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Reflections from Pennsylvania Charter School Leaders: A Qualitative Study

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REFLECTIONS FROM PENNSYLVANIA CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERS:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
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Title: Reflections From Pennsylvania Charter School Leaders: A Qualitative Study

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Charter schools have been developed and established for decades. With nearly 6,000 charter schools across the United States and more than 550 in Pennsylvania alone, hundreds-of-thousands of students are attending public charter schools from preschool through high school graduation. Over the past several years the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and states across the country, have continued to modify the process for applying, establishing, and renewing charter schools. This study describes three individuals who founded charter schools in an attempt to shed light on their leadership qualities, motivations for founding a charter school, struggles and triumphs, and to provide recommendations for others who will follow their lead. The three case studies described in this study are currently serving as leaders in their charter schools in Pennsylvania.

Current research and literature have identified the elements of evidence-based practices regarding school leadership practices. Legislation has provided the regulations, which govern the fiscal responsibilities of charter schools as well as the application and renewal process. This study found that the sample of school founders and leaders varied in their educational and professional experiences prior to the opening of their charter schools; however, they each have a sense of urgency to provide educational equality and innovation. Data identified supports and barriers to charter school application and renewal found among the leaders. Charter leaders who align their student's academic

experiences with the mission and vision of the school continuously find support from parents, teachers, and stakeholders. Supports for successful application and renewal of charters included; maintaining working relationships with the school districts, a supportive founding board, parents and other community stakeholders. Barriers to maintaining charter schools included ever-changing regulations, legislation related to finances, parental concerns, and variability with operating budgets due to the number of students enrolled from local school districts. Charter schools that were able to collaborate for various student supports were able to financially pool resources that they would not otherwise be able to do independently. Charter schools that exhibited working relationships with local school districts found a higher level of charter renewal and collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated to my son Dominic. You have been with me from the very beginning of this academic journey. We attended our first doctoral class together. As an infant you tolerated me reading research to you rather than nursery rhymes, you ate as I typed, and you continued to learn and grow as I did. You have taught me courage, you have given me strength, you constantly make me laugh and challenge me to think differently about the world; but most importantly, you are the greatest accomplishment of my life. Though it feels as if this is the end of my academic journey, I will remain a life long learner by eagerly watching you continue to grow into the young man you will soon become. I will be here to cheer you on through life's difficult moments.

To my brother who was once a student at a charter school—this is where my interests were peaked watching you learn and grow into a life-long learner.

To my parents who have spent many years encouraging me to work hard, learn more, and share the educational opportunities with others. Coming from a home that valued and appreciated education is one gift that can never be taken away. Both parents spent hours helping with homework, reviewing papers, and traveling all over to support my academic endeavors.

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learning from a wonderful and renowned educator provided the basis for what I yearn to become—a teacher that is able to make a difference in the lives of others.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM

In order to create a building, an architect must first conceptualize the space. Only after that space is imagined can a mason lay blocks. Then carpenters build sturdy walls and the electrician can ensure the building is well lit for occupants. Similarly, it takes a school leader to conceptualize a charter school before an application can be submitted, a school board can be formed, and employees can be hired to ensure students can receive a high-quality education. An estimated 6,004 charter schools across the United States are currently educating more than 2.2 million students in pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade (National Center for Education Reform, 2012, 2014). Though charter schools have just begun to receive notice in the popular media, such schools have been in place for more than twenty years. "Charter schools are now an integral part of the American public education landscape. They provide ubiquitous choices, opportunities, innovation, and involvement on a scale previously unknown by American students and parents" (Ashley & Kayes, 2006, p. 195).

Background

There are a variety of interests and motivations for children in the context of learning. Families, teachers, peers, and school environments all interact to influence the educational outcomes of our students in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Engagement is also a large component to the academic outcomes of pupils. Gone are the days of educating students in long, straight rows of desks, where students silently read information from large textbooks and jot down answers on lined paper. Students must be able to interact and collaborate within the classroom setting. Such classrooms

must be led by captivating instructors whom can utilize technology and various mediums to build connections in meaningful ways between a student's prior knowledge and new material.

Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers, and Ray Budde developed the concept of "school choice." In his seminal publication *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts Key to Long-Term Continuing Improvement in American Education*, Budde (1974) indicated that education reform should begin with schools that are created by teachers to provide an option to traditional public education.

Though policy makers at the federal, state, and local level were aware of the idea of charter schools, professionals in higher education and public education built upon Budde's idea for nearly two decades before legislation for the first charter school was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Legislation similar to Minnesota's quickly spread across the country. California passed legislation in 1992 and was followed by 25 other states within the next five years. By 2013, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and 41 states had charter school laws.

Enhancing public education has become a significant feature in education reform. Charter schools have not only garnered support from individual states, but also the federal government. The first federal legislation pertaining to charter schools began with the Charter Schools Program (1994) as part of Title X, Part C of the reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (20 USC §8061-8067). Throughout the past 20 years charter schools have gained bi-partisan support.

Though the motives for charter school creation vary greatly and mission statements differ, the overall tenet remains the same; each of these public schools create an educational environment that fills a particular gap to increase educational opportunities in a particular geographic area. The charter movement was vital to education reform and leadership by providing an opportunity for school leaders and teachers to create innovative environments for students.

Statement of the Problem

This qualitative case study focused on the experiences of charter school leaders and the process they went through to develop and maintain charter schools in Pennsylvania. This research is needed in order to identify and study themes in successful application preparation and in order to provide insight into leaders' experiences. In Pennsylvania, charter schools were created to provide educational choice to parents while providing new professional opportunities for teachers to implement innovative teaching methods (PA Public School Code §17-1702-A).

Although the problem of geographical determination for student enrollment in public schools is not a new phenomenon, it has negatively affected many families living in low-income communities. Historically, wealthy families move into affluent communities and the children attend high-ranking public school districts, or attend costly private schools, while families in low income areas are forced to send their children to lower performing schools in nearby neighborhoods (Yeung & Connley, 2008). With the creation of charter schools, school choice became an option for many more students.

Though skepticism exists, charter schools have consistently met with success on state and federal accountability measures, as well as matching enrollment, attendance,

and graduation rates of larger public school districts (Wells, 2002). Charter school founders continue to meld attributes of traditional public and private schools into new models designed to enhance the learning environment for students attending their newly formed schools by creating innovative learning programs; however, legislation regarding such schools continues to change (Callison, 2003; Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005).

The Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools (2012) reports that there were more than 44,000 children on waiting lists to attend charter schools across the Commonwealth. As charter school leaders identify best practices of such school development, this will enable others to better meet the academic needs of students across the Commonwealth when creating new opportunities for pupils to learn.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to focus on identifying best practices for creating and maintaining charter schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania from the perspective of three existing school leaders. This comparative case study identified trends in school leaders' experiences as they successfully created and maintained charter schools under the jurisdiction of local school boards and the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The personal experiences of school leaders, artifact review from their school's application process, and observations within each leader's charter school, provided insight into the process of charter school creation in Pennsylvania from conceptualization to fruition. This study moved beyond typical studies comparing charter schools to traditional schools, and charter school leaders to principals in traditional public school systems. To gain a deeper understanding of the motivation of charter school leaders, this

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study focused on those who founded schools and also described their experiences as they continue to lead the charter school.

This qualitative case study provided insight into the pathway through academic and professional experiences that led to charter creation from the perspective of three school founders. Outlying factors such as ways in which charter founders assembled a school board, found a physical location for the school, created marketing plans, recruited students, enlisted parental and community support, retained employees, and ways they funded curriculum materials before the start of the first school year, were also highlighted. This case study attempts to distinguish leadership qualities and motivations for founding a charter school and provide recommendations for others who will follow their lead.

Theoretical Framework

Charter school founders must have a global understanding of the academic climate in their region in order to articulate their vision of introducing a new school with a specific focus. Not only do school founders need to be educated, organized, and informed but a school leader must also be able to articulate motivations for beginning a school, the previous academic and professional circumstances that have thrust them into the development of a new school, and the ways in which they will meet the needs of their students. There is a schema of school leaders who hold multiple roles such as managing financial oversight, collaborating with the school board, dealing with personnel issues, developing marketing strategies, managing enrollment, and more (Leithwood & Sun, 2009). In order to properly explore charter school founders, multiple theories must be combined in order to fully understand the role of charter school founders and leaders. The

theoretical frameworks explored were Argyris and Schön's (1974) Espoused Theory and Burns' (2003) Transformational Leadership theory.

Transformational leadership theory (Burns, 2003) emphasizes leaders as influencers of change. Argyris and Schön (1974) developed the notion Espoused Theory, which is the set of assumptions and rules leaders use to make decisions. By exploring the multiple theories simultaneously, it provides an explicit framework to explore school leadership and the numerous responsibilities of charter school founders. In 1974, Espoused Theory is the idea that leaders have a set of beliefs and values, which guide their behaviors. While leaders may initially view the worldview and values as what guide their behaviors, their reflection in action can help them determine theory-in-use of individual behaviors (Argyris & Schön, 1974). In this study espoused and enacted theories were used to describe leaders' development and implementation of their charter schools. Leaders reflected on their original charter proposals, mission statements and vision statements, and their experience as a charter school leader (Savata & Gardner, 2012). Charter school development needs to be examined through the lens of Argyris and Schön's framework of theories of action; specifically espoused theory. Such framework provides the necessary context to define leadership actions and motivations, and describe the continuous pathway of reflection throughout the leadership process.

While responsible leadership requires a shift from individualistic thinking, to solidarity in order to meet an organization's shared goals (Freeman & Auster, 2011), school leaders can become models for their staff and therefore empower employees by modeling accountability and responsible decision-making through being transparent, or by providing clear explanations for each decision (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Cameron,

2011). In the business realm, this may be demonstrated by communicating fiscal decisions to stock-holders, while in the field of education this would be sharing information such as school budgets, board meeting notes, standardized test scores, and other information with employees and community members. Transformational leadership is the ability to act as a motivation for stakeholders including students, parents, personel, and members of the community. Transformational leaders are able to continuously build capacity for others to lead within the school's mission and vision. Pless and Maak (2001) indicate businesses and companies are now scrutinized more harshly in the public eye. By creating a culture of responsibility at the management level, organizations are able to problem solve better as a unit and meet challenges ethically, which in the long run creates a better public image (Pless & Maak, 2001). This level of management was reviewed in this study as it pertains to charter school leaders.

Research Questions

It is the hope of this research that future charter school founders and leaders can use best practices identified from this study to assist their quest to open more charter schools in Pennsylvania. Suggestions for future charter applicants were addressed through themes that were identified from data gathered and analyzed by the researcher. In order to identify strategies of creating and maintaining charter schools in Pennsylvania, school founders were asked: (1) What are the educational backgrounds and career paths of charter school founders/leaders? What motivates them to become charter school founders?, (2) How do charter school leaders make large-scale decisions, such as financing methods, building facilities, student population, creation of school board, school vision and mission statements, and hiring protocols prior to the completion of the

charter school application process?, (3) How did charter leaders respond to critiques of charter applications? How do charter schools in Pennsylvania compare to traditional school districts in terms of student enrollment and demographic data?, and (4) How do existing charter schools compare to the charter school proposals created as part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education charter application process; and how have the existing charters maintained the original mission statements and vision statements? Data gathered from in-depth interviews, school observations, and a review of artifacts were analyzed.

Significance of the Problem

School boards, union representatives, independent schools, and others fear that the public charter school movement, which has gained momentum around the country, could pervade rural, suburban and urban districts around the Commonwealth and therefore jeopardize the enrollment of established school districts (Millman & Maranto, 2009). Motivations of charter school leaders are relatively unexplored phenomena in the field of education. Though the mission, academic need, and the geographic location for such schools in Pennsylvania may vary greatly, the process leaders follow to apply to local school districts and the Department of Education is the same for all applicants.

Charters Defined

Charter schools are created in a myriad of ways. At times a school is created by a group of parents in a community who are seeking a particular kind of school, other times it is a public school leader or university educator who starts a charter school. Just like traditional public schools, charters are in rural and suburban and urban environments with students of every age, gender and ethnicity. What makes a charter school unique is not

that it has a charter, but it has a particular mission or vision that creates a niche for the students who will attend. Charter schools have the flexibility to specialize in a certain topic of instruction like science and mathematics, or arts and technology (Camilleri & Jackson, 2005) which can allow students to change their educational trajectory by focusing on a specific career path or area of study through secondary education.

For purposes of this study, charter schools will be defined as non-profit "bricks and mortar" schools. Such charter schools have autonomy over staffing choice, budget expenditures and instructional methods. These schools are provided a charter by a local school district, this district then becomes the charter authority for a specific geographical area. This authority then approves a charter for a school, which is permission to remain open for a permitted number of years pending student achievement. Charter schools that are public school conversions are therefore including in this study; however, virtual charters and hybrid charters are excluded.

Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress— (AYP) the determination of federal fiduciary resources determined by yearly academic growth of student progress for public schools.

Charter Leader—Also referred to as a school founder for the purposes of this study. The individual, or individuals, who developed the mission of the charter school and completed the application approval process, and then created a charter school.

Charter Movement—A group of professionals who advocate for and work with charter schools including attorneys, leaders, teachers, community members, parents, and students.

Charter Schools—A non-profit "bricks and mortar" public school that has autonomy over staffing choice, budget expenditures and instructional methods. This school is provided a charter from the state department of education, to remain open for a permitted number of years based on student achievement and other objectives. Such schools have particular missions and are accountable to students, parents, and community members for academics, as well as the state for assessments and fiscal responsibilities. For the purpose of this study, charter schools reviewed will only be non-profit entities.

Cyber charter schools—schools, which can be non-profit or for-profit, that provide students with computers and other access to technology in order to provide an online learning environment.

Local Education Agency—LEA—Local Education Agency, or autonomous school (such as charter school or school district)

Life map—A graphical representation (Worth, 2011) of a leader's life, including educational experiences and career choices that lead to the end result of applying for and opening a charter school.

No Child Left Behind Act--(NCLB, 2001) The re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. This legislation held states accountable for student achievement and presented punitive damages such as loss of funding for schools when lack of student achievement occurred.

Race to the Top—an initiative created by President Barack Obama and Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, to encourage innovation and academic achievement in the nation's public schools. This federally funded competition awards points to schools for

meeting performance measures, increasing state standards, and encouraging growth in charter schools.

Telephone interview—A convenient way to interview participants by telephone. Such interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher for accountability purposes (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

Transformational Leadership—Supports espoused theory by remaining reflective and encompasses attributes of responsible leadership including listening to employees, reflecting on other's contributions, meeting the daily needs of employees, and during crisis, and making decisions that are ethically and morally responsible (Coldwell, Joosub, & Papageorgio, 2012; Groves & LaRocca, 2011).

Assumptions of the Study

An assumption of this qualitative case study is that all school leaders have a similar experience when conceptualizing and applying to create their charter school within Pennsylvania. There is also an assumption that suburban and urban districts would have a similar process for charter applications, even though this process may be different in rural environments where there tends to be fewer students enrolled in districts due to geographical location. Additionally, it is assumed that there are more charter schools in Pennsylvania in urban environments, than in suburban and rural environments combined. Another assumption may be that charter school founders are applying to open schools because of a perceived need in their community.

Delimitations of the Study

A purposeful sampling will be used within two charter school settings, both urban and suburban. Each of the selected charter schools share the following characteristics: all have strong mission statements, have been established for more than 10 years and have students whom share the same demographics (age, gender, socioeconomic status). Participation in this study is delimited to current charter school leaders who (a) conceptualized and founded the idea of a school more than 10 years ago, (b) in which they are currently directing, (c) in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Though the original intent was to review the application process by gathering artifacts on all 157 bricks and mortar public charter schools in Pennsylvania, the amount of data would be too great for this type of study. It was then determined by the researcher that creating a purposeful sampling of fewer charter leaders would encourage a deeper understanding and more profound comparison of the experience of school leaders.

Limitations of the Study

The principal limitation to this study was that it is restricted to three charter leaders within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Though it would be informative to follow founders for all charter schools in the state, it would also not be feasible to analyze information from more than 150 founders in the time presented for this study. The study is an in-depth view into the experiences of three charter school leaders, and is therefore not necessarily applicable to the experience that all charter school leaders have had. There is a higher percentage of women in the field of education, but a larger number of school administrators are males (NCE, 2012); and therefore, it is expected that the participants will be predominantly male.

Another possible limitation to this qualitative case study is time. Due the multi-faceted responsibilities of school leaders, time constraints may have played a role in this research study. While care will be taken to schedule interviews and observations during times that will be most suitable to charter school leaders' needs, restrictions on time could create stress for participants. Additionally, it is possible that the responsibilities of such school leaders may differ and therefore differences in the amount of interview time, observation time, or access to artifacts may occur with each charter school in this study.

Though several studies exist on charter schools pertaining to student achievement, legislation, and other topics, very few studies of this kind focus on school leaders. A number of research studies have been published on leadership styles and leadership development, but the majority is limited to traditional K-12 settings. While some studies have been published that discuss leadership styles with school leaders, nearly none have been published on the characteristics of charter school leaders, specifically; even fewer have made the connection between leadership styles and the application of charter school creation.

Due to this qualitative study using purposeful sampling, leaders of traditional public schools or school districts, private schools, and cyber-charter schools are excluded.

Summary

This chapter serves as an introduction to creation of public charter schools in Pennsylvania. A brief summary Argyris and Schön's (1974) espoused theory highlights leaders as reflective practitioners who can articulate the assumptions and rules they use to make decisions. This theoretical model framed the study of school leaders and the process within the community as part of school choice for parents and students.

While studies do exist comparing charter schools to traditional public schools, and others highlight charter successes and failures; none provide examples of the process from conceptualization to fruition. Having leaders describe the process from their experience, the study will exemplify best practices, and possibly provide strategies that can assist future charter school leaders in creating additional schools for students. By understanding more about the manner in which leaders have already solved unease within school districts, rallied community support, and attained approval from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, future charter founders can utilize evidence explored in this study to initiate their own community schools in Pennsylvania.

Chapter Two presents a review of Budde's (1974) seminal research on charter school creation and reviews the historical context of charter school legislation in the country and within Pennsylvania. An overview of the reform measures and accountability pertaining to traditional public schools and charter schools will reveal differences, and lastly a review of related literature on leadership is included.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Charter schools are a part of the public school system and have become part of an educational movement to equalize educational opportunities for students across the country in rural, urban, and suburban environments. Many parents want their children to attend schools that have a particular focus or niche, while maintaining the importance of public education, rather than turning to private or parochial school. Meanwhile, charter school leaders are balancing the workload of sustaining their charter schools financially, supporting their staff, and most importantly working to ensure the needs of all students are being met. It is important then, to identify the motivations of school leaders.

Equalizing educational opportunity has been one of the longest and hardest civil rights battles in America. There are many factors that contribute to an unequal education in this country. For some students, it is the geographic location of their home that restricts educational opportunity. For others it is the educational attainment of their family members, and for yet another group it is their lack of interest in the traditional education system. Sir Ken Robinson (2010) indicates that the reason many students are disinterested in traditional public schooling is because American public schools are still running as they were intended to for the industrial revolution which ended more than 250 years ago. In the early 1990s, urban schools across the country were restructured to mimic corporations from the time (Gelberg, 2007). Though several initiatives have been created to change the face of public education, the only one to date that has created a movement across the United States began with an idea that there was a need for more academic choice for students in public education (Budde, 1974). An outgrowth of

traditional public education has become this initiative of earning a charter to create non-traditional public schools, which legislators have approved in 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia.

In 2006, Zimny indicated the way to improve the current public education system in America would be to decrease bureaucracy and create smaller community schools. Charter schools are often defined as such, and are predicated on being smaller public schools, which promote community and parent support and provide school choice to students (Kayes & Maranto, 2006). More recently, Rix (2012) noted that charter schools successfully build connections in their communities and with families, which can create long lasting effects. Some charter schools have created a niche in their geographical locations by publishing their mission within the community, meeting with students and parents in their homes prior to the start of each school year while others are publically tracking student success and teacher collaboration as a form of professional development. By creating a specific focus, a school can increase student achievement (Jenkins, 2005). Though the hope was for charter schools to push traditional public schools to increase student achievement (Kayes & Maranto, 2006), research has indicated it is more likely to fuel creation of more charters than change public education as a whole (Hassel, 2009).

In 1974, Ray Budde, developed the idea of "schools of choice." In his seminal publication *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts Key to Long-Term Continuing Improvement in American Education* Budde (1974) indicated that education reform should begin with schools that are created by teachers to provide an option to traditional public education.

Budde's idea was built upon by professionals in higher education and public education for nearly two decades before legislation for the first charter school was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Such legislation in Minnesota quickly spread across the country. California passed legislation in 1992, followed by 25 other states within the next five years. In 2013 the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and 41 states now have charter school laws.

Federal legislation has played a seemingly important role in continued growth in charter schools across the country. According to the Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools (2010) there has been a nine percent increase in charter school growth. The stagnation has been caused by caps imposed by legislators in some states. The Center for Education Reform (2010) indicates that there are more than 1.5 million students enrolled in nearly 5,050 charter schools across the nation.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) is a reauthorization of the ESEA, which requires states to close the achievement gap by increasing state standards, teacher quality, student tracking methods, and by increasing parental options related to education, or providing school choice. NCLB requires adequate yearly progress (AYP) for student achievement; it also encourages the conversion from low-performing traditional public schools into charter schools as a punitive measure for schools that lack of academic growth. Such measures were put in place so charter conversions could be opened to better meet the needs of individual students who may need creative solutions in order to increase academic achievement. Such schools are housed in district buildings and students usually come from only that district as well.

As part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, President Barak Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan rewarded states for encouraging charter school creation through the Race to the Top (R2t) initiative. Along with increasing student achievement, maintaining requirements for teacher quality, implementing common core standards, and implementing longitudinal data collection on students, states are also required to support the growth of charter schools. States earn points, which result in funding incentives for meeting Race to the Top initiatives. See Figure 1 for a map of states with charter schools.

The study focused on the experience of three school leaders describing the experiences they had as they went through the process of conceptualizing a charter, successfully completing the application process, and creating and maintaining the school. The study may provide important insight into this process for future leaders. This study analyzes personal accounts of accomplishments that can be replicated and failures that may be avoided. By understanding more about the manner in which leaders have already solved dissention within school districts, rallied community support, and obtained approval from the local districts and the Pennsylvania Department of Education, future charter founders can utilize best practices to start their own community schools in Pennsylvania.

Though many studies about charter schools have been published, this specific type of qualitative study was difficult to find. Charter schools have been in existence since the early 1990s and this timeframe is relatively diminutive compared to the age of formal public education. In addition, legislation various greatly among states and therefore there is variability in the ways in which charters can be created. By reviewing

legislation in Pennsylvania concerning charter schools and leaders' perspectives in charter creation, this study fills an existing gap in academic research.
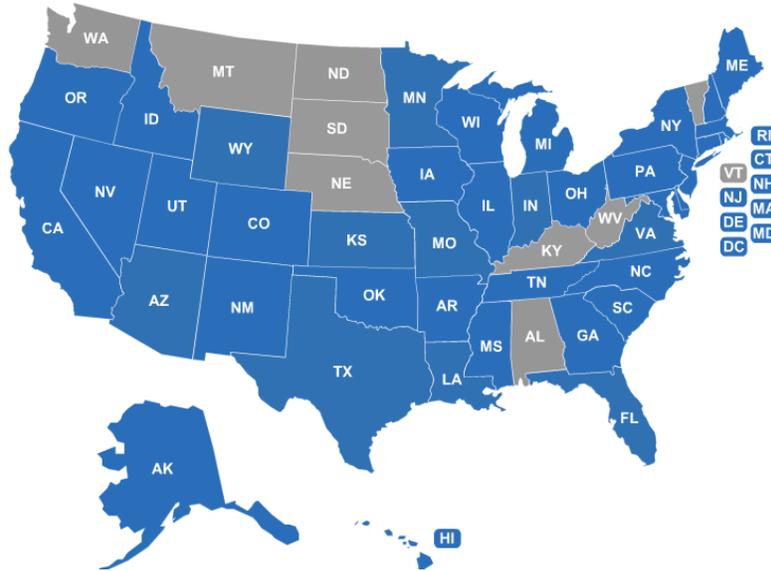
Figure 1. Map of states with charter schools. (NAPCS 2012)

According to the NAPCS (2012) there are currently 5,618 charter schools in America, which accounts for 5.8% of all public schools across the nation. During the 2011-2012 school year, there were 547 charter schools nation-wide, which contributed to charter schools making up 5.8% of the 96,398 public schools in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (NAPCS, 2012).

Three strands of literature provide the basis for this qualitative case study on identifying best practices for creating and maintaining charter schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The first area of research is historical context and legislation of charter schools in America including a description of state statutes and federal legislation. The next theme will address reform measures and accountability

pertaining to traditional public schools and charter schools. Lastly there will be a review of literature relating to school leadership and the foundations of relevant leadership theory. Such literature was selected to provide background knowledge necessary to understand the perspectives of current school leaders on the topic of charter school creation.

History of Charter Schools

The first blocks of the nation-wide charter school foundation were secured in an article by Milton Friedman (1962). Friedman, an economist noted in his seminal essay "The Role of Government in Education" in *Capitalistic Freedom*, that parents should have the choice of where to send their children to school. Friedman noted that schools should have a variety of focus areas to help parents choose schools that would align with their child's interests. Similarly, Budde (1974) indicated that providing school choice would allow teachers to create their own type of public schools that would be an educational option for students and families.

The sentiment for school choice was then compounded by the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which provided a painstaking look into the inequities of America's public school system. Although the problem of geographical determination for student enrollment in public schools is not a new phenomenon, it has been effective for some families in some socioeconomic classes. Historically, wealthy families move into affluent communities where the children can attend high-ranking public school districts, while families living in low-income communities are often forced to send their children to lower performing schools nearby (Yeung & Conley, 2008). At first, many educators were concerned that charter schools would create additional civil rights issues, rather than

reduce academic inequities (Hill & Lake, 2010). The initial concern was segregation, in that affluent parents would open charter schools where only affluent students could enroll; but the reality has been that community organizers and teachers have opened the majority of charter schools in urban environments that enroll students from predominantly lower-socioeconomic groups (Hill & Lake, 2010).

Though Budde initiated school choice in the 1970s, and the publication *A Nation at Risk* indicated change was necessary in the 1980s, legislation did not convene until the 1990s when legislation was implemented in states where parent groups, teachers, and community organizations proposed new schools.

The definition of charter schools has been expanded to include conversion schools—traditional public schools that have been converted to charter schools, but are housed in school district buildings; virtual charter schools--which provide all instruction online, hybrid charter schools—which usually include virtual education in a physical setting with certified teachers who can support students, and other amalgamations of traditional and charter schools. With this expansion of the definition comes an issue of school boundaries. In the majority of states, students are only permitted to attend charter schools located within their school district's boundaries. This is usually the traditional school district that approved the original charter. In the cases of regional charter schools, students can enroll from any of the school districts that originally approved the charter. Some districts are opening their own charters to keep their students and therefore fiduciary resources, yet provide additional types of educational opportunities.

Some states, such as Wisconsin, allow open enrollment, meaning students from any district can attend school at a neighboring traditional public school or charter school.

In a case study on Wisconsin charter schools, Witte, Schlomer, and Shober (2007) intended to learn why some districts open charter schools and others do not. The study followed 19 schools, reviewing district statistics including enrollment, demographic information, and number of charter schools located within a district, and also reviewed specific information pertaining to the charter schools including charter applications, application forms and mission statements. The study reviewed documents at each district, observed classrooms and interviewed teachers, parents, community members, and school administrators. The research indicated that Wisconsin followed most state legislation pertaining to charter schools that have evolved over time with the creation of charter schools (Witte, Schlomer, & Shober, 2007). Anecdotal data from this research indicated that school districts that opened charter schools had members of the district administration, school board, or parent groups who were entrepreneurial. Because Wisconsin allows open enrollment across the state, it behooves districts to create charter schools that may attract students from neighboring districts, which will only increase revenue for their own districts because they are not required to pay for special education support or transportation for such students.

In states like Pennsylvania, where per-pupil funding is still created from a formula of property tax and other allocated monies, district boundaries may begin to cause an issue for traditional public school districts. Shober (2011) studied school choice as it relates to support from voters. Although parents are choosing charter schools now more than ever, it is not necessarily beneficial for school districts. A review of data from California, Colorado, Minnesota, and Wisconsin indicates parents seek schools that relate to their child's individual interests; however, if students are permitted to attend charter

schools outside of their district, then the district could find itself under-represented at the polls (Shober, 2011). This leads to the question of what then will traditional public schools do if enrollment numbers from students in neighboring districts outweighs enrollment from the local schools, whose parents cast votes concerning school funding and referendums.

Charter School Legislation

The first and most predominant category of literature is on the differences between state charter school legislation (Smith, Wohlstetter, Farrell, & Nayfack, 2001). According to a 2012 report from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, there are currently 41 states and Washington D.C. that have legislation concerning charter schools. Each state is permitted to create legislation and make changes to legislation, based on the student needs in that state.

Interestingly, it has been found that charter schools provide greater autonomy, yet have greater accountability regarding student learning. (Stuart Wells, 2002). This topic has created academic dissonance due to the nature of charter school design, which was to create local control of schools and to be able to individualize educational opportunities to the students enrolled. Charter schools do face sanctions if student accountability measures are not met (Stillings, 2005). Traditional public schools are not closed based on lack of student achievement or being short of meeting their mission statements in the same ways that charter schools can be.

State and National Charter Legislation

Federal legislation pertaining to charter schools can be found in Part B of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA §5201-5211). Such legislation defines

charter schools as public schools that are "exempt from significant state or local rules that inhibit the flexible operation and management of public schools." Charters also must be schools that offer a parent-choice, non-sectarian school free of tuition, which complies with federal legislation pertaining to civil rights, has a contract with a charter-authorizing agency, and agrees to measure student progress on state assessments.

According to this federal legislation, traditional public schools must provide charter schools with student records, as well as transfer all information pertaining to special education records (§5208), and allocate per pupil funding for each child to the charter. It is also important to note that charters can also be awarded certain federal grants and loans.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required students in both traditional public schools and public charter schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The goal of this legislation was to make every child meet proficiency in reading and mathematics standards by 2014. More recently in 2009, the Race to the Top Initiative further promoted student achievement, raised state standards and supported charter school growth. Since these two federal initiatives, six more states have created legislation allowing charter schools to open. See the following figure 2 for a timeline of state legislation for charter schools.

Charter School Legislation Creation by State

1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2001	2002	2003	2011	2012
MN	CA	MI	AZ	CA	DC	PA	NY	OK	IN	TN	MD	ME	WA
	CO		HI	DE	FL	OH	MO	OR		IA		MS	
	GA		KS	TX	SC	NV	UT						
	WI			AR	NJ		ID						
	MA			RI	NC		VA						
	NM			NH	IL								
				AK	CT								
				WZ									
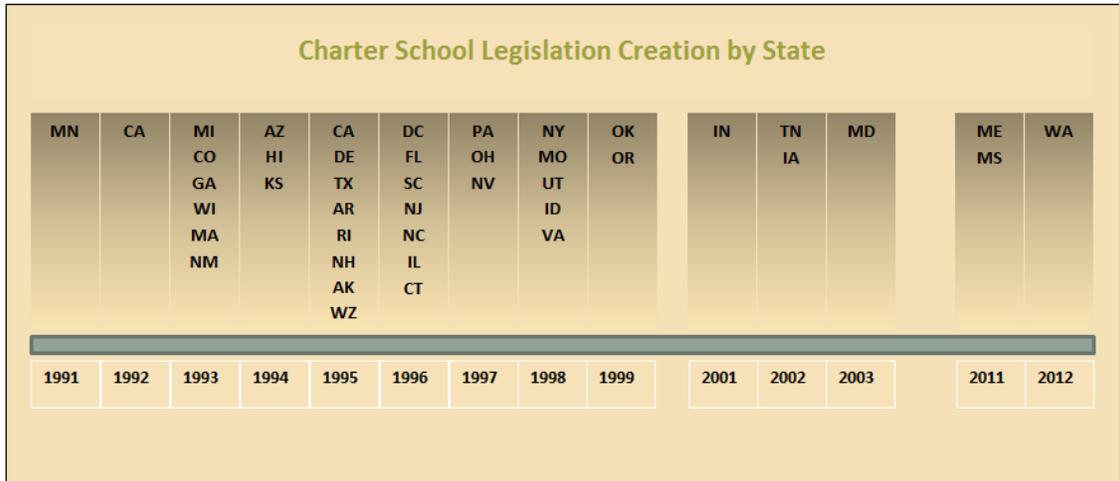
Figure 2. Charter school legislation by state. Adapted from statistics created by the Alliance of Public Charter Schools (2012).

Minnesota became the first state to legislate charter schools in America, after overwhelming support by the Minnesota Education Association. The legislation, drafted by Ted Kolderie, required school districts to sponsor charters and limited teachers to opening schools in existing school buildings (DiConti, 1996). While the initial legislation approved eight charter schools, the following year that number increased to 20. Though the intent was for teachers to have more freedom to choose their own curriculum and maintain their new schools under the charter law, the first charter school in Minnesota was actually a private school converted to public. In 1992, the Bluffview Montessori School in Winona, Minnesota, became the first charter school in the United States after parents and community members petitioned the government to allow it to become public so families would not need to pay $1,600 in yearly tuition (DiConti, 1996).

California became the next state to pass charter school legislation in 1992. The intent behind this legislation was to provide school choice for students in an environment where teachers, parents and community members could create an autonomous school (California §47601). In this state, legislation requires that the charter proposal must be

created prior to petitioning a local school board to set student enrollment and faculty numbers. Then the initial petition for a charter school must include signatures for half the number of students the school plans to enroll, as well as half the number of teachers the school plans to hire (California §47601). As with all states that formed charter legislation, the laws have continued to evolve over time (Witte, Schlomer & Shober, 2007).

After the initial legislation from Minnesota and California, several states followed suit each year though the reasons for opening charter schools vary as much as the styles of schools created. Zhang and Yang (2008) studied charter school distribution throughout school districts in Florida. In 1996, Florida initiated charter school legislation (Florida §228.056). The authors reviewed 67 school districts within the state. Lower performing school districts did not lead to higher charter school adoption in Florida (Zhang & Yang, 2008). Instead, it was the "political and institutional factors" rather than educational need that predicted the number of charter school openings.

Between the years 1991 and 1999 there were 36 states that created legislation (NAPCS, 2012). In the years 2001-03 another four states generated legislation and between 2011 and 2012 three additional states joined in (NAPCS, 2012). Though legislation varies among states, all charters have parameters which require the schools to report to the authorizing board, indicating if they have met or are working toward the educational objectives set forth in their initial charter.

Pennsylvania Statutes

Charter schools in Pennsylvania have become widely available alternatives to public schools housed within the traditional education system. In 1997, Pennsylvania became the 27th state to implement charter school legislation. As in most states, the

legislation clearly defines the application process for interested school founders. An application, similar to the example in Figure 2, must be submitted to the school board of the district where the charter plans to be located prior to November 15 of the school year preceding the year when the charter would open (Pennsylvania §17-1717-Ac). The local school board must hold a public meeting to announce the charter application prior to accepting or denying the charter proposal. If the charter application is denied there must be written notice of the issues pertaining to the proposal. The charter application can be resubmitted to the local school board once it has been revised. In the case of a regional charter, a charter school can enroll students from multiple school districts, pending approval from each of the district school boards; however, the charter would be granted in the district in which the charter school will be located (Pennsylvania §17-1718-A).

Pennsylvania Charter School Application		
Charter Application Identification	**Name of Proposed Charter School**	**Grade or age levels served by the school**
Description and method of appointment for board of trustees:		

Mission and education goals:
   Curriculum:
   Methods of student assessment:
	Admission policy:	

Procedures for suspension and expulsion of students:		
Community involvement in planning:		
Financial plan: Provisions for audits:		
Procedures to review parental complaints of charter school operation:		

Description of physical location of proposed school:
   Address:
   Ownership:
   Lease arrangements:		

Proposed school calendar:
   Length of school day:
   Length of school year:		

Proposed Professional development plan: Proposed faculty:		
Charter school & Local School District agreement pertaining to student participation in extracurricular activities:		
Criminal History of individuals with direct contact with students: Proof of official clearances/background checks:		
Proof of liability insurances: (for charter school, employees, and board members)		

Figure 3. The application process. (Pennsylvania §17-1701)

Charter schools are not permitted to charge tuition and therefore receive payments for students from each district that sends students to the charter. Pennsylvania school code requires school districts to provide the charter school the allocated per pupil funding amount for typically developing students and an additional amount to cover the cost of educating students with special needs for each student that leaves the district to attend a charter. This means that the amount of funding a regional charter school receives for students may vary according to the students' home district. Local districts are also required to pay for transportation costs to carry students from their district to the charter school.

Charter School Accountability Measures

The second cluster within the literature is focused on accountability and reform of traditional public school systems (Smith, Wohlstetter, Farrell, & Nayfack, 2001). For example, Maranto, Milliman, and Hess (2010) analyzed organizational structures in both traditional schools and charter schools in Arizona. Their research indicated that schools with pre-existing collaboration between administrators and teachers did see an increase of teacher autonomy with the introduction of charter schools. The idea behind this phenomenon was that if a district's teachers had more control over curriculum decisions, there would be fewer unhappy teachers who may leave the district to open their own charter schools. This might keep additional resources within the traditional public school district.

Some charter schools have attempted to turn curriculum autonomy into accountability only to find themselves receiving the punitive measures of school improvement introduced by the 2001 NCLB Act (Skilton-Sylvester, 2011). Charter schools must balance independence with responsibility. Similarly, the local authorizing board must determine if the charter school is meeting the goals set forth in the initial agreement in order for the charter to be granted a five-year renewal (§17-1728-A). According to the Pennsylvania Charter School code, the authorizing board can revoke a charter for failing to meet student performance requirements, fraud, violation charter legislation, and/or failure to meet fiscal management standards (§17-1729-A).

Equality for Students

Though skepticism exists, charter schools have consistently met with success on state and federal accountability measures, as well as meeting enrollment, attendance, and

graduation rates of larger public districts (Wells, 2002). Charter schools must follow federal and state laws, including legislation pertaining to civil rights issues and providing an education for students with special needs. This means that charter schools must have open-enrollment policies and ideally should have demographics that are representative of the local district that approved the charter. Charter schools are not permitted to selectively enroll, but competition for school choice can be enhanced when schools create a unique market niche (Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009).

Though many feel that charter schools provide school choice to students and families, others have indicated that charter schools cause residual segregation issues (Erickson, 2011). Because the majority of charter schools are still housed within their chartering districts, parents are still reliant on transportation and other societal issues that push students to remain in a particular geographic location (Erikson, 2011).

Though segregation by ethnicity and geographic location is a civil rights issue of the past; however, now students with exceptionalities are facing similar realities of exclusion. Some have argued that charter schools have too many students with disabilities enrolled and are therefore taking an exorbitant amount of money from traditional public school systems, while others oppose that notion (Estes, 2004; Fierros & Blomberg, 2005). The practicality of serving students with special needs becomes problematic due to lack of funding, resources, and highly qualified personnel at smaller schools like charters (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001, 2007). Even if their funding has an impact on the quality of services that are provided (Estes, 2004; Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2007; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001, 2007), charter schools must seek to provide services to these students (Swanson, 2004).

How Do Pennsylvania Charter Schools Measure Up?

According to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (2012), during the 2011-2012 school year there were 3,176 public schools, 5.1% of which were charter schools. Nearly 50% of charter schools throughout Pennsylvania have been open for 10 or more years, and 18 new charter schools opened during the 2011-2012 school year (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, 2012).

Results from the National Alliance of Public School's report: *A growing movement: America's largest charter school communities, 7th edition* (2012) indicates districts in Pennsylvania are ranked in the top 10 in the nation for serving public charter school students. According to the report, the Philadelphia School District tied with a district in Colorado and another in Mississippi for serving 23% of the district's students in public charter schools. The Philadelphia School District also ranked 4th for serving the highest number of public charter school students in the nation with 46,801 students (NAPS, 2012).

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School Leaders and Leadership Theory

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According to Transformational Leadership theory, leaders will not only make ethically and morally responsible decisions, but they also should be able to articulate the set of beliefs and values which guide their behaviors (Burns, 2002). Argyris and Schön (1974) developed the notion that through espoused theory, while leadership may initially view the worldview and values as what guide their behaviors, their reflection in action can help them determine theory-in-use of individual behaviors. Leithwood and Sun (2009) define transformational leadership as "a theory about some of the critical organizational conditions on which leaders should focus their energies, as well as the

specific practices likely to influence those conditions" (p. 3). They contend that this type

of leadership in education is separated into four categories; teacher emotions and beliefs,

school culture, teacher practices, and student outcomes (Leithwood & Sun, 2009). Such

leaders motivate and inspire their followers through their own hard work (Bass, 1990).

Some qualities of these leaders have been described as creative, committed, adaptable

and responsive, optimistic, intuitive, and visionaries.

Transformational leadership encompasses the notion of responsible leadership

including important tenets such as listening to employees, reflecting on other's

contributions, meeting the daily needs of employees, and during crisis, making decisions

that are ethically and morally responsible. This definition of responsible leadership from

business can be likened to a school, in that a teaching staff is "employees",

"stakeholders" are students, parents, and community members that are affected by a

school founder of leaders' decisions (Coldwell, Joosub, & Papageorgio, 2012; Groves &

LaRocca, 2011; & Voegtlin, Patzer, Scherer, 2012).

As charter leaders creating the foundation of their charter schools, they worked

under a set of assumptions and rules that assist in decision making when opening the

charters called Espoused Theory (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Such theory incorporates the

idea that leaders have a set of beliefs and values, which guide their behaviors. As a

reflective practitioner, charter leaders reveal these behaviors and beliefs as they present

their global perspective of the charter school environment.

Charter leaders must hold multiple roles such as managing financial oversight,

collaborating with the school board, dealing with personnel issues, developing marketing

strategies, managing enrollment, and more (Leithwood & Sun, 2009). "One of the most

salient characteristics of effective charters concerns leadership…. such leadership

conveys a critical element in the charter formula: ownership—not ownership by a distant

bureaucracy, but by the school community itself," Paul Reville, Massachusetts Secretary

of Education (Merseth, Cooper, Roberts, Tieken, Valant, & Wynne, 2009, p. xiii)

Blase and Blase (1998) found that influential school leaders focused on

professional development for teachers, curriculum development for students, instructional

improvement and collaboration with staff. They found that when school leaders collect

data from teacher's classrooms and listen to their staff members they are better able to

make suggestions for professional development and recommendations for improving

instructional practice (Blase & Blase, 1998).

Leadership Challenges

Because of the autonomy of charters, some school administrators can design and

implement strategic hiring practices and employment structures that incorporate a

professional development atmosphere with compensation structures based on

demonstrated competencies; however, many have lower-than usual teacher salaries

(Calvo & Miles, 2011; DiConti, 1996). Though there may be a deficiency in teacher

salary, research indicates the ability to innovate in charter schools promotes higher job

satisfaction (Henningfield, 2008). Renzulli, Parrott, and Beattie (2011) showed that

though teachers from charter schools have higher job satisfaction; such schools were not

without turnover. High stress academic environments, where teachers are required to

close the academic achievement gap by meeting student's individual needs can cause

teacher burn out. It is also more likely to have unsuccessful teachers terminated in charter

schools than in traditional public schools (Poliakoff, 2006, p. 123)

Just as competition is regarded as a way to improve business in a capitalistic society, a growing frustration with efforts to improve schools has been likened to a business model (Brower, 2007). Charter schools can be their own local education agency or they may depend on the chartering school district to be the LEA. This accountability measure determines the responsibilities of the school leader. If a charter school is its own LEA, than the charter leader is likened to the role of a traditional school district superintendent or a company chief executive officer. If the charter school is under the umbrella of a district as the LEA, or a charter school management company, the responsibilities of the charter leader will be similar to a building principal. All Pennsylvania charter leaders will still answer to a school board or board of trustees as required by state school law.

Building Charter School Capacity

Charter school founders continue to meld attributes of traditional public and private schools into new models designed to enhance the learning environment for students attending their newly formed schools (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). According to a study by Hubbard and Kulkarni (2009), the nature of uniqueness between charter schools provides a challenge for generalizing "best practices" for charter school leaders. Charter leaders must be able to maintain and build community support, partner with businesses and non-profit organizations to pool resources, and maintain high expectations for students (Hubbard & Kulkarni, 2009). School leaders can partner with existing community organizations, such as a library for books and technology (Deuink & Reinsfelder, 2007), or a gym for physical education to increase resources for students.

Sarason (1998) noted that creating new organizations begins with great excitement, but there are inevitable challenges in the start of any new setting. In his book *The Creation of Settings and the Future Societies* he indicated that the leader or founder has a conceptual framework that requires finding a location, hiring others, finding resources and supporters to produce the initial idea. Sarason (1998) noted that even the best created plans will face challenges and it is important to rely on an outside agency or impartial individual to support the founding team when developing the initial plans so that personal issues and personality disputes do not hinder the creative process. If a vision statement and mission statement is created it is something that can be continuously referred to in order to build motivation (Sarason, 1998). It is imperative that the leader and founder clearly communicate more than just the ambition to open the new organization, but also to note predictable challenges that may arise and the action plan to defeat obstacles.

Though charter schools have more autonomy when it comes to funding allocations, certain financial tasks can be devastating to the small schools. Hassel (2009) noted that start-up costs for charter schools can be overwhelming due to the expenditures for staffing, equipment, supplies, and investing in facilities. "...the cost of readying a facility can range from a few thousand dollars for small cosmetic improvements to millions of dollars for major construction or renovation" (Hassel, 2009, p. 106). Even when fiduciary resources are allocated to charter schools, they are often unavailable until nearly the start of school (Hassel, 2006). In addition to financial snafus when charter schools open, they also do not have the financial reserves that their traditional public districts have for school renovations and building projects.

Summary

Public charter schools have become part of the educational movement that equalizes educational opportunities for students across the country in rural, urban, and suburban environments. This chapter reviewed the historical frame of charter schools and legislation surrounding such schools. Though public education has existed in this country for more than 100 years, there has been a movement to provide autonomy and choice for students since the 1970s. Many parents want their children to attend schools that have a particular focus or niche, while maintaining the importance of public education, rather than turning to private or parochial school. The faces of public charter schools come in many shapes and sizes—there are charter schools that have been created from traditional schools that were closing, virtual or cyber charters, hybrid charters that have a blended focus between virtual platform in an academic environment with teachers to support, and local or regional charter schools.

A school leader, particularly a charter school leader, is responsible for finances, working with a school board, dealing with personnel issues, developing marketing strategies and managing enrollment. Therefore the theoretical frame for this qualitative research comes from business leadership. Strong leaders lead to strong academic environments. Transformational leaders have a hyper-focus on their employees and the work environment. Such school leaders not only ensure that students are at the forefront of all decisions, but take time to listen to the ideas that staff members have, reflect on everyone's contributions to the learning environment and attempt to meet the needs of their faculty and staff. Transformational leaders collect data from student and teacher

performance, provide consistent feedback to teachers, and make suggestions to increase

student achievement through building on instructional practices.

A question that remains is what motivates school leaders to become charter school

founders? The information gained in this review of the literature provided the foundation

for the research design and qualitative methodology used in this study that are described

in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify sustaining practices for creation of charter schools in Pennsylvania from the perspective of leaders who have completed the process. The researcher studied three cases in which leaders successfully completed the application process and created and led a charter school in a particular geographic location. Data were gathered on three charter school leaders through a series of semi-structured interviews, observations, and an artifact review.

Due to the nature of qualitative studies, the researcher developed an understanding of the leader's experiences through several approaches. Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity for candid reflection from each school leader. Through school observations, the researcher was able to identify school systems, support, and student experiences in the charter schools developed by leaders. A review of artifacts included charter applications, communications with community organizations, and additional artifacts and provided a unique insight into the experience of school leaders in this study. All information was compiled and reviewed to enable the researcher to synthesize, analyze, and identify phenomena pertaining to charter school creation in Pennsylvania.

Participants and Procedures

The subjects for this study included three school leaders from three different pubic charter schools in Pennsylvania. There are currently 105,050 students enrolled in the 157 bricks and mortar public charter schools and 16 cyber charter schools across Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Coalition of Public Charter Schools, 2012; Pennsylvania

Department of Education, 2012). The initial process in identifying possible participants was to compile a list of all charter schools and school leaders from information provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The next step in determining which schools and leaders would be studied was to identify schools that were opened for 10 or more years in Pennsylvania. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2012) there were 80 schools open for 10 or more years.

The third step in selecting school leaders for this study included determining which schools met additional criteria, including the age group of the student population and the location of the school. It was the intention to select schools in three distinct geographical locations within Pennsylvania to determine differences that may arise throughout the charter application process.

Once identified, the researcher contacted potential participants by formal letter describing the purpose of the study. Participants were also provided with a list of open-ended questions that would be asked during semi-structured interviews. Consent forms were also included in the contact.

The researcher chose three diverse geographic locations in Pennsylvania to locate charter schools in rural, suburban, and urban settings. The researcher contacted dozens of charter schools that fit the criteria; which included charter schools serving elementary or middle school students, the charter school founder remained a part of the charter school, and the charter was established and maintained for the past ten years, for this study in geographic locations including Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Central Pennsylvania. Three charter school leaders completed the entire data collection process.

When presenting and analyzing data, the researcher identified individual respondents with pseudonyms and charter school names with pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The use of pseudonyms has been found to increase participation for contributors as they feel less anxiety when they will not be identified in a study. If, at any time, a participant chose to withdraw from the study, the data collected from his/her interviews would have been destroyed.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to examine common themes within the charter school creation process in Pennsylvania. The researcher collected data from existing charter school leaders regarding the application process and creation of the schools they manage.

Individual interviews were used to provide school founders the opportunity to provide an in-depth description of their journey to school leadership and their reasons for creating charter schools. Since the researcher provided leaders with the protocol to guide questions, participants were able to reflect on personal experiences and provide an in-depth reflection of their professional experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). These semi-structured interviews with each school leader were audio recorded to increase accountability during qualitative data collection periods, and transcribed by the researcher at a later time. Transcripts were emailed to each participant to review and provide clarification if needed. Fasick (2001) and Al-Yateem (2012) indicated that having participants review transcripts provides reliability and validity to research because quotes from interviews can be couched in research under the participants' intended contexts (Al-Yateem, 2012). Once transcripts were verified by participants and returned

to the researcher, they were coded and compared using *NVivo 10* (QSR International, 2012), a software program designed for synthesizing qualitative data. The researcher determined themes from data.

Additional data were collected during school observations. Written descriptions from these observations were categorized by common themes that emerged. Artifacts were collected from school leaders and these data were categorized by common themes that emerged. Artifacts included, but were not limited to, school charter, or other application materials, mission statements, vision statements, strategic plans, school budgets, school board meeting notes, marketing materials, student application forms, and newspaper articles about the school. Information concerning the chartering school districts was collected including student enrollment and demographic data, in order to create a comparison between the charter schools and traditional schools.

Research Instrument

After a review of the literature on school leadership, an interview protocol was created for the semi-structured interviews. While structured interviews provide participant insight from a qualitative standpoint, a semi-structured interview allows for participants to expound upon ideas and experiences while leaving room for creativity (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Diefenback, 2008). The purpose of the interview protocol for this study was to guide conversation to hit key points for research; however, the intent was for the school leaders to expound upon personal experiences that led to their motivation to create a charter school.

Anecdotal notes were taken during school observations and included information such as student and teacher demographic information, enrollment figures, geographic

location of school, classrooms in school, course offerings, and parent involvement. Such observations were completed during visits to each charter school, and provided valuable insight. During the school visits, the researcher met individually with the charter leader for semi-structured interviews. During such meetings, the school leader was asked to create a life map, or a graphical representation of a leader's life, including educational experiences and career choices that led to the end result of applying for and opening a charter school (Worth, 2011). This life-map was an artifact that was collected for analysis.

In order to provide authenticity, audio-recorded interviews allowed the researcher to include quotations from leaders (Fasick, 2001). Though Fernandez and Griffith (2007) indicated that tape recording interviews caused distractions to participants and researchers, newer technology, which can digitally record interviews is less invasive and more effective.

Data Collection Procedures

After each of the three charter schools were selected, approval from administrators and the school board was obtained. Participants were then sent a letter (Appendix B), and a consent form (Appendix C). Once consent was obtained, the researcher worked with participants to schedule school observations and interviews. The letter explained to prospective participants that the research was for a dissertation examining charter school founders and leaders in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Potential participants learned that each school founder would be asked to participate in a telephone or in-person interview and to permit a school observation by the researcher. In addition, the letter requested that participants be willing to provide artifacts including the

charter school application, and a self-made lifemap, or graphical representation, of their educational and professional experiences. A copy of the interview protocol was attached to the voluntary consent form. Participants learned that their names and school names would remain confidential in the study. Interviews took place at the school location and were digitally recorded with the consent of the participants.

Alexander, who recently completed his doctoral degree in educational leadership, was eager to participate in the study. After initially being contacted concerning the study, he noted that he was a charter school founder in a nearby state; however, he felt his leadership at a Pennsylvania charter school could add to the discussion in the study. For Betty, her involvement was to contribute to the discourse surrounding her passion— charter schools. Cameron's participation was predicated on the idea of developing competence for future charter founders of "bricks and mortar" schools, and to bring attention to the lack of regulations surrounding cyber charter schools.

Artifact collection took place while researcher completed observations of the schools and by follow-up email communication. The digital recordings from individual one-on-one interview conversations and phone interviews were transcribed verbatim then participants received a transcription of their interviews by email. The researcher asked the participants to review the transcripts and add comments or clarifications to ensure that the transcript accurately reflected their opinions.

Method of Analysis

The interviews, observation notes, and artifacts were gathered and reviewed using *NVivo 10* (QSR International, 2012), and themes were identified. A review of artifacts including charter school applications, charter renewal proposals, Pennsylvania System of
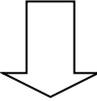
School Assessment scores, school profiles, school websites, and other materials provided

by school leaders provided data to support research questions one and two. Lifemaps

created by school founders provided data to support research question two while data

from semi-structured interviews provided insight to be analyzed regarding each of the

four research questions. See Figure 4 for a chart describing data collection and analysis.

See Figure 4 for a flowchart describing the methods and procedures for data analysis.

| Research Questions	Data Collection
1) How do charter school leaders create large-scale decisions, such as financing methods, building facilities, student population, creation of school board, school vision and mission statements, and hiring protocols prior to the completion of the charter school application process?	**Semi-structured Interviews**
2) What are the educational backgrounds and career paths of charter school founders/leaders? What are charter school leader motivations?	**School Observations** **Participant generated life map** **Semi-structured interviews**
3) What are success rates of charter school applications and how did charter leaders respond to critiques of charter applications? How do charter schools in Pennsylvania compare to traditional school districts in terms of student enrollment and demographic data? 4) How do existing charter schools compare to the charter school proposals created as part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education charter application process? How have the existing charters maintained the original mission statements and vision statements?	**Artifact Reviews** **Semi-structured interviews**

Figure 4 QualitativedData collection

| **Participants**		
- Researcher will use published resources from the Pennsylvania Department of Education to gather names of charter school founders. - Researcher will contact current charter school leaders from the 2013 Charter School List (PA Dept. of Ed). - Arrange and conduct in-depth telephone interviews, semi-structured interviews and school observations with charter leaders from three different schools.		

Document Analysis	**Telephone Interview**	**Semi-Structured Interview**
Gather documents from the Pennsylvania Department of Education; including, but not limited to, charter school applications, charter evaluation documents, mission & vision statements, public charter school profiles	Charter leaders will participate in an initial telephone interviews in order to gather information concerning ideas, emotions, attitudes and experiences concerning the charter application process in Pennsylvania.	Participants will be asked a series of questions in order to gather information concerning ideas, emotions, attitudes and experiences concerning the charter application process in Pennsylvania.
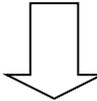
Life-Map of Education & Career Path

After answering interview questions, participants will be asked to make life-maps indicating their educational experiences and career path which led to opening or leading a charter school in Pennsylvania.
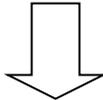
Data Analysis
1. Create and organize files for data.
2. Read through transcripts, make margin notes, form initial codes.
3. Describe the meaning of the experience.
4. Find and list statements of meaning for individuals.
5. Group statements into meaning units.   (Creswell, 2003)

Figure 5. Methods and procedures flowchart.

Common themes provided consensus for describing the experiences of charter

school founders and leaders during the application process and renewal process for their

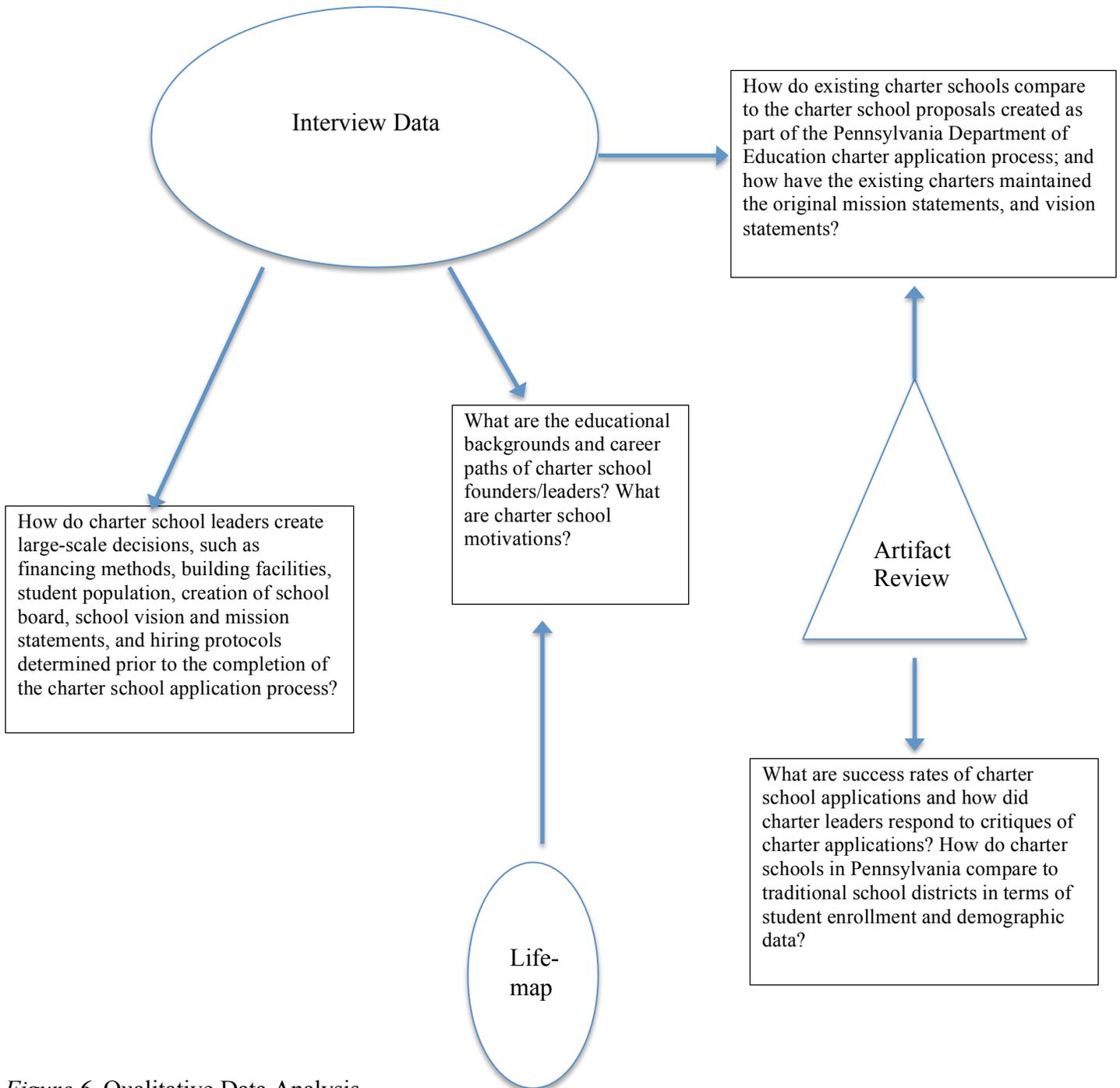charter schools. See figure 5 to identify data that contributed to qualitative analysis.

Figure 6. Qualitative Data Analysis

The participants in this study were all charter school leaders and founders of public charter schools. The participants were asked to complete an in-person interview, and follow up phone interviews in some cases, in order to share their experiences and perceptions of the charter school process from application to renewal. Participants were also asked to complete a life-map, or graphic representation of their path to school leadership. Children were not directly involved in the collection of data in this study.

In order to protect confidentiality of the participants, the researcher did not include identifying labels on interview protocols. Interview responses were coded upon receipt. The researcher was the only one who knew the specific coding criteria for identifying interview participants. The researcher also coded the audio interview transcripts, which will be kept by the researcher for three years beyond the defense of the dissertation, which uses the data collected. After three years, the codes will be destroyed.

Summary

This qualitative study on the process of developing and maintaining a charter school in Pennsylvania describes the perspectives and experiences of school leaders. Utilizing a variety of data collection methods including semi-structured interviews, school observations, and gathering artifacts pertaining to the school application process, an in-depth analysis of charter school development emerged. Including the perspectives of school leadership better enabled the researcher to identify and distribute missing data in this area of education research. This comprehensive data offers educators insight into the creation of public charter schools in Pennsylvania.

In addition to charter leaders' demographic information and descriptions of the schools, an in-depth account of the semi-structured interviews may be found in the

following chapter. Additionally, charter leaders were asked to create life-maps and these

artifacts were analyzed for common themes. School visit observations and additional

artifacts are also described.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to determine best practices for creating and maintaining charter schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The experiences of charter school leaders through the charter school application process were analyzed using an interview protocol consisting of seven questions. This chapter explains the data analysis used in this study and presents findings organized by the research questions which provided the foundation for this comparative case study:

1. What are the educational backgrounds and career paths of charter school founders/leaders? What motivates them to become charter school founders?

2. How do charter school leaders make large-scale decisions, such as financing methods, building facilities, student population, creation of school board, school vision and mission statements, and hiring protocols prior to the completion of the charter school application process?

3. How did charter leaders respond to critiques of charter applications? How do charter schools in Pennsylvania compare to traditional school districts in terms of student enrollment and demographic data?

4. How do existing charter schools compare to the charter school proposals created as part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education charter application process; and how have the existing charters maintained the original mission statements and vision statements?

This study was designed as a comparative case study in order to collect qualitative data through semi-structured interviews (Appendix D). The aim of the semi-structured

interviews was to analyze the data to determine themes which existed in the experiences of each school leader and to explore these themes in depth. The qualitative data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This interview was designed to provide participatnts with an opportunity to elaborate on their personal experiences that led them to founding and leading a charter school. The aim of the document review and school observations was to add descriptive data to support the leaders' responsibilities and further describe the school environments that the school leaders worked to create.

Description of Schools

Diligent Thinkers Charter School

Alexander, who founded a charter school in a nearby state before becoming a school leader at a Pennsylvania charter school five years ago, leads Diligent Thinkers Charter School, a school of nearly 300 students. This school, nestled in the corner of a residential community, serves children in Kindergarten through 8th grade in a unique foreign language program. Students learn Spanish and Chinese daily in mixed level classrooms as part of the multicultural curriculum—a keystone of the charter. Dozens of flags hang in the multipurpose room, representing the ethnic backgrounds of school faculty, staff, and students, further promoting the school's niche to foster a global perspective and promote a global understanding of world cultures and issues.

The school offers a unique extended day program with early morning study time for students to afternoon activities ranging from ballet and boy scouts to Robotics club and crochet. More than 70% of the student body comes from the school district where the charter school was built. The remaining students are from 12 neighboring rural school districts. The school is housed in a relatively new building, boasting large technology-

driven classrooms, brightly decorated hallways, and numerous multipurpose rooms for small group instruction, library, art, and other specialty classes.

Engaging Minds Charter School

In a neighborhood nearby, a church parsonage-turned school building sits amongst dozens of acres of rolling grass, a basketball court, swings and a playground—all part of a public park which students utilize twice-daily. After identifying a need for students to learn from hands-on experiences, Betty opened Engaging Minds Charter School, which focuses on teaching the "whole child." Tall flowers and plants attract indigenous birds and insects in the large garden maintained by students and staff. Not only is the garden a peaceful sanctuary for students to read and write in, but it also acts as an outdoor laboratory for students.

At Engaging Minds Charter School, teachers provide a learning environment where students have academic freedom to explore new topics on their individualized level, while also focusing on their social, emotional, and physical needs. More than 80% of the student population is from the chartering school district; however, if additional spots are available, students from neighboring school districts can attend. This school originally served students in 1st-8th grade; however, the charter was modified to include kindergarten students to increase the student population to 50. The reasonably sized classrooms are decorated with home-like décor—rocking chairs, wooden bookshelves, and knickknacks for thematic learning can be found in each grade band, and teachers seem more like family than colleagues. It is common to find classrooms with a large teacher to student ratio, and it is not uncommon to find a middle school student sitting

against a wall with ear buds in, enthralled in a computer program that is helping him to create a culminating project for a science unit.

Founding Futures Charter School

A few miles away stands an old brick church building that is owned by Founding Futures Charter School, the only middle school charter in the region. When the building was purchased by the school nearly a dozen years ago, parents moved in church pews and other furniture to create the giant multi-purpose room used for drama, music, and gym class. Students worked with teachers to wire the building for the computer servers, and siblings of students helped paint the walls and install lockers for students to keep personal belongings.

Cameron, the founder, maintains his position as a teacher and school leader at Founding Futures Charter School—one of the first charters to be approved in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. As the only middle school charter in the region it serves 128 students. Four teams of two teachers work with 25-30 students daily using a project-based and technology-enhanced curriculum. The charter, which has been renewed three times, remains focused on the same vision and mission—to engage students in using real tools to solve real problems by working independently and collaboratively. Students have dozens of electives they can choose from during each marking period—from guitar lessons to drama, cake decorating to basket weaving; there is something to meet the needs of all students.

Table 1

School Founders

Leader Pseudonym	School Pseudonym	Academic	Community Setting
Alexander	Diligent Thinkers Charter School	Elementary-Middle	Suburban
Betty	Engaging Minds Charter School	Elementary-Middle	Suburban
Cameron	Founding Futures Charter School	Middle	Suburban

Description of Participants

Three school founders and leaders responded to the request to participate in semi-structured interviews for this study. A total of 10 charter schools were contacted to participate in the study. Of the three founders who responded, two leaders had founded charter schools in Pennsylvania, and the third leader had founded a charter school in a nearby state. Each of the interview participants has been coded with a pseudonym to ensure anonymity of each leader and their representative school. The experiences of these participants are shared as the findings of this study are discussed in the framework of the four research questions.

Diligent Thinkers School Leader

Standing a little over five feet tall, wearing wire rim glasses Alexander explained his pathway into leadership in his deep native accent. Drawings from students, academic achievements, and photographs with current and past pupils cover the walls of his office. A polished nameplate adorns his rich mahogany administrative desk, reflecting his recent academic achievement—a PhD in educational leadership. A circular table with several comfortable chairs invites parents, students, and staff members into his office for

collaborative conversations. Though his belief in schools being an extension of family began in his founding charter in an urban environment, he appreciates the intense family interest and engagement of parents at Diligent. Alexander's goal is to continue to grow the robust curricular offerings at his charter so that students can have a rigorous learning environment so students can compete with students globally.

Through research projects, pen pals with the charter's sister school in China, and field trips that take students halfway across the world, students remain abreast of international education opportunities. Alexander, who is in his early forties, revels in the global perspective that the nearly 200 charter school students are acquiring. The school mission of valuing and promoting international perspectives flourishes through international holiday celebrations, inviting family members to share ethnic and cultural stories, and other large-scale school events that help students showcase their international interests.

Though the international stage is a large platform from which Alexander can leverage for educational opportunities, he also values the relationships between local community organizations and businesses. Without the support of the community, Alexander believes a school cannot function. Not only is community support important during the charter creation process, but it is also an ongoing tool for collaborative learning opportunities for students. Alexander believes the school should be the hub for a community, and the community should be the arena for deeper learning experiences.

Engaging Minds School Leader

Betty was hard to spot in her sizeable classroom surrounded by adults and children working on a project. The charter school founder chose to step away from

writing reports and managing school compliance to get back to her love—building

capacity in students to foster their individualized academic interests. At 61, it's hard to

believe this tall and slender educational leader with a modern haircut, quick wit, and

excitement for learning is in her early sixties. She thrives on daily conversations with

students—praising them for earning tickets for the school's token economy—and

building confidence when they are struggling on an academic task.

She agreed to be interviewed during a mid-week prep period during one of the

rare moments when she didn't have an IEP meeting or collaborative planning with her

team-teacher. Intermittently, her attention would turn to window overlooking her class at

P.E. as they enjoyed a warm fall at the nearby public park. Betty missed the lesson

planning, paper grading and teacher collaboration when she was stuck behind the desk as

the previous school CEO. She is content in her classroom, which currently features a

classroom library filled with historical fiction, walls covered in student projects

highlighting historical memorabilia, and a black iron mannequin, which is adorned with

her grandmother's wedding dress. Betty believes in recreating a moment in time for her

thematic units of instruction. Such creativity helps to foster building connections between

prior experiences and new knowledge for her students—many of whom have learning

exceptionalities.

When Betty's youngest of three children as old enough to attend elementary

school, she also jumped feet first into school by earning her degree in education. At first

she taught in a large traditional public school district, and has since founded not one, but

two charter schools within the past twenty years. Her focus is for families to have

academic opportunities that meet their individual needs and interests, and to provide an

academic environment that is different than the typical traditional school. Rather than seeing her charter schools as competing interests to traditional public schools, she sees herself as a transformational leader that is providing a different school option—a choice.

Founding Futures School Leader

Cameron, who seems to revel in the organized chaos of his middle school classroom, easily builds rapport with students by respecting them as intellectuals. His classroom is not outfitted with a fancy teacher's desk with colorful bulletin boards–for him, the focus is on real-life learning experiences. Several students are hunched over a folding table engineering airplanes out of spaghetti noodles. Cameron notes this medium was chosen for the complexity as a building material, the rather than the low expense of the pasta. Long after the busses have gone and parents have picked students up, a few students can be found sitting comfortably in various positions on the classroom floor—earphones on, diligently working on school-provided laptops developing an online module as a culminating project for a recent unit of study. Cameron sends words of encouragement to students as he transitions—computer in hand—to a small office-sized room where students receive pullout tutoring, speech and language therapy or ESL supports.

It's easy to imagine Cameron, who is in his late forties, hiking the nearby mountains, riding a bike, or rock climbing; it is harder to imagine this educator spending his late nights in the local music circuit as a talented guitar player in several rock bands. It isn't hard to see why students flock to him and continue relationships with the school long after their 8th grade graduation. For some, he fills the void of an absent parent, for others he is a coach and mentor, and still others see him as a "cool" dude who casually

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teaches them without them realizing the independence and life-long learning attributes they are gaining. Cameron makes it a point to continue the culture of acceptance, the importance of difference and value of creativity–a task that is not small with pre-teen students in their middle school years.

Cameron doesn't see himself as a leader, but rather a partner—a partner for parents to cultivate student learning; a colleague to students who build business plans, create marketing materials, delegate responsibilities of maintaining their school building, and who create real-world solutions; and a thought partner for teachers and volunteers within the building. His students and teachers find him to be a dynamic leader whose actions clearly align with transformational leadership by his continued efforts to provide structures which build other's capacity to lead.

Analysis of Influences and Emerging Themes

There are many factors that influence leaders to join the charter school movement. This section will analyze influences such as educational background, professional experience, service, and advocacy. Common themes emerged in each of the studied influences although some themes overlapped and were identified in more than one area of influence.

Research Question One

The three school founders were asked to answer a question during the one-on-one interview with the researcher to add depth and understanding to their motivations to found and lead a charter school. The following interview protocol question was used to explore the experiences of charter school founders: *Please reflect for a moment on the educational experiences and professional experiences you have had. What experiences*

do you feel led you to participate in the charter movement in Pennsylvania? Responses to these interview questions were coded using *NVivo 10.* Themes identified matching the focus areas of education and professional experience will be discussed here.

Educational Influences

Education was one of the threads in each school founder's life that influenced their career paths. Two of the three charter school founders have advanced degrees, another has an advanced certificate in Montessori education, and all participants have initial degrees in education. When the time came to join the charter movement, each of the leaders found themselves creating schools based on their individual learning styles in an effort to fill the void that existed within their own academic experiences.

While in graduate school Alexander had a family experience that in turn led him into educational leadership. Alexander had experienced significant emotional and financial stress when his premature daughter, born at 23-weeks, spent several months in the hospital. Though Alexander's insurance paid for 20% of the cost, the majority of the financial burden was covered by Medicaid and hospital resources. Alexander's experience with his child made him feel indebted to his community. With a background in education, Alexander decided that developing a charter school with colleagues might be the best way for him to give back to the families in his community who had provided so much to his family.

"It is a personal story how I got into the charter school movement. When I got into it, I found other values… [I realized] we were making differences."

Betty identified herself as a creative person who likes the creative process of building things and making crafts and also enjoys getting her hands dirty working

outside. By combining those interests, and many characteristics from her Montessori preparation, her charter school reflects an environment where students become independent learners and thinkers. This project-based environment provides students with mixed-age and mixed-ability classrooms whereby students learn through inquiry by working with materials.

A difficult middle school and high school experience left Cameron jaded about his traditional public school experience. "I hated school. I didn't get much out of any schooling up until college. College was a revelation in that I could take the courses that I wanted to. I could pursue my interests and things of that nature," Cameron said. When Cameron developed his charter it was one of school choice—students can choose from a variety of extra-curricular activities, students engineer their own culminating projects for each unit of study, and students drive their own learning experiences within the framework he has provided them.

Professional Experiences

Analysis of lifemaps and professional vitaes provided evidence that school founders are invested in the field of education within their community. All participants have led academic and creative after-school clubs, summer programs for students, coached sports teams, led professional development trainings, or taught at the college level—the leaders have done many of these concurrently.

Not only do charter schools provide learning opportunities for students and staff, both Alexander and Betty noted charter schools are laboratories for changing the face of traditional public education. Alexander noted his belief is that through charter schools the a broader change in education can be made,

The initial idea of charter schools started where charter schools are the

laboratories of education. We are places where the initial innovations are tested

and copied to the school districts. There is a good idea about why there are charter

schools.

For Betty, charter schools are to provide choice and innovation for students and

their families. She provided this description of her opinions,

We are doing that and it is making the district pick up their game. When [a charter

school] decided to make full-day kindergarten the school district said, 'oh we'd

better go with full-day kindergarten. When [multiple charter schools] are doing

well with middle school, [the school district] said 'oh, our alternative school

better drop down to offer middle school. The end result is that the kids are getting

what they need. So although I like a job, and I want to keep my people employed,

I'm not about charter schools for charter schools. I am about charter schools for

meeting the educational needs of kids.

Betty and Cameron each identified professional experiences as an impetus for

creating their charter school. Both began their teaching careers in the traditional public

school setting.

For Betty, the charter school is the home of life-long learning for staff members.

The framework of the school is to provide opportunities for teachers to continue building

capacity for their own scholarship. Betty describes the guiding principle at Engaging

Minds Charter School as,

[putting] the child first and you figure out what the child needs and that means the

staff is always learning…[sometimes we have] to step back and say we need to

study. We can't do this without learning more about it…we are always evolving and we meet the needs of the people that come to us.

After college, Cameron found himself working with at-risk students in underperforming schools in several urban districts and noted,

> [The districts] were just happy to have a warm body in there, so that allowed me to do what I wanted to do. And what I did was a project-based type of education and it worked. The kids liked it and the kids showed growth and made a great deal of progress and were very successful in a lot of ways. Not only in ways that I could quantify and quality, but they also began to demonstrate progress on a lot of the traditional tests and the standardized tests that they had to take.

At Founding Futures, teachers who work with Cameron have the freedom to develop instructional practices that help students build connections between state standards, school projects and the real world. While teachers can create small group instructional groups and peer tutoring in order to meet the needs of students the majority of learning is project work. Just as Cameron expects his students to explain the reasons they have for choosing a course or crafting a project using a particular academic focus, he requires teachers to articulate their instructional methodologies.

"Why do you have it structured like that? That is what I ask of all of my teachers. Anything you do here, if I ask you and you say 'I don't know' we have a problem," Cameron said. "You better have a good reason. You better be able to tell people why you are doing what you are doing when it comes to every little piece of the puzzle."

Research Question Two

After analyzing initial motivations for school founders to join the charter movement, the researcher sought to answer the following question through a review of artifacts: *How do charter school leaders create large-scale decisions such as financing methods, building facilities, student population, creation of school board, school vision and mission statements, and hiring protocols prior to the completion of the charter school application process?* The separate focus areas of large-scale decision making regarding budget, facilities, and stating the school mission and vision were analyzed by the review of charter applications.

Cameron and Betty submitted charter applications in 1998 and Alexander followed in 2003. More than ten years later the application process remains the same. Prospective school founders must complete a needs assessment or feasibility study, hold public meetings to determine community support, and complete a charter application.

The comprehensive charter template, or proposal, is provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This proposal must be submitted to the school district where the founder intends to construct his or her school. The proposal must include the educational goals and objectives for the school, a financial plan, expected enrollment figures, a budget, curriculum and assessment methods, and the founder's philosophy of education.

Charter School Application Artifact Review

Each of the school leaders integrated an area of interest into their school proposal based on their own educational and professional experiences. In this region of Pennsylvania there are only four charter schools—three of which are included in this

study—and the focuses are technology-enhanced project-based learning; foreign language; and project-based learning through individualized instruction. Although charter schools are predicated on the unique attributes, common themes within the charter applications emerged during the review of artifacts.

Mission and vision. While each school has a unique mission and vision, each of the schools seek to provide a proactive academic approach that rivals the traditional public school education because they can offer smaller class sizes and concentrated foci. Both Engaging Minds and Founding Futures charter schools emphasize project-based learning environments relating to solving real-world problems and Diligent Thinkers Charter School is focused more on the international perspective.

Educational goals and objectives. Each of the school applications reviewed proposed smaller class sizes than traditional elementary/middle schools and focused on individualized instruction. All of the school leaders promoted learner-centered experiences in the charter applications and connected such learning to unique elective course offerings, extracurricular activities, and experiential learning activities.

Enrollment. School leaders for Diligent Thinkers and Founding Futures charter schools planned for slow expansion of student enrollment. During the conception of these charters, founders envisioned a multi-year matriculation process for students to gain the greatest academic experience. Neither of the charters offered 8th grade within the first year of the charter because they wanted students to contribute to the growth of each charter. Both charters followed proposed plans for increasing enrollment with each year to meet projected enrollment capacity. While Engaging Minds proposed and executed its plan to open the charter with full enrollment capacity in the seminal year, another grade

level was added during the renewal process in order to increase enrollment and boost funding.

Curriculum and Assessment Methods

Each of the three applicants noted that curricula were intentionally general so that teachers and students could build connections based on individual student abilities, interests, and mastery of academic materials. Each founder indicated that teachers and students would have access to various curricular resources; however, they would not be tied to scripted curricula or large-scale initiatives that are typically found in traditional school districts.

At Diligent Thinkers charter school, students are assessed on conversational language skills in both Spanish and Chinese. Alexander noted teachers have the freedom to create project-based assessments with rubrics or formal assessments created based on units.

The proposal for Betty's charter school provided opportunities for students to be assessed through learning activities that integrate various subject areas and were relevant to each student's interests and abilities. Through active involvement with instructional materials students are assessed using progress monitoring related to individual goals. Individual goals include reading, mathematics, written expression, physical development (fine motor and gross motor skills), as well as social emotional learning. Instructional strategies offer multiple-modalities for learning and are assessed utilizing the strategies that best align with the student's cognitive abilities.

When Cameron developed his charter proposal for Founding Futures he articulated his concern for the way traditional schools assess "skill mastery" instead of

continued growth in a particular academic area. His proposal indicated that students would be assessed using a rubric to include the multiple stages of academic development of new knowledge; including but not limited to: investigation, research, information acquisition, team collaboration and development of learning outcome.

Though academic collaboration is a focus at this charter, there remains a balance between assessment of individual projects, and larger team projects, which assess various aspects of a learning unit. The expectations at this charter school do not include a multiple-choice summative assessment as a review of a textbook chapter—textbooks are non-existent in this learning environment. Mimicking the conference rooms of the business world, students are required to work in collaborative learning groups to develop multimedia learning modules. Such student-built modules will be later used as an assessment for peers who have not shown mastery in the skill area.

Student teams are provided with an outline of expected outcomes—or a list of questions pertaining to information that should be identified and understood in order to fully learn a new set of skills. Collaborative teams must use the "expected outcomes" to conduct initial research on the topic and begin the investigation stage of building a multimedia learning module. During this phase students create additional guiding questions, conduct research to extend their knowledge on the topic and create a concept map to review with their instructor. Once the teacher meets to review the strengths and areas of growth, the team can move into the product proposal stage. In this stage pupils must create a proposal summarizing the project scope and sequence, product design, cost, participant roles and timeline. Students create a storyboard or outline to visually represent the project design and members of the "steering committee" (other students from the

class) must provide input on the project—similar to a focus group in the business world.

Once the steering committee has approved the design, the collaborative team must

develop the product as design, maintain the budget and create an online assessment to

accompany the product. The assessment will be administered to three or more students in

the class that have not shown mastery of the skill, and the collaborative group will revise

module based on test results. In order for this multimedia project to be complete, the

collaborative team must schedule the presentation with their steering committee and

instructor, provide a presentation of the module, assessment results and report, and reflect

on celebrations and concerns from the learning experience. A collaborative score is

provided by the steering committee and the instructor provides feedback on skill mastery

based on individual performance. Such skill mastery is recorded on the student's online

portfolio or transcript.

Leveraging Community Resources

Each of the applications indicated significant partnerships between the

community and the proposed charter school. Each of the charters built a connection with

the local university including enrichment opportunities for students and professional

development opportunities for teachers. Community partnerships also allowed charter

founders to have initial funding or fundraising opportunities, mentor opportunities

between business and students, and/or partnerships for facility procurement for the

charter. For example, the charter proposal for Diligent Thinkers, which was developed by

several professors at a local university, built many ties between the university and the

proposed student body. College students and professors would work closely with pupils

to foster the foreign language program at Diligent Thinkers and develop opportunities for

students to gain a deeper understanding of cultures. Betty partnered with a nearby farm, at Engaging Minds charter school, the local university, and several environmental organizations to bolster a hands-on environmental science opportunity. One day each week is set aside to have a school-wide fieldtrip to a location in the community where students receive differentiated instruction in the area of science studying topics such as flora and fauna. Cameron created a partnership between a production company and Founding Futures to match professional multi-media specialists with middle school students.

Interview Data

School leaders described the process of explaining facilities procurement and financial planning in an application prior to student enrollment as insurmountable; however, building relationships with the community was achievable and imperative. Alexander noted,

> Initial founder group or initial board members are the most important people
> when a charter school is established because they have the vision and mission of
> the school, they have the initial interest to invest in this type of situation, and then
> anybody who has knowledge about charter schools—it could be a charter school
> organization, or someone who runs a charter school—is important to reach out to.

In the nearby state where Alexander founded his charter school he had to provide proof of an initial funding resource,

> The business community is a great resource, [but] parents—without parents you
> won't have a school. Trying to find out the initial interest of parents who want to
> send their kids [is of high importance]. You have to find the children who are

interested in your school, too. These are the most important [community stakeholders].

Betty noted that teachers from the private school she founded and parents were instrumental in gathering resources from the community, and devoting their time and efforts into developing the charter school. "Really it was the parents and the teachers that were instrumental. We didn't have attorneys, we didn't have any outside help like that at all."

Cameron noted that the application process is the time for a charter leader to articulate their vision for the school. The leader must provide evidence to parents and community members about the structures and goals of the school and the anticipated outcomes for students. "Most important are the parents that you are trying to convince to attend your school through their students; meaning the children that are going to come." He added, "You have to be able to articulate what you want to do in 25 words or less, because it [has to be] quick."

Research Question Three

Research question number three asked how charter leaders responded to critiques of charter applications. Each of the leaders indicated that building relationships with the chartering school district is mutually beneficial. Because school district leadership will ultimately vote to approve or deny a charter school, it is important to work closely throughout the application and renewal process. Cameron and Alexander describe different perspectives on this topic; however, both agreed that clearly articulating their vision for the charter school is important.

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Alexander explained that leaders must have a clear understanding of the academic climate in the district.

> [Leaders must] be realistic about [the] dream. Everybody has their own dream for if they had a school for this, that, and the other. That is great because without those types of dreams you can't start anything. You have to be realistic in terms of where you are opening the school, whether your dream matches the community's, whether the resources you will be offered matches your dream, whether the student body matches your dream. In essence, make the feasibility studies such that your dream can be achieved in the type of community that you would like to work in.

Cameron shared that leaders must be able to state, "what the school should be like when you are just starting out. You have to be like Teflon; everything needs to slip off of you. You will soon find that everybody is going to have issues with you and your little baby—your school. Just as many people will tell you that what you're doing is great. So you have to be able to take everything in stride and believe in what you are doing."

The second part of research question three asked *How do charter schools in Pennsylvania compare to traditional school districts in terms of student enrollment and demographic data?*

Each of the charter schools that participated in this study have significantly smaller enrollment numbers than the chartering district; however, the demographic makeup of students remains comparable. Dilligent Thinkers charter school accepts students in Kindergarten through 8th grade and is at full capacity with nearly 175 students. Because of the relatively small number of students moving from 8th grade into

the nearby traditional public high school, the charter school has developed an "alumni" mentoring program. Past "graduates" from Dilligent Thinkers charter school come back to present. They explain to students what their experience has been entering the large high school that is divided into two buildings. Students share information about how they made friends, what their favorite classes are, and they discuss the clubs and sports they have participated in. A similar mentorship program exists at Engaging Minds charter school where recent "graduates" from the school have moved on to attend either the traditional public high school or a local alternative program hosted by the traditional charter school.

Founding Futures charter school typically has between 120-130 students middle school students each year; however, this charter provides a unique representation of the region. As the only charter school that has a regional charter—meaning more than one school board that approved the initial, and subsequent renewal charters, the demographic make-up is geographically diverse. While the majority of students are from the largest suburban school district in the county, dozens of students are bused from neighboring rural districts. This not only reflects a difference in residency for students and the per pupil funding for the charter school—but it also means that students will be dispersed between several high schools at the completion of their tenure at Founding Futures.

Research Question Four

The fourth and final research question asked: *How do existing charter schools compare to the charter school proposals created as part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education charter application process; and how have the existing charters maintained the original mission statements and vision statements?*

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All of the charter schools reviewed in this study have maintained the mission statements and vision statements from the original charters, as reflected through the renewal proposals. In the most recent renewal for Engaging Minds an addendum was included to increase enrollment by incorporating Kindergarten students. As reflective practitioners, a tenet of a school founder within Transformational Leadership theory, each of the school leaders present reports to their school boards concerning the alignment between current school practices and the original charter mission, vision, and proposed principles.

With each year, additional opportunities for foreign language are incorporated into the school structure at Diligent Thinkers charter school in a continuous cycle of growth in the area of bringing global awareness to the student population. An elective in the Turkish language has been included in the course offerings for middle school students, all students have been offered extracurricular foreign language clubs, and students are offered Turkish dance.

At Engaging Minds, Betty and her team of educators have maintained the mission of individualized education by meeting each student at their discrete ability levels. "The guiding principle of this school, is that you put the child first and you figure out what the child needs and that means the staff is always learning," she said. "It is a very common thing for a teacher to want to be in control… although we want to keep the class under 'control,' the kid is the one in control, not the teacher. We do what the kid needs."

For Cameron and other teachers at Founding Futures, parental involvement has always been a cornerstone of the school culture.

We did take a lot of feedback from parents after it was up and running in terms of… making the school what it is. We never changed the philosophy, we never changed the goal, we never changed the missions, we never really changed the curriculum in terms of project-based, technology-based curriculum, but we did listen to parents…. Ultimately the stakeholders were the parents.

Additional Themes

Each school leader is focused on meeting the needs of the student population that they serve; however, they are cognizant that as charter school founders they are a part of the larger charter movement within the Commonwealth. Alexander is hopeful that charter schools will continue to be influential on public education system. "Charter schools have… had a big impact in Pennsylvania because right now all school districts are starting their own cyber schools…. [charter schools] were successful in initiating the process. This is a great innovation for education. There are things to be hopeful about, but there are worries for education if the problems are not fixed."

Becky believes it is apropos for school districts to accept that charters can provide a different academic product. "The districts like us less and less [yearly]. We have always made a point to be agreeable with the district and not rocking the boat. They come and they see us and they recognize very clearly that we are providing a service that they cannot provide. So we don't have problems with them."

Cameron's view of the charter school movement, and education in general is more cynical. Cameron said that charter schools are only as good as the educational climate—students attending charter schools benefit; however, the larger education movement isn't making changes based on charter school success.

One hundred years from now schooling will look the exactly same. The systems are too big. Once the system gets so big it doesn't change. Nothing that's happening or that has happened indicates to me that you will see any changes in schooling. It will still very much look the same 100 years from now. I think we are a self-selected group of people that have created our unique little habitat here, but I don't think we are having any impact on anything in terms of enlightening people as to a different way to do it. Probably because the systems are too big and it would require a complete overhaul in [the way] systems are organized to really make change.

Summary

This chapter has been confined to presenting and analyzing the qualitative data without drawing conclusions. Each research question was addressed using qualitative analysis and descriptive data. The qualitative data provided an opportunity for leaders to provide an in-depth explanation of their experiences (Creswell, 2003).

Research question number one was answered using data compiled from interviews and an artifact review. One-on-one interviews provided charter school leaders the opportunity to share their educational experiences. An artifact review was completed using lifemaps created by school founders. The researcher's analysis led to the reporting around common themes: (a) all school founders have advanced certifications or advanced degrees in the field of education (b) each of the school leaders spent time teaching within the public school system (c) professional development for teachers is of high priority.

To answer question number 2, the researcher analyzed data through a review of artifacts. When reviewing the charter school application themes were predetermined by

information required by the Pennsylvania Department of Education on the proposal including; (a) school mission and vision, (b) educational goals and objectives, (c) enrollment, (d) curriculum and assessment methods (e) leveraging community resources. Through one-on-one interviews, school leaders were able to reflect on the process of finding a facility during the application process and securing initial funding from local resources.

Research question number three was focused on charter school leader responses to critique of proposed ideas, and the necessity of sustaining relationships with chartering school districts. Through one-on-one interviews, charter leaders provided a deeper explanation of the vast knowledge of the educational climate that is necessary. An analysis of charter school applications provided insight into the proposed enrollment figures per grade level at each school and school profiles indicated current enrollment numbers. The student population at each of the charter schools participating in the study was at full capacity. While the percentage of students is highest from the public school district that provided the charter, each school has 20% or more of the student body from neighboring school districts from the county.

To answer question number four, the researcher analyzed data from the original charter school application, school websites and data from one-on-one interviews with charter leaders. An unintended theme found during data analysis including changes in education from the perspective of current charter school leaders.

Chapter 5 will present an interpretation of these data and implications for future charter school founders and leaders. Recommendations for future study will also be addressed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This final chapter serves to summarize the content of previous chapters, revisiting the questions, literature, data collection, and analysis. In this chapter, the findings of this study are also analyzed and summarized. The purpose of this qualitative comparative case study was to describe and compare the experiences of charter school founders and leaders in Pennsylvania. Qualitative data included a review of artifacts that provided information regarding the charter applications, school mission and vision statements. Additional information was gained after a review of artifacts concerning school founder professional experiences, as well as reviewing interview data, and executing school observations. By providing charter school founders the opportunity to participate in semi-structured interviews, participants were able to expound upon ideas and experiences while leaving room for creativity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Diefenback, 2008). Recommendations for future charter school founders, implications for future school leaders, and suggestions for future research are also included.

The criteria for charter leaders included having founded a charter school and currently acting as a charter school leader in Pennsylvania. Although ten charter leaders were invited to participate in this study, only three charter school leaders from Pennsylvania responded with an interest in becoming participants. While the original plan was to include only charter leaders who had founded schools within Pennsylvania, Alexander was willing to participate in the study and provided invaluable feedback regarding charter schools in Pennsylvania. Additionally, he was able to provide

information regarding federal legislation and historical information regarding charter school development because of his experience in founding a charter school in a nearby state.

Three factors may have influenced this low participation rate of charter school founders/leaders in this research study. The first is that the researcher sent an initial query to dozens of charter school founders in spring 2013 by email. It is possible that the charter leaders were managing a number of school-based responsibilities which could have included administering standardized assessments, managing enrollment and graduation, hiring of new personnel, creating a school budget, etc. which could have prevented them the time to properly focus time and energy on participation in a research study. Another reason for a diminished rate of confirmed volunteers for the study could have been due to high turn over rate of charter school leadership or the charter founders may no longer be associated with the charter school. Yet another factor could have been the lack of personal or professional connections between the researcher to the vast majority of the geographical locations across the Commonwealth. The researcher also had an absence of connections between schools, or school leadership, so there may not have been an incentive for school leaders to become invested in the study.

The school founders and leaders committed to participating in the research study were self-selected. These school founders have all participated in previous studies concerning education and were interested in sharing their professional experiences and motivations in order to assist future charter school founders and leaders.

Methodology

This study sought to describe individuals who founded charter schools; including their struggles and triumphs. The study also pursued identification of sustaining practices for the creation of charter schools within Pennsylvania to gain a deeper understanding of the founder experience. Using a qualitative research approach, the researcher reviewed artifacts and interview data and conducted school observations at each school.

The guiding questions for this research included:

1. What are the educational backgrounds and career paths of charter school founders/leaders? What motivates them to become charter school founders?

2. How do charter school leaders make large-scale decisions such as financing methods, building facilities, student population, creation of school board, school vision and mission statements, and hiring protocols prior to the completion of the charter school application process?

3. How did charter leaders respond to critiques of charter applications? How do charter schools in Pennsylvania compare to traditional school districts in terms of student enrollment and demographic data?

4. How do existing charter schools compare to the charter school proposals created as part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education charter application process? How have the existing charters maintained the original mission statements and vision statements?

After approval was received from the Instructional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, the formal invitation to participate and consent was sent to each participant group by mail. Initially,

the researcher identified the forms of data collection that would be used to analyze supporting evidence for each of the four research questions. During the data collection and artifact review phase it became clear to the researcher that there would need to be additional forms of data collection to answer research questions. For example, prior to analyzing data, the researcher believed that the second research question: *How do charter school leaders create large-scale decisions, such as financing methods, building facilities, student population, creation of school board, school vision and mission statements, and hiring protocols prior to the completion of the charter school application process?* would be answered simply through semi-structured interviews. Though school leaders did address portions of this question during the semi-structured interviews, other information was acquired through artifact reviews. The charter applications, school websites, and school profiles provided data to answer this research question.

The artifacts, school observation notes, and semi-structured interview transcripts were analyzed using *NVivo 10* (QSR International, 2012). The conclusions drawn from this study are discussed in the findings.

Findings

The findings of this research study are organized by the themes identified in the literature when answering each of the four research questions that determined the methodology for this study.

Education of Leaders

The findings from the first research question: *What are the educational backgrounds and career paths of charter school founders/leaders? What motivates them to become charter school founders?* were answered within the theoretical frameworks of

Transformational Leadership theory and Espoused Theory. The combined theoretical framework looked at charter school founders and leaders as influencers of educational change who can articulate the assumptions and rules they followed when developing their charter schools (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Bass, 1990; Burns, 2003; Leithwood & Sun, 2009).

An analysis of data acquired from the one-on-one interviews found that charter leaders all had experiences within traditional public school and college that led them to develop the vision for a charter school of their own. Academic and professional experiences also played a role in developing the specific niche and mission for the charter. The charter leaders reported that while they all held degrees in education, additional certifications and advanced degrees had also been completed.

Large-scale Decision-making

Data to answer the second research question*: How do charter school leaders make large-scale decisions such as financing methods, building facilities, student population, creation of school board, school vision and mission statements, and hiring protocols prior to the completion of the charter school application process?* were found in the school leaders' personal descriptions of their struggles and celebrations. School leaders celebrated the relationships they had with their founding school board which included future teachers, interested parents, and supportive community members. Such members devoted hours of research, planning, and meeting to assist charter founders with application creation, and required public meetings to market the idea to local families and school districts. Many of the founding school board members are still involved in the charter school in ome capacity.

Each of the charter leaders in this study also put significant energy into building relationships with community organizations and businesses. In doing so, students were provided with numerous opportunities to learn outside of the classroom, and from others that were not employed by the school, a practice which was supported by the literature (Deuink & Reinsfelder, 2007; Hubbard & Kulkarni, 2009). While some leaders included community partnerships within the school day to facilitate a deeper learning of technology or academics, others encouraged outside organizations to work with students for field trips or extra-curricular opportunities.

By creating such community relationships, leaders were able to earn initial financial backing from parents and business owners in the community through fundraising efforts; as well as assistance with initial facility locations. Despite a leader's best intentions, each charter school, like most newly formed organizations, go through a growth period. Sarason (1998) noted that even the best created plans will face challenges and it is important to rely on an outside agency or impartial individual to support the founding team when developing the initial plans so that personal issues and personality disputes do not hinder the creative process. Though this experience did aid in the creating a tranquil experience of the facility, resources, and personnel necessary to meet students on the first day of the charter schools, it did not stifle growth for charter schools. After Betty's charter application was approved for Engaging Minds charter school, the business that promised to provide initial funding and facility for the charter removed their support. Though she was afraid this would have a negative impact on her ability to open her charter school, teachers agreed to accept their first paycheck at the end of September, and she was able to acquire a facility right before the start of school.

Hiring protocols and financial decisions regarding teacher pay and benefits were based on an analysis of estimated per pupil funding. Initially some of the cost of teacher benefits for medical insurance was reimbursed by the chartering school district and the majority of retirement benefits were reimbursed by the state. Ten or more years after the initial charters were accepted, budget cuts at the state level had decreased the reimbursement for benefits for all schools—including charter schools.

Critique and Comparisons

The third research question in this study asked: *How did charter leaders respond to critiques of charter applications? How do charter schools in Pennsylvania compare to traditional school districts in terms of student enrollment and demographic data?* Working from Espoused Theory, introduced by Argyris and Schön (1974), charter leaders worked under a set of assumptions and rules that assist in decision making when opening the charters. Each of the charter leaders spoke to challenges they have faced from the community or the chartering school district about the philosophy of education they used when founding the charter school, or the methodology that they continue to use. Alexander noted, "It is a big war zone. On one side there are school boards, there are teacher unions, there are administrative organizations on the other end there are business, charter school promoters, certain political interest groups so it is a big war zone."

Betty, the founder of Engaging Minds charter school, said it is more about the charting district being insecure about the education of students attending charter schools. "Charter schools were established with certain things in mind; offering choice, providing innovative ways of doing things, the main reasons that you have heard over and over. We are doing that and it is making the district pick up their game."

Cameron noted that the environment between charter schools and traditional public schools state-wide is unfriendly.

> Right now the environment is somewhat antagonistic between charter schools and the traditional non-charter public schools. One of the biggest issues charter schools face is people wrap them all up in the same box. So you have people looking at cyber charters the way they look at brick and mortar charters. I don't like to rag on anybody, but cyber charters get the same amount of money but they have very different requirements financially. Some cyber charter schools are just raking in money but we get painted with that same brush. So there are a lot of people that are very upset at the cyber charter schools because of the way they are using money and the way they are financed. We get painted with the same brush. I think a lot of the negativity towards charter schools has to do with cyber schools and they can draw students from across Pennsylvania so they have a huge pool to draw from. I think that's one of the big problems. I think there needs to be some sort of separation. I'm not a big cyber charter fan. I see some problems when it comes to socialization. I think there is a role they play. I think there are certain groups that can benefit but so much of schooling is social behavior.

Pennsylvania charter schools reviewed for this study compare to traditional school districts in that county based on enrollment, demographic data, and student achievement. Consternation over civil rights issues and inequities between schools soon became a focus (Hill & Lake, 2010; Yeung & Conley, 2008); however, school leaders participating in this study reported that the demographics of student populations within their charter schools is illustrative of the larger traditional school districts. Student populations at each

of the charter schools represent a diversity of socioeconomic status. Attesting to the legislation which permitted students from multiple school districts to attend nearby charter schools, Engaging Minds and Founding Futures charter schools were two of the first charters to be approved in Pennsylvania in 1998 to include students from multiple districts. Diligent Thinkers charter school did the same when it first opened during the 2004-2005 school year. School leaders indicated frustration concerning the differences in per pupil funding from each district. Because school funding is based on a formula of property taxes set by the Commonwealth, student reimbursement to charter schools is based on per pupil subsidy assigned to each district from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (Pennsylvania Public School Code §17-1714-A).

The findings of this study refute Erickson's (2011) notion that charter schools cause residual segregation because parents are still reliant on transportation and other concerns that would keep students within a particular geographic location for schooling. Though the highest percentage of students attending the charter schools reviewed in this study are from the authorizing school district in the county, each of the schools have students from neighboring districts. The school districts provide transportation for any student within 40 miles to attend the charter school—which equates to all school districts in the county where the charter schools are located.

Lubienski, Gulosino, and Weitzel (2009) attest charter schools are not permitted to enroll selectively, but competition for school choice can be enhanced when schools create a unique market niche. Each of the charter schools have priority enrollment for siblings of current students, and for those that are residents of the authorizing school district. None of the charter schools have a process for selecting students based on merit,

academic performance, etc. The charter school leaders did allude to competition between the traditional school district and charter schools for families that are looking for a specific type of environment—foreign language focus, project-based learning, small class sizes, individualized education—in which charters can better meet that need (Ravitch, 2011).

According to the National Alliance of Public School's report: *A growing movement: America's largest charter school communities, 7th edition* (2012), Pennsylvania is ranked within the top 10 for serving students in the public school systems through charter schools. Nearly 50% of charter schools throughout Pennsylvania have been open for 10 or more years; including those that participated in this study (National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, 2012). A review of standardized assessment data in that county indicates that charter school students score comparatively to traditional public school students on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment in 3rd, 5th, and 8th grades.

Maintaining Mission and Vision

The final research question in this study asked: *How do existing charter schools compare to the charter school proposals created as part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education charter application process? How have the existing charters maintained the original mission statements and vision statements?* This research study found that charter school leaders are most likely to maintain their original mission and visions statements.

Each school is reflective of the proposal that leaders published more than a dozen years before. Though each of the schools have moved out of rental facilities and into buildings which they have renovated and own, the class structures, curriculum, and

student focuses remain the same. Each charter school continues to represent options for providing their children with a public school alternative. All of the school leaders present reports to their school boards concerning the alignment between current school practices and the original charter mission, vision, and proposed principles. The only recent change in any of the schools was at Engaging Minds, which submitted an addendum to increase enrollment by incorporating Kindergarten students. Activities and enrichment courses are continuously added at each charter school; however, this does not change the mission or vision of the school, but rather provides more choice for students to experience educationally. This is indicative of a leader who carefully crafted the mission that continues to endure (Cowen, Fleming, & Gofen, 2008).

Implications of this Study

The focus of this research study was to describe and compare the experiences of charter school founders and leaders. The qualitative data collected through the artifact review, school observations and semi-structured interviews provided insights into the application process and maintenance of charter schools. The findings of this study have implications for future charter leaders, teacher educators, and policy makers.

Implications for Future Charter Leaders

The three charter school founders identified the need for prospective charter applicants to have a deep understanding of multiple aspects of charter school laws. One school founder noted that if applicants do not have a global understanding of the process, some school districts try make it more difficult for applicants. As two of the leaders said, it is imperative to work with consultants and attorneys when completing a charter school application now in order to ensure all of the requirements are met prior to submission.

Applicants that have strong feasibility studies, intense community and parent support, and a robust niche in the academic market are more likely to have their charter application approved.

The three charter leaders agree that maintaining a close relationship with the chartering school district(s) is mutually beneficial. While there may be some animosity between the traditional school district and the charter school, it should be noted that rather than a competitive relationship, the charter school should be viewed as unique and therefore providing an innovative academic product for the children in the district. Specifically, charter school leaders may identify ways to foster collegial collaboration with the administration and school board members at such school districts. The findings in this study suggest that relationships between charter schools and traditional public school districts are maintained through infrequent school visits, a review of compliance monitoring reports that charter schools send to the school district, and discussion every five years as part of the charter renewal process. A low-cost initiative could be to have consistent collaboration between school entities for frequent school visits, planning meetings, and professional development for teachers. Teachers from charter schools could benefit from professional development that is offered at the school district or county level, just as classroom teachers from traditional public schools may benefit from observing the methodology of instruction at charter schools.

Finally, potential charter leaders must advocate for the students and families that they will serve in the unique learning environment they are planning. Many families live in environments where they feel as if they do not have a choice in where to send their

children to school. Budde (1974) found that when families have school choice, there is a greater happiness in the academic environment for their children.

Implications for School Leadership Preparation Programs

Preparation programs for educators such as principal certification programs, superintendent certification programs, and other advanced degrees in school leadership should consider creating projects that require participants to review various aspects of education. Alexander said he became interested in developing a charter school when he was a graduate student studying school leadership; however, there was no class project in place to help prepare him for that.

> I think this process [of creating a charter school] should be taught in teacher
>
> education programs, and principal education programs despite the fact that
>
> whether people would apply [for charters] or not. I think it is great, it teaches a
>
> person about all aspects of education. When you go through a principal education
>
> program or teacher education program you just learn certain things. When you
>
> apply for a charter school you have to think about everything that surrounds the
>
> education field. I think it is beneficial for everyone to go through. It can also
>
> increase the awareness of people understanding of how difficult it is to start a
>
> charter school they can appreciate that. They feel like these schools are just
>
> popping up in different parts and stealing money from us. They should get the
>
> feeling of the other side. They should empathize that side as well. Same for the
>
> charter school leaders, maybe there should be a way to learn about public schools.
>
> Some people come from backgrounds that have nothing to do with education, so
>
> they operate out of a business mind or they operate out of whatever their

education was. They should see how public schools are run. There are great things that public schools are doing that charter schools could benefit from.

Implications for Policy Makers

Policy makers should create a distinction between virtual charter schools (or cyber charter schools) and traditional "bricks and mortar" charter schools. While both types of charter schools are able to provide a distinctive learning experience for children in Pennsylvania, the framework for such schools are very different. By providing the label of "charter schools" for both virtual and traditional charter schools it provides inconsistent marketing. While traditional charter schools have facilities fees, administrative overhead costs, and numerous other costs associated with running a school, cyber schools do not have the same concerns.

The average per pupil cost for educating a child in a regular education classroom is nearly $10,000 per year. The average cost of educating a child who receives special education services is approximately $16,000 per year. Charter schools receive reimbursement per student from Pennsylvania Department of Education; however, the funding is funneled through the student's neighborhood district (PA Public School Code §17-1714-A). Policy makers across the Commonwealth should realize that budget cuts of charter schools have an adverse affect on a child's academic experience. Educational funds are just that—funds to educate each pupil—not to fund a particular traditional or non-traditional public charter school.

The process for charter approval and renewal, and on-going accountability should be restructured to become more efficient and impartial. Alexander believes consistency is the answer to ensure that charter schools will continue to exist and who be successful.

I think the most important thing is to streamline the process of how renewals and how initial authorizations and closures of charter schools is done. Right now, except for the virtual charter schools, which is authorize by PDE, all of the other charter schools are authorized by the local school districts. We have 500 school districts in the state of Pennsylvania and that means there are 500 methods that people use. Closing non-successful charter schools is as important as authorizing a good charter school. I, as a charter school leader, don't like charter schools that are not successful to continue because my work is reflected negatively. If they talk about charters not being successful they don't say [Diligent Thinkers Charter School] is successful but this one is not. I would like schools that are not successful to be closed. There should be a fair, consistent way of approving, monitoring, authorizing, and renewing charter schools. I think that is the most important element.

In addition, as policymakers work to streamline this process, it will be imperative to review the accountability measures that have been put into place. The number of reports that charter school leaders are required to produce yearly has increased ten-fold since Pennsylvania began accepting school charters in 1997. Cameron said,

There's a move toward treating small charter schools like these big school districts and it doesn't work. We have 100 kids. We are different. We have to do a lot of things that a school district has to do in terms of reporting. They want us to have this comprehensive plan. We have to have a board of 15 people to make a comprehensive plan. That's a whole staff. It doesn't even make sense. There is no allowance for difference. It's exactly what schools do with everybody; everybody

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is the same so they treat everybody the same, it just doesn't work that way. But I also understand that people just don't know what to do, it's the people [that feel like they] need control.

Limitations

There are limitations within this study's findings. There were a small number of participants. Because of the small sample size, it would be difficult to generalize the experiences of these charter school founders and leaders to all charter school founders within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Opportunities for Future Research

This study provided an initial evaluation of charter school leadership and development of charter schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania according to the experiences of charter school founders. Completing a longitudinal study on charter school applicants, the revision process, and renewal process might provide a deeper understanding of the process of charter school creation within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Many topics are discussed in political platforms regarding charter school legislation and regulation; however, few changes have been implemented regarding charter school development in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania throughout the past 20 years. A qualitative study on the views of charter school leaders on necessary legislation and regulation could enhance the debate between policy makers.

Another aspect of charter schools which deserves future study, is the changes in regulations and reporting requirements for charter leaders. Not only does the chartering school district require in-depth explanations of various aspects of the charter application

process, but the Pennsylvania Department of Education has also required supplementary information in recent years. It would be beneficial to determine which areas in a charter application are most often denied, and what measures must be taken in order to revise and resubmit a charter application within Pennsylvania.

Summary

Participants in this study value the significance of the charter school movement in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The participants had all founded a charter school and all remain leaders. Each of the participants in this study recognized and appreciated the importance of the charter school movement in Pennsylvania and maintained that the charter schools they lead are having a positive impact on the children they serve. Though each charter leader was asked initially required to resubmit after making minor changes to their proposals the charters were accepted within the first year of application. Each of the charters have been renewed each cycle they have applied.

This study corroborated the findings of Burns (2003) who indicated that charter school leaders would have a larger influence on school reform. It also validated Argyris & Schön (1974) indicating charter school leaders should be able to articulate the reasons for their decision-making could motivate others to create.

Charter school leaders design school missions based on their educational philosophy. For most leaders, this viewpoint is based on academic and professional experiences that have shaped their own educational experience. In order to make such charter schools move from the proposal stage into fruition, community relationships must be built in order to have a supportive system in place for the student population. School leaders depend on the community for financial assistance, real estate acquisition,

marketing to prospective families, and sustained support. Formation of initial charter school boards are often developed by members of community organizations, prospective teachers, and supportive parents.

When faced with critique, charter school founders operate tenets of espoused leadership theory to provide a rationale for motivations and inspiration. Charter school leaders must explain their intentions of creating a school with a specific niche to stakeholders including school districts, prospective community partners, parents, and students. Like all school leaders, charter founders will face criticism based on large-scale efforts such as the purchase of a new facility, the increase of enrollment numbers, or financing additional personnel. Likewise, school leaders face criticism regarding routine decisions such as the creation of new initiatives, providing intervention for struggling students, or additional enrichment opportunities for students who excel. The key to school leadership decision-making is poise, accountability, and influence as a transformational leader.

The findings in this study suggest that charter schools are filling a void that exists within the traditional public school system throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Each of the charter schools in this study ha a waiting list of interested students, and a team of personnel that have been on the payroll since the school's inception. If charter schools are going to continue to be created, school leaders must build community relationships, collaborate with local school districts, and leverage student and parent interests to meet the needs of pupils in each region.

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Founder/Leader Informed Consent Form

MONTH, DAY, 2014

Dear NAME,

You are invited to participate in a dissertation study that examines the experiences of charter school founders and leaders in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The purpose of this qualitative dissertation study will be to gain an understanding of common characteristics that lead to charter school acceptance by the state Department of Education. Only by examining this process with founders and leaders of charter schools, can future charter leaders gain an understanding of what the process is to effectively open and maintain a charter school in Pennsylvania. It is hoped that this research will: 1) reveal what charter school leaders and founders identify as the key characteristics and components for charter school acceptance, and (2) pinpoint what trends exist with successful charter schools in Pennsylvania.

The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate in this dissertation research. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a charter founder or leader who is involved in the Pennsylvania charter school movement in an urban, suburban, or rural school. The Indiana University of Pennsylvania supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time simply by calling me or sending an email at the phone number or email address, which I have provided for your convenience on the next page. Participation or non-participation in this study will not adversely affect you in any way.

Interested participants can contribute to the research by taking part in an initial telephone, or in person, interview for this study will require a time-commitment of approximately 20 minutes, which will be at a time that is convenient for you. Such interviews (via phone or in person) will be audio-recorded for transcription for this research study. During the interview a total of seven questions will be asked to reflect upon the charter school movement in Pennsylvania, your views on the future of public education, advice you would provide for aspiring charter school leaders, and legislative changes that have affected charter schools. You will also be asked to reflect upon your own education and your professional experiences. After the initial interview, a school observation will be scheduled at your convenience in order to compile additional information regarding your

charter school climate and student population. During the time of the school observation an in-person, semi-structured interview will take place and a life-map of your personal academic and professional experiences will be created indicating your pathway to charter school leadership. During the school observation, the researcher will record information regarding school climate, school culture and student population. Specific observations regarding students and teachers will not be made for this research.

All of your answers to these questions and your life-map will be kept confidential. No one, except myself and my faculty sponsor, Dr. Jennifer Rotigel, will have access to the data. All interview transcriptions, observation notes and life-maps will be secured in a locked file cabinet in my home office for at least three years in compliance with federal regulations. When presenting and analyzing the data from your interview, I will not identify you or your charter school by name, in order to maintain confidentiality.

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. (Phone 724.357.7730)

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement on the next page and return it to me. Please keep an extra, unsigned copy with you as well. By returning the signed statement, your consent to participate in this dissertation research. An executive summary of the findings from this study will be made available to you electronically upon request. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at the phone number or e-mail address below. If you choose not to participate, simply return this letter, unsigned, and no questions will be asked.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Colleen L. Freyvogel, Principal Investigator   Dr. Jennifer Rotigel, Faculty Sponsor
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Pittsburgh, PA 15211   Department of Professional Studies
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                                                      (724) 357-5694

Appendix B

Voluntary Consent Form

PARTICIPANT VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:

I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a subject the study; *A qualitative study: Reflections from Pennsylvania charter school leaders*. I understand that my participation will involve an audio-recorded interview consisting of seven questions lasting approximately 20 minutes that will be conducted at a site and a time that I select. I further understand that if I choose to participate in this study, a school observation and semi-structured interview will be scheduled. I further understand: (1) a copy of the questions is attached, (2) my responses are completely confidential and pseudonyms will be used to identify myself and school affiliation, (3) I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form to keep in my possession and will return the other copy by postal mail, or as a scanned e-mail attachment to c.l.freyvogel@iup.edu.

Name (PLEASE PRINT):

_____

Signature:

_____

Date:

_____

Phone number or location where you can be reached:

_____

Best days and times to reach you:

_____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

_____   _____
      Date   Investigator's Signature

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. (Phone 724.357.7730)

Appendix C

Interview Script

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed on the topic of the charter school application process in Pennsylvania. This initial telephone interview should require no more than about 20 minutes of your time. As you know from your consent form, we will be audiotaping this initial interview today to facilitate the transcription of your responses. You will only be identified by pseudonym and your school will be identified by pseudonym in any of the material that is published on this research. If, after we begin the interview, you decide for any reason not to continue, just let me know and any data collected will be erased. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Please reflect for a moment on the educational experiences and professional experiences you have had. What experiences do you feel led you to participate in the charter movement in Pennsylvania?
2. There were various stakeholder contacts, which were instrumental during the charter application process. What stakeholders are most beneficial throughout the process?
3. What are important legislative changes that have been made concerning charter schools in Pennsylvania?
4. Please reflect on the charter school movement in Pennsylvania. What are the most essential elements necessary to sustain and further develop charter schools in Pennsylvania?
5. Looking forward, what do you think is the future for public education and charter schools in Pennsylvania? Why?
6. If you could offer just one piece of advice to aspiring charter school founders or leaders what would it be and why?
7. Is there anything else that you would like to add on the topic of the charter school application, creation or implementation process?

Thank you for participating in this research. A transcript will be sent to you as an e-mail attachment in a few weeks and you will be able to check it for accuracy. Before we hang up, do you have any questions? Again, thank you for sharing your insights about the process of charter school application in Pennsylvania.