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AN ANALYSIS OF AN EXEMPLARY SOUTH TEXAS CHARTER SCHOOL

A Dissertation

by

MARIO H. SALINAS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2013

Major Subject: Educational Leadership

AN ANALYSIS OF AN EXEMPLARY

SOUTH TEXAS CHARTER SCHOOL

A Dissertation
by
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May 2013

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ABSTRACT

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Charter schools have emerged as a powerful force in American school reform. When first introduced in 1991, charter schools came with two distinct promises: to serve as an escape hatch for students in failing schools, and to create and incubate new educational practices. Through qualitative inquiry, this study examines a charter school's best practices and how some of these practices can be applied or emulated in a traditional public school setting. The goal is not to replace traditional public school practices with charter school practices, but to emulate charter school practices that have shown to be successful. The Chief Executive Officer and four campus principals of an Exemplary South Texas charter school system were interviewed for this study. These subjects all have leadership responsibilities within this particular charter school system and all have had previous working experience in a traditional public school setting. The participants identified nine educational practices that differentiated charter schools from traditional public schools. The study indicates that these charter school best practices could be emulated in a traditional public school setting. The ultimate result would be to increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of traditional public school administrators, and thus strengthen the traditional public school system.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife Ana and my sons Mario Antonio and Diego Nicolas. Mario Antonio was born during my first year in the doctoral program and Diego Nicolas during the fourth; hence, the completion of this work was all the more meaningful. This work is also dedicated to my mother Victoria and father Margarito Salinas, who I wish had lived to see me accomplish this work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Shortly after the start of the 1990s, the American public witnessed one of the most significant and controversial developments in public education: the emergence of the charter school movement. Until 1991, there was no such thing as a charter school in the United States. Diane Ravitch (2010) asserted that in the first decade of the twenty first century, the leading reform ideas in American education were accountability and choice. She posited that charter schools have become the jewels of the school choice movement. Ravitch (2010) cited how proponents of charter schools claim that,

> Charter schools appeal to a broad spectrum of people from the left, the right, and the center, all of whom say charters are the antidote to bureaucracy and stasis as the decisive change that would revolutionize American education and dramatically improve educational achievement. (p. 133).

Weil (2009) described public education in the United States as undergoing a remarkable transformation, as longstanding policies regarding how public schools are funded, staffed, and governed are revised in an effort to improve academic performance and increase student and parent school choice. He posited that over the past twenty years

frustration with what too many education leaders contended was a public education system that is stagnating has fueled the push for charter schools as well as for many other, even more radical, reform concepts, including vouchers and privately funded scholarship programs for low income children. The potential for change and reform inherent in the idea of charter schools—local control of schools, elimination of bureaucracy, independence, and entrepreneurism—is one of the reasons it has such broad support (Cookson & Berger, 2002). This appeal for reform is part of a broad social and educational movement called school choice. The central argument of advocates of choice is that market competition provides the best or most efficient way to change the way public schools function (Weil, 2009). These pundits argued that removing regulations, dismantling educational bureaucracies, and decentralizing schools will produce better schools. Charter school proponents say they look to such schools to be both beacons for a new alternative to traditional public schools (TPS) and a force to move the traditional public school toward greater levels of excellence (Weil, 2009).

Fryer (2012) reported that, on average, charters have had no statistical impact on test scores in comparison to TPS. Because charter schools have such a mixed record, they are clearly not the answer to closing the achievement gap; however, some studies suggested that some charters have had resounding success and that there are lessons that can be learned from them in the hopes of better serving the students enrolled in TPS (Fryer, 2012; Rix, 2012; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Betts, 2009). Thus, the researcher in this exploratory study focused on the leadership aspects of a particular high performing charter school system in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The goal of the study was to gain insight into those specific charter school leadership practices that have paved the way for the organization's exemplary record of success. The aim of the study was not to replace TPS practices with charter school practices.

Rather, the aim of the study was to emulate, in a TPS setting, the charter school's best practices that have contributed to the popularity and success (as defined by the Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2012a) of this particular open-enrollment charter school. The ultimate result would be to increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of TPS administrators, and thus strengthen the TPS system.

School choice plans and policies took root long before the introduction of charter schools. The notion of public schools operating in market-like settings has been studied for several decades (Chub & Moe, 1990). When the charter school idea emerged, the choice movement, recognizing an attractive option, quickly embraced charters as perhaps the most broadly acceptable choice plan possible—and perhaps its ticket to wholesale acceptance (Cookson & Berger, 2002). Albert Shanker first described the charter school concept in 1988. As the elected president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Shanker described charter schools as a new kind of school governance framework under which successful teachers would become "empowered" to create innovative programs at existing schools (1988). Charter schools as originally conceived would become places where teachers would be recognized as experts and, given the freedom to follow their own educational visions, would surely make schools better places for teachers to teach and more effective environments for students to learn. To Shanker, the charter school was a teacher-centered reform strategy that would inspire reform from the inside. Teachers would be free to innovate and build new educational models based on student needs and best practices (Shanker, 1988).

Minnesota has long been a progressive outpost in the conservative Midwest, and it was here that the seeds of the school choice movement took root. As far back as 1958, when the state enacted legislation that allowed parents who chose to send their children to private schools to

take a tuition tax deduction off their state income taxes, Minnesota had begun to test the waters of expanded school choice. In 1991, Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law (Budde, 1996). Shortly thereafter, the American public witnessed one of the most significant and controversial developments in public education: the emergence of the charter school movement (Weil, 2009). Classically American, the charter idea emphasizes individualism and promotes a maverick sensibility that suggests that handful of pioneers can create an imaginative and effective educational system through small scale local reform (Cookson & Berger, 2002). History tells us that the charter school movement operated at its inception, as it does today, on the idea that increased autonomy and flexibility in exchange for heightened accountability would lead to the creation and maintenance of more effective schools. At its core, however, the movement has always been about more than school effectiveness, for it seeks to promote school effectiveness by providing distinctive choices for parents and students and relying, in part on the market (Nathan, 1996; Stillings, 2005). Weil (2009) defined charter schools as follows:

> Charter schools are public schools under contract—called a charter. These contracts, or charters, are granted from a public agency to a group of parents, teachers, school administrators, nonprofit agencies (like but not limited to a school board), for profit management groups, organizations, or businesses that wish to create an alternative to existing public schools. Charter schools receive public money and cannot legally discriminate or exclude students. They are also publicly accountable; thus, they are not private schools. Charter schools are held to the educational accountability standards that have been adopted in their state and district in accordance with the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 (p. 6).

According to Betts (2009) advocates argued that one rationale for charter schools is that heterogeneous students have different needs, implying that a one-size-fits-all approach of traditional public education will fall short of the ideal of individualizing the education given to each child. Charter schools are often seen as a way of providing parents choice over both the curriculum and the pedagogical methods to which their children will be exposed. Hess, Maranto, and Milliman (2001), asserted that a major underpinning of school choice as a reform movement is that competition will force TPS to become more efficient and effective. The theory behind this belief is simple: TPS do not want to lose their students to charter schools for fear of cutbacks or outright closure. Teachers, principals, and district administrators therefore react to increased competition for students by examining what parents are seeking in a school, and then implementing reforms in the TPS to emulate the most popular of the charter schools (Betts, 2009). A second underpinning underlying school choice is that choice fosters market-like environments that offer parents and students the ability to flee underperforming TPS and enter into more innovative and less bureaucratic educational settings (Bothe, 2004). Bothe asserted, "The most fundamental reason why traditional public schools have an incentive to respond to charter school presence is money. When students exit traditional public schools and enroll in charter schools, the decline in student enrollment numbers are typically accompanied by losses in funding" (p. 501). As one official from the Houston Independent School District put it:

> When a school loses students to charter schools…that school loses state revenues. But the principal cannot always cut costs by eliminating a teacher because no one grade level may lose enough students to justify it….The students don't leave in nice neat packages of 22, all from the same grade, all from the same school. If I lose two students from first grade and two from fourth grade, and let's say six from fifth grade, you haven't cut

> anything. But I’ve lost on average about $4,000 a kid (Markley 2002, as described in Bothe, 2004, p. 502).

Weil (2009) documented how proponents of choice based reforms claim that market-based organizational structures are better suited for the delivery of education than government bureaucracies. They argued that in the absence of competition, TPS have little incentive to improve. A common feature of all choice based programs is that they are designed to increase the range of educational options available to students beyond the public schools normally found in their TPS.

Statement of the Problem

In her book, *The death and life of the great American school system*, Ravitch (2010) posited that, “We have known for many years that we need to improve our schools....Education is the key far into the future. It will affect not only our economy, but also our civic and cultural life” (p. 223). Chubb and Moe (1990) maintained that critics increasingly agree that a dynamic economy well suited to modern conditions requires workers who are not only technically knowledgeable and well trained, but who also have the capacity for creative, independent thought and action—since technology and the requirements of productivity are constantly changing and cannot be learned once and for all. In the modern world, these pundits claimed,

> Productivity is keyed to knowledge, brain power, and flexibility in their application, not as in Henry Ford’s day, to disciplined labor and mindless rule-following. Americans must be taught how to think, and they must learn how to learn (p. 9).

In their 1990 book, *Politics, markets, and America’s schools*, education researchers John Chubb and Terry Moe maintained that big government is part of the problem and not part of the solution. They were among the first to espouse a wholesale abandonment of school centered

reforms. Chubb and Moe (1990) argued, “We believe existing institutions cannot solve the problem because they are the problem—the key to better schools is institutional reform” (p. 3). Within that context, Cookson and Berger (2002) argued that public schools should be deregulated. That is that families should be able to send their children to the public school of choice—regardless of traditional school zoning regulations. Critics of TPS argued that public funds should be used for private schools or other schools of choice. Others argued that the public school system itself needs to become more flexible, more accountable, and more responsive to families (Betts, 2009; McGuinn, 2006; Cookson & Berger, 2002; Chubb and Moe, 1990). School choice supporters, including supporters of charter schools, believe markets are better than governments in supplying educational services. Loveless and Field (2009) reasoned that under the TPS system students are assigned to a government run school based on where they live. School quality is irrelevant to the process. Bad schools are assigned students as readily as good schools. Under a market-based system, they maintained, successful schools attract students and prosper. Cookson and Berger (2002) argued that,

> In theory, charter schools could be a perfect reform strategy in that they have the potential to transcend the accountability problem (perhaps the most dangerous achilles heel of the current public school system) and to inspire innovation and reform from within, while empowering teachers and providing parents and children with new and innovative choices (p. 3).

The charter school movement is growing, and there are many studies that examine charter school academic performance versus TPS (Weil D. 2009; Witte, J. F., Schomler, P. A. & Shober, 2007; A. F.; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Good & Braden, 2000; Maranto R., Milliman, S., Hess, F., & Gresham, A., 2001; Nathan, 1996). As cited in Chapter Two of the study, the research

suggests that charter schools do not perform any better than TPS. Operating under decentralized like conditions, along with charter school friendly legislation, charter schools have become an attractive option for parents who are not satisfied with TPS or who simply want educational choice (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2008).

In the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) of Texas, for many parents charter schools are increasingly becoming a popular option versus TPS. A particular charter school organization in the LRGV has had a student enrollment growth of over 250% in the last five years, making this school district the fastest growing district in South Texas (TEA, 2012b). As Hess, Maranto, and Milliman (2001) asserted in the introduction of this study, a major underpinning of school choice as a reform movement is that competition will force TPS to become more efficient and effective because as Bothe asserted,

> The most fundamental reason why traditional public schools have an incentive to respond to charter school presence is money. When students exit traditional public schools and enroll in charter schools, the decline in student enrollment numbers are typically accompanied by losses in funding (p. 501).

Furthermore, Betts (2009) contended that teachers, principals, and district administrators react to increased competition for students by examining what parents are seeking in a school, and then implementing the reforms in TPS to emulate the most popular of the charter schools. Weil (2009) cited how charter school advocates argued that charter school friendly legislation and the development of local charter schools will stimulate competition among all schools; thereby, these reforms will raise the level of quality instruction for all schools, raise educational standards throughout public schools, will allow for local community and neighborhood governance, and will stimulate meaningful reforms and improvements throughout the entire educational system.

Many educational constituencies ranging from parents to teachers, pundits to principals, educational entrepreneurs to nonprofits have argued that charter schools hold the promise of breaking up large, factory style schools along with the burdensome and often non-friendly educational bureaucracies and administrations that govern them (Weil, 2009).

Therefore, for practicing TPS administrators there is a need to explore those attributes, strategies, and best practices among charter school leadership that has transformed the charter school into the popular public school option that it is today. The literature cited in this study suggests that there are lessons that can be gained from the charter school movement, and if applied, these lessons could conceivably enhance the leadership capacity of TPS administrators and thus strengthen the TPs system.

Conceptual Framework

When Fred Smith created Federal Express in 1971, few thought it was possible to ship a package overnight without paying a fortune. Smith had a vision for an express delivery service that would operate differently than the U. S. postal system, and would also light a competitive fire under the sluggish U.S. Postal Service. Fred Smith created Federal Express because he was a visionary thinker. He is the quintessential entrepreneur: He had a vision for a new approach to solving a problem, and he created a new organization to carry out that vision (Smith & Peterson, 2006). Authors Kim Smith and Julie Peterson premised that there are many individuals in the field of education who can be considered education entrepreneurs who share many "entrepreneur-like" characteristics but who do so in the hope of catalyzing massive improvement in K-12 public education (Smith & Peterson, 2006). They defined education entrepreneurs as visionary thinkers who create new for profit or nonprofit organizations from scratch that redefine our sense of what is possible. Smith and Peterson (2006) claimed that these organizations stand

separate and independent from existing institutions like public school districts and teacher colleges; as such, they and the entrepreneurs who start them have potential to spark more rapid, dramatic change than might otherwise be created by status quo organizations. Smith and Peterson (2006) further suggested that education entrepreneurs are a rare breed of innovator whose characteristics and activities may lead to the transformation—not merely the slight improvement—of the public education system.

Deal and Hentschke (2004) contended that charter schools appear to provide a qualitatively different opportunity for some educational administrators, and they are attracting committed, passionate risk takers to the profession. Although their "business" is schooling, their aptitudes and capabilities are more akin to entrepreneurs and leaders of small businesses than those of traditional educational administrators. Further, Deal and Hentschke (2004) posited that studies of charter schools have found that those individuals that lead charter schools have a tendency to have "entrepreneur-like" characteristics. These traits, they claimed, differentiates charter school leaders from those of TPS leaders. Peter Drucker (1985) described an entrepreneur as one who shifts economic resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher productivity and greater yield. Drucker explained that an entrepreneur is, however, not just an innovator, but one who brings that innovation successfully to market. Hentschke (2009) suggested that to be (or act like) an entrepreneur is to see a problem along with a compelling idea for addressing it. The entrepreneur then sets about its remedy by creating and growing a business. Economist Joseph Schumpeter, says that entrepreneurship is the implementation of change via the introduction of new or better quality goods, new methods of production, new sources of supply, or the reorganization of an industry (as cited in Hess, 2002). At its most general level, according to Schumpeter, entrepreneurship equals innovation, which goes beyond

discovery or invention and includes implementation and/or commercialization (as cited in Hess, 2006).

Teske and Williamson (2006) asserted that the notion of "entrepreneurial-like" activities has expanded into the public and nonprofit sectors in recent years using the terms "public entrepreneurship" or "social entrepreneurship." Hentschke (2009) stresses that up until recently educational leaders had no compelling reason to evidence entrepreneurial attributes. He contended that TPS systems have favored other traits in their leaders such as, faithful stewardship of public resources, procedural compliance, balancing political demands, upholding professional norms, etc., etc. Hentschke (2009) further suggested that in our increasingly market-sensitive economy, more and more public schooling enterprises are now requiring entrepreneurial-like talents and skills. Hentschke described the "educational entrepreneur" as follows:

- They have a unique idea that borders on a fixation. It may be a solution to a widespread problem, a way to meet an unmet need or a significant improvement to a widely used product or process.

- In order to transform their idea into reality, they often have to "go their own way" to raise the necessary social and financial capital to create a separate enterprise.

- They operate and seek to grow the business as the concrete manifestation of their unique idea (2009, pp. 151-152).

Hess (2006) further suggested that educational entrepreneurship is a process of purposeful innovation directed toward improving educational productivity, efficiency, and quality. As Peter Drucker (1985) explained,

> The husband and wife team who open another delicatessen store in the American suburb are rarely entrepreneurs; however, the creation of McDonald's was entrepreneurial because, by applying management concepts and management techniques (asking, What is "value" to the customer?), standardizing the "product," designing process and tools, and basing training on the analysis of the work to be done and then setting the standards it required, McDonalds both drastically upgraded the yield from resources, and created a new market and a new customer (p. 21).

In education, entrepreneurs seek to teach children who have been ill served, improve the quality of teachers and school leaders, give educators effective tools, and deliver services in more useful and accessible ways. In short, they seek to tackle the same problems as other educators. The difference is in how they go about it (Hess, 2006). In applying the concept of entrepreneurship to education, the key element is its transformative nature—educational entrepreneurs are individuals seeking to instigate change in the public education system that will disrupt, transform, or radically alter the way education is provided (Teske & Williamson, 2006). Teske and Williamson further argued that educational entrepreneurs can be business people who see a new way to provide education services. They can also be public school leaders who seek to change or disrupt the existing system in fundamental ways from the inside, or they can be nonprofit leaders who create organizations on the fringes of the larger system that will try to alter the system over time. In seeking to change the system, Teske and Williamson (2006) asserted that education entrepreneurs in these sectors—private, public, or nonprofit—have these traits in common:

- They are alert to opportunities.
- They are prepared to take significant risks.

- They are skilled at building organizations and networking with other people.

The Need for the Study

Charter schools have emerged as a powerful force in American school reform (Loveless & Field, 2009). The central premise underlying this movement is that charter schools foster market-like environments that offer parents and students the ability to flee underperforming TPS and enter into more innovative and less bureaucratic educational settings (Bothe, 2004). Even though many Americans view public schools in positive light, there continues to be widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of American public education. Since the publication of A *Nation at Risk* in 1983, public schools have been accused of having overstaffed central office administrators, incompetent teaching, inadequate discipline, high costs, and perhaps most importantly, lax academic standards (Betts, 2009; Levin, 2006; Schlechty, 2001; Maranto, Milliman, Hess, & Greshman, 2001). There is a growing recognition that the industrial era factory model of "one-size-fits all" education does not fit everyone, and that schooling must be adaptive to the changing needs of children and society (Ravitch & Viterri, 1997).

The Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) (2008), found that the political appeal of charter schools coupled with increasing public interest in choice based reform has made charter schools a fast paced industry, both nationally and in Texas. Seventeen charter schools opened in Texas for the first time in the fall of 1996 (Estes, 2006). During the 2008/2009 academic year, 427 charter schools were operating in Texas with a total enrollment of 113,760 students (Weil, 2009). With more than 100,000 students on more than 400 campuses, only California has more students enrolled in charter schools than Texas (Weil, 2009).

Charter schools in the LRGV have become an option for parents who opt out of TPS as well (TCER, 2008). According to several recent newspaper accounts (Morten, 2011a; Morten,

2011b), a local South Texas charter school organization has more than 15,000 students on a waiting list to enroll in their schools. Further, the TEA (2012b) indicated that this charter school has had a student enrollment growth of over 250%, making it the fastest growing public school district in the LRGV. As cited in this study, there is an abundance of research on the popularity of charter schools as a choice based program (Bothe, 2004; Estes, 2006; Betts, 2009; Weil, 2009). Charter schools have become a popular option for parents choosing an alternative to TPS in the in the state of Texas, as well as in the LRGV. Although charter school effectiveness has been thoroughly studied, there is limited research on those successful charter school leadership attributes and actions that can be emulated in TPS. Thus, there is a need to identify those charter school leadership attributes and actions that have contributed to the popularity and success that a particular charter school in the LRGV has experienced.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to gain insight and understanding into those charter school leadership concepts, attributes, and actions that have contributed to the popularity and success (as defined by the TEA , 2012a) of a particular open-enrollment charter school organization and apply these same leadership concepts in a TPS setting. As was described in the literature review of this study, the current system of K – 12 public schooling was created in a social and economic context that was entirely different from our current one. Compulsory public education arose in the early 1900s as a way of ensuring that the massive influx of immigrants would be good American citizens and productive workers in the country's emerging industrial economy. The economy was driven by agriculture and industry, which offered the opportunity for a variety of skill levels to earn a living wage, often without a formal education (Smith & Peterson, 2006). On every front, this picture has changed dramatically. Schools are now the focus of great

expectations. Education is widely believed to be the solution to major social challenges, including workplace productivity, economic competition, social equity, civic behavior, technology innovation, cultural knowledge, and effective democracy (Levin 2006). Levin suggests that in response to these persistent issues, schools are under constant pressure to change—often in conflicting directions, not in only in the United States, but in most countries.

Amidst the reforms that states have adopted in recent years, charter schools have been the most widely adopted (McGuinn, 2006). Potentially charter schools offer the greatest avenue for introducing a more entrepreneurial spirit into the American traditional public education system (McGuinn, 2006). According to McGuinn, the charter school movement is predicated on the idea of giving educational entrepreneurs the ability to operate public schools that agree to meet specified performance targets in exchange for freedom from bureaucratic rules and regulations. In Texas the charter school movement is growing, and presently Texas operates one of the nation's largest charter school programs. In the fall of 2007, Texas charter schools ranked fourth in terms of the number of students enrolled and fifth in terms of the number of school operated (Center for Education Reform [CER], 2008, as cited in Texas Center for Educational Research, 2008). Based on a free-market economy concept, charter schools provide families with an alternative to the traditional neighborhood public school. As the charter school movement has grown, it has become of greater interest to understand why families choose charter schools for their children. There is significant research on charter school effectiveness and factors that influence parents' choice of a charter schools and their satisfaction with charter schools. However, few studies have addressed charter leadership attributes and actions that have transformed charter schools into the burgeoning movement that it is today. To date, most studies about charter schools have focused on performance evaluation—whether charter schools achieve

higher levels of innovation, accountability, learning, access, and satisfaction (Weil D. 2009; Witte, J. F., Schomler, P. A. & Shober, 2007; A. F.; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Good & Braden, 2000; Maranto R., Milliman, S., Hess, F., & Gresham, A., 2001; Nathan, 1996). Far less attention has been paid to the question of those charter school leadership attributes and actions, under the "decentralized and autonomous" context that charter school leaders operate in, which have led the perception—real or imagined—that charter schools are superior to TPS with regards to student academic achievement. As cited in the literature review of the study, with charter schools increasingly becoming a popular option for parents here in the LRGV of Texas, it is important that TPS administrators embrace the idea that there are leadership lessons that can be learned from this movement (Fryer, 2012; Rix, 2012; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Betts, 2009).

There is no disputing the fact the charter school movement in Texas, and South Texas in particular, is significant (TCER, 2008; TEA, 2012b). A local charter school system, with twenty campuses presently in operation in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, is set to open twenty four more charter schools by the year 2012. Additionally, the organization plans to expand to thirty eight campuses in South Texas by 2015 (Morten, 2011a; Morten, 2011b). Hence, as practicing administrators in TPS, it is imperative to embrace the idea that there are leadership lessons that can be learned from this movement. Therefore, through semi-formal, open-ended, in-depth interviews with those actors who are critical components of this particular exemplary charter school organization i.e., charter school administrators, the researcher to identified those charter school leadership concepts, strategies, and actions that have transformed this particular charter school system into the popular public school option that it is today and conceivably apply these same strategies in a TPS setting. The aim of this qualitative study is not to replace TPS

practices with charter school practices, but rather to emulate a charter school's best practices in a TPS setting.

Theoretically, under the decentralized and autonomous framework from which they operate, charter schools are free from bureaucratic controls which allow them to pursue new and different forms of schooling that challenge the long standing teaching and learning systems of TPS (Betts, 2009). However, as with other Texas public schools, charter schools are accountable to the TEA. If their students do not perform as per TEA accountability standards, charter schools can be denied public funds (Weil, 2009). Additionally, charter schools are accountable to any entity or interest group whose support it must maintain to exist.

Research Questions

Guiding central question: What leadership attributes and actions do charter school administrators demonstrate that have transformed a particular charter school into the popular public school option that it is today?

Associated sub-questions used to develop the response to this guiding question are:

1. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?
2. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to staffing?
3. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting?

Approach of the Study

This study used a predominantly qualitative research approach. Qualitative researchers have advocated for exploratory study methods (Patton, 1990). Basically, exploratory means that not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied, and the researcher aims to listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas (Creswell, 2003). According to Creswell (2003), "If a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it, then it merits a qualitative approach….Qualitative research is exploratory and useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine" (p. 22). Morse (1991) added that this type of approach may be needed because the topic is new, the topic has never been addressed with a certain sample or group of people, or existing theories do not apply with a particular sample or group under study (as cited in Creswell, 2003). To date, most studies about charter schools have focused on performance evaluation—whether charter schools achieve higher levels of innovation, accountability, learning, access, and satisfaction (e.g., Weil, 2009; Witte, Schomler, & Shober, 2007; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Good & Braden, 2000; Milliman, Hess, Maranto, & Gresham, 1999; Nathan, 1996). Far less attention has been paid to the question of those charter school leadership attributes and actions, under the "decentralized and autonomous" context that charter leaders operate in, that can be emulated in a TPS (Fryer, 2012; Rix, 2012; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Betts, 2009). Thus, with its emphasis toward exploration, a qualitative study was selected as the most appropriate methodology for the study of leadership attributes and actions of a particular high performing charter school system in the LRGV.

For this study, the semi-formal, open-ended, in-depth interview was the primary method of inquiry and data collection strategy. Using this method of inquiry the researcher was able to

produce a wealth of detailed information about the leadership attributes and characteristics of a particular high performing charter school system (Patton, 1990). Notes were taken throughout the whole process, and the interviews were audio-taped. The audio taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and a personal journal was kept throughout the study to record all personal thoughts and observations. All the qualitative data from the interview responses was transferred into computer files, coded, and analyzed using *NVivo 10*, a qualitative analysis software program. The researcher constructed an analytical framework to assist in the data analysis and interpretation of the data.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Limitations and delimitations establish the boundaries, exceptions, reservations, and qualifications inherent in every study (Castetter & Heisler, 1977) as cited in Creswell (1994). The study will be delimited to one exemplary open-enrollment charter school organization in the LRGV. One of the main limitations of the study is that the population studied is limited to administrators who are directly involved with one successful open enrollment charter school system in the LRGV. A second possible limitation is that the findings of the study may not be transferable to TPS environments because of the decentralized context under which Texas charter schools operate in. A third limitation is the fact that only one of the administrators in the study had TPS experience as principal. A fourth possible limitation could be researcher bias. With over twenty five years of experience in a TPS setting as assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent, the researcher could lend preconceived biases and notions to the study.

Assumptions

Fontana and Frey (2000) contended that everyone, not just social researchers, rely on the interview as a source of information. The assumption is that interviewing results in true and

accurate pictures of the respondents' selves and lives. Therefore, the researcher in this study assumed that the instrumentation accurately measures the leadership attributes and actions of an exemplary open enrollment charter school. Further, the researcher assumed that the administrators interviewed answered the questions honestly.

Significance of the Study

Given the need for the study, previously described in the study, and the recommendations for future research presented in current research literature, TPS administrators and all constituencies may benefit from the leadership attributes and actions of this exemplar of the charter school system, and incorporate such practice into the traditional practice and possibly policy. Many politicians, from governors to state legislators have looked to charter schools as an antidote to what they see as the failure of public schools, i.e., lack of educational innovation, barriers to parent and student achievement, and lackluster educational accountability (Weil, 2009). Weil described education in the United States as undergoing a remarkable transformation, as longstanding policies regarding how public schools are funded, staffed, and governed are revised in an effort to improve academic performance and increase student and parent choice. This policy environment has become more accommodating over the past decade to a wide array of new educational approaches both inside and outside of the TPS system (McGuinn, 2006). Therefore, this study's research questions were aimed at discovering those leadership concepts, strategies, and practices, under the "decentralized and autonomous" context that charter school leaders operate in, that has transformed this particular charter school system into the popular option that it is today. In its findings, this study will also contribute to the body of knowledge for educational leadership, since it will document areas of leadership practice that have transformed a particular charter school system into the popular public school option that it is today.

Furthermore, the researcher believes that many of these same charter school leadership actions, strategies, and best practices can be replicated in the TPS setting; thereby, the transferability of these findings can result in the enhancement of the leadership competencies of the traditional public school leader.

Definition of Terms

Entrepreneurship: The implementation of change via the introduction of new or better quality goods, new methods of production, new sources of supply, or the reorganization of an industry (Drucker, 1985).

Educational entrepreneur: A rare breed of innovator whose characteristics and activities may lead to the transformation—not merely the slight improvement—of the public education system. They have a vision for a better way of doing things, thinking beyond the constraints of current rules and resources (Smith & Peterson, 2006).

Intrapreneur: Those who have a vision for changing an organization from the inside—can also be change agents. They are different from entrepreneurs in that they have a lower tolerance for risk and frustration (Smith & Peterson, 2006).

Traditional public schools: This model which has come to mean an institution operated by the government, under the democratic auspices of the local school board, which aims to serve all students in the locality with a common curriculum. This model implies that both the financing of education and the direct operation of the schools are government functions. Students are assigned to a government run school based on where they live. School quality is irrelevant to the process. Bad schools are assigned students as readily as good schools (Gill, Timpane, Ross, & Brewer, 2001; Loveless & Field, 2009).

Distributed leadership: At the core of distributed leadership is the central notion that leadership is not the preserve of an individual but the results from multiple interactions at different points in the organization (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2007).

Intra-district choice: A plan that allows students to choose schools within a single public school district. Depending on the specific plan, the range of choice may be limited to a few schools within a district or it may encompass every school within the district (Cookson, 1994).

Inter-district choice: A plan in which students may cross district lines to attend school. Tuition funds from the state follow the student, and transportation costs—to get the students to the school of their choice—are usually covered by state funds (Cookson, 1994).

Controlled choice: A student assignment plan that requires families to choose a school from within a given community, but that also reserves the right to restrict choices to ensure the racial, gender, and socioeconomic balance of each school. Often, such plans reflect a strategy to satisfy court ordered desegregation requirements (Cookson, 1994).

Post-secondary options: Programs that enable high school students to enroll in college courses at government expense. The courses they take may be used to satisfy high school graduation requirements as well as count toward college credits (Cookson, 1994).

Tuition tax credits: A system of funding school choice that allows parents to receive credit against their income tax if they choose to send their children to a non-public school (Cookson, 1994).

Educational choice: Proponents of "choice" claim they are looking to stimulate new and innovative educational opportunities and to provide parents and communities with alternatives to traditional public schooling through "choice". Choice proponents advocate the privatization of public institutions and services based on market forces and individual demands (Weil, 2009).

Charter school: Charter schools are public schools under contract—called a charter. These contracts, or charters, are granted from a public agency to a group of parents, teachers, school administrators, nonprofit agencies (like but not limited to a school board), for profit management groups and organizations, or businesses that wish to create an alternative to existing public schools. They are financed by the same per-pupil funds that traditional public schools (TPS) receive. Unlike TPS, however, they are held accountable for achieving educational results. In return, they receive waivers that exempt them from many of the restrictions and bureaucratic rules that shape TPS (Weil, 2009; Nathan, 1996).

Exemplary charter school: Charter schools that meet or exceed state Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test exemplary standards. Exemplary standards are 90% of all the students passing overall and in each subject area (Reading/ELA, Writing, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Science); in addition, each sub-group (African American, White, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged) must also meet the 90% criteria overall and in each subject area (Texas Education Agency, 2012a).

School vouchers: Under a school voucher system, families would be given certificates (vouchers) for a set amount of money. They could then use these vouchers to pay tuition at their choice of public, private, or parochial schools (Nathan, 1996).

Privatization: The idea of having private companies to run public schools. This concept involves the transfer of public duties traditionally performed by government actors and/or agencies to privately held companies for profit who assume complete responsibility for the public assets and answer only to their shareholders or owners. These companies are commonly known as education management organizations (EMOs) (Nathan, 1996; Weil, 2009).

Magnet schools: Magnet schools are public schools with specialized curricula designed to attract particular students from within a given school district. Their stated objective is to bring students together from distinct and diverse racial and cultural backgrounds to share a common educational experience. Unlike traditional public schools, many magnet schools have admissions criteria (Nathan, 1996).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): This law reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2001. The law holds schools accountable for student achievement levels through standardized testing and provides penalties for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward meeting the goals of (NCLB) (Stillings, 2005).

Alternative schools: Schools created by a public school district to assign alienated, disruptive, and unsuccessful students. In many communities, the term *alternative school* was applied to these schools, and the term took on the connotation of a school or program for troubled youth (Nathan, 1996).

Summary

This chapter has introduced the reader to the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the methodology, definitions for the terminology used, and the significance of the study. In Chapter two the researcher will provide a review of the literature on emergence and growth of school choice programs as well as on other related topics. A detailed description of the methodology that be utilized in the study will be provided in chapter three.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ravitch (2010) has cited how for the past century or more, education reformers have tried out their ideas in the schools. A wide variety of reformers and reform movements have offered their own diagnoses and cures. Ravitch contended that with the best of intentions, reformers have sought to correct deficiencies by introducing new pedagogical techniques, new ways of organizing classrooms, new technologies, new tests, new incentives, and new ways to govern schools. In every instance, reformers believed that their solution was the one that would transform the schools, make learning fun, raise test scores, and usher in an age of educational joy or educational efficiency.

The Quality of American Public Schools

By 2025, one of five Americans will be 65 years old or older and by 2040, one of four Americans will 65 years old or older. Baby boomers are rapidly approaching the age of 65, and America's future economic success will be in the hands of today's youth to an unprecedented extent (Good & Braden, 2000). Most people believe that public schools can, and should, do a better job of helping youngsters learn (Nathan, 1996). Bushaw and McNee (2009) contended that in the U. S. most citizens value a high-quality education, but they are confused about how to define it and are in conflict about the quality of today's public schools.

Even though many Americans view public schools in a positive light, there continues to be widespread dissatisfaction with the performance of American public schools. Since at least the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, public schools have been accused of having overstaffed central administrations, incompetent teaching, inadequate discipline, high costs, and perhaps most importantly, lax academic standards (Maranto, Milliman, Hess, & Greshman, 2001). Good and Braden (2000) postulated that some (especially parents) are reasonably satisfied with American schools, but many policymakers are convinced that the present system of schooling is so flawed that it can be saved only by bold, aggressive experiments. Weil (2009) cited many critics that call for new experimental forms of schooling, such as voucher plans—public funds to subsidize private school education, and charter schools—public funds to establish schools under a contract with the state. Weil (2009) asserted that according to some critics, TPS are failing and children are not learning. They claim that the management and day-to-day operations of the public school system is being choked by an inefficient bureaucracy and overregulation and is being held hostage to resistant teacher unions and incompetent management bureaucracies that won't respond to parent concerns nor adopt meaningful educational reforms.

The development of youth's knowledge, skills, and attitudes has always been important to this country's success, and most citizens accept the premise that a good education provides a fundamental cornerstone for a productive democracy (Good & Braden, 2000). Viteritti (1999) pointed out that although experts disagree about whether the average performance of American public schools has declined over time, it is clear that their range of effectiveness varies greatly—from excellent to disgraceful. Gill, Timpane, Ross, and Brewer (2001) noted that public dissatisfaction with TPS is widespread: only 20 percent of Americans believe that the nation's

public schools deserve A or B grades, and education policy is always an important issue among voters in national and state level election campaigns. Schlechty (2001) contended that, whereas business leaders of the past tended to focus on the schools' role in vocational training, today those leaders say that schools do not develop the academic skills students will need to engage in continuous purposeful learning as employees. Additionally, Schlechty asserted that these same business leaders are equally concerned that the schools are not developing or enforcing the moral standards and work habits that they see as necessary for a world-class workforce.

Weil (2009) maintained that there is a great debate in this country about which statistics, which studies, and which reports make most sense. Some studies show U.S. students are doing relatively well; other studies show them doing relatively poorly. He asserted that depending which tests are used, U.S. students are doing better, about the same, or not as well as they were twenty years ago. What really matters is this: some public schools are able to help young people overcome troubled families. Some public schools are able to encourage, stimulate, and inspire youngsters. Even if, on the average, American TPS have students who are performing well in subject matter tests, it may still be the case that school reform is needed. In their book, *The Great School Debate* (2000), Good and Braden cited four reasons why one might support school reform. First, even those schools that are generally performing adequately on assessment measures have verifiable deficiencies that beg for reform. Second, some groups of students may not be served well by the "one-size-fits-all" TPS. Basically, some groups of students are better served by a different type of school. Third, it can be argued that by making adjustments to the current curriculum, the learning environment could be improved in important ways. Fourth, many have claimed that TPS are too bureaucratic to change. Thus, for these reasons and more,

many critics of TPS have argued that competition through choice such as voucher plans or charter schools will require TPS to improve by innovation to ensure their survival.

Sarason (2002) established that opponents and proponents of charter schools and vouchers agree on one thing: TPS schools are not accomplishing their educational mission even though billions upon billions upon billions have been expended to improve schools with little to show for it. Hess (2002) argued that “choice” as in free market systems, versus public systems, will force public school systems to improve. He maintained that free markets force these school systems to compete for students, and thus free markets systems will prompt public schools to improve in order to ensure their survival and success. Charter school advocates argued that charter school legislation and the development of local charter schools would: a) Stimulate competition among all schools, thereby raising the level of quality instruction for all schools, b) Raise educational standards throughout public schools, c) Allow for local community and neighborhood governance, and d) Stimulate meaningful reforms and improvements throughout the entire educational system (Weil, 2009).

Most have found that the common feature of all choice programs—whether public or private—is that they are designed to increase the range of educational options available to students beyond the public schools normally found in their school districts (Weil, 2009).

The Debate Over Public Education in America

For more than a decade, school choice has been a flash point in debates over education. At the most elemental level, choice based reforms seek to reshape education by transforming parents and students from clients of a public service agency into consumers of a market product (Hess, 2002). Education researchers have found that debates about school choice elicit high passion, meaning that much of the debate leans toward the emotional rather than the empirical.

Choice proponents claimed that vouchers, which parents could use at private schools, or public charters which compete with and are independent of the local school districts, will solve perceived education woes. Choice opponents fear that such drastic reforms raise serious concerns about equity and accountability, while promising nothing traditional schools do not already offer (Maranto et al., 2001). Choice proponents claimed that they are looking to stimulate new and innovative educational opportunities and to provide parents and communities with alternatives to traditional public schooling through "choice" (Weil, 2009). Maranto et al., (2001) has found that support for choice has grown particularly among minority parents who are most immediately concerned about school performance issues. There are many reasons why the "choice" movement has become so popular. In a recent *Phi Delta Kappa* Gallup Poll, findings indicated that many, if not most, people believe that public schools should and could do a better job of helping our nation's youth increase their knowledge acquisition and develop critical-thinking skills (Bushaw & McNee, 2009). Also, the argument that free market competition will force existing public schools to improve is widely appealing. Most choice advocates of today believe that empowering parents to select the schools their children attend will promote competition and provide an incentive for all schools to improve (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Nathan, 1996; Viteritti, 1999; Cookson & Berger, 2002; Hess, 2002; Bothe, 2004; Betts, 2009; Weil, 2009).

Although scholars may argue back and forth about the efficacy of the American public educational system, one fact is evident: we have not done a good enough job educating the children of the poor, a disproportionate number of whom are blacks and Hispanics (Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997; Viteritti, 1999; Estes, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). Therefore, while the debate rages over the efficacy of the job TPS are doing, Weil (2009) asserted that the impetus for the charter

school movement, in large part, rests on the assumption that the public schools are not doing enough; indeed, that they are failing.

Finally, as with so much of public policy, the issue of school choice is at its core a normative one. It comes down to the role that one believes education should play in American society (Maranto, et al., 2001).

The Case for Needed Reform

For decades there has been widespread agreement that America's urban school systems are in crisis. In many urban areas two-thirds or more of the students entering high school do not graduate. Urban schools are widely deemed unsafe, outdated, and overcrowded facilities are common (Hess, 2002). Chubb and Moe (1990) found that whether the criticisms have come from average citizens, business leaders, public officials, or educators themselves, they have had a common thrust: the schools are failing in their core academic mission, particularly in the more rigorous areas of study—math, science, and foreign languages. Chubb and Moe (1990) contended that America's public school children are not learning enough, they are not learning the right things, and most debilitating of all, they are not learning how to learn.

The twenty-first century is upon us, and Schlechty (2001) argued that the public schools of America in the 21st century are not much different from the schools of the 1970s. According to Schlechty (2001), the pace of public school change and improvement has been slow, so slow that increasing numbers of serious men and women have begun to doubt that real improvement in the American system of education is unlikely. For the first time in a century, reformers are beginning to think "outside the box" of the industrial-era factory model of schooling. There is growing recognition that this "one-size-fits all" educational school of thought does not fit

everyone, and that schooling must be adaptive to the changing needs of children and society (Ravitch & Viterri, 1997; Smith & Peterson, 2006; Weil, 2009).

In a speech on June 22, 2009, to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, Secretary of Education Arne Duncun reiterated his and President Obama's support for public charter schools. "The charter movement is one of the most profound changes in American education--bringing new options to underserved communities and introducing competition and innovation into the education system," stated Secretary Duncun during the speech (as cited in Bushaw & McNee, 2009, p. 12). According to Schlechty (2001), Americans have long held public schools in high regard, while at the same time, they have always complained about them. He maintained that historically, however, most of those who complain about the schools as academic institutions are members of academia such as university presidents and college deans, or members of the cultural and educational elite such as journalist, editors, and professional social critics. In recent years such criticism has become much more widespread. Governors, members of Congress, Presidents, and others too are critical of schools. These critics have focused particularly on the failure of the schools to produce students with sufficient academic skills to ensure a world-class workforce within the context of an economy that requires knowledge work as its primary mode of increasing productivity (Schlechty, 2001). Gill et al., (2001) added that economic theorists, notably Milton Friedman, have long argued that more choice in education will lead to improved outcomes by permitting students to transfer to better schools, by introducing competitive pressure for schools to improve, and by permitting a better match between the needs of the individual student and the program offered by the school (Gill et al., 2001). Many politicians, from governors to state legislators have looked to charter schools as an antidote to what they see as the failure of public schools, i.e., lack of educational innovation,

barriers to parent and student achievement, and lackluster educational accountability (Weil, 2009). According to Nathan (1996), the charter school movement brings to public education four powerful ideas:

1. Choice among public schools for families and their children.
2. Entrepreneurial opportunities for educators and parents to create the kinds of schools they believe make the most sense.
3. Explicit responsibility for improved achievement as measured by standardized tests and other measures.
4. Carefully designed competition in public education.

American Industrialism and the Factory School

Gil et al., (2001) maintained that a public responsibility to provide education for all children is a deeply held American value, with roots going back to the founding of the nation. During the 19th century, the common school belonged to the community. It was usually a small white one roomed building with one teacher assigned to a heterogeneous group of students, where older children tutored the younger children (Tyack, 1974). Gill et al., (2001) contended that in pre-industrial America, one factor favoring the common school model was efficiency. The population was distributed widely, and few communities were large enough to support multiple schools. Setting up a single public school was an ambitious undertaking that stimulated the tradition of local control still persisting today. According to Kincheloe, Slattery, and Steinberg (2000), early 20th century industrialization brought enormous economic growth to America's urban centers, attracting both residents from rural America and immigrants from around the world. For the first time in the country's history, people other than white Anglos began to dominate numerically in some of the larger urban centers. These researchers claimed schools

were where children, especially immigrant children, would be assimilated or “Americanized” into the social and political melting pot. Since administrators, teachers, and parents expected that many of the children would soon be at work in factories, schools began to resemble factories, complete with bells to signal the start of classes, desks bolted to the floor to maintain straight rows, and remorselessly imposed social order (Kincheloe et al., 2000). Along with the burgeoning industrial capitalism of the late 1800s and early 1900s came the development of an educational philosophy called *social functionalism*: education organized, implemented, and controlled to meet the functional needs of society’s business and economic interests (Weil, 2009). Researchers such as Wells, Lopez, Scott, and Holme (1999) asserted that various historians and social theorists have described U.S. public schools as modeled after factories, producing “human capital” in much the same impersonal and mechanical fashion that factories produce goods. Bowles and Gintis (1976) pointed out that, with the closing of the western frontier, and taking with it opportunity, in the latter part of the 19th century and with the growing conflicts accompanying the spread of the now established “factory system” of organization, a new ideology of opportunity became the order of the day. The folklore of capitalism was revitalized. Education became the new frontier. Educational reformers proposed an end run on economic strife by offering all children an equal opportunity to make it. Those who failed to measure up had only themselves to blame. Thus, a free public education for every child together with mandatory attendance laws symbolized the industrial era in that it prepared children of different races, ethnicities, social classes, and genders for their different places in the industrial work force under the modernist beliefs of equal opportunity (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Tyack, 1974). David Tyack (1974), in his book *The one Best System: A history of American Urban Education*, has documented how in the push for “efficient” and “rational” processes of educating

students for an ever more bureaucratic world, educators sought to create the "one best system" that relied on standardized conceptions of intelligence, appropriate behavior, and valued knowledge. This "one best system" sought to properly classify pupils and design a uniform course of study, along with creating standard examinations for students and teachers.

Weil, (2009) has documented how in the United States contemporary, post industrial production has shifted to technological and service work, and the ideology of efficiency and "lean production" now dominates the country's culture. Accordingly, one hears various schemes for strengthening the link between schools and workplaces such that policymakers now appear to embrace an updated version of the old factory school. Kincleloe et al., (2000) pointed out those school-to-work programs are now important aspects of many public schools. The charter school movement has arisen partly in response to the demands of the new social functionalism and the proclaimed need to prepare students for the exigencies of production in the 21st century.

Education reformer Joseph Viteretti (1999) postulated that the factory model of schooling, which has come into such disfavor among innovators, is the product of well-intentioned reforms of another era. Viteretti (1999) maintained that at the turn of the 20th century education reformers became infatuated with the private industry creed of scientific management which promised to improve organizational performance and promote new levels of efficiency. Translating the factory model of reform from business to education came rather easily to turn-of-the century school administrators. Academicians have documented how through the middle of the 20th century, the factory model of schooling worked remarkably well. It provided unparalleled educational opportunities to generations of immigrants who became literate and productive members of society (Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997). At the same time, the large number of students who did not enroll in school or left without graduating could count on finding a decent

job at the factory. Now, in a new century, the schools that were "good enough" several decades ago are inadequate. As the educational requirements of the future economy continue to increase, few jobs will be available for unskilled labor, and virtually none at good wages (Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997).

The Emergence of Choice in American Schools

Economic theorists, notably Milton Friedman, long contended that more choice in education would lead to improved outcomes by: a) Permitting students to transfer to better schools, b) Introducing competitive pressure for schools to improve, and c) Permitting a better match between the needs of the individual student and the program offered by the school (Gill et al., 2001). Weil (2009) described "choice" as the buzzword for market-based economic and social policies of deregulation and privatization that commenced with Milton Friedman in the 1950s and continues unabated today. Further, in economic terms, public support for education makes sense because education is a "public good": it benefits not only those who are students, but society as a whole, which stands to gain from having a well educated population (Gill et al., 2001). In practice, public responsibility to support education has been executed for most of the nation's history through a system built on the "common school." Gill et al., (2001) described this model which has come to mean an institution operated by the government, under the democratic auspices of the local school board, which aims to serve all students in the locality with a common curriculum. This model implies that both the financing of education and the direct operation of the schools are government functions. Historically, under this model, American public and private schools have operated in almost entirely separate worlds.

Shortly after the start of the 1990s, the American public witnessed one of the most significant and controversial developments in public education: The emergence of the charter

school movement (Weil, 2009). Weil (2009) documented how the charter school idea was relatively simple in its inception—charter school proponents claimed they were looking to stimulate new and innovative educational opportunities and to provide parents and communities with alternatives to TPS through “choice”. Until 1991, there was no such thing as a charter school in the United States (Weil, 2009). Interest in both vouchers and charters is motivated by frustration with the existing system. Gill et al., (2001) have documented how, since *A Nation at Risk* sounded the alarm about the quality of the American public education system nearly three decades ago, many education strategies have tried to improve and reform the system from within. Back to basics curricula, teacher professional development, class-size reduction, raised graduation requirements, comprehensive school reform, high stakes testing, the abolition of social promotion, site-based management, and innumerable reading and math programs—these are only a few examples of strategies and reforms implemented in public schools in an attempt to ratchet up the quality of instruction (Gill et al., 2001).

History of Charter Schools

The charter school movement’s early roots began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at a time when parents and innovative public school educators all over the nation were joining together to design distinctive educational options or choices (Nathan, 1996). After *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983, scores of magazines and news reports jumped on the supercharged privatization bandwagon and concentrated their stories on the supposed “failure of public education.” A *Nation at Risk* sounded a wakeup call to educators and policymakers, but this time the call was not for an improved public educational system, but for a private one (Weil, 2009). During this period, popular support for education reform remained high. Reformist energies were increasingly directed to far more difficult problems that much of the academic mainstream

saw as more fundamental, i.e., the need to reduce bureaucracy and the need to grant schools more autonomy (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Up to this point, the reform movement was largely a movement of ideas and proposals. Of these, the most popular have to do with school-based management, teacher professionalism, and "choice" (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Nathan (1996) contended that charter schools do not represent the first attempt in American history to release public school teachers from the bureaucracy perceived to stifle innovation and to thwart new instructional techniques. According to Nathan (1996), three school models from recent decades set the foundation for the charter school prototype: innovative schools, magnet schools, and alternative schools. Innovative schools were created with teacher, parent, and community input and collaboration. These schools, "gave public school teachers the chance to create the kinds of schools they thought made sense to a variety of students" (Nathan, 1996, p. 56). A second empowerment model, the magnet school, emerged in the mid-1970s as a tool to further integrate to targeted school districts. Armed with significant additional funding, these schools used incentives of specialized curricular themes or instructional methods to attract parents and students. Unlike innovative schools, magnet schools were crafted by school district administrators with little input from parents, teachers, or community members (Nathan, 1996). Alternative schools were designed by school districts to serve specific populations of pupils who were not well served in their zoned schools, such as youngsters with behavioral problems and students at risk of dropping out (Nathan, 1996).

Ray Budde, a retired teacher and expert on school district reorganization, is widely credited with introducing the idea of charter schools in the United States and coining the term "charter" (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). In fact, he first applied the term "charter" to innovative schools in a 1975 conference presentation. In his 1988 book, *Education by charter:*

Restructuring school districts, he pointed out that the term goes back more than 1000 years. He cited the Magna Carta (Great Charter), as the agreement guaranteeing rights and privileges that King John and the English Barons signed at Runnymede in June 1215, and the charter that English explorer Henry Hudson signed with the East India Company authorizing him to seek a hoped-for shortcut from Europe to Asia (as cited in Budde, 1996). In *Education by charter* Ray Budde outlined a model for improving instruction by changing the school organization. This model allowed the local school board to grant a charter to a group of teachers who would manage the school in exchange for a heightened degree of accountability for their failures and successes (as cited in Budde, 1996). These educational contracts would provide teachers with the authority to explore and develop new approaches to educating children with public funds but with minimal state intervention.

Although Budde had written about charter schools since 1975, it was not until American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Al Shanker described the idea during a National Press Club speech on March 31, 1988, that the concept generated much attention (Nathan, 1996). Shanker outlined the charter school concept and the idea was overwhelmingly endorsed by the 70th convention of the American Federation of Teachers (Murphy & Shiffman, 2002). He supported the idea of giving teachers a chance to create innovative new programs and went even further to suggest the creation of entire new schools. He suggested that both the school board and the majority of the teachers working in the school be required to approve the new school (Weil, 2009).

Minnesota responded to the call for education reform by charter in 1991 when it passed the nation's first charter school law. A year later, California passed a similar law. Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Mexico, Wisconsin followed in 1993 and Texas in

1996. Today there are more than 4,500 charter schools in over forty states and the District of Columbia, serving over one million students (Weil, 2009)

Educational Entrepreneurship

As was described earlier in this chapter, the current system of public education was created in a social and economic context that was entirely different from our current one. Smith and Peterson (2006) asserted that compulsory public education arose in the early 1900s as a way of ensuring that the massive influx of immigrants would be good American citizens and productive workers in the country's emerging industrial economy. At the time, only a small portion of school aged-children were attending school and even a smaller fraction of those completing high school, and college was almost exclusively for the children of the elite. The economy was driven by agriculture and industry. This economy offered the opportunity for a variety of skill levels to earn a living wage, often without a formal education. Smith and Peterson (2006) argue that today this picture has changed dramatically. Our nation's postindustrial and increasingly global economy is now driven by knowledge and by higher order thinking skills like symbolic reasoning, analysis, and communication (Smith & Peterson, 2006). According to Smith and Peterson, TPS, with over 48 million students, are expected to do more. Furthermore, they claim, the public's expectations of the school system have ballooned, such that public schools are now expected to prepare all children equally and prepare them for success in college. Smith and Peterson (2006) maintained this change in expectations demands innovative new approaches. To meet these expectations, they state, the delivery system simply needs to be more productive. In other words, these challenging expectations have created opportunities for entrepreneurs to find more efficient and effective ways of ensuring that all children receive a high quality public education. As the American public education system is undergoing this transformation, McGuinn

(2006) asserted that local, state, and federal reforms have been enacted to improve student academic performance and to give parents more educational choice. In addition, one of the most significant policy shifts over the last several decades has been the movement toward standards and accountability (Weil. 2009). This movement, according to Weil (2009), has begun to define desired learning outcomes and freed up the means for getting there. Smith and Peterson (2006) postulated that policy makers have created opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop new approaches to schooling, e.g., state charter school laws allow individuals and groups to create new public schools that are supported with public dollars but managed independently of the local education agency. McGuinn (2006) posited that amidst these reforms that states have adopted in recent years, charter schools have been most widely adopted and potentially offer the greatest avenue for introducing a more entrepreneurial spirit into the American public education system. The charter school movement, according to McGuinn (2006), was predicated on the idea of giving educational entrepreneurs the ability to operate public schools that agree to meet specified performance targets in exchange for freedom from bureaucratic rules and regulations. By specifying the expected school performance in the school's "charter", these policies encourage entrepreneurship by allowing charter operators to use their own approach to achieve those goals. The first charter school law in the United States was passed in Minnesota in 1991, and the movement has witnessed remarkable growth in recent years. In addition, reform in the name of charter schools has gained significant public support and political momentum during the last two decades. The idea is embraced by a number of Republican and Democratic leaders (Weil, 2009). These policies have spawned an entire sub-industry of nearly 4,500 charter schools in over forty states and the District of Columbia, serving over one million students (Weil, 2009).

Frederick Hess (2006) emphasized that this is the era of educational entrepreneurship to an unprecedented degree. He maintained that dynamic and unconventional thinkers have waded into the world of K-12 schooling. They have founded influential organizations, and they have upset established conventions. Hess (2006) maintained these educational entrepreneurs have developed new models for delivering instruction and recruiting teachers by applying old-fashioned practices with inspired fidelity. Hess (2006) described educational entrepreneurship as a process of purposeful innovation directed toward improving educational productivity, efficiency, and quality. In education, he claimed, entrepreneurs seek to teach children who have been ill served, improve the quality of teachers and school leaders, give educators more effective tools, and deliver services in more efficient, useful and accessible ways. Smith and Peterson (2006) defined educational entrepreneurs, "as a rare breed of innovator whose characteristics and activities may lead to the transformation—not merely the slight improvement—of the public education system" (p. 22). Smith and Peterson (2006) contended that educational entrepreneurs have great potential to make an impact today because they are focused on making a significant difference on outcomes of the K-12 system as a whole, particularly for those students and communities who are currently underserved. According to Smith and Peterson (2006) these educational entrepreneurs are also are highly focused on outcomes. Although their organizations sit "outside" the TPS system, educational entrepreneurs are still accountable to it. They may need to attract students to a new public charter school, or entice principal candidates to apply for new preparation programs, or deliver improved outcomes in order to maintain a district as a customer. As such, Smith and Peterson claimed, they have a customer-focused orientation and a consistent focus on outcomes. These critical factors allowed them to compete with existing education

providers for attention and funds. In short they seek to tackle the same problems as other educators; the difference is how they go about it.

Leisey and Lavaroni (2000) described an entrepreneur as an individual who can see a problem along with a compelling idea for addressing it and to set about its remedy by creating and growing a business (as cited in Hentschke, 2009). Thus, they said, an entrepreneur is a person who organizes and manages an enterprise, especially a business, usually with considerable initiative and risk. Hentschke (2009) maintained that until recently educational leaders have had little reason to model entrepreneurial attributes. He claimed that, among other things, public school systems favor other traits in their leaders such as faithful stewardship of public resources, procedural compliance, and inclusiveness over entrepreneurial attributes. Hentschke (2009) argued that in our increasingly market-sensitive economy, public school enterprises are now also requiring entrepreneurial-like talents and skills. He stated, "Schools are now more like businesses and their leaders are more like business leaders—for better or for worse. Entrepreneurial leadership in education, then, sits at the nexus of a relatively old, established topic (entrepreneurial leadership) applied to a relatively novel setting (compulsory education)" (p. 149).

Peter Drucker (1985) described an entrepreneur as one who shifts economic resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher productivity and greater yield. Drucker explained that an entrepreneur is, however, not just an innovator, but one who brings that innovation successfully to market. Hess (2006) further suggested that educational entrepreneurship is a process of purposeful innovation directed toward improving educational productivity, efficiency, and quality. As Peter Drucker (1985) explained,

> The husband and wife team who open another delicatessen store in the American suburb are rarely entrepreneurs; however, the creation of McDonald's was entrepreneurial because, by applying management concepts and management techniques (asking, What is "value" to the customer?), standardizing the "product," designing the process and tools, and basing training on the analysis of the work to be done, then setting the standards it required, McDonalds both drastically upgraded the yield from resources and created a new market and a new customer (p. 21).

Smith and Peterson (2006) described an entrepreneur as one who has a vision for a better way of doing things and thinking beyond the constraints of the current rules and resources. Perhaps more importantly, they have the passion and sense of urgency that literally compels them to take the risks necessary to realize that vision. According to Smith and Peterson (2006), entrepreneurs exhibit these traits:

1. Visionary thinkers: Entrepreneurs' most unique characteristic is that they are able to think beyond the current rules and resources to see a different way of working.

2. Start new organizations: Good entrepreneurs are both mavericks and institution builders. Their sense of urgency and drive to achieve leads them to take action by creating new organizations that will make their vision a reality.

3. Believe they can change the way things are done: Entrepreneurs face the potential failure inherent in creating a new organization by focusing on likely success and overcoming all hurdles that stand in the way.

Teske and Williamson (2006) maintained that currently students of entrepreneurship recognize that some business people play an entrepreneurial role within an already large

organization by creating a new product, service, approach or even a new industry. Author Gifford Pinchot III (1985) distinguished entrepreneurs within large organizations and coined the term “intrapreneur”. Intrapreneurs exist, act, and thrive inside large, nominally bureaucratic organizations. Pinchot asserted that although entrepreneurs are heavily associated with for-profit businesses and new business start-ups, it does not automatically follow that all educational organizations are hostile to entrepreneurs or that entrepreneurs cannot thrive in organizations outside the world of for-profit businesses. The intrapreneur, according to Pinchot, introduces new products or services that enable an organization to adapt to change and to grow. For example, the intrapreneur could be the unrelenting advocate within a public school system that tries to gain support for the development of an innovative alternative school for students with severe behavioral disorders that may not have been traditionally served within the school district (Brown & Cornwall, 2000). Pinchot (1985) described the intrapreneur as a heroic individual who, despite all odds is able to fight the status quo and bureaucracy of the large organization and to champion the new product or service through the corporate gauntlet. The individual entrepreneur, on the other hand, operates in the broader and more flexible economic marketplace. Studies of entrepreneurial activity in for-profit corporations have found no difference in the propensity for risk taking between entrepreneurial managers and managers not involved in entrepreneurial ventures. Brown and Cornwall (2000) contended that given the right opportunity and the right circumstances, most school administrators can become involved in entrepreneurial activities within their educational system. Further, they claimed, studies of entrepreneurship have demonstrated that entrepreneurship is a way of managing that can be learned by most managers and school administrators. Brown and Cornwall (2000) described entrepreneurship as a process of successfully taking advantage of opportunities for the benefit of the stakeholders of an

organization. These processes can be learned by almost any experienced manager or administrator. Although many people in an organization can become intrapreneurs, Pinchot (1985) identified a set of skills and attributes common to the most successful intrapreneurs as follows:

1. Passion and commitment: Successful intrapreneurs have a strong emotional commitment to the opportunity. They come up with an idea, evaluate it to demonstrate that it was an opportunity, and advocated it inside their organization.

2. Serve self and organization: Successful intrapreneurs develop a dual loyalty. Although they committed to the organization and its goals, they are also incredibly loyal to their projects.

3. Team building: Successful intrapreneurs generally have the ability to build strong teams and work well with a variety of people inside and outside the organization.

4. Leadership: Successful intrapreneurs have the ability to inspire their teams and create within the team the same passion and commitment.

5. Long term perspective: Successful intrapreneurs are patient.

6. Problem solvers: Successful intrapreneurs must be good problem solvers. They are the ultimate experts for their projects.

7. Management skills: Successful intrapreneurs must be able to bring together the resources, support, and information needed to successfully implement their projects.

8. Communication skills: Successful intrapreneurs are generally excellent communicators. Intrapreneurs must be able to communicate the vision to team members and other stake holders (both inside and outside the organization).

9. Tolerate risk and certainty: Successful intrapreneurs tolerate a moderate amount of risk and thrive on it. They also must be able to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity.

10. Decision makers: Intrapreneurs must be good decision makers. Sometimes decisions often must be made without complete information.

Weil (2009) described education in the United States as undergoing a remarkable transformation, as longstanding policies regarding how public schools are funded, staffed, and governed are revised in an effort to improve academic performance and increase student and parent choice. This policy environment, which is crucial to the future of educational entrepreneurship, has become more accommodating over the past decade to a wide array of new educational approaches both inside and outside of the TPS system (McGuin, 2006)).

Texas Charter Schools

The Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) (2008), found that the political appeal of charter schools coupled with increasing public interest in choice-based school reform has made charter schools a fast growth industry, both nationally and in Texas. Texas' charter school statute, adopted in 1995, was enthusiastically endorsed by Governor George W. Bush. Seventeen charter schools opened for the first time in the fall of 1996 (Estes, 2006). Texas' charter school law initially provided for three classes of charter schools: home-rule, campus, and open enrollment charter schools. In 2001, Texas legislators amended the state's charter school law to provide for university charter schools, a form of open enrollment charter granted to public

senior colleges or universities (TCER, 2008). Although the regulatory provisions vary by class, each type of charter school operates relatively free of most state and local requirements.

Classes of Texas Charter Schools

Home-rule charter schools: A home-rule charter is established when an entire school district elects to convert to charter status. Home-rule charter proposals may be adopted if approved by majority vote in an election in which at least 25% of the district's registered voters participate. The voter participation requirement of the home-rule charter is a substantial hurdle for districts, thus no Texas districts has sought home-rule conversion (TCER, 2008).

Campus charter schools: Individual schools within a traditional school district may opt to convert to charter school status under Texas provisions for a campus or campus program charter. In order to become a campus charter school, a majority of the school's teachers and the parents of a majority of students in the school must sign a petition requesting conversion. Campus charter schools remain the legal responsibility of the district's school board and receive state and local funding. Fifty-six campus charter schools operated during the 2006-2007 school year. Most of these campus charter schools were located in either Houston Independent School District or in the San Antonio Independent School District (TCER, 2008).

Open-enrollment charter schools: Texas open enrollment charter schools are entirely new public schools created by "eligible entities," such as nonprofit organizations, universities, or local government groups. These schools receive state funding and are eligible for federal categorical programs, such as special education and Title I funding for disadvantaged students. Because open-enrollment charter schools have no taxable property, they do not receive local property tax revenues and are more reliant on state funding than traditional school districts. Open enrollment charter schools comprise the largest proportion of Texas charter schools (TCER, 2008).

College or university charter schools: In 2001, the Legislature amended the Texas' charter school law to allow for an open-enrollment charter school to operate on the campus of a public senior college or university or in the same county in which the campus of the college or university is located. University charter schools are subject to largely the regulatory provisions as open-enrollment charter schools, but must be supervised by a faculty member with expertise in educational matters and the school's financial operations must be overseen by the university's business office. Only 17 university charter schools operated during the 2006-2007 school year (TCER, 2008).

Texas operates one of the nation's largest charter school programs. During the 2008/2009 academic year 427 charter schools were operating in Texas with a total student enrollment of 113,760 (Weil, 2009). Texas' open enrollment charter schools, some of which have more than one campus, function as independent Local Education Agencies (LEA) and are responsible for all the services provided by the larger, more experienced, and in most cases better funded local school districts. Unlike other LEAs, such as a school board of a TPS district, charter school boards have no power to collect taxes, exercise the right to eminent domain, nor do they receive capital funds from the state (Estes, 2006). The majority of charter schools in Texas are located in major metropolitan areas including, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, and their surrounding communities (Estes, 2006). The legislature, who crafted the law, hoped to improve the performance of at-risk students by offering innovation and increasing school choice to parents and students. As a result, law makers mandated a cap of 215 open enrollment charter schools in which 75 percent of the students enrolled met the states definition of "at risk of dropping out of school" (Estes, 2006). The charter school statute was amended in 2001 to remove the reference to at risk schools, but a number of charter schools whose mission is to

serve troubled youths remain open. Further, charter schools targeting "at-risk" students continue to open, although they are designated simply as open enrollment schools, a term now applied to all charters (Estes, 2006). Though Texas has given birth to some of the nation's most outstanding charter schools, it needs to overhaul its policies so that those at the bottom rung do not drag down the state's entire charter sector (Hendrie, 2005). With more than 100,000 students on more than 400 campuses, Texas charter schools trail only those in California in enrollment (Weil, 2009). On the whole, Texas charter schools have lagged well behind their TPS counterparts on the state tests. But studies also found that students in charter schools are making gains at a faster rate (Hendrie, 2005).

Major Findings of Texas Charter Schools

Campus charter schools have grown at a much slower rate than open enrollment charter schools. Texas' open-enrollment charter schools experienced a period of rapid expansion from 1998 through 2000. This growth was largely the result of 1997 legislation that raised the number of permissible charters to 100 and allowed for an unlimited number of "75 percent Rule" charters designed to serve large proportions (75 percent or more) of the students at risk of failure or dropping out. During the 2000-01 school year, nearly a third of Texas' 160 operating charter schools (32 percent) were characterized as 75 percent Rule charters (TCER, 2008). Due to concerns of rapid growth and accountability, the Legislature capped the number of open-enrollment schools at 215 and eliminated the 75 percent Rule in 2001. These changes have slowed the expansion of open-enrollment charter schools, but because Texas allows charter schools to operate multiple campuses under a single charter, the growth of open-enrollment charter campuses has remained steady as existing schools replicate their programs in multiple

locations (TCER, 2008). TCER (2008) documented the following major characteristics of Texas charter schools:

- Forty five percent of open-enrollment and 66 percent of campus charter schools operating in 2006-07 had been in operation for five or fewer years.

- Open enrollment charter schools enroll about 243 students and campus charter schools enroll about 389 students, on average, compared with enrollments of about 568 students in TPS.

- Charter schools enroll larger proportions of minority and low-income students and smaller proportions of White students than TPS statewide.

- Administrators and teachers at open-enrollment charter schools earn substantially less than their peers in TPS. Open-enrollment teachers are less experienced and have higher rates of turnover statewide.

- Open-enrollment charter schools received about $752 less per student in average daily attendance (ADA) than TPS in 2005-2006. Because open-enrollment charter schools are not able to levy property taxes, they do not have access to local funding as TPS. Texas tries to offset differences by providing open-enrollment charter schools with proportionately more state revenue than it provides to TPS.

- Students in open-enrollment charter schools had lower Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) passing rates in all tested areas compared to TPS statewide.

- Compared to TPS, open-enrollment charter schools have lower graduation rates, lower percentages of students who complete the Recommended High School Program, and lower advanced course completion rates.

Because charter schools offer different kinds of programs and attract different kinds of students than TPS, it is difficult to make fair comparisons between charter and TPS' student achievement outcomes. Researchers have documented how student achievement is affected by many factors, including parental education and income levels, neighborhood characteristics, a students' academic talents and prior levels of education, that are not necessarily related to the quality of a particular school's educational program (TCER, 2008). According to TCER (2008), comparisons of average test scores across charter and TPS that do not account for student differences may produce biased estimates of school outcomes. The evidence on student achievement in charter schools has been mixed at best, and some studies have provoked heated debate about the methods used to compare charter schools versus TPS outcomes (TCER, 2008).

Charter Schools and No Child Left Behind

The history of charter schools tells us that the charter school movement operated at its inception, as it does today, on the idea that increased autonomy and flexibility in exchange for heightened accountability would lead to the creation and maintenance of more effective schools (Weil, 2009). Weil (2009) documented that the movement has always been about more than school effectiveness, for it seeks to promote school effectiveness by providing distinctive choices for parents and students and relying, in part, on the market. As public schools, charter schools across the country are subject to No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) testing requirements. Students in charter schools must participate in state-designed assessments and charter schools have to meet NCLB-required and state-defined adequate yearly progress (AYP) standards or face

sanctions TCER, 2008. NCLB legislation stems from a real need to improve public schools in this country by holding them accountable for clearly delineated and measurable student outcomes (Stillings, 2005). NCLB legislation also aims to provide all children with at least the minimal skills necessary to succeed in an economically demanding world. According to Stillings (2005), it seems only fair that charter schools nationwide are subject to the same requirements as their TPS counterparts. Important philosophical tensions between the charter school movement and NCLB come to light when one considers the purpose and design of charter schools. Stillings (2005) argued that at its core, charter schooling asserts that our nation's public schools can be improved if they are granted more local-level autonomy and flexibility. Stillings contended that NCLB's requirements for accountability standards and testing strip charter schools of some degree of autonomy. Specifically, under NCLB, charter schools may be less able to offer innovative curricula and the type of student assessments then when they were in the pre-NCLB era. Stillings noted that the criterion-referenced tests that NCLB requires, by definition, come with a set of prescribed standards for teachers to teach and students to meet. Further, Stillings contended that it is possible that NCLB legislation prevents new and old charter schools alike from designing curricula and forms of assessment that set them apart from their TPS counterparts. In doing so, NCLB is forcing charter schools to look more and more like the TPS that they were built to differ from not only in terms of curricular offerings, but also in terms of the autonomy they exercise at the local level. Fusarelli (2004) asserted that NCLB subverts what many feel is the most important tenet of the charter school movement, the autonomy for local actors to decide what they will teach and assess in schools. It is this autonomy which charter school advocates feel leads to the ability to innovate and experiment in education (as cited in Stillings, 2005).

Leadership Practices in Traditional Public Schools

In an era of standards-based reform and accountability systems, the push for improved student achievement and the development of effective leadership practices in the United States has never been greater (Park & Datnow, 2009).With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), educational leaders are now required to analyze, interpret, and use data to make informed decisions in all areas of education, ranging from professional development to student learning. Park and Datnow (2009) posited that questions regarding the impact of leaders and leadership practices on the conditions of schooling and student outcomes have taken center stage within the field of education administration research. In the context of school reform researchers argue that the purpose of educational leadership is to improve student learning and to foster equity in educational outcomes (Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). School leaders can make important contributions to student learning although this impact is mostly indirect (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Leaders primarily exert their influence by setting directions for school improvement, cultivating shared goals and norms, developing human capacity, and modifying structures to create conditions to support student achievement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Leithwood and Riehl defined educational leadership as, "focusing on the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school's shared intentions and goals" (p. 13). Therefore, leadership is not solely an individual or personal endeavor but is a collective phenomenon (Leithwood & Reil, 2005). Further, Park and Datnow (2009) contended that leading requires actors to actively construct interpretations of school improvement that fosters both educator and student learning as well as developing conditions that support such efforts.

Park and Datnow (2009) argued that The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has served as a catalyst for school leaders to emphasize data- driven decision-making practices. This strategy resides on the assumption that the gathering and use of data bolster continuous improvement efforts by helping to assess existing capacities, monitor progress, and evaluate the efficacy of programs (Earl & Katz, 2006). This emphasis on data-driven decision-making practices to bring about improved student outcomes has begun to shape the landscape of education reform (Park & Datnow, 2009). Harris (2007) contended that, with the advent of the information age, the impetus for improvement cannot be solely located within exceptional principals or expert teachers. Contemporary research and practice of educational leadership has begun to recognize the need to move beyond individualistic, role-embedded concept of leadership and leadership practices to one that focuses more broadly on sharing of knowledge, expertise, and action (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2007; Harris, 2008). Given the increasing interdependency between districts and schools in leading data-driven decision-making practices, it is important to examine how leadership practices are being changed and how these changes are affecting reform efforts (Park & Datnow, 2009).

Given this movement towards emphasizing shared responsibilities, the concept of distributed leadership points to important new directions in leadership and leadership practice (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2007; Harris, 2008). First, the concept moves away from viewing leadership practice as an inherent property of formal authority figures or institutionalized roles. Rather, leadership operates within a network of actors with shared and complementary knowledge and expertise. In other words, the unit of analysis is not the individual but the social interaction within the organization as a whole (Spillane, 2006). Second, emphasis is placed on interdependency, dispersed responsibilities, and reciprocity rather than control and compliance.

Consequently, a distributed leadership perspective enables organizations to build on the strengths and skills of a variety of members. Leithwood, Mascall, & Struass (2009) argued that,

> As compared with exclusively hierarchical or "focused" forms of leadership, distributed leadership is thought to more accurately reflect the division of labor which is experienced in organizations from day to day and to reduce the chances of error arising from decisions based on the limited information available to a single leader (p. 2).

Leithwood et al., asserted that distributed leadership also enhances opportunities for the organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members, permits members to capitalize on the range of their individual strengths, and develops among organizational members a fuller appreciation of interdependence and how one's behavior affects the organization as a whole. Leithwood et al. (2009), Spillane (2006), Harris (2007), and Harris (2008), contended that leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed. At the core of this philosophy is the central notion that leadership is not the preserve of an individual but results from multiple interactions at different points in the organization (Spillane, 2006, Harris, 2007, & Harris, 2008).

In summary, those in formal leadership roles in schools have an indirect effect on pupil learning but a direct effect on the organizational conditions that support learning. There is emerging evidence that broadening or distributing leadership can positively impact these organizational conditions (Spillane, 2006, Harris, 2007, Harris, 2008, & Leithwood et al. 2009). As Leithwood and Riehl (2005) explained, leaders create conditions to improve student achievement by developing human capacity through the distribution of leadership responsibilities

Summary

Certain values are paramount in any discussion of education in the United States: Equality, excellence, and pluralism (Ravitch, 2010). Ravitch argued that as a nation we support the principle of equality of educational opportunity and excellence. In the United States today we have an education system from kindergarten through twelfth grade that embraces these ideas in theory but fails to achieve them in reality. According to Ravitch (2010), by all measures, our students do not achieve at high levels of excellence, and there continues to be large gaps in achievement between children from different social classes and ethnic groups. For many children, especially children who are poor and belong to racial minorities, both equality and excellence in education remain out of reach.

This literature review has provided background knowledge on the emergence of choice in public education, with an emphasis on charter schools. The emergence and growth of charter schools has been one of the most important developments in public education over the last twenty years has been (Weil, 2009). As cited in this paper, there are many possibilities that charter schools bring to public education in the United States including expanded choices, the opportunity to experiment and innovate, and the ability to shape a more responsive and challenging system. Charter schools may create the dynamics that will foster change within the entire educational system in the United States (Betts, 2009). Charter schools have become the most revolutionary idea in education since the 1990s, and they offer a concrete alternative to the factory model of public schooling inherited from the 19th century (Weil, 2009). Thus with charter schools increasingly becoming a popular option for parents here in the LRGV versus TPS, as practicing administrators in local TPS, it is important to embrace the idea that there are leadership lessons that can be learned from this movement. Therefore, the goal of this study is to

gain insight and understanding into those specific charter school leadership concepts, attributes, actions, and best practices that have contributed to the popularity and success of a particular open-enrollment charter school organization and conceivably emulate some of these same leadership concepts, strategies, actions, and best practices in a TPS setting.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate autonomously, free from the direct control and regulation of conventional public school districts. Unlike TPS, which are administered by local and state government agencies, charter schools are developed and managed by a group of private individuals and operate like private schools under the authority of a quasi-contract, or “charter”, which is granted by a public body (Zhang & Yang, 2008). Theoretically, under this decentralized and autonomous framework, charter schools are free from bureaucratic controls which allows them to pursue new and different forms of schooling that challenge the long standing teaching and learning systems of TPS (Betts, 2009). However, as with other Texas public schools, charter schools are accountable to the TEA. If their students do not perform as per TEA accountability standards, charter schools can be denied public funds (Weil, 2009). Additionally, charter schools are accountable to any entity or interest group whose support it must maintain to exist.

Therefore, the goal of this study was to gain insight and understanding into those specific charter school leadership attributes and actions that have contributed to the popularity and success, (as rated TEA, 2012a), of an open-enrollment charter school organization and conceivably apply these same leadership strategies and actions in a TPS setting.

Research Design

Merriam (1988) argued that there are few areas of practice that offer as many opportunities for research as does the field of Education. Having an interest in knowing more about the field and in improving the practice of education leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative or naturalistic inquiry. Furthermore, Merriam asserts that, "Research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (p. 3). Patton (1990) described basic research as knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Researchers engaged in basic research want to understand how the world operates. They are interested in investigating a phenomenon in order to get at the nature of reality with regard to that phenomenon. The basic researcher's purpose is to understand and explain (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined "naturalistic inquiry" as a "discovery-oriented" approach that minimizes investigator manipulation of the study setting and places no prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be. Therefore, the researcher conducted this study using a naturalistic, discovery-oriented

approach to holistically understand human experience in a charter school setting. Merriam (1988) contended that most qualitative studies in education approach a problem of practice from the holistic perspective, i.e., researchers use this design in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and its meaning for those involved. Merriam stressed that,

> In qualitative studies the interest is in the process rather than outcomes, in context rather than variables, in discovery rather than confirmation…Such insights into aspects of

educational practice can have a direct influence on policy, practice, and future research (p. xii).

In this study, the informant's charter school experience and practices provided an understanding of those leadership characteristics, attributes, and practices that have transformed this particular charter school into one of the most effective, as TEA has consistently rated the charter school an *Exemplary* school district—its highest rating, and popular public school options for parents in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2012a; Morten, 2011a; Morten, 2011b).

Therefore, the methodology selected for this study was predominately qualitative in nature. Qualitative studies allow the researcher to study selected issues in depth and detail (Patton, 1990). Creswell (2003) suggested that the actual methods of data collection in qualitative studies are traditionally based on in- depth open-ended interviews, observations, informal interviews, and documents which may include e-mails, scrapbooks, and other emerging forms.

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) suggested that questionnaires and interviews are used extensively in educational research to collect data about phenomena that are not directly observable: inner experience, opinions, values, interests, and the like. While the interview is more commonly associated with qualitative studies, the questionnaire is more commonly used in quantitative research because of its standardized nature. However, Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) contended that both methods can be used in either type of research. Therefore, the primary method of inquiry and data collection strategy used for this study was the semi-formal, open-ended, in-depth interview. By using the aforementioned method of inquiry, the researcher was able to accumulate an abundance of detailed information about the leadership attributes,

characteristics, and actions of the leadership team of one particular high performing charter school system (Patton, 1990).

The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms (Patton, 1990). Patton (1990) suggested that the purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind. The purpose of in-depth, open-ended interviewing, he argued, is not to put things in someone else's mind, but rather to access the perspective of the person being interviewed, to discover phenomena that cannot be readily observed such as perspectives, feelings, thoughts, and intentions. Additionally, Patton contended that one cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world—rather questions have to be asked about those things. Johnson (2002) maintained that a researcher who uses in-depth interviewing commonly seeks "deep" information and knowledge—usually deeper information and knowledge than is sought in surveys and informal interviewing. He noted that when an in-depth interviewer talks to an informant, the goal is to collect data through the use of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge.

Approaching fieldwork without the constraints of predetermined categories of analysis such as fixed response categories to which numbers are assigned contributes to the depth, openness, and detail of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 1990). Unlike quantitative research, "Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people….This increases understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduces generalizability" (Patton, 1990, p. 14). In a qualitative methodology inductive logic prevails, and categories emerge from informants, rather than identified *a priori* by the researcher. This

emergence provides rich “context-bound” information leading to patterns or theories that help explain a phenomenon (Creswell, 1994).

Merriam (1988) suggested that to obtain a holistic picture of a program would involve the experiences and perceptions of people having different associations with the program—administrators, teachers, students, and community residents. For the study, the researcher interviewed the Chief Executive Officer and four campus principals of an exemplary (as defined by the TEA, 2012a) South Texas charter school system. The subjects all had leadership responsibilities within the particular charter school system. As a result of the interviews, the researcher was able to develop a holistic description of leadership characteristics and strategies that transformed the charter school into one of the most effective of all charter schools in Texas, according to TEA (2012a). TEA has consistently given the charter school its’ highest rating as an *Exemplary* school district. The charter school chosen for the study is a popular public school option for parents in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, as this charter school district has had a student enrollment growth of over 250% in the last five years (TEA, 2012b).

According to Patton (1990), as opposed to the succinct, systematic and standardized nature of quantitative findings, qualitative findings usually are longer, more detailed, and variable in content. The open-ended responses advocated by qualitative methods permit the researcher to understand the world as seen by the respondents. Johnson (2002) stated, “If the interviewer is not a current or former member or participant in what is being investigated, he or she might use in-depth interviewing as a way to learn the meaning of participants’ actions” (p. 106). Therefore, the purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories. Johnson suggested that

the informant could be likened to a teacher, and the interviewer a student, one interested in the lived experience or gaining member knowledge from an informant (2002).

Interviewing for qualitative studies may use highly structured formats as in the questionnaire-driven interview e.g., to gather common socio-demographic data, or less structured formats using open-ended conversational type questions. Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways (Merriam, 1988). The purpose of the interview is, "not to put things in someone else's mind (for example, the interviewer's perceived categories for organizing the world) but rather to access the perspective of the person being interviewed" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Merriam (1988) surmised that in the semi-structured interview certain information is desired from all the respondents. Such interviews are guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. The format of the semi-structured interview allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas which may expand on the topic.

Creswell (2003) posited that in qualitative studies the researcher can conduct face-to-face interviews with participants, interview participants by telephone, or engage in focus group interviews with six to eight participants in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from participants. Johnson (2002) stressed that a researcher who uses in-depth interviewing commonly seeks "deep" information and knowledge. The information and knowledge is usually deeper information and knowledge than what is typically gleaned from surveys, informal interviews, or focus groups. The information generally addresses very personal matters, such as lived experiences, values and decisions, occupational ideology, or perspectives. Thus, the

researcher of the study interviewed the informants using a face-to-face, semi-structured format utilizing in-depth open-ended questions. Using this data collecting strategy the researcher was able to solicit direct quotations from the participants about their experiences, opinions, feelings, perceptions, and knowledge relative to their association with a particular charter school organization. Direct quotations are a basic source of raw data in qualitative inquiry, revealing respondents' depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions (Patton, 1990). Utilizing this strategy, the goal of the researcher was to provide a framework within which to gather high quality information from people—data that would reveal experiences with program activities and perspectives that represented accurately and thoroughly the respondent's point of view about the leadership traits and characteristics of the charter school organization under study.

For this study, the researcher used the constructivist perspective to frame the inquiry. Crotty (1998) suggested that social constructivist's roots are based on the ideas of Karl Mannheim, Berger and Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) and Lincoln and Guba's *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985) (as cited in Creswell, 2003). Creswell (2003) stated that the fundamental premise underlying the social constructivist perspective maintains that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings for their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings to a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. Creswell (2003) suggested that the more open-ended the questioning, the better the results, as the researcher listens carefully to

what people say or do in their life setting. Creswell (2003) described the constructivist perspective as,

> …constructivist researchers often address the "processes" of interaction among individuals. They focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants….The researcher's intent, then, is to make sense of, or interpret the meanings that others have about the world. Rather than starting with theory, as in postpostivism, constructivist researchers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning (p. 8).

Research Questions

Merriam (1988) stated that qualitative studies usually begin with a problem identified from practice, after which broad questions are raised. Questions about process (why or how something happens) commonly guide qualitative research, as do questions of understanding (what happened, why, and how). Creswell (2003) maintained that in qualitative studies research questions assume two forms: a central question and associated sub-questions. The central question is a statement of the question being examined in the study in its most general form. The inquirer poses the question, consistent with emerging methodology of qualitative research, as a general issue so as to not limit the inquiry. Creswell further suggested that the central question/s and the subsequent sub-questions become topics specifically explored in interviews, observations, and documents.

The researcher developed the research questions as result of a review of the literature on the emergence and growth of charter schools and related literature. As described in the literature review chapter, charter schools are increasingly becoming a popular option for parents opting out of the TPS system. There is no disputing the fact that the charter school movement in Texas, and

South Texas in particular, is emerging as a viable threat to TPS (TCER 2008; Morten, 2011a; Morten, 2011b; TEA, 2012b). Newspaper accounts cite a particular charter school organization in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas as having a waiting list of more than 15,000 students hoping to get in to this charter school organization (Morten, 2011a; Morten, 2011b). Additionally, the TEA (2012b) indicated that this particular charter has had a student enrollment growth of over 250% in the last five years. The charter school movement is predicated on the idea of giving educators the ability to operate public schools that agree to meet specified performance targets in exchange for freedom from bureaucratic rules and regulations. The literature suggested that due to this “de-centralized and autonomous” context that undergirds charter schools, they also offer the greatest avenue for introducing a more “entrepreneurial spirit” into the American educational system (McGuinn, 2006). As McGuinn suggested, this “entrepreneurial spirit” has helped transform charter schools into a significant option for parents seeking an alternative to traditional public schools. Additionally, the current policy environment encourages traditional public schools to behave in entrepreneurial ways, as evidenced by NCLB and federal and state policies that encourage choice programs (TCER, 2008). In this environment, TPS administrators can enhance their leadership capacity, and thus they can provide a better service to the school community by applying these same “entrepreneur-like” attitudes and strategies in a TPS setting.

The research questions were developed to explore the leadership concepts, attributes, actions, and best practices of a particular high performing charter school in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Additionally, each participant had previous working experience in TPS. Therefore, each participant was asked to describe their TPS experiences as compared to their charter school setting. To get a holistic picture of the organizational leadership of this particular

exemplary charter school, the researcher interviewed people with different roles and responsibilities within the organization which include: the Chief Executive Officer and four campus principals. Thus, the subjects all had leadership responsibilities within this particular charter school system.

The guiding central question was: What leadership attributes and actions do charter school administrators demonstrate that have transformed a particular charter school into the popular public school option that it is today?

Associated sub-questions used to develop the response to this guiding question were:

1. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?
2. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to staffing?
3. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting?

Subject Selection

Merriam (1988) maintained that the most appropriate sampling strategy for a qualitative study is a non-probability sampling, of which there are several forms, one of which is purposeful sampling. Patton (1990) maintained that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information rich cases, he contends, are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research. For example he says,

> If the purpose of an evaluation is to increase the effectiveness of a program in reaching lower-socioeconomic groups, one may learn a great deal more by focusing in depth on understanding the needs, interests, and incentives of a small group of carefully selected poor families than by gathering standardized information from a large, statistically representative sample of the whole program (p. 169).

The rationale of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study (Patton, 1990). Therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy was utilized to select the participants for this study. Specifically, a random purposive sampling technique was used for this study. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) described this technique as, "Selecting more participants than is need for the study; for example, if 25 participants were purposely selected by the researcher but only 10 participants could take part in the study, a random sample of 10 from the 25 potential participants would be chosen." (p. 137). The sampling was conducted from those individuals who are campus principals with *School of Excellence Public Schools* (SOE) in the LRGV of Texas. Additionally, the Chief Executive Officer was also interviewed. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most (Patton, 1990).

The SOE had a total of twenty two campuses in the LRGV of Texas as illustrated in Table 1. These twenty two campuses were located in ten sites. Each site consisted of one campus housing grades K- 5 called an academy and another campus housing grades 6-12 called college prep. The entire charter school district has a total student enrollment of over 6,000 students (SOE website).

Table 1: Public Schools of Excellence

Campus Name	Grades	Year Founded
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2010
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2006
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2000
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2011
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2006
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2012
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2008
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2010
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2008
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2009
School of Excellence LRGV	Academy/College Prep	2011

Unlike TPS that have seven publicly elected members on their Board of Trustees, the SOE had a fifteen member appointed Board of Directors that represents a cross section of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas business community.

Their organizational structure was as follows (source: School of Excellence Public School's web site):

- Senior Leadership/Central Administration (8)
  - Chief Executive Officer
  - Chief Operations Officer
  - Chief Financial Officer
  - Chief Development officer
  - Chief Schools Officer
  - Chief People & Systems Officer
  - Chief Growth Officer
  - Chief Human Assets Officer
  -

- Principals (22)
  - 11 Secondary
  - 11 Elementary

- Teachers (450+)

The study was confined to those campuses located in the LRGV of Texas, and the study population constituted of subjects that had the role of principal within the SOE. The study also included the Chief Executive Officer of the charter school organization. In early September 2012, a recruitment letter explaining the purpose of the study and requesting their participation in the study was emailed to all twenty two principals located in the LRGV of Texas (see Appendix C). Twelve principals responded via e-mail and agreed to participate in the study. A random selection strategy was then utilized to select the four study participants in the category of campus principal (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The Chief Executive Officer was also asked to participate in the study via a semi-formal, open ended, in-depth interview. The researcher then emailed the four selected participants to set up a pre-interview. There were three reasons why the researcher utilized the pre-interview strategy. The first reason for the pre-interview was to establish rapport with the participants. Patton (1990) posited that,

> An interviewer wants to establish rapport with the person I am questioning, but the rapport must be established in such a way that it does not undermine my neutrality concerning what the person tells me. Neutrality means that the person being interviewed can tell me anything without engendering either my favor or disfavor with regard to the content of their response….Rapport means I respect the people being interviewed, so what they say is important because of who is saying it (p. 317).

The second reason for the pre-interview was to explain the purpose of the study and obtain the signed informed consent forms from the study participants. The final reason for the pre-interview was to secure a time, date, and locale for the full semi-formal, in depth, open-ended interview. All the pre-interviews were conducted during the month of September, 2012.

Five individual, semi-formal, open ended interviews were conducted during the months of October and November 2012 (See Appendix A and B). Patton (1990) contended that the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to understand how participants view the program, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences. Therefore, to avoid work related distractions and time constraints, all the principal interviews were conducted after work hours and off campus (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The public library in the city where the principals worked was the location selected for the interviews. The Chief Executive Officer was interviewed at one of the charter organization's campuses. All the interviews were audio-recorded.

Gaining Access

For the study, the researcher emailed the Chief Executive Officer of the SOE asking for an appointment to conduct a pre-interview. The pre-interview was conducted during the month of May, 2012. At this pre-interview the researcher described the research study and requested permission to conduct the study with those individuals in leadership roles associated with SOE, i.e., the Chief Executive Officer and the principals. Permission was granted (see Appendix D). The study was limited to the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Instructional Review Board (IRB) Process

As a consequence of studying and working with human subject's safety and confidentiality, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversees research studies involving human subjects and guards against the violation of ethical issues. An IRB is a group of individuals who are also authorized by an institution "… to determine whether research studies by colleagues comply with institutional regulations, professional standards of conduct in practice and provisions of the code of Federal regulations" (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003, p. 66). As IRB, all

guidelines, set forth by the Public Health Service Act, as amended by The National Institutes of Health Revitalization Act of 1993 Public Law 103-43, June 10, 1993—The Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 CFR Part 46, were followed in this study.

As per university policy, upon gaining authorization to conduct the study from the Chief Executive Officer, the researcher submitted all required forms to the IRB for approval prior to involvement with human subjects in the study. The researcher was granted IRB permission in July, 2012

Data Collection Procedures

Researchers may use various methods for data collection, such as, unstructured or semi-structured observations and interviews, documents, surveys, questionnaires, and audio-visual materials. Data collection procedures include establishing protocol for recording the information (Creswell, 2003). Patton (1990) contended that fieldwork is not a single method or technique; fieldwork, he posited, means the researcher is on site observing, talking with people, and observing program records. Multiple sources of information are sought and used because no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective on the program. By using a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis, the researcher is able to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings (Patton, 1990).

The researcher of this study used the face-to-face, open-ended, in-depth interview as the primary source of data collection. However, other data collection strategies such as observations and document analysis were also utilized. Notes were taken at each interview and the interviews were audio tape-recorded. Immediately following all interviews the researcher wrote reflections relative to insights, verbal and nonverbal behavior of the participant, and any other thoughts of

the researcher pertinent to the content of the interview. In addition to these post interview notes, immediately after the interview, the researcher carefully listened to the audio tape recording to begin the process of analyzing the data.

Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowledgeable, and able to be made explicit (Patton, 1990). The open-ended or the semi-structured interview strategy will allows the researcher to respond to the emerging worldview of the respondent. This format allows the researcher to pursue information in whatever direction appears appropriate, depending on what is emerging from talking to the participants, and by responding to the situation at hand and to adjusting to new talking points on the topic, if need be (Patton, 1990; Merriam, 1988). Furthermore, Patton contended, open-ended responses permit the researcher to understand the world as seen by the respondents. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind, for example, the interviewer's preconceived categories for organizing the world, but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. Samples of the open-ended questions that the researcher asked are as follows:

For principals

1. How did you become involved with *School of Excellence Public Schools*? How did you find out about *School of Excellence Public Schools*?
    a. What about *School of Excellence Public Schools* appealed to you?
    b. What previous experiences have you had in the field of education?
2. As a campus level administrator, which features of your school are the most appealing to you?

3. Which features of your school do you feel are the most attractive to parents and students?
4. What would you say are the most significant differences between *School of Excellence Public Schools* versus traditional public schools in general?
5. How does working with *School of Excellence Public Schools* influence your approach to pedagogical strategies?

For the Chief Executive Officer

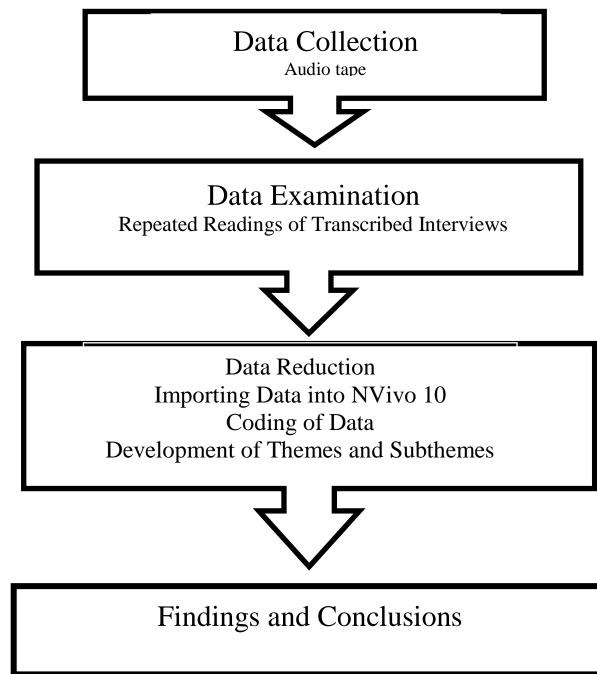
1. Could you talk a little about your background: personal/professional?
2. I'd be interested in knowing how you became involved with *School of Excellence Public Schools*? How did you find out about *School of Excellence Public Schools*?
    a. What about *School of Excellence Public Schools* appealed to you?
    b. What previous experiences have you had in the field of education?
3. Which features of your school system do you feel are the most attractive to parents and students?
4. What would you say are the most significant differences between *School of Excellence Public Schools* versus traditional public school in general?

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of one's data (Merriam, 1988). It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data (Creswell, 2003). Merriam (1988) suggested that the final product of a qualitative study is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the

entire process. The researcher constructed a data analysis framework based upon Miles and Huberman's (1994) *Qualitative data analysis* (Figure 1). Using this framework the researcher was able to make sense of the massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and draw conclusions from the data.

Figure 1: Data Analysis Framework



(based upon Miles & Huberman's (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis*)

As recommended by Merriam (1988) and Patton (1990), at the end of the interview process the researcher brought all of the information in the study together, i.e., interviews logs, audio-tape recordings, field notes, reports, records, the researcher's documents, and reflective writings. In the study, audio-tape recordings of participant interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher read through all the documents and transcriptions several times for the purpose of obtaining a holistic view of the data collected. Through this repetitive review of the transcripts, patterns and regularities began to emerge. The researcher then imported the interview transcripts and reflective notes into the computer software program, *NVivo 10*. This program allowed the

researcher to import data from transcripts and store it in text format which was coded into categories and/or units called nodes. Merriam (1988) defined a unit as the smallest piece of information about something that can stand by itself—that is it must be interpretable in the absence of additional information. Each unit of data must then be coded not only by category but by its original page number and possibly by other identifying codes such as the respondent's name. These units are then organized according to emerging themes and/or concepts. Merriam (1988) refered to this technique as coding. Numerous computer programs, such as *NVivo 10,* have been developed to store, sort, and retrieve qualitative data. In this study, interview transcripts, and field and reflective notes were imported verbatim into the computer software program, *Nvivo 10*. *Nvivo 10* allowed the researcher to discover chunks of recurring patterns using word frequency tables. The researcher then examined the text and coded individual words, phrases, or chunks of text. These codes served as markers for the researcher to generate patterns or themes (See Figure 3.1 on p. 79). The primary advantage of using *NVivo 10* is to free the researcher from the mechanical and management tasks of data analysis, thereby, freeing the researcher to concentrate on analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data. The different patterns or themes developed through the fieldwork were examined and interpreted by the researcher to determine which leadership concepts, attributes, strategies, and actions contributed to the exemplary success of SOE.

Creswell (2003) stated that validity is used to determine whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the reader's account. According to Creswell (2003) qualitative researchers can choose from among a number of strategies to check the accuracy of their findings including: triangulation, member checking, thick description, peer review or debriefing, external auditor, and others. Merriam (1988) maintained that because of the

applied nature of qualitative inquiry, it is imperative that researchers and others be able to trust the results of research—to feel confident that the study is valid. For this study, member checking was one strategy used to ensure validity. This strategy involves taking data and data interpretation back to the people from whom they were derived and asking the participant if the results are plausible (Merriam, 1988). The researcher provided the research participants with a copy of the audio-taped transcriptions and asked them to reflect and provide feedback. A second strategy that was employed was peer reviewing of the data. The researcher provided a colleague with a copy of the findings as they emerge and asked them to ask questions and provide comments about the study (Creswell, 2003).

Summary

Chapter Three provides the reader with the research methodology that was used in the study. The methods used to identify and secure a study population sample, along with data collection strategies, were described and discussed. Permission to contact the interview participants was sought through the executive director of the SOE. Study participants included subjects that have leadership responsibilities in the SOE including: the Chief Executive Officer and campus level principals. The researcher used a semi-structured interview format utilizing open-ended questions for all interviews. The next chapter will describe the findings of the interview results.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The Texas charter school movement is growing, and at the time of this study, was operating as one of the nation's largest charter school programs. In the fall of 2007, Texas charter schools ranked fourth in terms of the number of students enrolled and fifth in terms of the number of schools in operation (Center for Education Reform [CER], 2008). There is no disputing the fact that the charter school movement in Texas, and South Texas in particular, is significant. The TEA (2012b) indicated that this particular charter school has had a student enrollment growth of over 250% in the last five years. This charter school system, with twenty two campuses presently in operation in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas, was set to open twenty four more charter schools by the year 2013. Additionally, the organization had a student waiting list of over 15,000 students and intended to expand to thirty eight campuses in South Texas by 2015 (Morten, 2011a; Morten, 2011b).

Publicly funded but privately run, charter schools come in many different shapes and sizes. In fact, charter schools epitomize diversity, with some located in the inner city and others in rural areas; some are members of larger networks while others are standalone institutions (Weil, 2009). When originally conceived, charter schools offered two distinct promises. First, they were to serve as an escape hatch for students trapped in failing schools. Secondly, they

were to use their legal and financial freedoms to create and incubate new educational practices (Fryer, 2012). These schools currently enroll almost four percent of all students in the United States. Some of the charter schools have shown remarkable success in boosting test scores offering their students the promise of closing the achievement gap in just a few years (Betts, 2009; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Others, however, have failed to increase achievement and have actually performed worse than their TPS counterparts (Weil, 2009; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Because charter schools have such a mixed record, they are clearly not a panacea. However, the astounding success that some charter schools have experienced suggests that we should learn as much as possible from them in the hopes of better serving students enrolled in TPS (Fryer, 2012). There are studies that indicate that TPS can adopt some of these methods in order to achieve similar results (Betts, 2009; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Fryer, 2012; Rix, 2012). As presented in Chapter One, the aim of the study was to gain insight and begin to understand charter school leadership concepts, attributes, actions, and best practices that have contributed to the popularity and success (as defined by the TEA, 2012a) of this particular open-enrollment charter school organization and possibly apply some of these same charter school practices in a TPS setting. The goal is not to replace TPS practices with charter school practices, but to emulate charter school practices that have been proven to be successful.

Conceptually, this study was framed around the idea that policy makers have created opportunities for entrepreneurs to develop new approaches to schooling, e.g., state charter school laws allow individuals and groups to create new public schools that are supported with public dollars but managed independently of the local education agency (Smith & Peterson, 2006). McGuinn (2006) posited that amidst the reforms that states have adopted in recent years, charter schools have been most widely adopted and potentially offer the greatest avenue for introducing

a more entrepreneurial spirit into the American public education system. The charter school movement, according to McGuinn (2006), is predicated on the idea of giving educational entrepreneurs the ability to operate public schools that agree to meet specified performance targets in exchange for freedom from bureaucratic rules and regulations. Hess (2006) described educational entrepreneurship as a process of purposeful innovation directed toward improving educational productivity, efficiency, and quality. In education, he claims, entrepreneurs seek to teach children who have been ill served, improve the quality of teachers and school leaders, give educators more effective tools, and deliver services in more efficient, useful and accessible ways. Smith and Peterson (2006) contended that educational entrepreneurs have great potential to make an impact today because they are focused on making a significant difference on outcomes of the K-12 system as a whole, particularly for those students and communities who are currently underserved. According to Smith and Peterson (2006), these educational entrepreneurs are also are highly focused on outcomes. Although their organizations sit "outside" the TPS system, educational entrepreneurs are still accountable to it. They may need to attract students to a new public charter school, or entice principal candidates to apply for new preparation programs, or deliver improved outcomes in order to maintain a district as a customer. As such, Smith and Peterson claim, they have a customer-focused orientation and a consistent focus on outcomes. These critical factors allow them to compete with existing education providers for attention and funds. In short, they seek to tackle the same problems as other educators; the difference is how they go about it. Hentschke (2009) maintained that, until recently, educational leaders have had little reason to model entrepreneurial attributes. He claimed that, among other things, public school systems favor other traits in their leaders such as faithful stewardship of public resources, procedural compliance, and inclusiveness over entrepreneurial attributes. Weil (2009) described

education in the United States as undergoing a remarkable transformation, as longstanding policies regarding how public schools are funded, staffed, and governed are revised in an effort to improve academic performance and increase student and parent choice. This policy environment, which is crucial to the future of educational entrepreneurship, has become more accommodating over the past decade to a wide array of new educational approaches both inside and outside of the TPS system (McGuinn, 2006).

For this study, the researcher used the constructivist perspective to frame the inquiry. Creswell (2003) asserted that the fundamental premise underlying the social constructivist perspective maintains that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings to a few categories or ideas. The goal of research then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. Creswell (2003) suggested that the more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting.

This chapter describes the results of the interviews with the five participants of the study. The participants included the Chief Executive Officer and four principals of this particular open-enrollment charter school organization (see table 2). All of the participants interviewed had previous experience working in TPS. The principals interviewed had tenure with the SOE ranging between two to ten years. The Chief Executive Officer was one of the founding partners of this public school system, and he had been with the organization since 1998. All five participants were interviewed twice face to face. The first interview was an informal "pre-interview". As was described in Chapter Three, the first reason for the "pre-interview" was to

establish rapport with the participants. The second reason of the "pre-interview" was to explain the purpose of the study in addition to obtaining the signed informed consent forms from each participant. The final reason for the "pre-interview" was to secure a time, place, and date for the second semi-formal, in depth, open-ended interview. The second interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed to address the research questions. A pseudonym was used for the name of each participant to maintain complete confidentiality.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Participant	Yrs.of experience TPS	Yrs of Experience SOE	Type of Experience in TPS
William Harris	9	3	Teacher and Central Administration
Antonio Garza	4	8	Teacher
Alejandro Guerra	6	3	Teacher and Principal
Samantha Alvarez	19	2	Teacher and Assistant Principal

The study was guided by the following research questions: What leadership attributes and actions do charter school administrators demonstrate that have transformed a particular charter school into the popular public school option that it is today?

Associated sub-questions used to develop the response to this guiding question were:

1. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?

2. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to staffing?
3. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting?

In this chapter, the themes, revealed from the interview data after it was collected and analyzed, will be presented by grouping them in such a manner so as to provide the reader a focus on the three research questions. Each major theme was further divided into sub-themes. The major themes were divided and grouped under one of the three research questions of the study to demonstrate each theme's relevance to answering one of the three research questions as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
Research Question 1: How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?	Academic Focus Principal as instructional leader Data driven decision making High student expectations
Research Question 2: How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus traditional public school setting relative to staffing?	Staffing Tendencies Recruitment of staff Autonomy to hire Termination of staff
Research Question 3: How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus traditional public school setting?	Organizational Level Characteristics Senior administrator visibility and feedback Board politics Staff accountability and expectations

Using the open-ended interview as the primary method of inquiry and data collection, the researcher was able to produce a wealth of detailed information about the leadership attributes/actions, characteristics, and best practices of the participants in the study (Patton, 1990). A summary of the findings is provided as follows.

Research Question 1

How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?

Academic focus

Under the theme of academic focus, the sub-themes that emerged from the participant interviews were: the principal as an instructional leader, high student expectations, and data driven decision making.

Park and Datnow (2009) posited that in an era of standards-based reform and accountability, the push for improved student achievement and effective leadership practices in the United States has never been greater. Educational leaders are now required to analyze, interpret, and use data to make informed decisions in all areas ranging from professional development to student learning. In the context of school reform researchers argued that the purpose of educational leadership is to improve student learning and to foster equity in educational outcomes (Firestone & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). DeAngelis and Presley (2011) contended that when teachers and administrators fail to work cooperatively, there is no improvement in student learning. They argued that to improve teaching, we have to improve schools and associated resources to include time, materials, teacher communities, and principal leadership. Hoy and Hoy (2009) described instructional leadership as consisting of principal behaviors that: set high expectations and clear goals for students and teacher performance, monitor and provide feedback regarding teaching and learning, provide and promote professional growth for all staff members, and help create and maintain a school culture of high academic expectations. The principal is accountable for the whole instructional program. As the campus leader, the principal is the pivotal person within the school who affects the quality of the individual teacher instruction and the degree of student achievement (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, and Javed (2009) further asserted that the principal's most important task is teacher supervision and evaluation. Instructional leadership means little unless leaders are

willing and able to observe teachers, offer advice about problems, and make formative evaluations that support and pinpoint areas to improve. In the end the success of any educational program comes down to the performance of the students. Are they reaching the objective proposed? Where are they failing and why? The more specifically that problems can be identified, the more successfully the learning problems can be remedied or traced to course activities (Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, & Javed, 2009).

The principal as the instructional leader. After reviewing and analyzing the participant's responses as they relate to Research Question One, which focused on academics, it was clear to the researcher that academics is this charter organizations main priority. In a meta-analysis of sixty-nine studies conducted from 1978 to 2001, Marzano et al. (2005) found that the average correlation in studies conducted in the United States indicated that principal leadership has a significant and positive relationship with student achievement (as cited in Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Ron Smith, founder and Chief Executive Officer of SOE, said that the number one goal of SOE was to build an academic foundation for all children. He said, "Parents who have their children start with us know that by the end of their Kindergarten year their children will be able to read, write, add, and subtract. They know that when their children leave fifth grade, they will be ready for middle school, and they know that when they graduate from high school, their children will be ready for college level work". Mr. Smith stated,

> Right now we are focusing on the organization's ability to recruit and develop leaders. Our principals need to focus on their ability to get their teachers to perform at higher levels, and we have started a structured leadership development program that focuses on training and coaching principals to become better instructional leaders. We concentrate

on building their capacity in the area of instructional leadership through hands on training.

Mr. Smith went on to state that he has spent a significant amount of time mentoring and coaching principals. He described the training as, "Very intensive where they can actually see that the students are performing better as a result of how well we train our principals". Mr. Smith contended that such leadership training was unlike anything seen before in TPS.

Blankstein (2010) and Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter (2008) contended that demands for greater accountability requires the principal to be instruction oriented. Are the students learning? If the students are not learning, what is to be done about it? They argued that the focus on results, student achievement, and on students learning at high levels, can only happen if teaching and learning become the central focus of the school and the central focus of the principal. All of the principals interviewed made it very clear that their number one priority was to make sure they knew what was happening in the classroom. Hoy and Hoy (2009) posited that although principals play the critical role of instructional leaders, principals, clearly, are not solely responsible for leadership in instruction. They contended that leadership in instructional matters should emerge freely from both principals and teachers. To engage in such cooperation, principals should spend time in the classrooms as colleagues and engage teachers in conversations about learning and teaching (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). Alejandro Guerra explained, "I spend most of my time in the classroom working alongside with teachers. I do quite a bit of coaching, mentoring, and training teachers mostly with a focus on curricular issues". Alejandro was a high school principal at a TPS before he joined SOE. When he was asked to describe the differences between his TPS versus SOE experiences relative to his instructional responsibilities, Alejandro stated that the first year was almost like a culture shock. He likened the difference as

to when he transitioned from high school to college. He said that the instructional program was his primary responsibility at SOE, whereas in the TPS, in addition to the instructional program, he was expected to be involved in all kinds of issues unrelated to the academic mission of the school. Samantha Alvarez, administrator at a local TPS for eighteen years before joining SOE, said that biggest difference between SOE and TPS is that in SOE principals are expected to be in the classroom. She said that she did not see this type of classroom focus in TPS. Antonio Garza and William Harris shared similar experiences. William was an administrator at a large Texas TPS before he joined SOE. He shared that the biggest difference between the two systems is that at SOE the principal is expected to be in the classroom. Whereas all of the participants reported that instructional focus was one of the many priorities in TPS, all of the principals interviewed in the study concurred that instructional leadership is priority one at SOE. Alejandro described his TPS experience as an administrator as delving into mostly non-instructional responsibilities.

When asked to describe a typical day as principal of an SOE campus, Samantha Alvarez stated,

> The biggest difference between SOE public schools and TPS is that principals are expected to be in the classroom. I spend most of my time coaching and mentoring teachers either through data conversations or through constructive feedback. That is what is expected. I did not see this classroom focus in TPS. Headquarters wants the principals to be in the classroom.

She explained that she had assistants assigned to take care of other responsibilities, so that she, the principal, could be free to frequent the classroom and focus on the delivery of instruction and student learning. Hoy and Hoy (2009) asserted that school improvement is equivalent to teacher improvement. They contended that this improvement is a continuous process. Therefore,

classroom observations should be continuous as well, not merely a ritual observation that principals make once or twice a year. Samantha added,

> As principal you are expected to know the curriculum well. You need to be able to walk into a classroom and assist if a teacher is struggling. That is what we do. That is what we are expected to do.

William had been an administrator in a large TPS in northeast Texas for several years before he joined SOE. When asked to describe his present role as an SOE principal he said, “You know when I was teaching in TPS, I basically had to learn to teach on my own. With the exception of the PDAS required observation, uh very rarely did an administrator visit my classroom.” He stated that he saw his principal maybe once or twice a year. At SOE he said, “Oh my God, the amount of time I spend coaching and having data conversions with my teachers is unbelievable. I spend so much time in the classroom coaching and giving feedback”.

High student expectations. Rix (2012) contended that charter schools have two advantages over most TPS: autonomy and a mission. Having a focused mission or a school philosophy and the autonomy to make decisions to put that philosophy into practice is what sets charter schools apart from TPS.

Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, and Javed (2009) described instructional leadership as consisting of principal behaviors that set high expectations and clear goals for students and staff. All five participants agreed that one of the central reasons why SOE has a waiting list of 15,000 students is because of high student expectations. DiPaola and Hoy (2008) described effective instructional leadership as, “Individuals who: set high expectations for all students, used assessment data to support student success, kept the focus on the students, addressed barriers to learning” (p. 8). Mr. Smith stated that he founded his first SOE public school because he felt

there was not enough being done to provide a high quality college prep curriculum in the area. He contended that the student waiting list to get in to SOE has grown exponentially ever since. Alejandro Guerra explained that since SOE does not have such things as athletics and fine arts, the focus has to be academics. He explained, “They do not come here for athletics, so the quality of instruction has to be better. Our mentality, our mindset is that our teachers are going to do the extra hours required to provide a better product.” He cited their homework policy as an example of student high expectations. He stated that all children are expected to do one and one-half hours of homework daily. Students are expected to complete their homework assignments on time with no excuses. Alejandro stated that students who did not complete their homework were required to participate in an afterschool program designed to assist students in completion of their homework. He stated that at the three TPS where he worked prior to coming to SOE, there were no strict homework policies. He said, “I know that at TPS such policies do not exist”. When asked why a parent would want to send their children to SOE? Antonio responded,

> Do you want your son to attend and graduate from college? The biggest thing we do is to teach children about the college experience, about expectations. When TPS are talking about graduating in the class of 2012 from high school, we do not even focus on that. We focus on 2016 when students graduate from college. We start talking about college from the first day they come to us. All the students know that when they graduate from SOE, they are going to go to college.

The participants agreed that their number one priority was college matriculation and graduation. The participants cited, as another example of high student expectations, that all students take Algebra I in the eighth grade. Alejandro stated, “Whereas in TPS, only students identified as advanced take Algebra I in the eighth grade, at SOE, all students take Algebra I in

the eighth grade”. The participants further cited that there was no such thing as a Gifted and Talented Program at SOE. Dufour and Marzano (2011) posited that all effective schools have high expectations for all students. All of the participants of the study reported that at SOE all students are enrolled in advanced classes, and they are all expected to do well. William reasoned, “At SOE we believe that, when you set expectations high, your kids will rise to expectations.” Mr. Smith posited, “Parents bring their children to SOE because they know our focus is on academics”.

Data driven decisions. Park and Datnow (2009) contended that in the era of standards based reform and accountability systems, educational leaders are now required to analyze, interpret, and use data to make informed decisions in all areas of education from professional development to student learning. Park and Datnow (2009) argued that The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) has served as a catalyst for school leaders to emphasize data driven decision making practices. This strategy rests on the assumption that the gathering and use of data reinforces continuous improvement efforts by helping to assess existing capacities, monitor progress, and evaluate the efficacy of programs (Earl & Katz, 2006).

Picciano (2006) posited that whereas decision making involves choosing among alternatives, data-driven decision making involves using quantitative or qualitative information sources to make inform choices. Though the process has been promoted as a valuable management tool in education for more than fifty years, NCLB has been primarily responsible for making it a core topic in the profession today (Picciano, 2006). All of the principal participants of the study professed that the SOE is a data-driven district. Data driven decision making as an instructional tool for student scholastic achievement is the foundation of the SOE academic program. All participants of the study stated that data-driven conversations with

teachers are the primary instructional tool used for feedback and improvement. Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, (2008) contended that all educators play a critical role in using data to accelerate student achievement; however, the principal is the most critical player. Furthermore they stated, “More than any other single policy or law, NCLB has visibly amalgamated directed autonomy, data driven decision making, and school leadership” (p. 8). Alejandro Guerra reflected on his experience as a TPS principal versus his experience with SOE. He stated,

> I am much more deliberate now than I was when I was a principal at a TPS. I am continually reflecting on my efficiency and effectiveness as a leader. I spend a significant amount of time having one-to-one data conversations with the teachers. So, if I am going to make decisions regarding change, I better know what is going on in the classroom in terms of data. Based on these data conversions, I make decisions regarding existing structures, trainings, and other issues.

Hoy and Hoy (2009) asserted that it is difficult to be an effective instructional leader if the principal does not spend enough time in the classroom engaging with teachers. Antonio Garza mentioned that most of what they do as principals is quantitative based. Antonio stated that for every twenty minutes he spends in class observing a teacher, he will spend at least another thirty minutes outside of the classroom having data conversations. He explained that the expectation of the principal to be in the classroom has other responsibilities attached to it. It is one thing to be in the classroom with the teachers observing, mentoring, and coaching, but is quite another to provide feedback to the teachers. He stated, “If I spend twenty minutes in a particular classroom, I probably will spend at least half an hour with the teacher outside of class having data conversions about student progress or lack of progress.” Reflecting on his four years of TPS teaching experience, Antonio said that not once did he have a data conversation with his

principal. The participants of the study cited that tracking data was one of the most important practices of the principals that at SOE public schools. The principals reported that they track student data, as well as teacher data, including progress and interim reports, on a weekly basis. One participant stated, “I am always having data conversions with teachers about student progress or lack of progress.” Nidus and Sadder (2011) contended that data encompasses all the talk and work of teachers and students. The participants all agreed that they have data conversions with their supervisors on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. William Harris described his discussions with his superiors as one-on-one conversations on topics ranging from Average Daily Attendance (ADA), to student persistence, student attrition, to data about teacher performance data, and/or special populations’ assessment data. William explained, “All the teachers must have weekly assessments because the assessments are the formative data that we track so that we can make adjustments if we have to”. He stated that the formative assessment can be a homework assignment as well. Antonio reported that at SOE, “It is observation, observation, observation, feedback, feedback, feedback”. He also stated that he had many conversions with his direct supervisors over the chart data. He said, “When I was teaching at the TPS, I never once had a data conversion with my principal”. A lot of what we do here he said, “is quantitative stuff.”

Research Question 2

How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to staffing?

Staffing Tendencies

Under the theme of staffing tendencies, the sub-themes that emerged from the participant interviews were: Recruitment strategies, autonomy to hire staff, and terminating staff.

Effective teachers and quality principals are the bedrock of effective schools (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Almost all U.S. children, no matter where they live, will be academically endangered if they have poor teachers for three years in a row (Nye, Konstantopoulus, & Hedges 2004). Furthermore, they claim low income elementary students who have good teachers for three years in a row will have test scores that are similar to the test scores of their middle class peers (as cited in Wilson, 2011). There is also evidence that the appropriate unit of analysis, when it comes to judging teacher quality, is not always the individual teacher. Hoy and Hoy (2009) argued that teacher quality is the single biggest school level factor related to the academic success or failure of students in high poverty schools; however, they posited, principals are responsible for developing the school climate that supports the very best instructional practices. Quality teaching also depends on the schools where teachers work, the materials available, and the communities of professionals that surround them (Wilson, 2011). Wilson reported that the quality of teaching in a school is also directly related to a strong principal who exercises inclusive leadership. In addition, she stated that schools need to be able to recruit promising teachers, reward and retain effective ones, and to have a mechanism in place to dismiss those teachers who do not improve.

Recruitment strategies. All five interview participants indicted that staffing and recruitment methods are fundamental components of the SOE public schools. Before their employment with the SOE, three of the principals were working as administrators in a TPS

setting. When Mr. Smith was asked about SOE strategies or methods for recruiting faculty and staff he said,

> Our HR department is not where everybody is sitting in offices. We have a team of recruiters, and their job is to be out in the field .We invite potential recruits to Starbucks to talk and to share over coffee. Our recruiters visit high performing teachers in their classrooms on task. They recruit them all semester, and we try to get them excited about the prospect of coming on board with the SOE.

Mr. Smith also indicated that the recruiters host recruits on tours to SOE campuses. The recruits visit classrooms and talk with the teachers about the SOE experience. He stated, "It is the same things that investment banks, consulting firms, and hedge funds do. They get these really aggressive recruiters throughout their head hunting. Um that is what we try to do." Mr. Smith indicated that once they the recruits excited about applying, they put them through a rigorous selection process. Mr. Smith went on to say that it is about building excitement in the teacher pool, and then having the recruits go through a rigorous selection process. All teachers that are hired go through the same process, and the process changes every year. He stated that, "A teacher that we hire today is more likely to be successful than a teacher that we hired five years ago because our selection process is continually improving." He explained that at the end of the year, the recruiting team analyzes the recruits hired versus performance to see where improvements can be made. He clarified, "Our team goes back and we look and see if there is any correlation in how well they did in the selection process versus how they performed. It is not scientific yet, but we are getting there." When the principal participants were asked how they became involved with SOE public schools they all indicted that the recruitment strategy was significant. All the participants agreed that SOE utilized a recruitment strategy that was

deliberate and rigorous. The principal participants all shared similar experiences in the process of joining the SOE. For example, before becoming a principal at SOE, Alejandro had been an assistant principal for several years in several different high schools here in the LRGV of Texas. He was a principal at a local high school when he first met the SOE Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at a social gathering. Alejandro explained that the CEO inquired about his history and background. Alejandro described his education and training, and the CEO asked if he was interested in joining SOE. Alejandro told him that he was happy with his present assignment, but that he would keep the offer in mind. The communication between the two continued and after approximately two years, Alejandro decided to join SOE.

Samantha Alvarez shared a similar story. She was an assistant principal at a local middle school for eighteen years before she joined SOE. She explained that the recruitment process for her lasted about one year. She described that the communication process was on going for almost one year from the point of her initial inquiry with SOE. She stated,

> They interviewed me, and for about eight months they would go visit me at my work. They were looking at how I was performing. They would go and actually see me in action conducting data desegregation, meeting with teachers, faculty meetings, or, you know, anything that assistant principals do.

She also said that she often would meet with SOE senior administrators at *Star Bucks*, where they engaged in data discussions over coffee. Samantha stated that the recruitment process, although rigorous, was fair. To join SOE she stated, “You know, you have to have a really great record of results”.

The recruitment process for William Harris was a little different. He was a science coordinator in a very large school district in Texas for nine years before he joined SOE. He

explained that his wife was employed in the human resources department in the large school district, and that SOE first recruited his wife as director of professional development. He came along with her. He said he joined SOE as a teacher. He said that after one year of teaching he was promoted to assistant principal because he had great scores. After one semester as an assistant principal, he was promoted to principal. At SOC, he explained, "You don't just get promoted. You have to have a record of results. You have to show that you are really top notch". He explained that, as result of his TPS teaching experience, he had a solid pedagogical background and quite a bit of content knowledge. As a result he said, "My scores were 15 to 20 points higher than the district average. Those scores propelled me through the principal interview process".

Antonio Garza actually started working for SOE part time as an after school math tutor. He explained, "I was working in their afterschool tutoring program for the sixth grade, when one of the co-founders of SOE asked me if I was willing to teach full time with SOE". He stated that the administrator told him SOE needed more Hispanic role models because most of the SOE teaching staff was recruited from the ranks of Teach for America. He said that Teach for America recruits were mostly Anglo at that time. When asked how he became a principal he said,

> I had been teaching sixth grade for one year at SOE. That sixth grade class had a TAKS passing rate of ninety percent. When these students were in the fifth grade, they had a passing rate of sixty percent. In one year this class improved by over thirty percent with a significant number of students recognized as commended. So the senior leadership gave me an opportunity to become a principal. You have to have a record of results with SOE.

Additionally, all the interview participants indicated that SOE has a flexible salary and benefits program to be able to meet or beat out the competition. All the principals indicated that SOE offered better salary and benefits than TPS. When Mr. Smith was asked if he was tied to a salary structure during the recruiting process, Mr. Smith replied that they did have a base salary, but the base salary was adjustable. He explained, "Let me give you an example. Our base salary for a senior executive is in the range of $120,000 to $170,000, but they have a bonus potential to earn another $50,000 to $75,000 if they meet certain performance standards." All of the principal participants concurred that they had potential for performance related bonuses and had already, in fact, earned bonuses as employees of SOE.

Autonomy to hire. All four principal participants indicated that the autonomy given to them to lead a campus was one of the most significant differences between SOC and TPS. When asked to describe some of the differences between TPS versus SOC Alejandro Guerra stated,

> So the biggest thing I would say is the fact that they give me total autonomy of the decision making. I hire, fire, and move people around with no interference from headquarters. They do not interfere, but then they hold me accountable.

When the researcher asked Alejandro to compare the level of autonomy, on a scale of one to ten, between TPS and SOE Alejandro stated, "I would give TPS a five versus a ten for SOE."

Like Alejandro, Samantha Alvarez cited autonomy to lead as an important factor in her ability to succeed as a campus leader with SOE. She stated, "To me as a campus leader, I think it is important to be able to promote from within." She explained that campus motivation is high because her staff knows that if they work hard, the opportunity to get promoted to a leadership position is always a possibility. She said, "This last year I promoted my first grade ELA teacher to assistant principal of operations, and I promoted another teacher into assistant principal of

instruction." When asked if she was the final authority in these kinds of personnel moves, she said, "I am the final authority, as long as they have a record of results. Headquarters lets me do my job. They have never asked me to interview or to hire an individual."

When asked if he had authority to hire his own teachers, William Harris said,

> We have a recruiting department at headquarters. Prospective teachers have to go through a pre-interview process with the recruiting department before I can even talk to them. If they go through the pre-interview, I have full authority to hire. I have hired all my teachers.

Antonio Garza described the recruiting process as one that starts at headquarters. He explained that headquarters pre-screens all applicants. He mentioned that, "The talent recruiters find us people that are worthy to teach at SOE. They have to exhibit our core values." When asked if he believed this recruiting process existed in TPS, he stated,

> I do not think so. In TPS applicants come to you. At SOE, we go after them. The recruiters go after talent. So by the time I interview an applicant, he or she has already been pre-cleared. They fit our core values.

Antonio suggested that from that point he has full authority to hire. When asked if there had ever been a time when there was interference from headquarters with his hires, Antonio said, "I am the hiring and firing manager on my campus. No, I do not recall interference with any of my recommendations."

Terminating staff. All principal participants agreed that terminating staff at SOE is a much easier and simpler process than in TPS. All the principals indicated that, as principals at SOE, they had terminated staff for various reasons. Alejandro Guerra stated, "This is the part of autonomy given to me that I like the best." He explained that he had a first year teacher that was

struggling to connect with the students. He stated that he had recruited the teacher from a local institution of higher learning to teach United States History. However, it was not working out. He stated, “I told him my concerns from the very beginning. I told him that his ability to connect and motivate students was a concern. He has content knowledge, but the problem is communicating the knowledge to the students”. Alejandro stated that he met with the teacher and told him that he was not seeing any progress. He explained that the teacher understood and submitted his resignation.

When asked how she would deal with a teacher that was performing below standards Samantha Alvarez stated,

> I generally will put the teacher on a performance improvement plan. We outline specific goals that they have to meet. My assistant and I will coach, provide support, and give feedback on a daily basis. If the teacher still does not improve, then I will let him or her know that they need to start looking for another job.

When asked if she was the final authority on terminating staff, she responded, “Absolutely.”

William Harris also described having to terminate staff. When the researcher told Mr. Harris that terminating staff in TPS was a lengthy and difficult task, he responded, “Not at SOE.” He described that, in SOE, administrators do not want to lose teachers. He stated that administrators go through the process of training teachers. A sizable amount of taxpayer dollars are spent on getting teachers ready to teach, therefore administrators really do not want to lose teachers if it can be avoided. “If I can avoid terminating staff, I will.” When asked if he had ever terminated a teacher, Mr. Harris responded,

> For instance, I hired a teacher this year, and I coached her every single day. We would watch videos of her teaching, and I would give her feedback on what she needed to

> improve on. I would tell her this is what I see, and this is what I need you to work on. In the end I had a conversation with her that she needed to transition out.

When asked about SOE contracts, Mr. Harris responded that the way the contract is written makes it easy to release an under-performing teacher. He stated, “I do not know if this is the general rule for all charter schools, but that is the way it is at SOE. It makes a huge difference in my ability to lead.”

Antonio Garza simply stated, “I am the hiring and firing manager on my campus. At the end of the day, I am accountable to my kids. That is the bottom line.” He explained that employees at SOE are basically “at will”. When asked if all SOE employees were “at will,” he responded, “We have a contract, but because of the charter school guidelines we are all “at will” employees. They can tell me, “Antonio we do not need your services,” and I am done.” Mr. Garza further stated that their charter guidelines allow them autonomy and flexibility. He said, “There are growth plans and paperwork. We do not just fire people, but I know that the process is much easier than what you do at TPS”. When asked if he had ever had to fire a teacher, Mr. Garza stated that he had. He shared that once he had hired a teacher who was pregnant at the time of her hiring. He stated,

> During the interview process, the teacher had explained that she was due in December, and her maternity leave would coincide with the Christmas holidays. However, she delivered in October, and we were left without a teacher. I said, “We need somebody right now.” I felt that she had lied during the interview by telling us that she was due in December. So I called this lady after the delivery and told her that she was out of a job.

Research Question 3

How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting?

Organizational level characteristics

Under the theme of organizational level characteristics, the sub-themes that emerged from the participant interviews were: senior administrator visibility and feedback, staff accountability and expectations, and school board politics.

Dufour and Marzano (2011) stated that research has shown that some of the most effective school districts have embraced the concept of "defined autonomy". In these districts, the superintendents worked with the board of education, other central office staff, and principals to articulate clear, non discretionary student achievement goals for the district as a whole, each school, and subgroups of students. These school districts also established a common framework of research based strategies for achieving these goals. Dufour and Marzano (2011) contended that the superintendent expected building principals to accept responsibility for the success of their schools and provided principals with some flexibility. Principals, however, are also expected to lead within the boundaries established by the district's goals. Furthermore, Dufour and Marzano (2011) claim that, "Effective superintendents recognize the importance of on-going communication. A "state of the district" address at the start of the school year does not suffice. A single presentation on the district's new direction fails to meet the standard of powerful communication; On-going communication during implementation of the plan is far more important" (p. 42).

Senior administrator level visibility and feedback. All the principal participants agreed that senior level administrators were constantly on campus to observe teacher and student

interaction. All participants agreed that the Chief Executive Officer and his senior administrators visited the campus regularly and provided constructive feedback on their observations. All the participants cited that communication between campus level staff and headquarters was a fundamental component of the SOE philosophy. When Mr. Smith was asked what he thought were significant differences between the SOE and TPS, Mr. Smith stated that it begins with alignment. He explained,

> I think, uh, from an instructional point of view, what is happening in one of our first grade classrooms is happening in every first grade classroom in that school and in every first grade classroom across all the schools. So our ability to train, manage, and support is really, um, high because we are in the same operating system and the same curriculum across that board. The second thing is, I mean, we get our principals together and what we do to build their capacity under management and instructional leadership is very hands on.

He described the training as very intensive where principals can actually see that the students are performing better now as a result of how well principals had been trained. Another difference between the SOE and the TPS was accountability. He stated, “You can walk into any of our schools and you will see and feel our mission and our goals.”

He said,

> You do not want to be that principal in a school that does not hit the goals. I mean because you are going to be in trouble. That is the culture of our organization. All of our principals know it and want to be that highest performing school.

Alejandro Guerra explained that senior administrators regularly visit his campus. When asked to describe who the senior administrators were, Alejandro said that the vice president in

charge of his campus visited him at least once weekly. The CEO does visit his campus but not as frequently. He described the visits as,

> They are visible in the classrooms, look around, sit in my meetings, discuss different issues that I may have at the time, and we have data conversions. Ron will come in and visit all my classrooms, and he usually gives me direct feedback on his observations. He is very good at giving feedback. Feedback is usually direct, but he also uses a lot of voice recordings and e-mail. Uh, that is pretty typical of anyone who visits the campus from headquarters.

Antonio Garza said that when Mr. Smith visits his campus he usually visits all the classes. He stated that, "Mr. Smith usually gives me feedback on his observations on issues of rigor, assessments, student behavior, culture things, and things of that nature." He added that sometimes Mr. Smith will even send teachers feedback on his observations. Antonio Garza stated, "When he has concerns he will tell me. His feedback is usually about what he observed both positive and negative." When asked how often headquarters visited, Antonio said, "They visit on a regular basis. But when they have concerns, they will camp out here and have talent deep dives and data conversions." When asked what was meant by talent deep dive, he said, "Talent deep dives are discussions on staff competencies. We look at all the teachers and discuss their strengths and weaknesses."

Samantha Alvarez said that one of the biggest differences between her experiences at TPS versus SOE was the visibility of the Chief Executive Officer. He described Mr. Smith as highly visible, providing feedback, and asking for feedback. When asked to give a specific example she said,

> As a matter of fact he visited the campus today. He gave me direct feedback on what he saw. He said that the SOE culture was evident. He said the students were fully engaged, and the teachers were teaching. He gave me positive feedback, but he also told me things to work on. Additionally, he asked me for feedback on how he, himself, could be more of assistance to the principals.

Samantha added that Mr. Smith, along with headquarters, did very good job of coaching and developing the skills of the principals. It is hard for a principal with SOE to fail simply because headquarters provided so much assistance and mentoring. She said, "I think that is one of the biggest differences between my experience at TPS and SOE."

When William Harris was asked if the Chief Executive Officer visited the campus he said, "You know, at SOE, there is no such thing as, has Ron visited your campus. The question is, how many times has he visited your campus? He always visits." He explained that when Ron visits the campus he always give feedback. In addition to Ron, he stated, "The vice presidents are always on campus. We have data conversations, talent deep dives, or discuss any other issues that may be of importance at the moment. You would think that senior leadership, including Ron, would not visit that often, but they are always on campus. That is what we are known for". He described his weekly conversations with his vice president as lasting at least one hour. He stated, "There have been times when my vice president re-directs my actions based on what she sees." He said, "She will ask have you seen the lesson plans, let me see the weekly assessments; let me see the assessment piece; how about the rigor; man she asks a ton of questions." William added,

> At SOE it is about pedagogy; it is about results. If my vice president does not like what she sees, she will make it very clear. Then she leaves and I reflect on her message the

whole day. Sometimes the feedback is difficult to swallow. But you know, they hire us, in part, because of our ability to reflect and to grow professionally.

Staff accountability and expectations. All participants described SOE culture as a "no excuses" culture of accountability and expectations. They all stated that this culture of expectations applied to students as well as staff. The principal participants all agreed that accountability and expectations revolved around results. William Harris stated that the mission of SOE was academics, plain and simple. He explained that one of the expectations at SOE that was unique was that all the teachers and administrators were given an *iPhone*. When asked if parents were free to call staff at any time, he responded,

> When asked if parents were free to call staff at anytime he responded,
>
> Every teacher is given a phone, and they are expected to answer any inquiries a parent may have. We ask our teachers to answer parent calls till about nine p.m. I have had many parent conversions on the phone. Parents usually call our teachers to inquire about a particular assignment or another, sometimes discipline, but it is usually about homework.

He described this strategy as almost like tutoring. He said,

> Think about it. If your child is struggling with an assignment and they need help, and mom and dad cannot help, why not call their teacher? They are the ones who created the lesson block. To me it makes perfect sense.

William explained that even though he came from a large progressive TPS district, he was not prepared for what SOE expected of him. He said,

> The expectations they have of the staff and of me are so far and beyond, it is hard to imagine unless you are going through it. The expectations are high for the senior level

administrators, campus level staff, and down to the kids. It is about numbers, about results, and everyone is held to that.

When asked if he could cite a specific example of those standards he said, “Everything stops with me. There is no such thing as it did not happen because the teacher did not make it happen. The question that is asked is what did you do to help the teacher? The accountability is on both of us”. He described that in his role as principal you need to have a thick skin because the feedback he receives sometimes is in your face mentality. He said, “You know numbers are numbers [sic] and sometimes the feedback is difficult. But those are the expectations they have of me.” When asked what makes SOE what it is, William explained that SOE has a business approach to schooling. He described this attitude as, “Give me everything that you’ve got, do everything you can possibly do to make it happen, and there are no excuses.”

Samantha Alvarez shared a similar response to the question of expectations and accountability. She said that SOE has a no excuses do whatever it takes culture of expectations for both the students and the staff. When asked to compare working in a TPS district versus SOE public school relative to expectations and accountability Samantha said,

> We are held accountable to the results. If the results are not there, you do not have a job. That is the bottom line. The chief executive officer has goals, the vice presidents have goals, we have goals, and the teachers have goals. If everyone meet their goals, then we’re good.

Samantha explained that one of the big differences between her experiences as an administrator at a TPS and the SOE was that at SOE you had to constantly reflect on continuous improvement. She said,

I self-reflect on things like, What do I need to do to be a better leader? Why are the scores not where they need to be? Is it me or is it my teachers? What are my weaknesses? Where are my teachers the weakest? I am held accountable so I am going to turn around and hold my staff accountable too. If a teacher is not producing, we are going to sit down and have data conversions and figure it out because we have our goals and we have to meet them.

Antonio Garza was asked to describe expectations and accountability at the SOE. He said, "I am given the autonomy to run my campus, and I do, but I have to produce. Results matter here." Antonio said that quantitative practices were emphasized. For example, he said,

> When I go into a classroom to observe, I always provide feedback as soon as possible. I will tell the teacher, "When you were doing this or that during the lesson, only ten out of twenty five were actively listening. Or I will tell them two out of thirty did not understand the lesson. How can you make sure that those students do not fall behind on the lesson?" So it is about analyzing the learning environment in the classroom and then being able to prescribe a remedy.

He explained that headquarters will hold him accountable. He concluded,

> You know, they demoted me from principal several years back because my campus results did not meet SOE standards. They gave me another chance. You better believe I hold myself, my teachers and staff accountable. Headquarters is very supportive, and they give you the autonomy to lead, but you have to produce.

Alejandro Guerra said that one of the biggest differences between working in a TPS versus SOE was autonomy to lead. He said,

> The biggest thing I would say is the fact that they give me total autonomy of the decision-making process. I hire and fire my staff; I move my staff as needed; I make the curricular decisions I feel I need to make with little or no interference from headquarters. So then I am held accountable to, uh, … In the end, if there are problems or if the results do not pan out, … Hey, you made the decision.

He asserted that headquarters expected him to resolve any issues that might arise. Alejandro cited high teacher expectations as another big difference between his experiences in TPS versus SOE. He said,

> You know, it is easy to set high expectations of the students, which we do. The hard part is getting the teachers to plan and execute those high expectations. Holding the teachers accountable for those high student expectations is my responsibility. That is the hard part.

He said that sense of urgency is absent in TPS. He said,

> The prevalent culture here is to do whatever it takes to make it happen. That is the expectation. No excuses; get it done. All of us have goals. Ron has goals; I have goals; and the teachers have goals. We just have to meet them.

William posits, "You know the expectations for principals here at SOE are very high. But you know that it is ok, because at the end of the day I own the results."

Board politics. Moody (2011) contended that the complexities surrounding superintendent and board relations has intensified over time. Moody cites that the increasingly complex quality of the relationship, including political and social influences, has produced additional challenges and stressors upon a relationship that has historically been disjointed and, by its nature unstable. Studies (Haugland, 1986; Moody, 2007) concerning superintendent and school board relations indicate that problems between board members and superintendents tend

to surface when some board members attempt to assume a more active role in the operational aspects of schooling than the superintendent is willing to accept (as cited in Moody, 2011). Hensley and Burmeister (2009) argued that it is incumbent upon school leaders such as the superintendent and the school board to promote positive relationships and to develop healthy organizational cultures that serve to advance powerful, effective teaching and learning.

Three of the four principal participants agreed that board politics in TPS is the primary reason why they work at SOE. By the same token, all the principal participants reported that they could not recall a single incident of school board member interference while working at SOE. The Chief Executive Officer and SOE founder, Ron Smith, was asked to describe his relationship with the school board. He said,

> I recruit most of the board members myself. So I make sure that people have the right mind set before I appoint them to the board…they look at how we perform versus our goals. They do not get involved in the day-to-day management of the enterprise. One big difference between TPS and us is that the board does not do the hiring.

When asked if the board tried to micro-manage him or anyone else, Ron said, “No, but occasionally they will try; but I just remind them that it is not the way it works and um that usually works.”

Alejandro Guerra said that he joined SOE because of board politics in the TPS that he worked in. He said,

> Ron had been recruiting for a couple of years, but I was reluctant to leave the TPS where I worked as principal. Finally, I had enough of the petty board politics. It really turned me off. They were asking me to do things that I was not comfortable with. I was being asked

> to do things that were against my core values. So I said, "You know what, I am going to take Ron's offer, and here I am."

Samantha Alvarez and Antonio Garza shared similar stories of petty board politics influencing their decision to join SOE.

Summary

After coding and analyzing the transcriptions of the five audio-taped individual interviews, the researcher found three major themes and sub-themes as they related to the research questions. Three main themes emerged from the analysis. Each major theme was further divided into three sub-themes. The three main themes and sub-themes are as follows: 1) Academic focus: a) The principal as an instructional leader, b) High expectations of students, c) Data driven decision making; 2) Staffing tendencies: a) Recruiting strategies, b) Autonomy to hire staff, c) Terminating staff; 3) Organizational level characteristics: a) Senior administrator visibility and feedback, b) Staff Accountability and expectations, c) School board politics. The analysis of each theme and sub-theme was informed and supported by the introduction of literature relative to theme.

The Chief Executive Officer and the four principals in the study all had previous work experience in TPS. Therefore, one of the objectives of the interviews was the intent to draw comparisons between each participant's lived experience as an employee of SOE and TPS. A second objective of the interviews was to better understand what SOE practices are most effective in raising student scholastic achievement. The final objective and focus of the study was to see if some of these best practices could be transferred or applied to a TPS setting. The goal of the study was not to replace TPS practices with charter school practices. The aim of the study was to emulate, in a TPS setting, the charter school practices that have contributed to the

popularity and success (as defined by the TEA rating system) of this particular open-enrollment charter school. The ultimate result would be to increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of TPS administrators, and thus strengthen the traditional public school system. The study summary, conclusions and recommendations will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insight and understanding into those best charter school practices, and how some of these practices can be applied or emulated in a TPS setting. Merriam (1988) argued that there are few areas of practice that offer as many opportunities for research as does the field of Education. Having an interest in knowing more about the field and in improving the practice of education leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative or naturalistic inquiry. Furthermore, Merriam asserted that, "Research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education" (p. 3). Therefore, the methodology for the study was predominately qualitative in nature. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) suggested that interviews are more commonly associated with qualitative studies. Therefore, for this study the semi formal, open-ended, in-depth interview was the primary method of inquiry and data collection strategy. Using this method of inquiry the researcher hoped to produce a wealth of detailed information about the leadership attributes, characteristics, and best practices of a particular high performing charter school system (Patton, 1990). One of the objectives of the interviews was the intent to draw comparisons between each

participant's lived experience as an employee of SOE and TPS. A second objective of the interviews was to better understand what SOE practices were most effective in raising student scholastic achievement. The final objective and focus of this study was to see if some of the best practices could be transferred or applied to a TPS setting. The goal of the study was not to replace TPS practices with charter school practices. The aim of the study was to emulate, in a TPS setting, the charter school practices that have contributed to the popularity and success (as defined by the TEA, 2012a) of this particular open-enrollment charter school. The ultimate result would be to increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of TPS administrators, and thus strengthen the traditional public school system. The study was conceptually framed around the premise that state charter school laws allow individuals and groups to create new public schools that are supported with public dollars but managed independently of the local education agency. As cited in Chapter Two of this study, the charter school movement is predicated on the idea of giving educational entrepreneurs the ability to operate public schools that agree to meet specified performance targets in exchange for freedom from bureaucratic rules and regulations. These policies encourage educational entrepreneurship by allowing charter operators to use their own approach to achieve specified performance targets.

The study included five individual interviews. The participants included four principals and the Chief Executive Officer of this particular open-enrollment charter school organization. All of the participants in the study have previous experience working in traditional public schools. A pseudonym was used for the name of each participant to maintain complete confidentiality.

The study was guided by the following research questions: What leadership attributes and actions do charter school administrators demonstrate that have transformed a particular charter school into the popular public school option that it is today?

Associated sub-questions used to develop the response to this guiding question are:

1. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to academic focus?
2. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting relative to staffing?
3. How do charter school administrators describe the differences between working in a charter school setting versus a traditional public school setting?

After coding and analyzing the transcriptions of the five audio taped individual interviews, the researcher found three major themes and sub-themes as they related to the research questions. Three main themes emerged from the analysis. Each major theme was further divided into three sub-themes. The three main themes and sub-themes are as follows: 1) Academic focus: a) The principal as an instructional leader, b) High expectations of students, c) Data driven decision making; 2) Staffing tendencies: a) Recruiting strategies, b) Autonomy to hire staff, c) Terminating staff; 3) Organizational level characteristics: a) Senior administrator visibility and feedback, b) Staff Accountability and expectations, c) School board politics.

Academic focus

The principal as the instructional leader

Good principals engage their schools in the core processes of establishing, maintaining, evaluating, and improving their structures and cultures. Schools need a principal to keep the organization going effectively and improving continuously. The instructional leadership of the principal is a critical factor in the success of a school's improvement initiatives and the overall effectiveness of the school (Lunenburg, 2010). Whereas all the participants reported that instructional focus was one of many priorities in TPS, all the principal participants concurred that instructional leadership was priority one in SOE. All of the participants reported that a majority of their time and focus is spent in the classroom with the teachers. As cited in Chapter Four of this study, Hoy and Hoy (2009) argued that principals cannot be effective instructional leaders if they do not know what is happening in the classroom. Additionally, principals reported that they spent at least equal amounts of time outside the classroom providing constructive feedback and having data conversion with the teachers; all other responsibilities of leading a campus are delegated. They all agreed that schools are about teaching and learning. All other activities are secondary to these goals (Hoy & Hoy, 2009). In addition, all the participants agreed that the position of principal in SOE was about coaching and mentoring teachers and providing the needed support for student learning. Education researchers Hoy and Hoy (2009) argued that principals cannot promote the success of all students without a clear understanding of teaching and learning. Thus, the participants all cited that to be effective instructional leaders principals must know, and get a clear understanding, of what is happening in the classroom. Therefore, all principals reported that a majority of their time was spent in the classroom and providing feedback to teachers in the form of data conversations. The teachers deliver the instruction in the classroom, but the principal should forge a partnership with teachers with the primary goal of the

improvement of teaching and learning. It is difficult to engage in such cooperation without principals spending quality time in the classroom. Therefore, as cited in Chapter Four, the school principal sets the climate, creates the focus, and contributes significantly to the culture of the building (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). Therefore, it is recommended that school principals find time within their day to meet with teachers to learn and discuss formative data. As cited in the study, it is important to spend time in the classroom with the teachers to be able to engage them in formative conversations. Therefore, a second recommendation would be to make classroom observations a priority and a must in the daily duties of a principal. A third recommendation, especially in light of dismal performance data, it is the critical need for the principal to encourage questioning, analyzing, critiquing, and facing challenges (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). Another recommendation would for principals to set up common grade level planning periods to enable staff to have meaningful conversations about student learning and provide opportunities for coaching and mentoring. The final recommendation is to give praise for a specific teacher's skill if observed.

Data driven decision making

As noted in this study, all of the principals cited that their number one priority was the instructional program. Furthermore, data driven decision making was identified by the participants as a primary tool used as a strategy for student academic achievement. In their book, *Data Driven Decisions and School Leadership,* Kowalski, Lasley, and Mahoney (2008) stated, "What gets measured and gets monitored gets improved" (p.104). William Harris noted that the term data does not mean just test scores; it encompasses all the talk and work of teachers and students (Nidus & Sadder, 2011). All educators play a critical role in using data to accelerate student achievement. Arguably though, the principal is the most critical player (Kowalski,

Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). Alejandro Guerra and William Harris both cited that one of the biggest differences between SOE and TPS was that at SOE they were constantly tracking and charting data. The participants all reported daily data conversations with teachers and supervisors as well. They described one to one data conversions with teachers and supervisors on topics that include student daily attendance, student persistence and discipline, student homework, student writing samples, student attrition, teacher progress and assessments, and assessment data on special populations, or any information that provided the opportunity to discuss student work in the context of the lesson and instruction (Nidus & Sadder, 2011). All participants agreed that at SOE data driven decision making is a pedagogical way of life. Data driven decision making was the primary tool they used to make better decisions about how best to educate the students. As cited in the study, data driven decision making is an important strategy to have in the tool box, and all principals should consider teaching and learning as their primary focus. Therefore it is recommended that principals use formative data as a tool to assist them in making important decisions, and especially those that directly affect student achievement. A second recommendation is that the principal spend quality time in the classroom with the teacher. As cited in Chapter Four of the study, Hoy and Hoy (2009) contended that school improvement equates to teacher improvement. They posited that improvement is a continuous process. Therefore, classroom observations should be continuous as well, not merely a ritual observation that principals make once or twice a year. A one to two minute walkthrough is not enough time to gather the necessary formative data to provide quality feedback. As cited in Chapter Four of this study, it is difficult for the principal to engage in data conversations with the teacher if he or she does not spend enough time in the classroom gathering formative data such as observing and recording student responses and recording techniques that are used by the teacher during the

lesson. It is also recommended that the principal follow up the observation with a post observation data conversation about what was observed in the classroom. Additionally, the conversation should include talk about school-wide and class-wide assessment data charting student progress. A third recommendation is for the principal to make the classroom observation and subsequent feedback part of the daily routine. It takes time to make data conversation a part of the school culture. Therefore, a final recommendation would be for the principal to delegate all other non-instructional responsibilities to assistants.

High expectations of the students

Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, and Javed (2009) described instructional leadership as consisting of principal behaviors that set high expectations and clear goals for students and staff. The participants all agreed that the primary feature that set SOE apart from TPS was the high student expectations. From the beginning students are told and reminded on a daily basis that they will matriculate and graduate from college. The participants described SOE as a “No Excuses” school. All of the participants emphasized that high expectations of the students and the staff is the culture of SOE. Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, and Javed (2009) further reported that a teacher’s commitment to change within the instructional program was affected the most by leadership that gave direction and purpose, e.g. the purpose of the school is to educate all students at high levels. As one example of high student academic expectations, the principals reported that they do not segregate student by ability, as they expect all students to perform at high levels of academic performance. William Harris emphasized the high academic expectations for all students by citing that at SOE there is no tracking of students by ability level. He said that all students take Algebra in the eighth grade; all the students are enrolled in advanced classes; and all the students will graduate with at least one IB credit. Another example of the high academic expectations of

SOE was that all students are expected to do at least one and a half hours of homework every night. The students are expected to complete the home work on time. No excuses. William reasoned that SOE had high expectations of their students because most students come to SOE with serious academic deficiencies. He explained that they need more time to accomplish the SOE mission than just regular school day hours. The students needed to invest more time in order to catch up. He explained, “That is why we insist on home work every night.” He said, “If you add up the hours of after school academic time over the course of a year, I would say it would add up to thousands of hours. We think that it is very significant.” In the event that a student does not complete his or her homework, SOE has an after-school program specifically designed to assist students with their homework assignment. Any student who does not complete the homework assigned was required to participate in the after school program. William Harris explained the rationale for the strict homework policy. He reasoned that to begin with, all SOE students are expected to excel academically. The second reason he cited was the fact that most of the students that SOE serves have serious academic deficiencies when they enroll in SOE, and need more time than the regular school day to strengthen their academic foundation. Third he said, “We believe that these high expectations will ultimately result in college success.” DiPaola and Hoy (2008) described effective instructional leadership as, “Individuals who set high expectations for all students, used assessment data to support student success, kept the focus on the students, and addressed barriers to learning” (p. 8). At the district level, student achievement should be the major focus and all teachers and staff should expect high levels of learning from all students. Therefore, a recommendation for instructional leaders is that high student expectations should be the foundation of the school’s academic program and should begin from the time students enter a school. An example of how district leadership can model high student

expectations is by aligning the curriculum and requiring all eighth grade students to take algebra I. A second recommendation is for a district level focus on homework. The district should have a clearly defined district wide homework policy that reinforces an extension of classroom learning at home. A third recommendation, at the campus level, is an initiative for schools to implement a policy that requires teachers, students, and administrators to engage in conversations that focus on what behaviors and actions are conducive to achieving student success. A fourth recommendation is for teachers to post goals on their classroom walls and throughout the school as a constant reminder to students and their parents of the high expectations for students in the SOE.

Staffing Tendencies

Recruitment of staff

The Chief Executive Officer of SOE public schools reported that recruiting quality staff was critical component of their business model. He reported that SOE has a recruiting department whose job it is to find individuals who meet their recruiting criteria in order to fill their ranks. He described that once a candidate is identified as a potential recruit, the recruiting becomes deliberate and rigorous. As cited in Chapter Four, effective teachers and quality principals are the bedrock of effective schools (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Additionally, Amrein-Beardsley (2007) contended that the best solution for raising the historically substandard levels of student achievement in public schools is to increase the quality of teachers and administrators. Hoy and Hoy (2009) argued that teacher quality is the single biggest school level factor related to the academic success or failure of students in high poverty schools. However, they posited, principals are responsible for developing the school climate that supports the very best

instructional practices. All the participants in the study described a deliberate recruiting process that centered mostly on an individual's track record of success. In one case the recruiting process included on-going communication and dialogue that lasted more than two years. In another case the recruitment of one of the principals lasted almost one year and included constant communication that included several face to face in-formal interviews over coffee or lunch. Additionally, this process included SOE staff observing the potential candidate in her place of employment. Amrein-Beardsley (2007) cited that the factor most likely to encourage teachers to work in a school would be the quality of the principal. The extent to which the principal would be caring, supportive, open-minded, committed to student learning, knowledgeable, and "highly qualified" mattered most. The second most persuasive recruitment strategy was an offer of a higher salary, promotion, or increased benefit. In every case in this study, the candidates were offered a better salary and benefits program than was provided at their previous place of employment. All reported that included in their benefits program was a potential for performance related bonuses. Additionally, the Chief Executive Officer cited the salary structure flexibility and bonuses as a significant recruiting tool. Wilson (2011) contended that the quality of teaching in a school is directly related to the quality of the teachers and the principal. Thus, in recruiting potential principals and administrators, it is recommended that district Human Resources (HR) departments exercise a deliberate recruitment process that includes rigorous review of an individual's track record in addition to the TPS practice of reference checks. A second recommendation, in addition to this rigorous review of potential candidates, is that HR should venture out into the field and invite/attract and persuade skilled individuals to apply. A third recommendation to recruit high quality candidates is to offer salary and benefits incentives. All the study participants reported that TPS had rigid salary schedules that were based on the number

of years of experience in Education. All other factors were disregarded. Thus, in addition to years of experience, salary schedule flexibility and benefits incentives should be considered and equitably distributed based on the candidate's awards, degrees, and other qualifications related to administrative expertise and should reflect the level of need found in the district.

Autonomy to hire

More than a quarter century ago, Ernest Boyer, one of the most influential figures in the advancement of public education and teacher training, observed,

> When you talk about school improvement, you are talking about people improvement. That is the only way to improve schools, unless you mean painting buildings and fixing floors….The school is people, so when we talk about excellence or improvement or progress, we are really talking about the people who make up the building (as quoted in Dufour & Marzano, 2011, p. 15).

Two different meta-analyses of research on the factors that impact student achievement found that the quality of instruction students receive in their classrooms was the most important variable in student achievement. Those same studies also noted the wide disparity in the quality of instruction within the same school (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). The principals reported that after the talent recruiters screened the applicants, they were free to interview and hire the staff they felt was the best fit for their campus. All of the principals in the study cited that the autonomy granted to them to hire teachers and staff was the single biggest difference between SOE and TPS. Furthermore, all of the participants indicated that they could not recall a single incident of headquarter interference during the hiring process of staff for their campuses. On the other hand, three of the participants in the study indicated that the lack of autonomy in TPS was the primary reason for leaving TPS. Therefore, a first recommendation is for central

administration HR departments to actively search for talent. Rather than just serve as an application depot of interested applicants, HR should actively recruit and screen for talented candidates. To ensure system-wide efficiency and consistency, a second recommendation is that all potential candidates for employment must go through the central office screening process. As cited in this study, the teacher is the single most important variable in student achievement (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Fryer, 2012). Thus, a final recommendation is for superintendents of TPS cite, as a non-negotiable to board members and others, that the campus principal has the final say the hiring of their classroom teachers.

Terminating staff

All principal participants agreed that terminating staff at SOE was a much easier and simpler process than in TPS. The primary reason that terminating staff at SOE was an easier process was that charter schools do not offer contracts. Even so, the participants reported that, before termination of an under-performing employee, they would generally put the employee in a performance improvement plan along with specific objectives and goals that they had to meet. All of the participants agreed that SOE spent significant resources on training and preparing teachers for the instructional rigor of the classroom. Thus, all of the participants reported that they provided support in the form of coaching, mentoring, and constructive feedback before they made a decision to terminate a teacher. All of the principal participants reported having to terminate staff; all reported that headquarters supported them in every case. The participants stated that the autonomy to terminate staff was a significant component in their ability to lead. As cited in this study, the teacher was the single most important variable in student achievement (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Fryer,

2012). Therefore, the first recommendation is for the district to have policies that make the process of terminating underperforming staff easier. One of these policies, for example, would be to put all new teachers in TPS on a three to four years probationary contract. If the teacher on a probationary contract is under-performing, the principal can recommend termination without having to justify the reasons for the recommendation. Thus, a second recommendation is for central administration to provide all necessary support in such recommendations. A third recommendation is for the principal to focus on all new teachers, and to start documenting, beginning on the first day of school, teacher performance. If the principal observes potential problems, then the principal needs to provide needed support as soon as possible. A fourth recommendation is for the principal to evaluate all new teachers to the campus and all teachers that he or she perceives to be in need of improvement. If the principal fails to see progress, then the principal needs to place the teacher on a growth plan with specific and measurable goals and objectives. This action needs to happen as soon as possible. If the teacher fails to meet the goals and objectives, then the principal needs to recommend termination. A fifth recommendation is for district level staff to support the principal on all termination recommendations.

Organizational level characteristics

Senior administrator visibility and feedback

Richard Dufour and Robert Marzano (2011) contended that creating conditions that foster academic achievement can be done with existing resources if schools and districts are willing to change some of their traditional practices. As described in Chapter Four under the theme of organizational level characteristics, the principal participants each described a significant difference between TPS and SOE.

All of the participants reported that senior administrators, including the Chief Executive Officer, were regular visitors to their campuses. At the same time, they reported that while employed at TPS, central office staff visits to their campuses as a strategy for academic improvement were rare. All reported never to have seen the superintendent visit the campus for the purpose of a walkthrough and subsequent feedback as a strategy for academic improvement. Lezotte (2008) argued that the principal and his staff could help a school improve student achievement, but they could not sustain the improvement or survive the departure of key leaders without the support of the district and a commitment at that level to promote effective schooling practices (as cited in Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Markus Buckingham (2005) concluded that one thing all leaders must remember to be effective is the importance of clarity in their communication. He contended that effective district leaders recognize the importance of ongoing communication, and they engage in conversations with stakeholders about all things related to school improvement. Effective school leaders are eager to initiate dialogue, and develop formal and informal strategies for soliciting the perspective of others. Thus, regular campus visits by central office staff is a significant strategy for academic improvement (Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Also, as cited above, it is of critical importance for the superintendent to visit campuses on a regular basis and provide constructive feedback on his or her observations. The visits should focus on what is happening in the classroom and conversations and feedback should be on data as well as on the district's mission and goals and not on individuals or personalities. Thus, based on the evidence cited in this study, it is recommended that the superintendent and central office administrative staff prioritize campus visits for the purpose of providing clarity in communications and provide needed support of the

campus' goals and objectives. These regularly scheduled campus visitations by senior administrators as a strategy for academic improvement should be categorized as a top priority.

Board Politics

Fusarelli and Peterson (2002) wrote, "Research literature focused on district leadership indicates that the relationship between the superintendent and the board of education has a significant impact on the quality of a district's educational program" (p. 282) (as cited in Moody, 2011). Furthermore, The Center for Public Education (2011) concluded that school districts with a strong board/superintendent relationship had greater student achievement as measured by dropout rates, the percentage of students going to college, and aptitude test scores. As cited in this study, three of the four principal participants opted out of TPS because of the political nature of their working environment. Board politics, the participants cited, often influenced the campus level decision making process. The participants, on the other hand, reported that board politics or the influence of the board members relative to their decision making was non-existent at SOE. Therefore, it recommended that the superintendent strive to develop a relationship of trust with the board of trustees. It is vital that boards and superintendents see themselves as a team and not separate entities. Thus, one of the superintendent's initial team development initiatives should be to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of their respective positions (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The superintendent could enlist the services of Region One Education Center to assist with this activity. The focus of this team building activity should be to: a) Create a trusting and collaborative relationship between the board and the superintendent; b) Creation by the board of conditions and organizational structures that allow the superintendent to function as Chief Executive Officer and instructional leader of the district; c) Effective communication between the board president and the superintendent and among the board members (The Center

for Public Education, 2011). Finally, the superintendent and the board of trustees should recognize that team building and effective communication is a continuous and on-going process.

Staff accountability and expectations

All participants described SOE culture as a “no excuses” culture of accountability and expectations. Even though the principal participants described a high degree of autonomy to lead their campuses, they all agreed that they were held accountable for student achievement results. As cited in this study, all of the principals contended that they were held to high expectations, and that senior leadership expected them to reach the bar that was set for them; no excuses. Furthermore, all the principals had previous experience working in TPS and agreed that the sense of urgency and high expectations, characteristic of SOE, was absent in TPS. Although the senior leadership in SOE was willing to compromise on some aspects of the job, there was little or no compromise on student academic achievement. Thus, it is important that the superintendent and central office administrative staff clarify, to the campus principal, what is non-negotiable. Therefore, a recommendation is that the superintendent would expect the building principals to accept responsibility for the success or failure of their schools and, in return, would provide principals with some flexibility. However, the principals are also expected to lead within the parameters established by the district’s goals, such as academic achievement as a non-negotiable (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). To improve the clarity and specificity of expectations, a second recommendation is that central office leadership would work with the principals to identify specific instructional practices. These practices, such as data- driven decision-making and data conversations, would be visible at each school. A third recommendation is that central office leaders, including the superintendent, must clarify expectations and monitor, through regular

campus visitations, the degree to which the priorities are understood and acted upon (Fullan, 2010).

The literature and research on how charter school best practices can be emulated in TPS is nascent. Further research, including quantitative studies, are needed to fully investigate if the charter practices cited in this study can take root in TPS.

Summary

In conclusion, the Chief Executive Officer and four principals in one exemplary South Texas public charter school system were asked to participate in this study. Each participant was interviewed twice in an effort to reach a greater understanding of each participant's lived experience as an administrator in the charter school organization (Patton, 1990). The chief executive officer and the four principals in the study all had previous work experience in TPS; thus, one of the objectives of the interviews was the intent to draw comparisons between each participant's lived experience as an employee of SOE and TPS. A second objective of the interviews was to better understand what SOE practices are most effective in raising student scholastic achievement. The final objective and focus of the study was to see if some of these best practices can be transferred or applied to a TPS setting. The goal of the study was not to replace TPS practices with charter school practices, but rather to emulate, in a TPS setting, the charter school practices that have contributed to the popularity and success (as defined by the TEA , 2012a) of this particular open-enrollment charter school. The ultimate result would be to increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of TPS administrators, and thus strengthen the traditional public school system. All of the principals interviewed for the study were in agreement that there were practices in their charter setting that were either non-existent or were not a priority in a TPS setting. Studies (Fryer, 2012; Rix, 2012; & Terry, 2012;

Betts, 2009) indicated that, as a whole, charter schools have yielded inconsistent results. Some charters have made impressive gains in closing the achievement gap, while others have not had any significant results. However, the studies also indicated that some charter schools have drastically improved student achievement, and that the practices that distinguish these high performing charter schools can be identified and subsequently implemented in a traditional public setting. The Chief Executive Officer reported that there was a waiting list of over 15,000 students wanting to enroll in SOE. All of the participants agreed that at SOE the main focus was academic readiness that translates into college matriculation and, ultimately, college graduation. All agreed that academic focus was the driving force behind the student waiting list. The participants of the study identified, as a pedagogical way of life at SOE, the following: the principal as the instructional leader, data-driven decision making, and high student expectations. These factors have been identified in studies found in literature as essential components to sound instructional programming (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Nidus & Sadder, 2011; Hoy & Hoy, 2009; Zafar, Umar, Rahmat, & Javed, 2009; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). Another factor identified by the participants as instrumental to their leadership capacity was the autonomy given to them to staff their campuses as they saw fit. They cited the autonomy to hire and fire staff as a critical factor relevant to their success as instructional leaders. All of the principal participants reported absolute autonomy in the hiring and terminating process. The participants reported zero instances of interference from headquarters, board members, or anyone else in the hiring and terminating process. A third factor identified by the participants as critical to SOE success was system-wide headquarter tendencies. All of the participants reported a high degree of senior administrator level campus visibility. The participants stated that the headquarter level staff, including the Chief Executive Officer, frequently visited their campuses.

The participants reported that the campus visits were always followed by subsequent constructive feedback. Additionally, the participants reported that, in return for campus autonomy, headquarters held campus principals to a high degree of accountability and expectations. The participants also reported that board member politics was non-existent or not evident at the campus level.

Fryer (2012) reported that, on average, charter schools have had no statistical impact on test scores in comparison to TPS. Because charter schools have such a mixed record, they are clearly not the answer to closing the achievement gap. Some studies (Fryer, 2012; Rix, 2012; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Betts, 2009), however, suggest that some selected charter schools have had resounding success and that there are lessons that can be learned from them in the hopes of better serving students enrolled in TPS. The researcher's aim for the study was to identify charter school best practices so that those practices can be emulated in the TPS setting. The ultimate result would be to increase student achievement by strengthening the leadership capacities of TPS administrators, and thus strengthen the traditional public school system as a whole.

Recommendations for Future Study

This qualitative study was limited in scope by location and its sample size, since it focused upon four principals and one chief executive officer from a charter school organization in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. To further add to the reliability to this study, additional data gathering and analysis across the state from other high achieving charter schools should be conducted. Secondly, further research could be conducted which examines the different types of partnerships between TPS and charter schools with an emphasis upon best practices. A third recommendation for further study would be to study the governance framework/policies that grant TPS board of trustees authority over local education agencies (LEA) versus their impact on

LEA . Finally, further studies could examine leadership best practices in TPS and compare these practices to charter school best practices.

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APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRINICPALS

1. Could you talk a little about your background: personal/professional?

2. I'd be interested in knowing how you became involved with *School of Excellence Public Schools*? How did you find out about *School of Excellence Public Schools*?
    a. What about *School of Excellence Public Schools* appealed to you?
    b. What previous experiences have you had in the field of education?
3. As a campus level administrator, which features of your school are the most appealing to you?
4. Some people have difficulty deciding whether or not to employ or associate with charter schools, and others find it an attractive option versus traditional public schools. What kind of decision making process did you go through in deciding whether or not to employ or associate with *School of Excellence Public Schools*?
    a. What particular issues were you concerned about?
    b. What was happening in your life that stimulated your decision to join *School of Excellence Public Schools*

5. Which features of your school do you feel are the most attractive to parents and students? Now that you've joined the *School of Excellence Schools*, how do you feel about it?
    a. How would you describe your feelings about *School of Excellence Public Schools* right now?
    b. What lingering doubts or concerns do you have?
6. What are your expectations about how *School of Excellence Public Schools* will affect you personally?
    a. What changes in your professional life do you hope will result from the *School of Excellence Public School* experience?
    b. What do you hope you will get out of the *School of Excellence Public School* experience?
7. As a campus level administrator, what concerns/issues have been the most challenging to you in the operation of your school?
8. To what extent has *School of Excellence Public Schools* been what you expected it to be?
    a. How was it different from what you expected it to be?
    b. To what extent did the things/issues you were concerned about before joining the *School of Excellence* become a reality?

    b-1. Which things/issues came true?

    b-2. Which things/issues did not come true?
9. What would you say are the most significant differences between *School of Excellence Public Schools* versus traditional public school in general?

10. How does working with *School of Excellence* influence your approach to pedagogical strategies?
11. During the time that you have been employed at the *School of Excellence*, what kind of feelings do you have about the school staff in general?
    a. What feelings do you have about the central administration leadership?
    b. What feelings do you have about the campus level leadership?
    c. How has your experience, with *School of Excellence* leadership (in general), been different from your experiences with other schools (public or private)?
12. What are the things that happen at *School of Excellence* that make a difference for you?
    a. What has been the high point of your *School of Excellence* experience so far?
    b. What was the low point?
13. What makes the *School of Excellence* what it is?
14. Which features of your school do you feel are the most attractive to staff in general?
15. What methods does your school use to assess student academic performance?
16. Do you have any other feelings and thoughts that you would like to share with us to help us understand your experience with *School of Excellence* and how it has affected you?

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

1. Could you talk a little about your background: personal/professional?

2. I'd be interested in knowing how you became involved with *School of Excellence Public Schools*? How did you find out about *School of Excellence Public Schools*?
   a. What about *School of Excellence Public Schools* appealed to you?
   b. What previous experiences have you had in the field of education?
3. As the Chief Executive Officer, which features of your school system are the most appealing to you?
4. Which features of your school system do you feel are the most attractive to parents and students?
5. Which features of your school do you feel are the most attractive to faculty and staff?
6. Now that the *School of Excellence Schools* has been in existence for over 10 years, how do you feel about it?
   a. How would you describe your feelings about *School of Excellence Public Schools* right now?

    b. What lingering doubts or concerns do you have?

7. How has *School of Excellence Public Schools* affected you personally? Professionally?
8. As Chief Executive what concerns/issues have been the most challenging to you in the operation of your school?
9. To what extent has *School of Excellence Public Schools* been what you expected it to be?
    a. How was it different from what you expected it to be?
    b. To what extent did the things/issues you were concerned about before joining the *School of Excellence* become a reality?

    b-1. Which things/issues came true?

    b-2. Which things/issues did not come true?

10. What would you say are the most significant differences between *School of Excellence Public Schools* versus traditional public school in general?
11. How has your association with *School of Excellence* influence your approach to pedagogical strategies?
12. During your time as Chief Executive of the *School of Excellence*, what kind of feelings do you have about the school staff in general?
    a. What feelings do you have about the central administration leadership?
    b. What feelings do you have about the campus level leadership?
    c. How has your experience, with *School of Excellence* leadership (in general), been different from your experiences with other schools (public or private)?

13. What are the things that happen at *School of Excellence* that make a difference for you?
    a. What has been the high point of your *School of Excellence* experience so far?
    b. What was the low point?
14. What makes the *School of Excellence* what it is?
15. Which features of your school do you feel are the most attractive to staff in general?
16. What methods does your school use to assess student academic performance?
17. Do you have any other feelings and thoughts that you would like to share with us to help us understand your experience with *School of Excellence* and how it has affected you?

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Principal,

I am conducting a study on "The Leadership Attributes and Actions of an Exemplary Open-enrollment Charter School in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas**".** The focus of the study is on the charter school leadership strategies, attributes, and actions that have contributed to the popularity and success of a particular open-enrollment charter school organization. As part of this study, we are interested in the views of the charter school staff that are in leadership positions in this particular high performing charter school system.

Twenty two current school principals in your school district will be asked to participate in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. The extent of said participation will be an interview about issues related to this topic. The interview is expected to last approximately 60 minutes.

Of those principals who volunteer to participate, four will be randomly selected for the interview. All individual responses will be treated confidentially, and your participation is completely voluntary; although you have shown interest in participating in this study, you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time and can choose not to answer specific questions.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality as required by research protocols, all interviews will conducted off campus at a mutually agreed time and location, and the results of the study will be made available to the public and shared with the Chief Executive Officer of School of Excellence Public Schools. No actual names will be used in this study; instead, pseudonyms will be used in the study.

If you are interested in participating in the study, please reply via this e-mail message.

Thank you for your consideration,

Mr. Mario Salinas

e-mail address: m.salinas@ecisd.us

(956) 207.4610

Doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership

University of Texas-Pan American

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mario H. Salinas was born March 3, 1960, in Edinburg, Texas to Mrs. Victoria and Mr. Margarito Salinas. He received his Bachelor's degree from Pan American University, Edinburg Texas in 1985. He had taught Secondary Science for 6 years with the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District. He completed his Masters in Educational Administration and Mid-Management Certification at the University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg, Texas in 1990 and has worked as High School Assistant Principal for 6 years and as a High School Principal for 8 years in Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District. Since 2005 he has been a working as an Assistant Superintendent for District Administration with the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District.