations for addressing the local problem, and I will describe lessons learned from the study. Reflections on the doctoral experience, and insights I gained as a scholar and practitioner is included in this section.



## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

The purpose of Section 4 is to analyze the strengths and limitations of the project to improve the ability of traditional public schools to successfully compete in a school choice marketplace. I will reflect on my role as a scholar and the effects of the project on scholarship. I will review the process of project development and what I learned from the process. I will detail what was learned about leadership, and change, as a result of the process, and provide an analysis of my role as the developer of the project. Analysis of the potential impact on social change that might be possible as a result of the work will be included in this section. Finally, I will discuss the opportunities for future research, implications, and possible applications for the information and analysis gained as part of the project.

### **Project Strengths**

The project strengths are found in helping public educators gain knowledge of key factors parents use in school choice situations. It offers public educators the opportunity to understand, and plan to address, factors that affect school choice. The professional development seminar provides school leaders with the tools necessary to plan and implement policies and practices that greatly improve their chances of success in practice.

The positive experience gained for public educators may facilitate the understanding and change needed in public education to improve services and outcomes for all students. It may affect the perceptions of public educators and parent perceptions

of public schools to bridge the gaps that push parents to seek something better than their assigned public school.

The professional development seminar is planned as an easy-to-understand process to gain understanding of the context of the school choice marketplace. Participants will learn about gathering and analyzing data from actual parents within the community who have exercised choice and about creating a specific plan to make traditional public school responsive to customer needs. This will help make traditional public schools competitive with the charter schools that have been successfully drawing students away.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

As with any project, this project has some limitations in its application to public education. However, the limitations could serve as a vehicle for other school districts that face the same challenges as the subject district. The challenge is to engage with their educators and parents to understand and address parent perceptions of public schools, charter schools, and the education system as a whole.

Successful implementation of a project like this one is dependent on the perceptions of its importance to district leaders. It requires a willingness to accept that the data from the research may or may not be complimentary to the district and should be seen as an opportunity for improvement instead of an insult. Administrators who participate in this professional development opportunity must be dedicated to implementing the plan they create during the training.

Additionally, one of the most often cited barriers to change in public education is the budget. Public educators need to be willing to consider spending limited money on factors that are not always tied to specific academic scores. Change does not always require additional spending; however, it does often call for a reallocation of funds in support of change.

A third limitation is the need to continue the process of implementing the plan and to repeat the process each year in order to remain engaged in the competitive marketplace. This requires dedicated follow-up through the year of initial implementation and an annual revisiting of the plan.

To remediate limitations, it must be understood that perceptions of one group in one school district may not be shared by the same group in a different school district. The very act of finding perceptions makes it necessary for the project to be replicated in each district, and it should not be assumed that the data/results will be the same. The best way to remediate limitations of this project is to understand the process is important and should be recreated in each district to find factors of school choice that might be unique to each different school district.

Open-mindedness is easier discussed than practiced. Ideas and perceptions that go against traditional thought can tend to redirect the conversation back to traditional approaches. Open-mindedness, although key to positive change, can be frightening, and can stop the project before it even begins. To remediate this issue, leaders need to be comfortable and do the work necessary to help those who work within the organization to be comfortable with the process of change.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

The subject school district could decide that the data gathered from the research could be used to improve traditional schools. They may decide that, instead of trying to compete for students, they will simply work to improve their schools. The traditional approach to school improvement whereby schools use student progress on commonly accepted academic measures as metrics to gauge quality might better fit the culture of the school district.

School district officials might simply agree that equity, generally sought by public schools, is of higher concern to them than losing some students to charter schools. In that case, they might simply use the data gathered from the research to improve district schools relative to the charter schools but not do anything to focus on marketing in order to stop the flow or compete with charter schools. If the charter organizations and the district simply work together in the interest of choice in education, and service to all stakeholders, all schools in the district might experience improvement.

### **Scholarship**

During my doctoral project, I learned about the process of taking very broad ideas and refining them to ideas that are worthy of study and that lend themselves to research that is valuable in helping to improve practice. I learned about the planning and implementation of a qualitative study with the proper form to be effective and realistic as a project. I learned to be open-minded to criticisms of the evolving plans in order to make the project better.

I learned about the proper steps of research from committee approval to URR and IRB approval, which was all designed to make the project better in the end. I learned about pitching the project to district leaders in such a way that they were able to not only approve the work, but be publicly supportive of the project. This enabled me to find outcomes that are based in reality and easily understood by those who could use the research data to improve public education.

I gained a new appreciation for the protection of sources in order to get participants to give me the best and most truthful answers for the research. Before this project, I discounted the need to protect sources, and I questioned why people who are not properly protected often have irrational fear of speaking plainly. This was a very big concern of almost all of the parents who participated in the questionnaire and interviews.

I had a positive experience with developing the project, and in turn working with participants to gather information. I especially enjoyed interviewing parents about school choice, which is a topic that definitely engenders strong opinions based on perceptions they have about traditional public schools and charter schools. While interviews were time consuming, allowing participants to add commentary to their initial answers on the questionnaire was vital to gaining deeper understanding of their true perceptions.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

The professional development seminar associated with this study was designed to build professional capacity by identifying a need, collecting actionable data, and defining a process for decision-making and implementation of necessary professional practices to support solutions to the identified problems.

The project was developed for a school district that is experiencing the challenge of declining enrollment numbers that are almost identical to the number of students attending two charter schools within the district boundaries. The 3-day professional development program was based on data gathered from research on the perceptions of parents who had exercised school choice in favor of enrollment in one of the charter schools. The data were then analyzed and used as part of the market analysis, which became the basis of the School Choice Marketing Plan that was created by each of the district schools and district level staff.

The project will be evaluated by the level of plan implementation over the next year of implementation. The effectiveness of the project over the long run will be to measure the enrollment trends to see if, after the plans are fully implemented, the movement of students from traditional district schools to the charter schools can be slowed or even reversed.

### **Leadership and Change**

Through this study, I have learned that leadership and change are easier talked about than practiced. While educators all claim to be open-minded and risk-takers, they tend to be pulled to that place that provides comfort and security when the going gets tough. People need to be convinced that a change in vision and mission is necessary for their growth. People need to be part of the process and feel as though they are an integral part of the change in order to gain buy-in (Marzano et al., 2005).

In contemplating change, Dufour (2004) wrote about trust in leadership, strong rapport among members of the team, clear vision, and passion for the work as the key

ingredients to lasting change. The importance of understanding and celebrating the perceptions of parents has been paramount to this project. The interaction among parents and educators is necessary for the change people in the district seek to gain for the improvement of the public schools. In this case, I studied perceptions, which were sometimes positive, sometimes negative, sometimes true, and other times arguably untrue, to understand perceptions that are driving choices in the education marketplace. There is a lot at stake for the future of public schools.

I have learned that it is far easier to exercise leadership in the context of this scholarly study. I now understand that the protection provided through the URR in the development of the study and the protection provided to the participants by the IRB were decisive in making it possible to implement the study.

Ultimately, I realized that the project study is only the start in the long process of effecting change. A scholarly approach is the key to gaining the support of the groups that started with their own perceptions and in getting educators to be interested in understanding, and working, with other people. The real work commences after the initial study. The data only offer opportunities; it is up to everyone involved finding the energy and courage required for change.

### **Analysis of Self as Scholar**

As I undertook the necessary study and research for this project, I learned a lot about myself as a practitioner and scholar. From understanding the differences in value of URLs, to identifying and relying on quality, scholarly research, and writing, I learned to

be discerning when finding and using data to confirm, or to change, my perspectives on issues in a more scholarly manner.

I learned a lot about performing exhaustive research, taking notes, and sifting through the best research in order to study the topic. Additionally, I struggled to approach the research with an open mind in order to ensure that recommendations made at the end of the project were balanced, tied to reality, and usable by the educators and parents I was attempting to help.

Through the process, I learned about time management and my ability to actually set aside time for study. Starting with 2 years of regular classes online, with a real possibility of failing at time management, helped when it came time to find the dedicated time for researching, developing, and writing the project.

I also learned that there is great power in research and scholarship. Before the doctoral journey, I was sometimes quick to discount research and often tried things without the proper amount of research and available data. I now know that, in the field of education, not only does the title have a lot of respect, but the lessons learned about scholarship through the doctoral journey, especially the project, are valuable to understanding challenges and developing quality solutions.

In the end, scholarly writing as opposed to verbosity has been a definite challenge. I can say that paying the required attention to my proclivity to take two sentences to say what can be better said in one is a challenge that has made a big difference in my study habits and in my professional writing.



One of the main lessons I learned about myself as an education leader is that preconceived ideas and opinions need to be supported by research before they are acted upon. I learned a number of lessons about the proper way to collect and analyze data, with objectivity, in order to make solid recommendations and the importance of being “right” based on data as opposed to being “right” because I thought I was right.

I expected to find that parents who were making the choice to enroll their student in one school could be convinced with some strong data and solid persuasive conversation that there are good alternatives in education. I learned that educators, on the other hand, really distrust the choice movement, even while a number of them have their students in charter schools. They struggle with the political nature of what they see as attacks on them by people who know little or nothing about a truly good education. It was evident that with all of the negative press about public education, parents would think they had to look for something better for their kids.

Ultimately, I learned that scholarship finds its roots in hunches and ideas that can be properly researched and studied. Often before this experience, I was much quicker to skip the scholarly steps, and act on hunches. This approach has not always worked to my advantage, or to the advantage of those I was attempting to serve.

### **Analysis of Self as Practitioner**

I have been working on the issue of school choice for over 8 years. As I have taken a scholarly approach, I have come to know the district made some great choices when it created a charter school, and it also made some poor choices. These choices were

all made based on what district leaders thought parents wanted in a school in order to get them to enroll their students and subsequently keep them at the charter.

I learned that people are more than willing to give their perceptions about an issue if you just ask them. As I look back on past practice, and look forward to what I hope is new practice, not enough questions were asked in order to really understand what parents wanted. Educators in the district simply assumed that we knew what parents wanted and consequently missed some important things, and we have been spending time and money on some programs and materials that students and their parents would happily do without. From this experience, I have gained the insight that, as a practitioner, it is imperative I learn to be a good questioner, and then a good listener, before acting.

#### **Analysis of Self as Project Developer**

During the development of this project, I have come to realize that I have had a lot of help from other people for a lot of years. This is important because I could not assign this project. I had to develop the project and the processes on my own. In that I learned a valuable lesson that the development of a good project, with sound planning and implementation, is something that I need to be more involved in and not be so dependent on staff and others.

I learned that to be an effective project, there must be a good reason for the participants to be invested in the outcomes. Ideas are one thing, but leadership on issues requires one to defend his or her thoughts, and ideas, and be willing to hear the thoughts and ideas of others with an open mind. In order to build collaboration and get people to be comfortable giving their perceptions for research, they have to feel as though their

ideas, thoughts and perceptions are important and will be respected. Most importantly, I learned that everyone who participated had an important voice from which I found important pieces of information.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

School choice is growing in popularity. The charter schools included in this study are vibrant schools serving students and families. The traditional public schools from which these students are enrolling, do not appear to be mismanaged, or dangerous, nor are they performing far below average when compared to schools with the same demographics (Table 2). If these common factors, often noted by parents using charter schools to escape perceived bad schools, are not present, yet parents are still choosing to enroll in charter schools, it is important to understand what factors are driving school choice decisions.

This study identified factors that are important to parental decision-making in one competitive school marketplace. Data indicate that parents are concerned that their student(s) have a quality personal experience at school. Enrichment opportunities, small class size, rigorous teaching, individualized attention, were the most frequently listed factors affecting parental enrollment decisions. Participant interviews reinforced the perceptions that the charter schools in the study were better able to address factors important to them than traditional public schools.

The purpose of the project was to connect professional development with the demands identified in the research of one particular competitive education marketplace. I used the research to help public educators understand factors that are important to parents

and make plans to address those factors in traditional public schools. A public school system that was designed to serve the masses must adapt to a competitive marketplace in which parents are free to choose the school that best fits their needs.

If educators perceive that parents are not fit to make the choices, or they discount, or ignore, factors that drive the choice, progress toward improving traditional public schools to meet the desires and needs of the public, who are their clients, is impossible. If parent perceptions about the quality of the public school system, or the people who work within it, are negative, then the only way to change that is through active communication. Without taking the time to understand perceptions there will not be lasting improvement.

This approach could spark the changes to public education that charter school supporters have always sought. Instead of looking through the narrow lens of academic performance, if public educators begin through this process to understand that when parents have choice, it is incumbent on them to understand how those choices are being made, and produce a school/brand/product that will meet the desires and needs of their clients. If change comes from the bottom up, instead of from the top down, hopefully it will help to create a new system of public education. It might lead to a system that is responsive to the needs of the individual student, instead of a system that by design sacrifices the needs of the individual for the perceived needs of the many.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

This study was necessarily limited in scope to one school district. Although all of the perceptions and factors listed can be considered mainstream and generalizable across schools in the subject district, some of the factors listed were specific to one of the

schools or programs in this study. Perceptions can vary from one district or one region to another. While perceptions found in this study can be generalized as relatively common parental perceptions, it is important to also consider the general demographics of the district in which the research was conducted and the comparability of school quality indicators before assuming the factors found in this study are applicable in other situations. Future research might include the replication of the study in other school districts as the act of facing perceptions about school choice and charter schools is a local challenge. Results of this study should not be assumed to be applicable in all situations. The research questions themselves can be used or altered slightly for application in different districts or regions.

Other research could be conducted as a review and comparison of individual district or regional perceptions of school choice. Study results could be compared to identify similar parental choice factors that might form a pattern across regions. That analysis might lead to a possible compilation of information, practices, and policies that might be successful in reaching the goal of adapting traditional public schools to improve public education.

Although this study focused on the perceptions of parents who have exercised school choice in favor of charter schools, further valuable research might study the perceptions of parents who exercise school choice and decide to stay in traditional public schools. Parent voice might be a valuable tool in the quest to improve public schools.

### **Reflection on Research**

Educators who tend toward traditional indicators of quality when it comes to factors that are, or ought to be, considered when making a good decisions about school enrollment, might be surprised to find that the reasons parents make the enrollment decisions they make are not necessarily based on academics. An effort to understand perceptions is the first step to helping educators makes the necessary paradigm shifts to a client service oriented approach to the educational experience.

### **Conclusion**

Charter schools have injected competition into a public school system that could be described as tradition bound. While competition has clearly not had the overwhelming change effect to the system that proponents would have hoped, charter schools certainly are having a change effect. Charter school academic outcomes are most often comparable to traditional public schools; parents are still choosing to enroll their students. For educators, understanding the reasons why, and adjusting their practices to meet the needs of their clients, is essential if they are to be successful in the marketplace.

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## Appendix A: The Project

### A1. Professional Development PowerPoint Slides with Presentation Notes

This professional development is intended for district and school site level administrators who are leading schools that are in a competitive marketplace caused by charter schools.

# What Is It These People Want?

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MEETING PARENT/STUDENT NEEDS IN A SCHOOL CHOICE  
MARKETPLACE



## Seminar Content Overview

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- 1 – Why is Perception Important?
- 2 – The Research – Parent Perceptions of Traditional Public Vs. Charter Schools in Our Community
- 3 – Who are these people who make such demands of us? (Demographics)
- 4 – What factors make great schools?
- 5 – The Marketing Model
- 6 – Marketing 101 – The Marketing Triangle for Educational Services
- 7 – Branding -- Brand Messaging – Product Quality
- 8 -- Making Research into Action Steps
- 9 – Change Your Trajectory



## Session I: Research Background

---

### Why Is Perception Important?



## Perception = Reality

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### Perception:

**A thought, belief, or opinion, often held by many people and based on appearances.**

Perception is the window/door used by many charter and private school organizers as justification for their existence and to recruit students who would otherwise attend traditional public schools.

### Table Talk: (10 minutes)

What perceptions do you think/know the public holds about your school?

What drives those perceptions?

Are those perceptions fair?

Why is perception important?

Is it important for you to actively engage perceptions?

## Research Study: Background

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### Facts about the Research Study:

1. Participants were all parents who have made the choice to enroll their students at either \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ charter school.
2. Participants were asked to give the "most important determining factors" that they considered in their enrollment decision making process.
3. District declining enrollment numbers are almost equal to the number of students who have enrolled at either \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Currently \_\_\_\_\_ serves 1000 in grades K-8. School administrators report (unverified) they have over 800 students on the waiting list.
5. Currently \_\_\_\_\_ serves 675 students in grades K-8. School administrators report (unverified) they have 675 students enrolled and over 250 students on the waiting list.

## Research Study: Guiding Question #1

---

### What are charter school parents' perceptions about school choice?

Within the local Education Community, we measure the success of our schools using accepted formulas which produce numbers and measurements based on standardized scoring of student proficiency and other statistical factors. By these measures, schools in our community are average to high average when compared to other schools in surrounding districts and around the state.

Table Talk: (10 minutes) (Provide Standardized Measures Report – District and School)

What is your perception of your school and our local schools as a district?

Why do you think so many parents are choosing to enroll their students in local charter schools when they are not “escaping” obviously failing schools?

(We will review the actual parent perception research in the next session)

## Research Study: Guiding Question #2

---

### What are the determining factors that affect parent choice to enroll their student in a local charter school instead of the traditional public school he/she would otherwise attend?

Schools in this community get relatively high marks on official state success measures. Some of them are: English Language Arts Proficiency levels, Mathematics Proficiency levels, high school truancy rates, middle/high school dropout rates, suspension and expulsion rates, cohort graduation rates, and English Learner progress/reclassification rates.

Table Talk (10 minutes) (Please rank these measures in the order you believe parents did)

From the list above, which measure does your group believe are the most important, or are all of them equally important?

(Please do a forced ranking of the listed measures individual/group and be ready to compare your ranking with information found in the YCJUSD Research Study.)

## Research Study: Guiding Question #3

---

**What challenges does a competitive school choice marketplace bring to traditional public education?**

**Facts:** 1) Parents used to have to get permission to change schools. Choices were limited to what public educators decided to give them. 2) In 2016 as long as a parent participates in the lottery system, they are free to make whichever enrollment decision they want to. When they enroll, government funding follows them automatically. The power of choice has changed who holds the power within the system.

**Table Talk (10 minutes)**

Talk about your understanding of the K-12 education marketplace. Does the fact that parents can now make whatever choice they decide change the way we operate our schools?

How will this marketplace in education change the way you approach your job within the system?

---

## Session II: The Research

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Parent Perceptions of Traditional Public Vs. Charter Schools in One Community

---

## Study Demographics

### Age Range:

25-35	14 – 17%
35-44	59 – 70%
45+	11 – 13%

### Gender:

Male	14 – 17%
Female	70 – 83%

### Political Affiliation:

Democrat	9 – 11%
Republican	42 – 50%
Not Affiliated	33 – 39%

### Religious Affiliation that affects decisions:

Definitely Yes	13 – 15%
Probably Yes	44 – 53%
Might or Might Not	15 – 18%
Probably Not	12 – 14%

### Education Level

Graduate Degree	11 – 13%
Some Graduate Study	14 – 17%
College Degree	24 – 29%
Some College	28 – 33%
High School Diploma	7 -- 8%

## Analyzing Demographics

**Does the demographic data tell us anything important about how parents form perceptions about the district? What about your school?**

(Table Talk 20 minutes)

1. What is your group reaction to the data?
2. Does this data match the community demographics as a whole?
3. What themes that might become “marketing issues” do you see in the data?
4. How does the district and your individual school currently serve your community demographics?
5. Should the district and the school pay any attention to demographics in planning for participation in the competitive school choice marketplace?



## Why Include Demographics in our Plan?

---

Raise your hand if you shop at Nordstrom

Raise your hand if you shop at Nordstrom Rack

Why did they create Nordstrom Rack?

---

Raise your hand if you get your latte from Starbucks

Raise your hand if you get your latte from McCaffe

What is the difference?

Be honest, have you ever gotten your latte from McCaffe and dumped it in your Starbucks cup before you got to the office?

## Demographics (Continued)

---

Who proudly shops at Walmart?

Who secretly shops at Walmart?

Why?

Who refuses to enter Walmart?

---

What do you know about Hobby Lobby?

What do you know about Chick-fil-a?

---

1. Does your knowledge of these two companies influence whether or not you patronize them?
2. What is your information source about these companies?
3. Do you research (Ask Siri) about them or just accept the public information?

## Enjoy Your Lunch!

---

Table assignment: Why did you choose the restaurant you chose?

1. Because everyone else did and you don't care?
2. Because you know what you like and they have it?
3. Because you only have an hour and they will make sure you are back on time?
4. Because the place you would like to do is just too darn slow?
5. Because the price range fits the amount of money you have in your wallet?
6. Do you think this restaurant is concerned about the demographics of the community?




## Who are these people? (Quick Review)

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If you know the demographics, you know your customer base.

If you know your customer base, you can better serve their needs.



## Session III: The Research Continues

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Parent Perceptions that influenced parent's enrollment decision to choose a charter school.



### What factors make a school great?

(What should parents consider when making their enrollment decisions?)

---

Step 1: (10 minutes) Make a list of the top ten factors you think make a school great


Step 2: (20 minutes) With your table group, agree on a Top Ten list and rank them in order of importance

Step 3: (10 minutes) Make a poster with your Top Ten and select a spokesman to be able to tell the whole group why

Step 4: (20 minutes) As a group, walk and talk by looking at the Top Ten list of the other groups, be on the lookout for things your group did not think of.

Step 5: (20 minutes) Change your poster (if after the walk and talk you think you should), remember to put the items you add in order of important

Step 6: (10 minutes) Select a spokesman to explain the changes your group made, or if you did not make any changes why



## What did our study participants say?

Blue Handout – Factors Affecting Decisions – Frequency Table

Enrichment Opportunities	39	Quality Leadership	8
Small Class Sizes (25/K-8)	38	IB Curriculum (C2)	8
Rigorous Teaching	34	High Test Scores	6
Individualized to meet my student's needs	32	Community Service for Students	6
Possible IB High School Program (C2)	28	Not pleased with public schools in my area	5
K-8 Campus	26	Security/Safety	3
Parent/Family Involvement and Commitment	24	Common focus through all grade levels	2
Quality Teachers	16	Great Kids/Great Families	2
Technology	14	Atmosphere	1
Family Orientation	13	Strict Discipline	1
Classed stay together in Cohorts(C2)	12	Personally responsive school admin.	1
Small Learning Community (whole school)	11	Student Uniforms	1
Word of Mouth Friends' Experience	10		
Conservative Families	9		

## Compare and Contrast

How does your list compare with what the parents said?

Do the parents have any good points?

What would you do to help to educate the parents?

Should you care about what the parents think when making your decisions?

As a group discuss concerns you see in the data, be ready to share with the whole group.

## The New Equation

---

Old Equation:

Plan Programs you think are good + plan and pay for them = Here is what we offer!

$$PL + PP = PO$$

New Equation:

Plan Programs you think are good + Free Parent Choice + plan and pay for them = Here is what we offer!

$$PL + FPC + PP = PO$$




## Today – Tonight -- Tomorrow

---

Today: Perception – Demographics – Factors and Equations

Tonight: Think about your school, is it marketable?

Tomorrow: The Marketing Triangle


- \* Audiences
  - \* Branding and Messaging
  - \* Action Steps
  - \* Play the Market and WIN!
- 

## BEFORE YOU GO!

---


Please take the time to fill out the Yellow Seminar Review Sheet! It will help us make tomorrow more productive!

Have a Good Evening: Tomorrow Starts Promptly at 8:00AM!



## Good Morning: Today we will...

---

1. Review Yesterday: Questions and Answers – Seminar Review Sheets
  2. Learn about the Marketing Triangle
  3. Apply the Research and the Marketing Triangle to our district and our schools
  4. Formulate an Action Plan -- The Five C's of Educational Services Marketing
  5. Plan the Follow-Up Steps for the Coming Year
  6. Change our Trajectory in the Public School Choice Marketplace!
- 

## Session IV: The Marketing Triangle

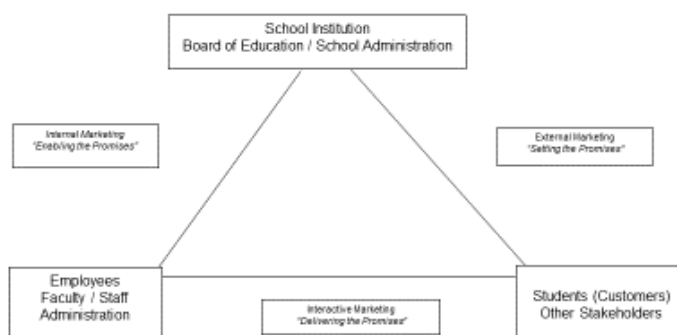
---

Three sides to the story; Making Action out of Research.

---

### The Marketing Triangle

Sferie, S., Garden, D., Gudei, S., Geangu, I. (2012),



## Three Sides of the Marketing Triangle

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**External Marketing: Who are these people and what do they want?**

***"Setting the Promises"***

**Internal Marketing: How do we give them what they want and maintain some standards?**

***"Enabling the Promises"***

**Interactive Marketing: We heard you! Here is what we can do for you. Join the Team Today!**

***"Delivering the Promises"***

## Setting the Promises (External)

---

1. Know your Customers: Parents – Students (Customers)
2. List the "things" from the Factors list that you think you can actually deliver or are actually delivering.
3. Place the Top 5 Factors in the Action Step Template (Green) \*Note: Put all of your listed factors in priority order. Remember this is a year long process so you will get a chance to take each action step through the process. You won't be limited to five during the year.
4. Prepare to Share: (10 minutes) Be ready to share your chosen steps with other groups in the seminar:
  - Why did you choose the steps you did?
  - Will these priorities trigger a big change in your program?
  - How will these priorities help your school compete in the School Choice Marketplace?

Listen Carefully to the other presentations, you will have time to modify your list!



## Enabling the Promises (Internal)

---

1. You know “what” to deliver, now you need help. (Teachers, Staff, Others)
2. Who needs to be involved in planning/ implementing your programs? (Each Item Sold Separately)
3. What permissions do you need? How will you get them? (Everyone has a Boss!)
4. Don't forget that organization insiders will need to be convinced that offering this “New and Improved Customer/Client Service” is a) the right thing to do; b) legal and supported; c) necessary; and d) required.
5. Use the *Insiders Guide to Enabling Promises* template for each of the Factors you have decided are important to success in the marketplace. (Top 5)

Team Time: (30 minutes) Work as a team with your group to create the template for each factor

**These will become your Action Steps!**

## Delivering the Promises (Interactive)

---

1. Connecting Customer Needs/Wants to Services/Service Providers
2. Insure:
  - \* The Plan is based on the market research
  - \* The right people have the right tools to make and implement a service plan
  - \* The right people have the right tools to make and implement a marketing plan
  - \* The marketing plan (branding) is a true picture of the actual services (quality control)
  - \* The plan has measurable benchmarks and metrics for success
  - \* Timeline for Each Action Step is Established
3. So... Is this all ok? This is not what we are used to!
4. Can we be all things to all people? Do we have to be all things to all people?

## Enjoy your Lunch!

---

Table Assignment: Just talk to your friends today, every once in a while that is fun, we don't do it enough!

When we return we are going to apply the 5 C's to make 5 separate plans into one plan!

Don't eat too much, still lots of thinking to do?

Notice the restaurant branding? What is their demographic? Do you raise or lower the quality of the demographic pool?

(Just seeing if you are reading!)

---

## Session V: The 5 C's (Forsyth, 2004)

---

Characteristics of Marketing Applied to the Education Field—  
The Lens through which we view the plan

## The 5 C's of School Marketing Programs

---

Client Focused  
Continuous  
Coordinated  
Creative  
Culture Oriented

---

### Forsyth's basic themes...

Client focused, continuous, coordinated, creative, and culture oriented, are all interrelated and have an important role in assuring the capacity of educational service organizations to be personalized for every segment of the market and at the same time maintain their proper social role

Table Talk (5 minutes) – What do you think this means for your role as the leader of the process?

## Client Focused

---

Customer or Client? Are these terms interchangeable?

Test #1: Have you taken time to understand them before you make decisions that they don't want?

Test #2: Does your "program" reflect your demographics and what they have told you they want? While maintaining some standards?

Test #3: Are you ready to change if what they want changes? How will you know they have changed?

---

## Continuous

---

Congratulations, your plan is finished, please keep it in a safe place until you have to update it again next year. Admit it! You have done this! We all have we are Educators! The children need us to pay attention to them. Most of us don't even have time for lunch on most days, how are we supposed to worry about all of this to?

Table Talk (5 minutes): Does this marketing stuff really need to be all the time? How often does the CEO of Target worry about this?

## Continuous – Continued (Yeah I know, sounds funny!)

---

To be competitive and Client Focused you need to think about this stuff all the time. On a day to day basis things will happen that threaten the plan and you need to change the way you think about image and service to clients.

Test #1: You know the plan, are you, and your people, actually implementing it?

Test #2: Do you have a process whereby your people can share their good ideas for client service and marketing?

Test #3: How long has it been since you talked with someone about your organization's image in the marketplace?

Test #4: Have you calendared time to review the plan and monitor implementation, and act for continuous improvements?

## Coordinated

---

Marketplace Survey –	District and School
Planning Tools –	District and School
Resources –	District and School
District Support –	District Guide to the Marketplace Continued Support and Training Public Relations (Flexible by school - Context)

Who needs to be in the know? Everyone (See Culture Oriented)

Who needs to make sure the plan is coordinated? That's right, YOU baby!


## Creative (The Fun Part, but...)

---

Creative Marketing: The Jingle – The Brand – The Commercial

Table Talk: (5 minutes) Talk about those brand jingles you know

Creative Programming: What sets you apart? Is it more or better? Why should I choose you?

Table Talk: (5 minutes) Talk about Walmart and Target? Answer the three questions above 

Creative is fine but... It has to be true!

Table Talk: (5 minutes) The pictures you see in the menu vs. the plate you see in front of you.

## Culture Oriented

---

Is this OK to spend our time on?

Does everyone understand we need to be competitive?

Does everyone understand what one bad experience can do?

That's their stuff, I am a teacher.

That's their stuff, I am just a clerk – secretary – yard duty – custodian...

Is everyone free to help create the brand?

Does everyone understand their role in making the brand real?

Where do I go with my good ideas?

## The Ritz Carlton Story – Gold Standards

---

Read the Handout:	10 minutes
Talk About the Handout:	10 minutes
Share what you think it means:	10 minutes

I know, this ain't the Ritz Carlton!

But the Ritz-Carlton wasn't the Ritz Carlton either until they made it the Ritz-Carlton.



## BEFORE YOU GO!

---

Please take the time to fill out the Pink Seminar Review Sheet! It will help us make tomorrow more productive!

Have a Good Evening: Tomorrow Starts Promptly at 8:00AM!



## Good Morning: Welcome to Plan Writing Day!

---

The Job Today Is:


1. Review Yesterday
2. Review the Necessary Elements of your Action Plan
3. Formulate an Action Plan -- The Five C's of Educational Services Marketing
4. Plan the Implementation and Follow-Up Steps for the Coming Year
5. Change our Trajectory in the Public School Choice Marketplace!



## Session VI – Bringing It All Together

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Leaving here with a plan, a vision and the courage to move forward!






## The Plan – Table of Contents

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1. Demographic Information
2. Top 5 Factors (you need a plan for all of them)
3. Action Step Templates (one per factor)
4. Market Plan – Using the Resources
5. Building the Culture
6. The Plan for the Year




## Before You Go....

---

Please fill out the feedback form for the entire program, you will help us improve it!

Make sure to make your first appointment for follow-up!

THANK YOU FOR YOUR WORK TO IMPROVE SCHOOLS!



## References

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Forsyth, P. (2004). *Marketing and selling professional services. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*. London, England: Kogan Page.

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## Appendix B: Professional Development Seminar Packet

**Document 1: Study Demographics Report**

<i>Demographic</i>	<i>Raw Response Numbers</i>	<i>Percentage of Total Responses</i>
Age Range:		
25-35	14	17%
35-45	59	70%
45+	11	13%
Gender:		
Male	14	17%
Female	70	83%
Political Affiliation		
Democrat	9	11%
Republican	42	50%
Not Affiliated/Other	33	39%
Religious Affiliation that affects decisions:		
Definitely yes	13	15%
Probably yes	44	53%
Might or might not	15	18%
Probably not	12	14%
Definitely not	0	0%

## Education Level:

High School	7	8%
Some College	28	33%
College Degree	24	29%
Some Graduate Study	14	17%
Graduate Degree	11	13%

**Document 2: Day One/Two: Participant Review Sheet**

Please tell us about the most important information you got from today's seminar.	Please tell us about any questions you have about today's seminar that you would like to have addressed tomorrow.
Did today's seminar contribute to your understanding of the School Choice Marketplace and your role within it? How will new knowledge affect your work?	As you think about the information you heard today, what parts of it would you like to see as part of the coaching process after the seminar?

Name  
(Optional): \_\_\_\_\_

**Document 3: Top Five School Choice Factors**

Note: Factors are limited to five for the purposes of this seminar. Please choose them, and rank them in order for purposes of this exercise.

Factor 1:

---

Factor 2:

---

Factor 3:

---

Factor 4:

---

Factor 5:

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**Document 4: The Plan: Insider's Guide to Enabling Promises**

## STEP 1: Market Research

Get the Demographics

Ask them what they want

Address the Factors your CLIENTS say are important to them

## STEP 2: The Right People – The Right Tools – Service Plan

Certificated

Classified

Administration

Board and District Supports

## STEP 3: The Right People – The Right Tools – Marketing Plan

Certificated

Classified

Administration

Board and District Supports

## STEP 4: Branding – Quality Message – Quality Product

The Jingle

The Resource Plan

Important to look good – Important to be good

## STEP 5: Measuring Success – Metrics

Measurable Benchmarks

Timelines

The Plan Template should be repeated for each Factor chosen by the team. It is ok to connect factors with other parts of the overall plan, but remember they are all important to the plan and you must make sure your clients here the message about each of them.

Factor: \_\_\_\_\_

<p>Market Research: 5 Key Demographics</p> <p>* * * * *</p>	<p>The Right People: Certificated (Specific)</p> <p>* * * * * *</p>
<p>The Right Tools: (Attach Worksheet)</p> <p>Schedules _____</p> <p>Materials _____</p> <p>Budgets _____</p> <p>Outside Support (Permissions) _____</p> <p>Metrics _____</p> <p>Timelines _____</p>	<p>The Right People: Classified (Specific)</p> <p>* * * * * *</p>
<p>The Jingle:</p>	<p>Why should I buy this?</p> <p>* * * * *</p>



<p>How will we measure program Quality?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li></ul>	<p>How will we measure program Success?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li></ul>
<p>Benchmarks / Timelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li></ul>	<p>Applicable District Resources -- Supports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li><li>*</li></ul>

**Document 5: The Five C's Checklist**

Questions are presented at short answer narratives. Some are easily answered with one or two words. This checklist is meant to remind the team of all of the important parts of the plan, it is provided as a lens through which you can evaluate your program.

**Client Focused?**

1. Do you feel you understand your clients? (Research)
2. Is your plan based on that understanding?
3. Can you change with the marketplace?

**Continuous?**

1. Are you and your people implementing the Plan?
2. Is there a process for sharing good ideas about competition?
3. Are you talking about the image of your school? (District?)
4. Have you calendared time for monitoring and implementing the Plan?

**Coordinated?**

1. Is there a District plan to continually measure the marketplace?
2. Does the District have the tools you need to compete?
3. What district resources are you using for your plan?
4. Are there resources you need that you don't currently have?
5. Does the District understand and support the "different" needs of each school?

**Creative?**

1. The Jingle, is it good?
2. What sets you apart? Is it obvious in the plan?
3. Are you offering more, or better, or both?
4. Is it obvious to the observer why they should choose your program?
5. Is all this stuff true?

**Culture?**

1. Is it ok for a public school to do this stuff?
2. Are the right people involved?
3. Does everyone know their role?
4. Is there a mechanism that allows everyone to offer ideas and opinions, supportive and critical?

Let's face facts, we are all busy! This checklist provides a lens through which we can better the chances this plan will be successful. In education we tend to skip the program evaluation. Please guard against the temptation to skip the process!

## **Document 6: The Ritz-Carlton Story**

### **Demystifying the Ritz-Carlton Secret of Legendary Customer Service**

Reprinted from: [customerthink.com/demystifying-the-ritz-carlton-secret-of-legendary-customer-service/](http://customerthink.com/demystifying-the-ritz-carlton-secret-of-legendary-customer-service/)

Flavio Martins

The secret to Ritz-Carlton customer service lies in its strict adherence to its “Gold Standards” that include the Credo, the Motto, the 3 Steps of Service, the 20 Basics, and the Employee Promise.

Services at the Ritz-Carlton is so outstanding at the hotel company that it has won the coveted Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award twice, the only service business to do so.

As area marketing director for several Ritz-Carlton properties, Bruce Siegel strives to keep the company synonymous with superior service. At the FAB conference, Siegel shared the Ritz-Carlton’s philosophy and business practices, which all “ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen” (the Ritz-Carlton motto) are expected to know. The company’s Gold Standards comprise such aspects as the Credo, the Motto, the 3 Steps of Service, the 20 Basics, and the Employee Promise.

Siegel likes to use analogies when referring to the company’s success, such as, “We make the bar soap bigger and charge more, but make sure it takes a lot of work to do it.” This philosophy translates into putting customers first to justify the Ritz-Carlton higher room rates. “Giving more and charging more is part of our philosophy,” says Siegel.

### **Service is the Brand**

He reiterates the importance of the Ritz-Carlton brand. “A brand is more than an identity. It’s a promise” he says. “A product can be outdated, but a successful brand is timeless.” The Ritz-Carlton is now branded as a “lifestyle company,” meaning it manages golf resorts and spas, and even sells bedding. To become known as the place to call for exceptional service and a dependable product, “you have to be relentless about service commitment. You have to do it every day,” says Siegel.

In the 3 Steps of Service, Siegel stresses the importance of using names. From greeting a guest to bidding them goodbye, always use their name. The bellman sees the name on the luggage as the guest checks in; the server sees the name on the credit card slip.

The small things all add up to the exceptional guest experience the Ritz-Carlton guests associate with the brand. Every touch point, every interaction, helps build the positive customer experience the Ritz customers have come to expect from the brand.

### **Key Success Factors to a Ritz-like Experience**

- If an employee can't support the company, they should find a job elsewhere
- Don't say, "It's not my job." It is everyone's job. Whoever receives a complaint from a guest is responsible to resolve it
- Don't reply to a request by saying, "Our policy says we can't do that." Solve the problem
- Make sure your environment is surgically clean. It's the responsibility of every employee to pick-up discarded cigarette butts
- Don't ever lose a guest. Think about how much money is spent on marketing to acquire a new guest. An average guest spends \$100,000 at the Ritz-Carlton over a lifetime.
- Be aware of your language when communicating with guests. As an expression, "no problem" is perceived as insincere. Train your employees to use correct language.
- Escort guests to another area of the hotel instead of pointing or giving them complicated verbal directions. "When you take your customers somewhere, that demonstrates care and concern."
- When working the phone, answer on three rings. "The customer isn't calling to ask about the weather or to wonder if you are there. Never screen calls. And use the guest's name when you speak to them."

The Ritz-Carlton is famous for its "daily line-up." At every shift change, every employee, without exception, participates in a 10-15 minute line-up. This time is used to review the company's objectives, to discuss commitment to quality, and to keep everyone informed of the daily travails. What's on the menu, who's checking in, all the daily goings-on are discussed so that everyone is on the same page. "This program energizes," says Seigel. It's crucial to know your people, he explains. And this is what the line-up does. "You get to know everyone on your team, their desires, where they want to be."

At the FAB conference, Seigel asked for a show of hands from those who talk with their employees on a daily, weekly, or even monthly basis. As expected, a few hands were

meekly raised when it came to monthly, none for daily or weekly. At the Ritz-Carlton, everyone would raise their hands.

### **Employees Are Brand Ambassadors**

Legendary customer service begins with training. “The Ritz-Carlton doesn’t hire; it selects its staff.” Seigel says. “A candidate must look you directly in the eye, be warm and friendly during the first interview. We are looking for ability to show empathy. If they can’t do that in the first interview, how are they going to react with our guests?”

The Ritz-Carlton looks for potential employees who can detect unexpressed needs. Part of its Credo states that it “fulfills even the unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests,” Seigel gives an example: A room service waiter places a breakfast tray on the ottoman as requested by the guest and on the way out the door the waiter tilts the TV toward the guests’ viewing direction.

This is taking service to the next level, addressing unexpressed wishes. It’s the Ritz-Carlton way.

## **THE RITZ-CARLTON GOLD STANDARDS**

### **The Credo**

The Ritz-Carlton Hotel is a place where the genuine care and comfort of our guests is our highest mission.

We pledge to provide the finest personal service and facilitates for our guests who will always enjoy a warm, relaxed, yet refined ambience.

The Ritz-Carlton experience enlivens the senses, instills well-being, and fulfills even the unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests.

### **Motto**

At The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, L.L.C., “We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen.” This motto exemplifies the anticipatory service provided by all staff members.

**Three Steps of Service**

1. A warm and sincere greeting.
2. Use the guest's name. Anticipation and fulfillment of each guest's needs.
3. Fond farewell. Give a warm good-bye and use the guest's name.

**Service Values: I am Proud To Be Ritz-Carlton**

1. I build strong relationships and create Ritz-Carlton guests for life.
2. I am always responsive to the expressed and unexpected wishes and needs of our guests.
3. I am empowered to create, unique, memorable, and personal experiences for our guests.
4. I understand my role in achieving the Key Success Factors, embracing Community Footprints and creating The Ritz-Carlton Mystique.
5. I continuously seek opportunities to innovate and improve The Ritz-Carlton experience.
6. I own and immediately resolve guest problems.
7. I create a work environment of teamwork and lateral service so that the needs of our guests and each other are met.
8. I have the opportunity to continuously learn and grow.
9. I am involved in the planning of the work that affects me.
10. I am proud of my professional appearance, language and behavior.
11. I protect the privacy and security of our guests, my fellow employees and the company's confidential information and assets.
12. I am responsible for uncompromising levels of cleanliness and creating a safe and accident-free environment.

**The 6th Diamond**

Mystique

Emotional Engagement

Functional

**The Employee Promise**

At the Ritz-Carlton, our Ladies and Gentlemen are the most important resource in our service commitment to our guests.

By applying the principles of trust, honesty, respect, integrity, and commitment, we nurture and maximize talent to the benefit of each individual and the company.

The Ritz-Carlton fosters a work environment where diversity is valued, quality of life is enhanced, individual aspirations are fulfilled, and The Ritz-Carlton Mystique is strengthened.



**Document 7: Day Two: Participant Review Sheet**

Please tell us about the most important information you got from today's seminar.	Please share any questions you have about today's seminar that you would like to have addressed during your follow-up.
Did today's seminar contribute to your understanding of the School Choice Marketplace and your role within it? How will new knowledge affect your work?	As you think about the information you heard today, what parts of it would you like to see as part of the coaching process after the seminar?

Name

(Optional): \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Parent Questionnaire on School Choice and Charter Schools

## School Choice Questionnaire

This questionnaire was designed as a qualitative (narrative) study to gain insight into parent perceptions on school choice, and factors included in parent decision-making in a school choice marketplace. The data was analyzed and used in a process designed to identify trend information and improve public schools.

All responses will be kept confidential. Please note that as a participant, the researcher requests that you be available for a short interview if, in the opinion of the researcher, your answers to the questions warrant further discussion.

Please indicate if you would like to receive an electronic version of the results after they have been published as part of this doctoral project.

Thank you in advance for full and complete answers, and your willingness to contribute to this study with your valuable time.

Demographic Data:

Age Range (Optional): 25-35, 35-45, 45+

Gender (Optional): Male, Female

Political Affiliation: Democrat, Republican, Not Affiliated/Other

Religious Affiliation: Do you affiliate with a religious denomination that affects your decisions about your children and family? (Optional)

Level of Education: High School, Some College, College Degree, Some Graduate Study, Graduate Degree

## Questionnaire:

1. Do you feel the K-12 public education system is providing our students with the skills and knowledge they need in today's world, or do schools need to be changed? Please give a short justification for your opinion.
2. How much do you think is spent each year on each student in California public schools? Your estimate (to the nearest thousand dollars) will represent the combined expenditures of local, state and federal governments.  
\$5000-\$7000, \$7000-\$9000, \$9000+
3. Do you believe charter schools receive more, less, or the same funding as public schools?  
More, Less, The Same
4. In thinking about public schools in your area, what grade would you give them?  
A      B      C      D      F      Please briefly explain your choice.
5. What are the most important characteristics, attributes, or factors that you used to make a school selection for your child (ren)? Please list in order of importance to the process.
6. Did you contact or visit the public school to which your child would have been assigned before you enrolled them in their current school? If yes, did that help you make your enrollment decision?
7. Can you think of anything the school could have done, or could do to make you enroll your students there instead of the charter?
8. You have chosen a charter school, before you chose the charter, did you consider school choice options between traditional public schools in your district?
9. If you had not "won the lottery" at the charter school, would your student(s) attend their neighborhood public school? If yes, please briefly explain why you would make that choice. If no, please briefly explain why not.
10. If the charter school you selected for your student(s) was not available, would you have researched other options, charter or private? If yes, please briefly explain why you would make that choice. If no, please briefly explain why not.
11. What are your perceptions about the school choice process in the district?
12. Do the opinions of others matter to you when it comes to making these kinds of choices? If yes, please briefly explain why.

Would you be available and willing to participate in a short follow-up interview if the researcher has further questions about your answers to this survey? If so, please provide your consent to be contacted by providing your email address as contact information. Would you like to receive an electronic copy of the survey with information and analysis?

Yes please.     No thanks.

Delivered in Electronic format.

## Appendix D: Letter of Cooperation Community Research Partner

XXXX School District  
 XXXX XXXX, Superintendent  
 XXXXX  
 XXXXX  
 (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Mr. Litel

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Perceptions of challenges faced by public school parents who choose charter schools within the XXXXX School District. As part of this study, I authorize you to engage with parents from XXXXX with completing an electronic survey, a follow-up interview, member-checking activities, and receiving results from the study. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: authorizing your contact of XXXXX parents. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside or the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

XXXX XXXX, Superintendent  
 XXXX School District

XXXX Charter Schools  
 XXXX XXXX, Director  
 XXXX  
 XXXX  
 (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Mr. Litel

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Perceptions of challenges faced by public school parents who choose charter schools within the XXXX School District. As part of this study, I authorize you to engage with parents from XXXX Charter Schools with completing an electronic survey, a follow-up interview, member-checking activities, and receiving results from the study. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: authorizing your contact of XXXX parents. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside or the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,  
 XXXX XXXX  
 XXXX Charter Schools

*Template updated 2/18/15.*

XXXX Charter Academy  
 XXXX XXXX, Director  
 XXXX  
 XXXX  
 (XXX) XXX-XXXX

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Mr. Litel

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Perceptions of challenges faced by public school parents who choose charter schools within the XXXX School District. As part of this study, I authorize you to engage with parents from XXXX Charter Academy with completing an electronic survey, a follow-up interview, member-checking activities, and receiving results from the study. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include: authorizing your contact of XXXX parents. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside or the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

XXXX XXXX, Director  
 XXXX Charter Academy  
*Template updated 2/18/15.*

## Appendix E: E-mail Messages to Participants

Initial Invitation to Participate in Doctoral Study Research  
(Distributed by E-mail)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Parent:

You have been selected to participate in a doctoral study related to parent choice in public education. As the parent of a student who attends a charter school within the XXXX school district, I would like to invite you to take a few minutes to complete the online questionnaire that is linked to this email.

My name is Jeff Litel and I am in the process of completing my doctoral study at Walden University. As part of that process I am completing a research study about the factors that are important to parents when making the decision to enroll their student in a charter school instead of the local public school to which they would otherwise attend.

Please see the attached informed consent information. In no way are you required to participate in this process. Your identity will be held in the strictest confidence. Cooperation of the school is limited to the use of their email list and they have no other interest in the project. Your email information will not be used for any other purpose than this initial invitation and a series of electronic reminders over the next two weeks during the research window. Your email information will not be released to any other entity and you will not be contacted by me after the study is completed. Providing your email is not a pre-requisite for your participation in this study.

It is hoped that as a result of this research, traditional public schools and public charter schools services to students and families can be improved.

Link to the Questionnaire: [www.xyxyxyxyx](http://www.xyxyxyxyx) (Sample)

Please read the informed consent document before proceeding to the questionnaire link. Your completion of the questionnaire is completely voluntary and constitutes informed consent to participate in this study.

Kindly,

Jeff Litel  
Doctoral Candidate  
Walden University



## Reminder (Window Day 7)

(Distributed by Email)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Parent:

A few days ago you were invited to participate in an electronic questionnaire as part of a doctoral research study examining the factors that are important to parents when making the decision to enroll their student in a charter school instead of the local public school to which they would otherwise attend.

If you have not already done so. Please consider taking a few minutes to participate in the study. It is hoped that the information gained will help traditional public schools and public charter schools improve their services to students and families.

Attached Link: [www.xyxyxy](http://www.xyxyxy) (Sample)

Your completion of the questionnaire is completely voluntary and constitutes informed consent to participate in this study.

Kindly,

Jeff Litel  
Doctoral Candidate  
Walden University

Final Reminder (Window Day 12)  
(Distributed by Email)

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear Parent:

You were recently invited to participate in an electronic questionnaire as part of a doctoral research study examining the factors that are important to parents when making the decision to enroll their student in a charter school instead of the local public school to which they would otherwise attend.

If you have not already done so, please consider taking a few minutes to participate in the study. It is hoped that the information gained will help traditional public schools and public charter schools improve their services to students and families.

Attached Link: [www.xyxyxy](http://www.xyxyxy) (Sample)

Your completion of the questionnaire is completely voluntary and constitutes informed consent to participate in this study.

Kindly,

Jeff Litel  
Doctoral Candidate  
Walden University

## Appendix F: Interview Protocol and Questions

### Interview Protocol

Good afternoon, thank you for taking the time to meet with me. There are five things I want to remind you about before we start the interview:

- 1) I am recording it so I can be sure to make an accurate transcript. Once I have done that and you have reviewed the written transcript the recording will be erased.
- 2) The interview is informal and mean to probe for deeper meaning from your responses or the responses found in the group data from the questionnaire. You should not feel pressured to give an answer or say anything in this interview that makes you uncomfortable.
- 3) At no time will your identity be associated with your answer for publication of any kind. Only you and I will know who you are and any parts of this interview that are used in the data analysis of the research will be referred to Participant X.
- 4) Before any information gathered from this interview is used in the research study, you will be allowed to review it and approve it for accuracy.
- 5) You can stop the interview at any time you would like.

### Interview Questions

1. Please react to the information in Table 4 showing the frequency of priorities listed by parents who participated in the study. \*For telephone interviews Table 4 was emailed to the participant.
2. High Test Scores are generally at the top of the list when analyzing success of our public school system. What do you think it means that high test scores are so low on the frequency table in this study?
3. You are part of a group of parents who have chosen a charter school over traditional public school for your children. You can see in the questions I asked on the electronic questionnaire that I am trying to get information as to why, in a district like this one, when traditional public schools are not the best, but certainly above average, parents like you are making the choices you made. Can you give any further insight for me to consider in my research?

## Appendix G: Transcripts of Participant Interviews

**Interview Question 1:** Please react to the information in Table 4 showing the frequency of priorities listed by parents who participated in the study. \*For telephone interviews Table 4 was emailed to the participant.

---

P1: I agree almost completely with this list and the order. The only thing I question just a little is I think rigorous teaching should always be at the top. I had my kids in both lotteries and the thing I liked was before I entered the lotteries I was able to look at the Leadership curriculum and the IB curriculums as a parent so I could know that no matter which school we got into our kids would be challenged. We ended up winning both but chose the Leadership program simply because at the time the school had already been operating and we thought it was better established at the time. We have friends who went to the other school and have loved it.

---

P2: Uh oh, I am the only one who mentioned uniforms? Wow! I think they look sharp and the kids know they are there to study and not goof around. I am with the top group on enrichment opportunities. My son was so unchallenged and bored with pre-school I scared to death that he would be disrupting in the class drive the teacher crazy. My third was class size so I see the others agreed with me on everything but uniforms. I am also one of the “word of mouth people” as people at my church camped out to get in. I was a year behind them but I will tell you that camping for the night in the cold to get their kid in this school I think has really affected their dedication to the school. Whenever we have any event it is packed, you can tell this school is important to the parents!

---

P3 I was one who said I was not happy with the public school in my area. I like them but all they did was get kids ready for state testing. When I went to the informational meeting about this school the founding director said his philosophy was to help the students do well in class and let the test scores take care of themselves. That is why we are here. My second thing was individual attention and I see that was important to a lot of the people. The list might be a little misleading because I think everything on the top of the list contributes to the personalized treatment I want and I think a lot of parents want.

---

P4 My first factor was class size. Having 32-36 kids in a middle school class is just too big and I was really happy to hear about class sizes capped at 25. My second factor was quality leadership. It is odd to me that only 8 of us thought that was important enough to make a decision. I knew the guy who started the charter and when he told me he was doing a Leadership Theme and

that my students (2) would be released in the afternoon, I was hooked and I know he is a smart, quality guy. We love the school!

---

P5 I have to be honest, Mrs. C. has taught every one of my kids and when we heard she was transferring to the charter school that was the decision maker. I am sure you listed my answer under quality teachers. I have to say that she (daughter) only had Mrs. C. for her first year and now she has had a number of excellent teachers. She loves the school and my wife and I love the other families. You might have put my second choice under Great Kids/Great Families, I don't know but I can tell you it is true. Many of these people belong to our church (Mormon) and this school is talked about all the time at church. I am surprised that high test scores ranked so low on the list, only 8 people thought it was important. Well, since we have had the highest scores in the district ever since we opened, I guess people just take it for granted now. I guess this says that there are a lot of things that are important to parents before you get to test scores. I do think though that doing well on tests might be hidden in the "rigorous teaching" answer but we should not put words in peoples' mouth I guess.

---

P6 My top two factors are at the top of the list. Most important to me is the K-8 Campus. I went to Catholic school and I believe it is much better to have your middle school students in a K-8 instead of a middle school. Middle schools are trouble and I am very happy they made this school because I cannot afford private and this is just like a private school. My second factor was rigorous teaching. I love the IB program and I think it should be used everywhere! The kids learn so much, technology, languages, art, how art works with science, it is really neat. My kid works really hard to get through this school and I think that is great. Third I listed strict discipline and I can't believe I am the only one. I am going to have to talk to these people (laugh).

---

P7 I am surprised that technology was only mentioned by 14 people. I know I was impressed by the initial meeting where they said that every student was going to have a computer, they weren't real laptops they were those Neo2 things, but I was impressed. That didn't last long though, the company that provided them went out of business and now the school has laptops just like every other school, not one on one. If they had not have mentioned that at the information meeting we probably would have left our son where he was. I was right on with the rest of the crowd with the enrichment opportunities being very high on my list. My kid loves robotics and this school has two teams. He works on his robot all year in order to be ready for robot season. I have noticed that once we had a team all the other schools in town are getting them to. I guess that is a good thing.

---

**Interview Question 2:** High Test Scores are generally at the top of the list when analyzing success of our public school system. What do you think it means that high test scores are so low on the frequency table in this study?

---

P1 I understand that schools have to pay attention to the overall number to compare themselves to other schools. I am a teacher who does it all the time. But the message that sends is that the individual does not matter. At the charter school meeting the principal said, "If we pay attention to the individual student, the school scores will take care of themselves." That statement right there told me that these people care about my baby as an individual. Any school can do that it does not have to be a charter school! I don't think that means that good test scores are not important for parents. I think parents understand that doing well on test is important but if you look at the things that are important to parents, all of those things will help students score well on tests. But, tests are only one measure of success, remember that.

---

P2 I think that parents expect that their kids will do well on the state tests. I think it is a matter of timing of this study and the fact that test scores have not been published like they used to be for two years now.

---

P3 This does not mean that test scores are not important. Of course they are important but, I think parents want their students to have personal attention which will help their student(s) be successful on the tests. If you look at all the top things they all make it easier for students to be excited about learning which will help them do better on tests. Like I said, tests are ok but they are not the only thing and traditional public schools are paying too much attention to scores and how it makes the school look.

---

P4 Exactly! I think that tells you just exactly that parents are not as concerned about test scores as the state and federal government are.

---

P5 Well, I guess this says that there are a lot of things that are important to parents before you get to test scores. I do think though that doing well on tests might be hidden in the "rigorous teaching" answer but we should not put words in peoples' mouth I guess.

---

P6 As I think about it, test scores have never been an issue for my kids to I really didn't think about it. Maybe the other parents in the study are in the same situation. I am not sure you can look at the results of the study and say for sure test scores are not important, clearly they are, and clearly our school does really well with test scores. I think it is interesting that the two charter school traditionally have higher scores than all of the other schools.

---

P7 Oh yeah, those pesky test scores. Who cares? (laugh) Those things are used by the government to beat up on schools! If you can't tell, I am with the parents who don't think they are important at all. I remember taking those things when I was in school, I didn't think they were important then and I have not changed my mind.

---

**Interview Question 3:** You are part of a group of parents who have chosen a charter school over traditional public school for your children. You can see in the questions I asked on the electronic questionnaire that I am trying to get information as to why, in a district like this one, when traditional public schools are not the best, but are certainly above average, parents like you are making the choices you made. Can you give any further insight for me to consider in my research?

---

P1 I appreciate being asked to share what is important to me in making the decisions I made about school enrollment. With more and more freedom to choose being given to parents, I think it is becoming a very interesting and competitive system. I think that is good for our schools and will help to improve them.

---

P2 I think this study is definitely interesting. I believe that the answers you got to your questions would vary by area so I am not sure you can make the assumption that because these factors are important to this group they would be important in other communities. I would think you would have to repeat the same study with a different group to see what is important to them in order to make good decisions. I still don't believe nobody but me cares about uniforms! (Laugh)

---

P3 I doubt the public schools will be able to take this information and do much to change. The system is just way too geared for equality of opportunity instead of quality of outcomes. I realize the history of public education has demanded

equality of access, but when parent has choice they are going to go for personalized over good for the masses every time. It is certainly an interesting thing to watch.

---

P4 This is a small town. Word of mouth spreads like wildfire at the baseball field and the truth is these two schools have a very good reputation. I think people want to get in just because they think it is better, even if they don't know why it is better. It is a consumer society, when the crowd finds something it likes, everyone hears about it and runs to get their fair share.

---

P5 The truth is, this data shows that parents really want a good experience for their kids and they don't think you measure that with test scores. However, if the school has substandard test scores, you can bet a bunch of them would start thinking about taking their kid out. So while it is legitimate to use this information you better still get good scores.

---

P6 This is really interesting. I think it will benefit all schools if people will just look at the information and not try to make it say what they want it to say. The public school system is a system that is full of tradition and that will be very hard to change. I do worry that if something is not done that all of the kids left in the traditional public schools will be the ones whose parents don't take the effort to help them get into the better schools.

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P7 I think this research is only valid for a small group of people. If you want to know why parents in other places are making the same decisions, I think you need to ask them. Don't just assume that they would come up with the same answers we did.

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