An analysis of successful charter school operations

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An Analysis of Successful Charter Schools Operations

by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is hard to capture all of the support, guidance, and inspiration I have received throughout this process. So many have played a role in my passion for successful school opportunities for students and for completing this massive undertaking. While it is not possible to capture each friend, co-worker, and student who has impacted me, I hope you will see the inspiration you have given me throughout this work.

My older brother and best friend, Christopher, stipulated that I not only attend college, but would accept nothing less from me than a continued drive to achieve my goals. He has supported me in ways only a big brother can, and I cannot fathom where I would be today without his unwavering support and love. My sister Lynn and brother (in-law) Kevin were sounding boards, strategists, editors, and the only ones who could get away with telling me when to stop and walk away. Their knowledge and expertise give me something to aspire to, and their love and caring got me through many drafts of this work. Laurie and John not only provided emotional support for me, but selflessly took care of my husband through the years of preparation and writing to finish this project. They are dear friends who always seemed to know what we needed, which often times included dinner. Finally, my husband, Dino, who amazingly managed to keep up with what was going on and how to support me at any given time. Through highs and lows, he stood by me as my biggest cheerleader, even when he didn’t always know what he was cheering for. Learning to adapt on the fly wasn’t easy, but he made it seem natural and continued to go with the flow. I really do promise this is the last degree.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my committee and chair. Approaching a project of this magnitude on a timeline many called impossible is not something many would have done. They were each willing to take on this work with me, often times interrupting their own lives to ensure
I met my goals. Dr. Burton joined my committee with little direct knowledge of me or my work, and I appreciate her trust and faith that I would produce. Dr. Tracie, who over a decade ago helped me finalize my master’s program, has supported me throughout my doctoral program ending with being an invaluable member of my committee. Dr. Winborne started as my charter authorizer in what seems another life and has become a tremendous resource and friend. Dr. Saunders, my chair and guide through this journey, has gently but firmly redirected and provided feedback while encouraging me, and sometimes talking me off the ledge. I am truly grateful to each of you.
This study adds to the literature specific practices and systems that contribute to successful charter schools. Nine open ended interviews were conducted, which were then read and coded to identify themes. Using a process consistent with the *constant comparison* method, codes were transferred into a separate document. To ensure novel code development, constant comparison involved a recursive check of the code list. The code list was considered complete after reaching a point of *theoretical saturation* whereby novel codes were no longer necessary to interpret uncoded interview content. Codes were then assembled into higher order themes based on shared meaning and content. Themes served as umbrella summaries of lower order coded meaning. Thus, themes provided an interpretive framework or “grounded theory” for the study sample.

Participants included two authorizers who were public universities in Michigan. Both were labeled as “large authorizers” having portfolios of more than six schools. Two educational service providers were also included who were providing full management of charter schools in the Metro-Detroit area. One managed seven schools, the other provided various levels of service to more than 35 schools and fully managed two. Four K-8 schools participated, all of which were located in the Metro-Detroit area. The schools ranged in size from just over 90 to more than 400 students.

Since adopting charter school law in Michigan, 117 public school academies have either not fully opened (12) or have been closed (105). While the original intent of charter schools was to be an educational environment where experimentation and innovative practices were tested, significant negative impacts occur when we close schools, for the students, staff and community.
Maintaining the flexibility to close those schools that are not working is essential, but we also need to understand why we are closing the schools, and how to design them successfully so that the real work of developing innovative practice can occur and be sustainable.

The study revealed far more significant pre-planning is required when designing and opening charter schools than is often taking place. The work done for the charter school application was not intended to be nor is it sufficient as the end of the planning process. In order to fully design a school that can be successful long term, a seven-to-ten-year plan must be developed. Staffing plans should have clearly defined roles for separate leaders of academics and back office as the foundation. These plans should then be developed to anticipate increased needs in quantity and type of programming. Fully developed financial planning must include all aspects of facilities and maintenance, representing not only growth of enrollment but also upkeep of facilities. Sound and complete fundraising plans are key as it was reiterated that the start-up grant funds are not nearly enough to create a solid foundation from which to grow. Lastly, well-researched and documented systems and practices allow the organization to function fluidly but stably beginning with the opening of school. All of these areas will continue to grow, adapt, and change which, is one of the benefits of the charter experiment.

By developing a strong and detailed long-term plan inclusive of academics, human capital, enrollment, budgeting, fundraising, facilities, systems and procedures focus can be dedicated to the implementation of instructional models with integrity. Each area will concentrate on their responsibilities while having the ability to step back and look at the whole and how it works together. The organic modifications should not be stifled, but well documented so as to benefit from experience. This was the original intent of charter schools.
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CHAPTER ONE---INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Analysis of Successful Operational Structures in Charter Schools

In 1993 Michigan passed its first law permitting the opening and running of charter schools, also referred to as public school academies (PSA). According to the Michigan Department of Education, as of July 2016 there were 372 active public charter schools in Michigan, accounting for more than 10% of all school-aged students. While these schools were located around the state, many were concentrated in urban areas such as Detroit and in Flint where more than 51% and nearly 40% of students attended a PSA, respectively (Michigan Association of Public School Academies, n.d.). Charter schools have grown substantially in other areas in Michigan, such as Lansing, Grand Rapids, and the counties of Genesee, Washtenaw and Macomb. While prominent in urban areas, the Michigan Department of Education reports at the MI School Data website that 23% of students attending rural schools are also enrolled in charter programs.

The vision for charter schools was that groups of educators would develop small, independent learning environments where innovation and autonomy (from the local school district) provided a venue for student success. The focus of these schools, rightfully so, was on the student and their educational experience. A result was that hundreds of groups would open learning environments that needed to successfully function from the budgetary, operational and compliance perspective, but were being run by those with a laser-like focus on instruction and culture.

In Michigan, local intermediate school districts (ISD) authorize approximately 12% of the 301 charter districts, according to the Michigan Department of Education (2016). These ISDs provide for oversight and the services of their central office; compliance reporting,
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organization, and budgeting are all managed through the district with no additional charge to the PSA. The vast majority of public school academies in Michigan are being charted by universities and community colleges, which do not provide these services. PSAs then need to either hire full-service management companies, self-manage and hire out specific aspects of this work, or hire staff to take on these roles.

In contrast, these systems and processes have been successfully established in traditional school districts due to their longevity. When a key staff person leaves the district, stability allows for reasonably smooth transitions of new employees. Traditional districts also have the benefit of being able to spread the cost of these services across a much broader base, including multiple buildings with higher numbers of students. Public school academies must develop operational systems and practice from scratch, frequently with staff that do not have the training or experience needed to do so. Those who hire out these services, often piece them together in order to save on costs. For example, schools will choose to work with a staffing company or accounting firm, but keep the compliance reporting in house. Even with the assistance of these educational service providers (ESP), the school is left to organize operational processes and systems, ensure all compliance reporting occurs, and remain financially viable.

Some charters choose a full service provider, a company that will oversee all management, instructional, operational, compliance, and budgeting aspects. Many, especially new or smaller charters, cannot afford this option. Ultimately, every school needs to have strong and efficient operational and management systems in place to ensure compliance with their authorizer, the Michigan Department of Education, and the Federal Government if
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receiving federal grant dollars. Without strong systems in place across these areas, failure to successfully run a school is likely.

Statement of the Problem

Authorizers rate school success using three categories: acceptable student academic progress, financial viability, and adherence to compliance requirements. In a review of the data, the majority of public school academies are closed for reasons unrelated to academic achievement, or for reasons in addition to lack of achievement. Causes for closure include: (a) compliance deficiencies, (b) facility concerns, (c) contract terminated or nonrenewal, (d) lack of financial viability, (e) lack of governance and leadership, (f) merging with or transferring status to another charter, and (g) MDE directed closure. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Michigan opened 33 schools in 2013-14, a significant amount of growth in one year (2014). What is not being discussed is the significance of charter schools that are closing. According to the Michigan Department of Education, as of July 2016, a total of 117 charter schools had closed in Michigan; 12 of which never fully opened. The other 105 were closed for a variety of reasons. It is important to determine what operational procedures, or lack thereof, are causing such high numbers of closures and what can be done to prevent it. When these schools close, thousands of students’ educational careers suffer.

Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the components that make for successful charter school operations. For the purposes of this study, successful school operation is identified as: (a) being in good standing academically (not falling into the Focus or Priority ranking), (b) being financially sound, and (c) satisfactorily meeting compliance requirements. Information was collected and analyzed on charter schools identified as high quality by
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authorizers. This information was then compared to information collected on charter schools that have closed. This comparison allowed identification of challenges that contribute to failed charter schools. Once these challenges are identified, both charter schools who are struggling in these areas and those groups interested in opening new schools can use this information to develop processes for successful management. The ultimate goal is that all charter schools have strong operational and management policy and practice in place so that a focus around educational culture and instruction can remain the primary focus of school personnel.

Significance of the Study

Millions of dollars are spent annually to prepare for and open charter schools. The United States Department of Education has provided $940,000,000 to charter schools nationally through the charter school grant program, providing for startup costs (Price & Jenkins, 2015). Schools are granted $35,000 during stage one—completion of an innovative academic vision and design of academic plan. During the second phase, $75,000 is granted to develop the business plan that will support the school and finalization of the charter application. Finally, $200,000 is granted over the course of two years for startup costs, such as purchasing supplies and curriculum, staffing, and facility-related expenses. When charter schools fail to open or even more costly, close during the first two years, crucial financial resources have been wasted.

The impact school closure has on displaced students is equally troubling. Academic impacts vary based on the school, but most students experience some academic setback. The severity is dependent on their accomplishments and the academic quality of the school from which they are displaced (Brummet, 2014). Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2001) report negative consequences not only for students who move schools, but also for those students
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attending schools with large influxes of new students. From the leadership perspective, school leaders need to fully understand and be able to implement all aspects of a successful school, including where to get support when needed. By identifying specific strategies in management and operations of public school academies that demonstrate long-term success, schools can adopt these practices; this will greatly reduce the charter school closure rate in Michigan, and provide long-term educational opportunity and stability in K-12 education.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What operational systems are in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study?
2. What are the operational similarities and differences in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study that are impacting school failure?
3. What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to close the K-8 public school academies included in this study?
4. What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to maintain operation of the K-8 public school academies included in this study?

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations in the study included the following elements:

1. Charter schools in Michigan were used as the models to identify successful operations. Due to chartering laws in other states, not all systems may be transferable.
2. Interviews inclusive of charter authorizers, board members, principals and management company were not possible at every location due to a variety of reasons.
When possible, multiple employees were interviewed in each school system to obtain multiple viewpoints and knowledge of systems and practice.

3. Information provided by individuals could not be substantiated in all cases and could be interpreted in multiple ways within any given situation.

4. Only K-8 public school academies were included in this study.

Delimitations in this study include the following elements:

1. The study was confined to charter schools that fell into one of the following three categories:
   a. Fully-managed
   b. Partially-managed (such as only accounting, human resources or other contracted service)
   c. Self-managed

2. Authorizers included in this study represent university authorizers in Michigan.

3. Success of the school organization was determined based on meeting compliance standards of the authorizer, organizational and fiscal viability, and the school being in good standing academically (not falling into the Focus or Priority ranking).

4. Operational systems included in this study represent those used for maintaining the regular school day (not inclusive of before/after school activities or extracurricular activities).

**Definition of Terms**

**Authorizer**—Michigan charter school authorizers include: colleges and universities, school districts, local educational agencies, or state education agencies. According to the National Charter Schools Organization, the role of the Authorizer is to support and monitor charter
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Schools, work with the school to ensure they are meeting their goals, and to hold them accountable to that agreement. This is inclusive of instructional practices, goals of the schools, mission of the school, the community they serve and organizational structure of the school. Any changes in grades served, total number of students enrolled, school adopted curriculum and changes in board members must be approved through the authorizer.

Currently accreditation for Authorizers is voluntary in Michigan, but is becoming a more prominent expectation. The intent is to ensure that the authorizing body has clear and consistent systems in place including to hold school boards accountable for fulfilling their contract, but also providing support to them and the school leaders to promote success.

Charter Management Organization (CMO) — Usually a non-profit entity that manages certain aspects for the board. These include providing back office functions, such that charter schools can take advantage of economies of scale. Some also provide a wider range of services including hiring, professional development, data analysis, public relations and advocacy (National Alliance for Public Charter schools, n.d.).

Compliance—Reporting required by the intermediate school district, charter authorizer, State and Federal Education Departments. This is inclusive of financial, attendance, and academic progress data. It also includes proof or verification that the school is abiding by all laws, policies, and expectations set by the above governing bodies.

Decision Theory—According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, decision theory concentrates on the reasoning motivating an agent’s choices, whether a mundane choice such as taking the bus versus getting a taxi—or a more significant choice such as pursuing a demanding political career. In contrast, standard thinking is what an agent does on any given occasion, is completely determined by her beliefs and desires/values. In any case, decision
theory is as much a theory of beliefs, desires and other relevant attitudes as it is a theory of choice; what matters is how these various attitudes impact a final decision.

**Educational Service Providers (ESP)** — Can be nonprofit or for-profit. They contract with private, traditional public and charters to provide a variety of services. Some ESPs are contracted by the board to provide comprehensive management (inclusive of everything from policy development to day-to-day operations); others provide staff hiring, or instructional training and support. When hired for comprehensive management, school boards allow the ESP to make all decisions and report out on a regular basis the status of the school. Michigan law requires Authorizers to review any agreement between a board and ESP, allowing for disapproval for limited reasons (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, n.d.). The American School Choice organization describes ESPs by breaking them into two major categories, Charter Management Organizations (CMO) and Education Management Organizations (EMO).

**Educational Management Organization (EMO)** — Typically for-profit and manage all aspects of the educational system (American School Choice, n.d.).

**Elementary School** — According to the Michigan Department of Education, an administrative unit including any single grade, K-6, or combination of grades from retention/developmental kindergarten to fifth or sixth grade, or sometimes up to eighth.

**Focus Schools** — According to the Michigan Department of Education, Focus Schools are identified as the ten percent (10%) of Michigan schools having the widest gap in student achievement between their lowest and highest performing students. These schools have the greatest issues in supporting their lowest achieving students compared to their highest achieving students, whether their overall performance is high or low.
Local Education Agency (LEA) — According to the Michigan Department of Education, a school district as defined under MCL 380.6 and as organized under MCL 380.11a (general powers school district) or under part 6 (district of the first class) of the Revised School Code, usually a local or countywide district whose school board is the literal “authorizer” since it makes final decisions. In Michigan an LEA can charter a school Intermediate School District (ISD) — According to the Michigan Department of Education, includes constituent local education agency (LEA) and public school agency (PSA) districts. A qualified charter authorizer in Michigan.

Operational Systems— Established or prescribed procedures to be followed for the successful performance of day-to-day operations or in designated situations, inclusive of compliance reporting, fiscal management, curriculum delivery assessment, and day to day activities within and around the school.

Organizational Design— Study of organizational designs and organizational structures, relationship of organizations with their external environment, and the behavior of managers and employees within organizations.

Priority Schools— (formerly known as Persistently Lowest Achieving Schools) are Michigan public schools identified in the bottom 5% of the statewide Top-to-Bottom ranking.

Public School Academy (PSA) — Also referred to as charter school. A publically-funded school chartered by a state approved authorizing body.

School Day— Activities taking place to support required clock hours and days. Not inclusive of before/after school programming or extra-curricular activities. The state of Michigan requires a minimum of 180 days, and a total of at least 1,098 hours of instruction each year.
While specific hours per day are not mandated, the average school day for most schools is 7 hours long.

**RESA**—Regional Educational Service Agency, a qualified charter authorizer in Michigan

**School Board**—The role of a school board, according to the U.S. Department of State, includes the following: (1) determine the school’s mission and purpose, (2) select the head of school, (3) support the head and assess performance, (4) ensure effective organizational planning, (5) ensure adequate resources (financial, human, facilities and time), (6) assure effective management of resources, (7) determine, monitor, and strengthen school’s program and services, (8) enhance school’s public standing, (9) ensure legal and ethical integrity, maintaining accountability, (10) recruit and orient new board members; assess board performance (2005). These items, inclusive in the charter contract, are the responsibility of the board to carry out primarily through policy development and oversee. The charter school board must be approved and appointed by the authorizer and commit to upholding the charter contract granted to them.

**School Failure**—Closure of the the public school academy being mandated by the authorizer, state, or school board making the decision to dissolve the school.

**School Leader**—The educator who has executive authority for a school. This could be the principal, superintendent, headmaster, lead teacher, or any combination of these.

**School Management**—Oversite ensuring all areas of a charter school are successful and efficient, including operational, financial, and academic and comply with the charter contract.

**School Success**—Completion of required compliance and reporting, financial viability, and not identified as priority or focus school.
Secondary School—Often referred to as a high school or a senior high school, is a school which provides secondary education, between the ages of 11 and 19 depending on location, after primary school and before higher education.

Traditional Public School (TPS) —Publicly developed and financed school systems, includes local educational agencies and intermediate school districts.

Top-to-Bottom School Rankings—Part of Michigan's school accountability system which ranks schools on their student performance in mathematics, reading, writing, science, social studies, and graduation rate data (for high schools). School performance components include student achievement, improvement, and achievement gaps between the highest and lowest scoring 30 percent of students in each school.

Design of Study

In order to identify systems and practices in public school academies that contribute to successful and prolonged school management, one must understand the difference between common and successful practices in PSAs. This information was gathered from schools currently open and identified as successful by two charter authorizers in Michigan. For the purposes of this study, success was defined as: (a) being in good standing academically (not falling into the Focus or Priority ranking), (b) being financially sound, and (c) satisfactorily meeting compliance requirements.

Charter school academies are required to adhere to compliance reporting to the Federal Government, state agencies, and their charter authorizer. Table 1 lists reporting requirements for these three agencies, some of which overlap, especially between the state agencies and the charter authorizer. It was created based on information posted at multiple compliance websites. While not an exhaustive list, it demonstrates the breadth of compliance
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reporting and the immense amount of data collection and tracking necessary to remain compliant with all three agencies.

Table 1

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<th>Required Federal, State, and Authorizer Compliance Reporting</th>
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<td>Required Reporting</td>
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<td>Adequate Yearly Progress</td>
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<td>Annual Education Report</td>
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<td>Annual Financial Audit</td>
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<td>Annual Graduation Rates</td>
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<td>Annual Program Review</td>
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<td>Annual Wellness Policy</td>
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<td>Anti-Bullying Policy Certification</td>
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<td>Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act</td>
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<td>Average Class Size Report</td>
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<td>Bi-Annual Benchmark Assessment</td>
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<td>Bidding Policy Including list of Bids Accepted</td>
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<td>Board Policy Manual</td>
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<td>Calendar and Clock Hours Reporting</td>
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<td>Career and College Ready Standards</td>
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<td>Certificate of Boiler Inspection</td>
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<td>Certification of Constitutionally Protected Prayer</td>
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<td>Child Protection Act</td>
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<td>Clean Water Act</td>
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<td>Clean Air Act</td>
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<td>Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation</td>
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<td>and Liability Act</td>
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<td>Criminal History and Conviction Checks (Employees and Volunteers)</td>
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<td>Dashboard Report</td>
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<td>Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act</td>
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<td>Parental Involvement Plan</td>
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Statistical information included data specific to charter schools including: (a) student enrollment, (b) free/reduced lunch data (demonstrating socio economic status of students enrolled), (c) school revenue resource data. Data from the Authorizer’s Annual Report provided information on parent satisfaction surveys, compliance reporting, and the school’s mission, which will be used to identify areas of success or failure in schools. All data will be compiled and analyzed to determine practices of successful schools, and to uncover commonalities.

**Method**

Qualitative data was collected and analyzed. In addition to narrative information collected through interviews, performance data was collected from authorizers to identify the case study participants used and to inform areas of success for each school. Scholarly resources regarding three areas grounded this research and provide a starting point for open-
ended interviews: (a) the creation and operation of charter schools, (b) the foundation of theoretical strategies, and (c) the identification of recommended steps to be followed. Presumably, the longer a school has been open, the more time they have had to develop strong systems. School profiles were then used to categorize or group similar schools together, which allowed an in-depth analysis of systems in place across schools of similar size and programming, as well as the systems used when comparing longevity of operation. Finally, open-ended interviews allowed the researcher to collect rich qualitative data that according to King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) is most useful when comparing two or more cases that include variation in the dependent variable.

Using a grounded theory approach, this study compared the operational processes in multiple K-8 charter schools and across multiple categories (established and veteran) to identify common themes and practices, in order to identify those practices that best support the operational success of the school (Charmaz, 2006). According to Simon, “One of the advantages cited for case study research is its uniqueness, its capacity for understanding complexity in particular contexts” (1996, p. 225). Summarized from Yin’s book, Case Study Research Design and Methods, are four key indicators of when to use case studies include: (a) relevant when the focus of a study is on “how” and “why,” (b) useful when researchers cannot manipulate the behavior of those under study, (c) appropriate when researchers want to learn more about the contextual conditions that are especially relevant to the phenomenon under study, and (d) useful when the boundaries between the subject of study and the context are not clear (1994, p.8—13). This study met all four criteria.

Two primary concerns when doing qualitative research are author bias and reliability of the data. Due to the nature of the research, ensuring the author’s positionality is neutral
safeguards against personal experience and belief to influence the data collected is critical to obtaining accurate data (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). When asking people to recount personal experiences, the validity of the information can become unreliable. Time, state of mind, and the stress of interviewing can result in lost or adapted memories. One must take care to ensure the integrity of both the descriptive validity and interpretive validity in three ways: (a) determine the source is credible, (b) demonstrate the data collected is representative of the population, and (c) confirm the authenticity of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Having significant experience with charter schools in the Metro-Detroit area, it was imperative for the researcher to separate those experiences and expectations with data gathered during interviews. By keeping separate notes throughout each experience and recognizing personal touchstones, the researcher took care to review and codify only information gathered from participants.

Purposive sampling was used to achieve a cross sampling of size and length of operation in order to learn more about specific settings and phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Schools included as case studies were authorized by two public universities, both have been identified as large authorizers (holding six or more charter contracts), therefore having a broad selection of schools to choose for participation. Each authorizer publishes in their annual report schools of recognition based on compliance reporting, financial viability, and student academic progress. This information along with recommendations by the authorizer, was used to select schools for participation in this study. Budgetary and time constraints limited the number of sites and interviews possible, making it even more important to ensure schools with varying characteristics were selected. Two Educational service providers and four schools were included that are currently operating and
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range in length of operation: (a) *start-up*—within its first two years, (b) *established*—three to five years old, and (c) *veteran*—seven or more years old. At each of the schools three key individuals were interviewed: (a) the charter authorizer, (b) the school leader, and (c) the operations or compliance officer. When considering these roles, because each charter school is organized independently, the title and placement of this individual varied. In some charter systems this role was performed by the CEO, finance director, assistant to the principal, or even the principal. Guidance was sought from the authorizer to determine the most appropriate person to interview at each school. Information included about school enrollment, financial information, location and demographics was obtained from the MI School Data website which collects and reports data for all public schools in Michigan.

Sharp et al. (2012) described purposive sampling as choosing the most appropriate sites based on the goal of the study and questions asked in the research. With this in mind, charter authorizers were interviewed first, in part to obtain their feedback on those schools they identified as strong operationally. This is known as the Key Informant Technique—in-depth qualitative interviews done with those who have first-hand knowledge (Marshall, 1996). Profile data from those schools was compared to ensure they met the criteria listed above. This allows for the collection of the most applicable data in the least amount of time. Each Authorizer collects contacts directly connected to submitting required student data. During interviews with them, as they recommended schools to participate, this information was requested to better ensure connection with the most accurate person to interview at each site, namely those developing and/or using the actual procedures. A potential weakness of this technique, according to Marshall (1996), is that “the identification of key informants may be in error because some societies may attract people who wish to improve their status but do not
have the necessary skills of a true key informant” (p. 93). If the key informant is misidentified, it may necessitate additional interviews with alternative sources within each organization to obtain the most complete and accurate data.

The interviews were open-ended, using strategic questions to guide the participant to describe topics pertinent to the study, such as meaningful operational processes. After completing the first round of interviews, a determination was made regarding follow-up interviews that needed to take place to ask any questions that came up during the first round, for clarification of information, or if further details were needed to best represent the data (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

To ensure compliance with legal, ethical, and moral issues, approval for human subjects research was obtained before beginning the study. All participants received an explanation of the purpose of the study and how the information was to be used. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview. Their identifying information was kept confidential. Permission to audio record the interview was requested and pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

The nature of qualitative research is personal, often asking one to share successes and challenges that may be revealing for them, potentially creating conflict and/or harm (Gay et al., 2012). Each actor’s role, language, and cultural norms impact the relationship between the participant and researcher, who should be mindful of these defining characteristics throughout the process. They also go on to explain how ethics requires conformity to honesty and justice, not just good intent. Ensuring the care and respectful treatment of those contributing to a study is the fundamental responsibility of the researcher (Gay et al., 2012).
The ultimate goal of this study was to identify operational processes, procedures, and structures that when put in place, contribute to the successful management of charter schools. Having strong procedures in place early is especially important for start-up and self-managed schools, which lack the structure enjoyed by veteran schools and larger management companies. Throughout the research of related literature, developing formal practices was a reoccurring theme. The majority of charter schools develop informally through small groups seeking to make a difference. However, the “liability of newness [is]… an array of daunting trials and constraints facing new organizations” (Loveless & Jasin, 1998, p. 12).

To fully comprehend systems of operation in charter schools, gathering data from the source is indispensable. While review of policy and procedural manuals will provide theoretical information, what occurs daily in the setting is best collected from those living in it. The participants at each site revealed, through interviews, how systems evolved, where gaps still exist, and those areas that appear seamless. Prior to meeting with school personnel, interviews with the authorizers provided data on their perceptions of quality of operations at each site, including accuracy and timeliness. Combining and comparing data from the authorizers with that collected through interviews at each school revealed differences in perception and data inaccuracies; frequency of recurring themes strengthened the reliability of the data. Collecting data from multiple schools with diverse characteristics and multiple authorizers, while limited, provides generalizable research to the extent that start up schools in Michigan can use it to inform their processes and timeline for developing a successful Charter school.
Conceptual Framework

Ogawa, Crowson, and Goldring (1999) describe a dilemma as, neither a problem or issue, but as a situation with equally valued alternatives. They go on to explain, “the very notion of a dilemma infers deep commitment to core values that are often found in conflict with one another” (p. 278). When using this description, school organization and operations in new charter schools are appropriately described as a dilemma. In the first three years of operation, a charter school has significant financial and staff resource limitations. Decisions regarding how to use those resources often come with strong values attached. The idea of charter schools was to provide an environment where educators could “break the molds” of traditional public schools; the objective is to do things differently. Unfortunately, as publicly funded entities, expectations and requirements must be met to satisfy governing bodies. Often, groups who apply for and start charter schools focus primarily on the curriculum and instruction delivery rather than the day to day operations. While a strong educational plan is essential for a successful school, the operational processes and structures are equally important. Loveless and Jasin (1998) explain that not properly developing vital operational systems is “effectively crippling the charter experiment before it has been given a fair chance to succeed or fail on educational grounds” (p. 10).

Sarason’s work is pertinent to charter schools when describing a setting as “any instance in which two or more people come together in new relationships over a sustained period of time in order to achieve goals” (1972, p. 1). He then goes on throughout his book to explain key pieces necessary when developing a setting, starting with the “before the beginning” phase where significant work should be done to better predict success (Sarason, 1972, p. 24). Settings are ultimately created by one person (originally) through some sense of
urgency and need to improve a current setting. Then they develop a core group and begin the process of developing a new setting; the individual remains the leader or organizer for a length of time. It is vital that this leader understand they are not “the first person in human history to start such a venture” (Sarason, 1972, p. 35). Understanding and considering the history of previous schools, both successes and failures, has conceptual significance; their development, organization and challenges should be contemplated and discussed. Only after investigating these pieces, and developing a strategy to proactively plan for them, should the core group move forward into beginning phases. As new members are added to this core group additional values and beliefs are added as well. Group members are brought on to do a specific job, often without the analysis of how they will change the core group and the setting. The beliefs they bring, their personal history, even the order in which they are hired all impact the dynamics of the group. During this planning phase is when these ideals, viewpoints, and expectations need to be discussed. Because this is an uncomfortable discussion, even in the best circumstances, it often does not happen or is ineffectual. Sarason (1972) consistently expresses that conflicts, either real or perceived, will arise. A key piece to planning is in discussing how they will be dealt with prior to the disruption. This discussion must take into account the history of similar settings; “one should scrutinize what others have said and done about that problem. One has to know this history in a way so that its dilemmas, mistakes, and solutions can be used productively now” (Sarason, 1972, p. 36). While still in the planning stages, the core group must focus on fully understanding what other charter schools have experienced, how they reacted, and the impact those had on the organization and community.
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Doing so before the beginning stage is challenging, the creation of settings (in its earliest phases) almost always (if not always) takes place in a context containing conflicting ideas and values, limited resources, a sense of mission and superiority on the part of some and a need to preserve tradition on the part of others, the need to protect the setting from outside influences, and that this context almost always incudes, or quickly is seen as impinging upon, a large number of existing settings,” (Sarason, 1972, p. 57-58).

Numerous variables, competing priorities, and sometimes egos impact the cohesiveness of the group and their ability to compromise with integrity. A verbal agreement in a meeting that is not honored when a conflict arises significantly damages the setting. Early in the planning phase, roles, responsibilities and clarity around the group’s purpose and mission should be defined and agreed upon. How decisions will be made and by whom must be transparent with an understanding that as the organization grows and changes, so must these original structures. Loveless and Jasin (1998) instruct us that “new organizations must establish roles, routines, and authority structures…even organizations that are created by informal, risk-taking entrepreneurs go through a process of formalization” (p. 12). Sarason (1972) reminds us that in addition to these structures being designed, we must also expect that as the setting changes the need for the design to adapt is essential. This flexibility must be especially owned and practiced by the school principal, once the leader joins the core group the school now belongs to him/her. Not necessarily from a legal standpoint, but in practice, teachers, parents, and students will view that role as the leader of the setting (Sarason, 1972).

Human resources, hiring teachers and support staff, is often one of the first and certainly one of the most important tasks the principal will face. Again, the process of
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considering personal history, expectations, and values must be taken into consideration with
the knowledge that each person brought into the school further impacts the setting. When
hiring occurs, the interviewer highlights what is unique and special about the school, brags
about accomplishments, and downplays struggles. The interviewee looks for those pieces
they believe are missing in their current setting, believing that a new organization will give
them what they are looking for. They too focus on highlights of theirs that will fill the gaps
the principal is looking for in a staff member. What should be discussed are the struggles the
school is currently facing, data gathered and used in analyzing the problem, and plans for
correcting it. By being upfront about challenges and strategies the school leader’s
expectations are clear and the potential employee has a better understanding of what will be
expected of them. Often, creators look for someone who can do the job, not specifically how
they will fit into the current setting. Leaders and creators look at potential staff and believe
“[their] degree of motivation will overcome any and all obstacles” (Sarason, 1972 p. 141).
This demonstrates an example of how not openly discussing and planning how to deal with
conflict sets one up for failure.

Once teachers are hired, sometimes even during this process, the principal is
responsible for ensuring the building is ready, curriculum materials and supplies are ordered,
students are being enrolled, and numerous other equally important tasks are addressed.
Shortly after being brought on board, the principal leaps into those issues most important for
school to be open on the first day of class. Sarason (1972) relates,

up until the opening of the school the principal is not concerned with such issues as
what life in a classroom should be, how teachers will be related to decisions and
planning about educational values and goals, the role of parents and neighborhood-
community resources, the handling of problem children the purposes of evaluation, 
and other issues that bear directly on the educational experience of all those who have 
or should have a vested interest in a school. In fact, up until the opening of school 
there is precious little discussion of children or education” (p. 89).

With this understanding in mind, and the knowledge to ensure the likeness of a successful 
setting, time must be spent on discussing histories (both personal and organizational), 
establishing common values and expectations, and deciding how conflict (real or perceived) 
will be handled. A system must be in place where the operational aspects of setting up a 
school are being completed while care is taken to build the core instructional team. Not doing 
so negatively impacts decisions on operational procedures or neglects them totally, which 
may lead to eminent failure.

By considering theories discussed by Sarason (1972) and Kirst & Wirt (2009) and 
analyzing the data collected in interviews around compliance and operations systems and 
practice, description of high impact structures and processes that can be used to influence new 
and young charter schools as they develop into successful organizations was developed. By 
fILTERING the collected data through theories from each of these authors, a well-rounded, 
realistic application that begins with pre-planning through implementation and evaluation of 
systems was developed. The operational practices of charter schools remain an area where 
little research has been published, and not done so in a way where practical use can be made 
of it quickly (if not immediately).

The conceptual framework below establishes the area (shaded) where dilemmas, 
operations, and decisions overlap. Multiple factors go into each fundamental area 
independently, while at the same time impacting each other. Dilemmas have broader effects,
typically involving organizational level action. Operations focus on compliance reporting, financial stability, and student academic progress. Decisions include the numerous determinations made by all actors within the organization, typically impacting the day-to-day running of the school. All three influence the key factors in deciding whether a charter school will continue to operate, or will be closed. The theoretical framework below describes the continuous process and flow of people and information.
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
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Creator Develops Idea

Building (expansion of) the Core Group
(School Board, Principal, Finance Officer, Operations Officer)

Discussion of personal history/vision/expectations (How this impacts decisions and actions)

Discussion and analysis of history of similar organizations:
-What worked (replicate)
-Issues, real or perceived (anticipate)
-Failures (what to avoid)

Develop Plan

-Anticipate conflict
-Establish process for dealing with conflict
-Identify anticipated changes over time and acknowledge need for change

Develop Policy

-Formalize procedures
-Identify decision maker(s)
-Identify anticipated changes over time

Secure Agreement and Buy-in (Core Group)

-Verify clarity around values, expectations and priorities

Expand Core Group (hire secondary group)

-Discussion of personal histories/vision/expectations
-Communication and training

Implement Procedural Plans

-Collect data and revise procedures for gaps/needed adjustments

Allocate resources

-Revenue
-Programs
-Staffing

Figure 2. Theoretical Framework
Throughout history schools have played key roles in their communities while also being markedly political. The federal constitution, by omission, gave states the right and responsibility to educate their population. Organized schools, similar to what we are familiar with today, began in the 1840s as what were called common-schools (Kirst & Wirt, 2009). These schools were run and maintained locally; the governance held ultimate authority in all decisions. It was almost unheard of for a state to take over or close a school district, even though they held that power. By the time of the Civil War, these schools had become the traditional public schools we know today; supported by taxes and run by local boards or trustees (Kirst & Wirt, 2009). The first wave of charter schools started prior to 1966; private, segregated schools were created to serve White students in a continued debate over racial segregation in schools. These academies were created as private schools with low tuition to serve families who withdrew from the public school. Between 1966 and 1972 the number of students attending these private academies increased to 535,000 students (The Yale Law Journal, 1973). These schools primarily survived on grant funding, charting minimal tuition. As their true intention was revealed, much of the grant funding was revoked, making it an even bigger hardship for middle and low income families to attend and increasing the divide for low income and minority students.

While what we see in classrooms today varies considerably from a century ago, it is significant to note that even then, groups were pushing to reform the education systems; complaints of inefficiency in operations, dissatisfaction with the curriculum, and lack of student progress were common. Concerns around global competition and worker training started in the early 1900s Kirst and Wirt (2009). These same criticisms and concerns are heard daily in the
halls of schools across Michigan. It is disheartening to see how far we have come regarding how we educate students, while at the same time realizing the concerns remain the same.

**History of Charter Schools**

Michigan passed PA 362 in 1993 amending the Revised School Code Act 451 of 1976 to permit the operation of public school academies. The act declared that a public school academy was in fact a public school and could be authorized by a school district board operating grades K-12, an intermediate school board, the board of a community college, or the governing board of a state public university. The public school academy is to be presided over by a board of directors who is to adopt bylaws, using them to govern the academy. A public school academy will comply with all applicable laws including: the open meetings and freedom of information acts, laws relating to participating in state assessments, data collection systems, student growth models, accountability and accreditation systems, and comparative data collection required for public schools. This act mandated that teachers be certified. However, if the academy is authorized by a state public university, tenured or tenure-track faculty from that institution (or in the case of a community college, a faculty with five or more years’ experience) can serve as classroom teachers within the academy. Lastly, the authorizing body has responsibility for enforcing compliance with the law and has complete discretion to issue, not issue, or revoke a contract with a public school academy.

By 2014, at least 43 states had authorized charter schools as part of their state education system (Price & Jankens, 2015). The terms public school academy and charter school have, over time, come to be used interchangeably in Michigan. To be specific, a public school academy (PSA) is a tuition-free school, created and authorized under the state constitution. An approved body must then charter the academy; universities, community colleges, intermediate school
districts, and local school districts are all authorized organizations to charter a school in Michigan. This authorizer then is responsible for appointing the school board members and oversight of the academy (Price & Jankens, 2015). According to the Michigan Department of Education, as of July of 2016, 51 entities had authorized schools. With 335 schools, the largest portion of schools were authorized by universities.

**Success of Charter schools**

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) has produced the most thorough and recent reports to date involving Michigan charter schools: *Charter School Performance in Michigan* in 2013 and the *Urban Charter School Study Report on 41 Regions* in 2015. The report on Michigan Charter schools completed in 2013 used the same method as the 2015 report, matching students up to a counterpart and tracking them over six years (year one represented starting scores) for Grades 3 through 8. This study noted significant gains in math; 42% of the charter schools outperformed their traditional public school (TPS) equivalents. While reading achievements were lower, charters still showed 35% more positive learning in reading compared with their TPS counterparts. The study went further and analyzed students within the city of Detroit (27% of all Michigan charter students at the time of their report). Students in these schools demonstrated gains at a rate of nearly three months for every year of attendance at a charter school, higher gains than demonstrated in the rest of the state (CREDO, 2013).

When breaking down the data to identify schools located in urban, suburban, rural or town areas, CREDO (2013) reported rural schools (11% of the state’s charter population) had the most significant gains, close to double in reading to those identified as in town. Schools in urban settings demonstrated the next highest gains compared with other groups. Throughout the study,
special education students underperformed their counterparts whether in charter schools or TPS, and students in Michigan charter schools underachieved those in traditional public school. Speculation included the broader inclusive resources available in some traditional settings versus charter schools. Data supported that longevity in charter schools had noteworthy positive impact, with the most significant being after the first and third years (fourth and fifth year data were combined in this data point), demonstrating that students experience a large academic gain during their initial year, which then levels off to a steady annual increase (CREDO, 2013).

In their urban study, CREDO (2015) again matched charter pupils against otherwise-similar students in district-operated schools to measure true comparative gains or losses. Data from 41 urban regions was analyzed to compare student academic growth in charter schools versus their counterparts in traditional public schools (TPS). The report overwhelmingly found that urban students in these 41 regions (including Detroit) had higher achievement rates compared with their counterparts in TPS:

The typical student in an urban charter school receives the equivalent of 40 additional days of learning growth (0.055 s.d.’s) in math and 28 days of additional growth (0.039 s.d.’s) in reading compared to their matched peers in TPS. The results were found to be positive for nearly all student subgroups, but especially strong for students who are minority and in poverty, who are a significant portion of the urban student population. (CREDO, 2015)

Notable growth rates were present in both reading and math. Unlike the 2013 study, reading exhibited higher rates of growth; 38% of urban charter students outperformed their TPS peers, and only 16% experienced smaller gains (CREDO, 2015). The longer the students were in charter schools, the greater the benefit. Furthermore, students who were either Black or Hispanic
and low income, or Hispanic and an English Language Learner, showed gains months ahead of their counterparts per year attending (CREDO, 2015).

While both the 2013 and 2015 CREDO reports affirm that on average charter schools in Michigan are making academic gains, sometimes significant ones, other reports are not as favorable. An article published in 2015, Public School Review, argued that while 37% of charter schools posted improvements in math scores, the rates were significantly below those of students in traditional public schools (TPS). Furthermore 46% of the math improvements reported by charters were statistically indistinguishable from those reported at TPS (Public School Review, 2015). This same article did acknowledge students from lower-income and English Language Learners who attend charter schools have higher success rates than their counterparts. Further research including geographic areas, school missions, and student subgroups needs to be completed to determine exactly where successes and gaps still occur.

Public school academies (PSA) are publicly funded entities, relying primarily on state and federal support to cover all operating expenses. They are not permitted to charge tuition and do not have taxing authority. Because they do not have a local tax base (this is claimed by the traditional school district), they are not eligible for the local non-homestead property tax income (Price & Jankens, 2015). Principal funding for these academies comes from the state established per-pupil foundation system; charter schools receive the lesser of the two funding options. The first option is the per-pupil allocation for the local school district; the second option is the state’s pre-set charter school foundation allowance. According to Charter School Funding: Inequity Expands (Maloney, 2014), the charter school foundation allowance in 2011 was $7,580, the same that it had been since 2009. Price and Jankens (2015) reported that in 2014 Michigan’s charter school foundation allowance had decreased to $7,251 (p.14). In addition to the state’s
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per-pupil allowance, charter schools may also qualify for additional funding for special
education needs, bilingual education, and at-risk students. Both charter and traditional public
schools (TPS) can accept donations from private philanthropic sources. Nationally, charter
schools received $3,814 less per pupil than their TPS counterparts (Wolf et al., 2014). When
considering the disparity, critics of the report asserted the difference was due primarily to the
lower number of economically disadvantaged students being served by charter schools.
However, data in The Productivity of Public Charter Schools Report (Wolf et al., 2014) shows
that Michigan is one of 13 sectors (12 states and DC) enrolling higher proportions of low-income
students than their TPS counterparts state wide. In fact, Michigan is rated seventh of the 28
sectors in regards to low-income student enrollment and rated 16th out of the 28 on income
disparity (2014). CREDO (2015) cited 87% of the students enrolled in Detroit charter schools
were identified as students in poverty, compared with 78% in TPS, affirming that while working
with larger populations of students with significant needs, charter schools in Michigan continue
to do so with considerably less funding.

When considering the significance of funding for schools, a fundamental question is how
much does it cost to educate a student? The Revised School Code requires the state to ensure that
resources are being used. The report, Charter School Funding: Inequity Expands (2014),
provides extensive research on the financial aspects of charter schools, including deficiencies
that impact their ability at long-term success. Funding of public school academies has a
substantial impact on the effective management and operations of the school. Because staffing
costs are by far the highest portion of any school budget, decreases in staffing are often
implemented first when budgets are not met. Many academies are one building or a small district
and do not have the ability to maintain a traditional central office (or back office). This places a
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heavy burden on the administrative and support staff to ensure all compliance and reporting is completed, and that daily operations run efficiently. Even those schools who work with a management company often need to use parent volunteers to assist in lunch room supervision, recess supervision, and running the front office so that school staff can tend to compliance related issues, data collection, and reporting requirements. Many charter schools are created and started by groups of teachers and parents who have a strong desire to create a positive learning culture, somehow different from their local district. Most of these groups do not have experience or training in the high demands of administration, operations, and compliance requirements of public education. A study completed by Loveless and Jasin (1998) analyzed eight schools focusing on the challenges they had in opening charter schools. In each case the founding group were community members who had volunteered in school environments, parents unsatisfied with their local school, and former teachers with educational degrees. The one thing they all had in common was “the founders possessed limited entrepreneurial skills…[and] it became apparent that they knew very little about the nuts and bolts of starting a new business” (Loveless & Jasin, 1998, p.17). These “grass roots” types of start-up schools often have the most significant issues around management and operations. Having untrained personnel overseeing operations can result in a sub-par standard being accepted out of necessity or lack of understanding.

The Productivity of Public Charter Schools (Wolf, et.al., 2014) compiled extensive research on 28 states (including Michigan) and the District of Columbia charter systems. A focus of the study was to determine the return on investment of charter schools versus traditional public schools (TPS). This study researched the income of both charter schools and TPS, the costs of running each, and how the money was spent. A point system was developed demonstrating the return on investment (ROI) achieved for both PSAs and TPS by comparing
financial data to student outcomes. When considering the long-term investment, lifetime earning returns in relation to learning, the study concluded; “in all states, charter schools deliver a greater ROI than do TPS” (2014). This was shown to be true starting with even just one year at a charter school and compounded when at least half of their school career occurred in a charter system.

The value of charter schools in Michigan, especially in urban areas, is solidified when considering the findings from both The Productivity of Public Charter Schools report compared to the Urban Charter School Study of 41 Regions:

When the impact of urban charter schools is studied for students in different subgroups, we see that nearly every group of students experiences greater growth in charter schools than they would have otherwise realized in their local TPS. Mirroring the findings for the charter sector at large, disadvantaged students tend to receive the strongest positive benefits from enrollment in urban charter schools (CREDO, 2015, p.16-17).

Table 2 from Stanford’s CREDO report shows the number of additional days of learning students experienced when compared with their TPS counterparts over the six-year study in urban environments. While both White and Native American students experience a loss, the majority of students experienced significant gains in both math and reading (CREDO, 2015 p.17).
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Table 2

Impact of Charter Enrollment on Annual Average Learning Gains for All Urban Regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Math Effect Size</th>
<th>Days of Learning</th>
<th>Reading Effect Size</th>
<th>Days of Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>0.055**</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.029**</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.051**</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0.036**</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.029**</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0.008**</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-0.047**</td>
<td>-36</td>
<td>-0.021**</td>
<td>-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.012**</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>-0.097**</td>
<td>-70</td>
<td>-0.033</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>0.033**</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.024**</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retained</td>
<td>0.012*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Ed</td>
<td>0.013**</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.018**</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Students in Poverty</td>
<td>0.082**</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0.061**</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Students in Poverty</td>
<td>0.067**</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0.035**</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Students with ELL Status</td>
<td>0.10**</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>0.11**</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(CREDO, 2015, p.17)

Closing Charter Schools

Arguably one of the points of flexibility in charter schools is the ability to close those not successful. While the focus in the literature continues to have an emphasis on closing public school academies for lack of academic progress, the reality is there is little research regarding other factors that play into PSAs closing, either voluntarily or by their authorizer. The data in Table 3 was collected from the department of Public School Academies Unit of Improvement and Innovation of the Michigan Department of Education. Only 11 out of the 109 charter academies closed were strictly for lack of academic progress. However, the reasons for closing listed in Table 3 still remain somewhat vague or unknown and provide no real information on what factors were ultimately used in determining closure. Further research around the underlying factors for these school closures and how future closings can be prevented is crucial to the
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educational stability both from the financial perspective and for student and staff stability. This study seeks to identify and articulate the non-academic reasons why a charter school may fail.

Table 3

*Reason for PSA Closing Reason by Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Academic and Financial Viability</td>
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<td>Academic Viability</td>
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<td>Academic Viability and Feasibility Concerns</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic, Facility, and Financial Viability</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charter Revoked</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compliance Deficiencies</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Contract Not Renewed</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Dissolved</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Viability</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Viability and Facility Concerns</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Governance and Leadership</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDE Superintendent directed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merged with another PSA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Opened</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Reorganized</td>
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<td>Transferred Status</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Reason on Record</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Closed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Charter School Autonomy**

The notion of autonomy is used across the literature to demand action or inaction with lawmakers, make excuses for and against student progress, and to describe charter schools. The generalization of the term has contributed to the confusion of what charter schools are accountable for and to whom. Are we to assume “autonomy exclusively means to be freed from
certain regulations, does it mean the flexibility to pursue desirable educational goals, or does it 
mean the empowerment of teachers?” (Finnigan, 2007 p. 505). While the law was written to 
include autonomy, the ambiguity of the language continues to be confusing. Being autonomous 
does not necessarily portend freedom from state regulations and reporting requirements 
(Finnigan, 2007). These regulations vary greatly by state. In Michigan, charter schools are held 
accountable to the same level of expectation and reporting as other public schools in the state 
including teacher certification, services for special needs students, funding and accounting, and 
other operational requirements (The Revised School Code, Act 451 of 1976, 2016).

Charter schools have the choice to be self-governed, allowing for a radical approach to 
decentralized management (Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995). The idea of self-managing 
is an attractive one, until all aspects of what goes into that role is considered. Most schools 
ultimately decide to hire providers to take over all or part of the governance and management 
responsibilities. In 2013 only 11% of Michigan charter schools were self-managed while 89% 
worked with either a nonprofit or for-profit management company (Mao & Laundauer-Menchik, 
2013). By choosing to work with a service provider, the school may acquiesce autonomy, adding 
a third layer to whom they are accountable—the state, their authorizer, and the hired 
management company. It is important to clarify that the management company works for and is 
accountable to the school board, which sets policy for the school. Where a full service 
management company is hired, authority in decision making regarding finances and operations is 
usually unofficially relinquished to the management company.

Because charter schools are newly designed, there is a tremendous amount of freedom in 
the instructional methods, structure of the day, and organization of the classrooms. The minimum 
number of instructional minutes and days must be met according to the guidelines set by the
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Michigan Department of Education; but within those parameters the creator-leader has the ability to set the schedule that fits their educational programming. Some schools will plan a half-day of professional development weekly or use a balanced calendar model. Other schools organize in non-traditional age grouping; 21% of Michigan charter schools use multi-level classrooms (CREDO, 2013). Significant autonomy is provided around instructional practice, such as project-based learning, teacher-directed learning, and Montessori programs. The instructional details are spelled out when developing and applying for charter approval. Once the charter is authorized, any changes in these decisions must be approved by the authorizer prior to adoption. While the creator-leader, and often the teachers, dictate curriculum and instructional practices, most authorizers require annual assessments. Across the country, 90% of charter schools used standardized, norm-referenced tests, and 82% used criterion-referenced tests (some require both). Of these, 74% and 65%, respectively, used these tests because of mandates by their states, districts, or authorizers (Finnigan, 2007). Michigan requires both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests are required for all charter schools.

While charter schools frequently experience autonomy over curriculum and hiring decisions (within the restrictions of the state), few schools have much budgetary control. Thus, all decisions are significantly impacted by the funding stream (based on student count). In Michigan, money flows through the authorizer to the school. While the school board must approve the school budget, often times it is controlled by the management company when these services are contracted (Finnigan, 2007). When this is the case, the amount of funding at the school level that leaders and staff have control over is minimal.
Policy and Political Updates

The charter movement in Michigan has been debated extensively. Laws allowing the authorization of charter schools passed in 1993 and has undergone tremendous controversy and significant changes ever since. In 1996, a cap was placed on the total number of charters (85) that could be issued by state universities. It was then increased to 150 by 1999 (Public Act 451, 2016). Controversy again rocketed in 2003 when the city of Detroit turned down a 200-million-dollar donation by the Thompson Foundation to build 15 new charter schools in the city.

According to the article, *What Happens When You Mix Mayoral Politics and Education?* Mayor Kilpatrick and Governor Granholm had originally welcomed the much needed funding, then after significant uprising by teachers’ unions and other political pressures, they turned down the gift (MAPSA, 2016). Once again the issue of capping the number of charter schools authorized by public universities was discussed in the 2007 study *Moving Forward or Sliding Backward* (Lacireno-Paquet & Holyoke, 2007). This report reviewed the continued political debates in Michigan relating to charter law, specifically the desire to raise the cap on Authorizers to open new schools. Teacher unions and charter opponents again attempted to limit the number of charter contracts held by public universities, the largest group of Authorizers in Michigan. A charter proponent highlights the money behind the political battle, “I think the intent of the legislature is to do something about the cap. But I think it’s a very tough issue to do, because you have a $14 billion-a-year industry that doesn’t want competition,” (Lacireno-Paquet & Holyoke, 2007, p. 203). The McPherson Commission was appointed to review current law and make recommendations around key topics including: (a) caps on the number of contracts written by public universities, (b) accountability of authorizers, and (c) documentation of student academic progress (Lacireno-Paquet & Holyoke, 2007, p. 206). Ultimately, the report completed
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by the committee kept a balance between those who supported and opposed charters. Final recommendations did not lift the cap, but included additional testing for charter students, expanded regulatory powers to the state board of education, added an accreditation process for authorizers, and prevented school trustees from being affiliated with related education management organizations (p. 207). In December of 2011, Public Act 277 changed the cap for public university contracts to not exceed 300 through December 31, 2012, a total of 500 through December 31, 2014, and then removed the cap entirely after that (p. 2).

In May of 2016, controversy again returned to Detroit. With the failing of the Detroit Public School System, both the House (House Bills 5382, 5383, 5384, 5386 and 5387) and Senate (Senate Bills 710, 711, 819, 820, 821, and 822) developed plans intended to get the Detroit Public School (DPS) system back on track. The two entities agreed on very little around what policy was needed to meet this goal and proposed distinctly different plans. In order to pay off DPS’s debt, both called for maintaining the “old DPS,” permitting them to earn funding through taxes, but removing any operating power. In its place, a “new DPS” would take over management of the current schools, gaining all property and equipment. Both the House and Senate plans allowed the district to outsource educational functions to other entities, implement a grading system (A through F) for schools, and focus on high-stakes testing for students.

There were a number of significant differences in the two plans. The information provided is a summary taken from both the House and Senate Bills collectively in order to compare them (as of May 2016).

**Senate.** The Senate called to disband the Education Achievement Authority and add a seven-person education commission appointed by the mayor of Detroit to be in place for five years, renewable for another five years. This commission would have the responsibility of
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assessing all public schools operating in the city of Detroit based on standardized test scores, graduate rates, annual yearly progress, and post-secondary enrollment; nonacademic measures would include student and parent satisfaction surveys, absenteeism rates, and reenrollment rates. Using a formula, they would assign a grade (A through F). This commission would also have approval over all new schools (traditional and charter) opening up within the city of Detroit with few exceptions, ultimately giving this commission significant power over any school within the city limits. The Senate’s plan would no longer require school boards within Detroit to actively run a K-12 school; their sole purpose could be to authorize charter schools. This version of the Senate’s proposal came with a significantly higher price tag. In addition to the cost for staff running the seven member Detroit Education Commission, they included $200 million in transitional costs. The Senate called for all tax revenue gained through the enhancement property tax to remain with old DPS to aid in paying down the $515 million of debt (Naeyaert, 2016). Based on the strength of the proposed education commission by the Senate, it appeared that a primary goal was to strongly limit charter schools in Detroit. This sentiment was supported by the Detroit Public Schools Transition Manger who was quoted as saying, “it will be more challenging for DPS to succeed without some kind of control over the opening of new charter schools or other kinds of educational opportunities” (Livengood, 2016, np).

House. In comparison, the House did not include adding the Commission, capped administrative expenses at 6.3 percent of current operating expenditures (the statewide average), and limited start-up funding to $33 million (Livengood, 2016). The House also restricted funds received from private gifts to be used on academic programs or wraparound services, unless it were specified for another use. The House Bill prioritized closing of underutilized Detroit Public School buildings and required any active school board to be currently running a K-12 school
with the exception of old DPS, who would have no operating authority beyond levying taxes and paying off its debt. The May 2016 version of House Bill 5387 used strong language around educational personnel striking and included the loss of wages for any days absent due to strike activities. It also limited bargaining topics by removing the following: (a) employees’ placement, (b) work schedule or the school calendar (all new DPS schools will be required to be on a balanced calendar), (c) any decisions regarding staffing, (d) program reduction or elimination, (e) hiring/discharge, (f) staff discipline, and (g) the contents of performance evaluations or the impact of them. The legislation called for radical changes around staffing: (a) teacher and principal compensation being heavily dependent on job performance and accomplishments; and (b) the new school district being allowed to employ full or part-time non-certificated, non-endorsed teachers if the individual had an appropriate combination of experience and education and it was in the best interest of the students. The House raised the accountability for charter schools or demanded closure; any charter school operating for at least four years who was among the lowest achieving 5% of all public schools in the state for three of the last four years would have their charter revoked at the end of that school year. It also called for all charter authorizers to be accredited by a nationally recognized accreditation body that specialized in charter schools. While Detroit is not new to highly politicized controversy around charter schools, these proposals held potential power to change the face of charter schools throughout the state. If Detroit was granted the authority to approve any and all schools settling within the city boarders, other areas disgruntled with the competition of alternative education choices would likely use this legislation to demonstrate precedence to adopt similar authority.
Starting a Charter School

Leaders who start charter schools do so for many different reasons: parents are dissatisfied with their current school, teachers believe they have an innovative idea, and/or administrators think they can do it better. While the number of reasons are numerous, so are the challenges involved with the process. Loveless and Jasin (1998) enumerate these issues by stating, “founders had trouble acquiring basic resources---the building blocks of schools---funding, time, a building, and personnel” (p.16). Brouillette (2002) conveyed six main categories where start-up schools face problems. First, inconsistent vision in governance results from tensions among the board members, administrators, parents, and staff. Each has their own perception of what the school will look like, and regardless of how many conversations are held, the details are often not sufficiently discussed. Second, creators-leaders are tend to be singularly future oriented. Their focus is on what the new setting will look like and achieve rather than on what they will have to do to accomplish the goal (Sarason, 1998). Third, a lack of funding, including cash flow, is often underestimated. In addition to salaries for those working on getting the school up and running, curriculum materials, supplies, facilities and renovation, and often travel expenses need to be considered. Fourth, enrollment is frequently overestimated at new schools and can lead to significant financial challenges. Doing a market analysis, using conservative attendance estimates, and planning for attrition (typically 10%) will assist in planning accordingly (Hayes & Keller, 2009). Fifth, instructional concerns including, “problems with curriculum, materials, pedagogy, assessment, and other issues pertaining to educational content and its delivery” are frequently overlooked or not adequately planned for (Brouillette, 2002 p. 11). And finally, facilities are one of the largest start-up budget items for schools. The facilities budget can include: purchasing and/or renovating buildings, developing outdoor
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parking and playgrounds, setting up and maintaining utilities, purchasing and repairing equipment, maintaining school grounds including custodial staff and appropriate equipment and supplies (Hayes & Keller, 2009). Each of these planning and operational areas requires substantial planning and financing. This last category will be discussed in greater detail as operations is the focus of this this study.

Sarason’s (1998) work on establishing organizations describes key components that are frequently neglected, including “little or no discussion about governance and structure and style, resources and their allocation, development of constituencies, criteria by which to judge progress, and the role the core members will play in choosing the additional staff which will be needed” (p. 30). Many schools today still have their beginnings among a small group of friends or colleagues who have a passion to provide a high-quality learning environment. However, intense planning, problem solving, organizational design, and securing financial resources must transpire early in the process for that passion to not only become reality, but also have longevity. Yet, “schools were forced to evolve from informal collections of close friends and fellow visionaries to formal educational institutions” (Loveless & Jasin, 1998, p. 17). This often translates to a well-intentioned group without the background and knowledge to fully understand the scope of adequately planning for and opening a school.

Community

Often parents chose a charter school because they were unhappy with their child’s current school. In her study on charter school satisfaction, Almond (2013) reported that parents professed “an enhanced educational experience that she attributed to the positive culture that these charter schools displayed” (p. 4). Other qualities parents cited supporting their satisfaction of charter schools included defined mission statements, culture of high expectations, college-
going atmosphere, focus on standardized tests, the use of routine, longer school days and extended years. While charter schools have contributed to a sense of competition, they have also created a system that provides far more accountability to the community and stakeholders compared with TPS: “The market approach to schooling enables parents to unearth their schooling preferences by selecting schools that they deem suitable for their child’s needs, and in turn, holds schools accountable to their clients” (Almond, 2013, p. 3). This public persona requires charter schools to not only be accountable to the community they serve, but also ensure that community members’ voices are heard in the school. The Michigan Department of Education now requires schools to include parent and community perception data in annual Needs Assessments and School Improvement Plans, ensuring these groups are considered during the planning process for the following academic year. Michigan schools are encouraged to have parents and community members on their school improvement teams, and include them in the annual school evaluation. Parents and the community are being asked to provide feedback and get involved with their schools in more ways than just chaperoning fieldtrips or running fundraisers.

A study completed by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute stated that parents, across the nation, regardless of race, socioeconomic levels or political affiliations are ultimately looking for the same things in a school: strong core curriculum in reading and math, an emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); the development of good study habits, strong critical thinking skills, and excellent verbal and written communication skills (Wohlstetter, Nayfack, & Mora-Flores, 2008). During their interviews with parents, a number of common themes developed. Lower income families, and those primarily with boys, discussed vocational classes or job preparation programs. African American and Hispanic parents often cited the
importance of test preparation or high test scores. This same group also identified learning to
work with those from other backgrounds. Authors researched parent satisfaction of charter
schools in key areas: (a) academic Programs, (b) support services, (c) teachers, (d)
administrators, (e) school culture, and (f) school environment (i.e., cleanliness and physical
condition). The study included 17 charter schools inclusive of those identified as new, emerging,
and mature. When assigned an overall grade (A, B, C, D, or F), 70% of parents graded their
children’s school an A grade (Wohlstetter, et al., 2008). In comparison, the National Phi Delta
Kappa Gallup Poll for 2008, reported only 12% of parents nationally assigned a grade of A to
their local school (inclusive of charter and traditional schools). Notably, in all publically funded
settings, lack of school funding remains a high concern for parents (Bushaw & Lopez, 2011).
Overall parents were pleased with their charter school, although facilities, especially in new
schools (first two years) was reported as an area of concern often citing the need for additional
space. These same concerns were mirrored in Almond’s (2013) research; parents expressed
concerns around cleanliness, lack of space (for physical education), library facilities, school
lunch program and overall appearance of the school. Literature continues to show that overall,
parents and community members are happy with charter schools as a whole. Reports repeatedly
indicate the satisfaction around curriculum and instruction and school culture in these
environments. Almost as often, the concern of facilities and lack of needed resources was stated.

**Facilities**

Facilities are often a concern, especially during a charter school’s first three years of
operation. In Michigan, charter schools are dependent on start-up grants or private funding to
secure accommodations. Most states whose laws permit the running of charter schools do not
provide state assistance to secure buildings. In 2010, only 11 states and the District of Columbia
provided state tax dollars for charter school facilities (Cunningham, 2010). Federal programs available for this purpose require the home state to have an existing policy that grants state funding for facilities; currently, Michigan is not one of them. Many states have developed a variety of support programs including bond programs, grants, and specific policies regarding facilities. For example, the “right of first refusal” policy requires traditional public schools to allow unused space in vacant or underused buildings to be used by charters. This policy provides an opportunity for charters to secure facilities where amenities such as libraries, kitchens, and gymnasiums are available to provide programming for students (Cunningham, 2010). While eight states had no policy regarding facilities for charters schools, funding opportunities have since been expanding. As of 2010, 33 states allowed for a tax-exempt bond program, 11 directly funded facilities (most often through the use of unused public school areas), and 13 ran state level grant programs (Cunningham, 2010). Table 4 demonstrates the progress in assistance provided to charter schools around facilities, it was compiled from data in the 2014 Charter School Facility Finance Landscape report (Abraham et al.)
Table 4

*How States Fund Charter School Facilities 2014*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Jurisdiction</th>
<th>State Dedicated Facilities Funding</th>
<th>State Grant Programs</th>
<th>Tax-Exempt Bond Programs</th>
<th>State Credit Enhancement</th>
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<tr>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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*Arkansas distinguishes between conversion Charter schools and open-enrollment charters. Conversion charters are entitled to the same forms of state assistance for facilities as traditional public schools.
**Conversion schools maintain ownership/continued improvements
***Indiana now has law requiring closed, unused, or unoccupied school buildings to be available for lease to Charter schools for $1 per year.

While many states have increased support for charter schools in the form of access to vacant or underused public school facilities, Michigan’s support continues to be significantly overdue. In March of 2014, Detroit had 80 schools and 40 vacant land parcels for sale, Flint and Pontiac are in similar situations (Levine, 2015). Large numbers of empty and underused buildings continue to be a financial burden on these districts. Continued declines in enrollment create increased financial burden to maintain unused space that could be made available to charter systems. An Analysis of the Charter School Facility Landscape in Michigan (2013) reported that less than 9% of Michigan charter schools have use of buildings and only 13% use of land owned by traditional public schools. Furthermore, 33% reported vacant facilities nearby. Possibly most disheartening was that 51% of Michigan charter schools reported that they cannot provide federally-subsidized free and reduced meals to students because they do not have the
required facilities, and yet 71% of students attending charter schools were identified as low-income by the Michigan Department of Education (2014). In order to provide food services for these students, many charters pay for contracts to supply the meals, which are often costlier than the federally-subsidized reimbursement. This forces the charters to use operational funds or private fundraising to cover the gap. In addition, charter schools spent on average $971 ($850 for schools renting their facility) of operating revenue per student on facility expenses, which traditional schools do not (The Michigan Association of Public School Academies, 2013). These operational expenses take funding away from additional teachers, staffing and other programming.
Charter School Misconceptions

Public understanding of what charter schools are, and what role they play, continues to be an issue. In the 2008 Phi Delta Kappa Gallup Poll, 53% of respondents stated that charter schools were not public schools, 60% believed they could charge tuition, and 58% thought charters could select students based on ability (Wohlstetter, et al., 2008). Other reported misconceptions include that charter schools are not held to the same standards as public schools, are not accountable to anyone, are “for-profit money machines,” are a financial drain on traditional school districts, and they do not serve students with disabilities (Grossman, 2016, np.). This lack of comprehension will likely continue to hinder the perception of charter schools, continue to foster a belief of them being less rigorous, and acceptance that their accomplishments are not as noteworthy. These misconceptions are reinforced by those working in traditional public schools (TPS): “several superintendents expressed concern that charter schools exist to serve only a segment of the population, and leave out students with special needs, English language learners, those with behavioral problems, and those without [involved] parents” (Ricciardelli, Cummins, & Steedman, 2014. p. 104). In fact, Michigan is rated seventh of the 28 sectors in regards to low-income student enrollment and rated 16th out of the 28 on income disparity (Wolf, et al. 2014). This is supported by the 2015 CREDO report that cited 87% of the students enrolled in Detroit charter schools are identified as students in poverty compared with 78% in the TPS located in this same area (2015). The MI School Data website, which maintains school reported data, listed 2015 statewide averages for students identified as English Language Learners served by charter schools was 8% compared with 5.4% at TPS. Statewide averages for this same timeframe reported Special Education students in Michigan at charter schools were 10.1% compared to 12.7% in traditional public schools.
This same lack of understanding also impacts hiring, as Cannata (2010) states, "teacher applicants are confused about whether charter schools were public or private entities" (p. 2). She then explains that due to lack of knowledge, many teachers believe charter schools are private or that they serve predominantly students from low-income families (Cannata, 2010). These misconceptions impact thoughts of professionalism, pay, job security, and retirement. Thus, new teachers are hesitant to seek out charter environments when looking for employment.

Organizations

When discussing the success or failure of charter schools, accountability is used to shift the blame, explain challenges, and even avoid responsibility. Multiple groups within the charter school organization are required to work together while each being accountable for specific responsibilities. These groups include the authorizer, school board, educational service provider, and school leadership. Sarason (1998) describes the necessity for a guide map and the desire to work together in his research on successful organizations.

Authorizer. Michigan charter school authorizers include: colleges and universities, school districts, local educational agencies, and state education agencies. Universities authorized five of the original seven charters, two of which became fully operational. Portfolio sizes among Authorizers in Michigan vary greatly. Smaller portfolios range from one to five (22 authorizers), while 11 authorizers have six to or more, which is considered a large portfolio. As of 2014, the largest portfolios include: Grand Valley State University with 42, Bay Mills Community College with 43, and Central Michigan University with 59 charters (National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2014).
Currently accreditation for authorizers is voluntary in Michigan, but is becoming a more prominent expectation. Grand Valley State University was the first Authorizer in Michigan to seek and obtain accreditation (AdvancED, 2015). The process reviews the monitoring systems of schools chartered by the authorizer inclusive of academic, operational, governance and financial performance. The intent is to ensure that the authorizing body has clear and consistent systems in place to not only be holding school boards accountable for fulfilling their contract, but also providing support to them and the school leaders to support success.

The school board is accountable to the authorizer to uphold the contract that was granted, including academic, operational, and fiscal performance. Any changes in grades served, total number of students enrolled, school adopted curriculum and changes in board members must be approved through the Authorizer.

**School Board.** The board, while approved and appointed by the authorizer, is ultimately responsible for the success of the school. Choosing and hiring the school leader and the management company or service provider are at their discretion. Public school funding for charter schools flows from the state through the authorizer to the school board. The board develops and approves the district budget and is accountable to ensure it is met. As fluctuation occurs amendments are approved by the board and provided to the authorizer. Ultimately, “School Boards are accessible to the public and accountable for the performance of their schools” (The Center for Public Education, n.d.).

**Education Service Providers.** The role of an educational service provider (ESP) varies depending on the school and the needs of the school board. Services range from full and complete management, to contracted services in one or more areas. Because each school is unique “the variation in service provider/management company arrangements is broad and
difficult to quantify” (Michigan Department of Education, 2016, p.14). An important piece to remember is that regardless of how much authority the service provider has, they work for the school board, who is ultimately responsible for the success of the school.

**School leadership.** School leadership is ultimately determined by the school board, who may contract with a service provider to hire a principal and/or superintendent directly. Depending on the size of the charter school, the school leader may serve in both the principal and superintendent roles. Whatever the combination of school leader and service provider, it is at this level where processes and guidelines are developed and carried out. As mentioned earlier, the school board adopts policy and then relies on school leadership to develop, facilitate, and modify procedures insuring that policy is carried out in the day to day operational systems.

The school leadership (along with the educational service provider when appropriate) develop the district budget, determining where funding should be dedicated, and then submits it to the board for final approval. When a comprehensive ESP (or specific financial, staffing, and/or operational service) is contracted, they may have authority over the school leadership to develop the budget and make final decisions presented to the board. When there is a true partnership between the school leader and ESP, both will equally take part in hiring staff, ensuring facilities function smoothly, and classroom instruction is a high priority around which decisions are made.

While all organizations involved in a charter school work together, it is essential to understand that the authorizer approves and oversees the implementation of the contract. The school board, who is approved by the authorizer, is accountable for the execution of the contract and, eventually for the success of the school. The board may hire a management company or
school leader to independently implement the board’s vision, or these two roles may work together to serve this purpose.

While it is crucial that these groups work collectively to ensure a school is successful, there is little research around what these interactions look like, nor how the relationship and connecting behaviors between these groups impact achievement. A first step is to identify specific characteristics, systems, and practices necessary to support charter school success and how these groups can work collectively to ensure they occur. Then, leadership at each of these levels can use this research to inform the development and implementation of these characteristics, systems, and practices going forward.
CHAPTER THREE—DESIGN OF STUDY

This research project is a qualitative study, using the grounded theory Model to produce theories about systems and practice resulting in charter school success. Grounded Theory is a process; the researcher sought to understand the perspectives from those living it, systematically collecting then analyzing data to develop theoretical insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The strength of this theory comes from interacting with the direct sources and comparing how they describe their individual experiences to develop a theory (Corley, 2015). The research questions for this study include:

1. What operational systems are in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study?
2. What are the operational similarities and differences in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study impacting school failure?
3. What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to close the K-8 public school academies included in this study?
4. What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to maintain operation of the K-8 public school academies included in this study?

Using data collected directly from those in the school environment who are performing these tasks daily provided an understanding of systems currently in place and how they impact the decision to keep a school operating or close it. This information provided for an “interpretive understanding of the data” and reporting of a theory usable immediately in public school academies (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9).
Interviews

Purposeful sampling was used to identify charter schools to be used as participants in this study. Purposeful sampling “involves selecting information-rich cases for study in depth, cases that offer insights into issues of central importance,” (Quinn Patton, 2005). Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to complete a screening protocol in order to save time during the interview process, this protocol can be found in Appendix B. Two authorizers were chosen to participate based on the size of their charter portfolio (identified as large) and convenience of access. Each authorizer was asked to recommend several schools identified as successful and to identify appropriate personnel from each site. From those recommendations, four successful schools were chosen and contacted to request an interview. At each school location, a principal and operational lead was sought out to be interviewed. While the titles of principal and operational lead are being used, those interviewed may have held different titles. They may have had another title. They may have been the finance director, chief executive officer, principal, chief academic officer, director or superintendent. The people primarily responsible for ensuring compliance, financial and academic reports are compiled and submitted. Data collected from the authorizer and the screening protocol were used to ensure the most appropriate person was identified based on their work responsibilities. When attempting to contact former employees and board members of closed schools, identification was not frequently available. Authorizers reported that they do not maintain information on schools that were closed.

In preparation for the interviews, a pilot study was completed to inform the questions needed to collect the desired information and the length of time needed to complete interviews. The pilot study included one school level operational lead.
Open-ended interviews were used to collect data on systems and procedures impacting the three areas on which charter schools are scored and rated annually: financial viability, compliance, and student progress. The emphasis of the interview was on the operational aspects of these areas. By using open-ended, non-judgmental questions, the interviewer encouraged detailed stories to emerge, thus collecting unanticipated evidence (Charmaz, 2006). Included in Appendix C is a list of guiding questions for both the Authorizer and school level discussions. The interviews were audio recorded, with permission, and transcribed. Both audio and transcribed reports were stored in a password protected on-line folder. Printed copies of transcription notes were secured in a locking file storage container.

**Protection of Human Rights**

To ensure compliance with legal, ethical, and moral issues, approval for human subjects research was obtained before beginning the study (Appendix D). All participants received an explanation of the purpose of the study and how the information was to be used. Each participant signed a consent form prior to the interview. Their identifying information remained confidential. Permission was requested to audio record the interview and pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

**Reliability and Validity**

As qualitative research has progressed, both traditionalist and modernist researchers have held that the “source of genuine knowledge was empirical research and logical analysis” which could be supported by verification (Lewis, 2009, p. 3). Traditionally, the stability of findings was referred to as reliability, and validity represented the accuracy of the results (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). As qualitative research has expanded, how reliability and validity are determined has shifted. Lewis (2009) reports that now the qualitative researcher use *consistency*
synonymously with *reliability* and the associated measure is whether research findings can be replicated. *Credibility* and *authenticity* are used synonymously with *validity*, to address the portrayal of the participants’ experiences and interpretation of those meanings (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). Care must be taken to ensure both the content and interpretive data are validated in order to remove any distortion or bias. Prior to publication excerpts identified for inclusion were emailed to the participants for an opportunity to validate the content or to opt out of the project.

**Generating Theory**

This research sought to identify the reasons why charter schools are successful or result in closure. While the theories included here are based on data collected from case studies representing successful and closed schools, they are not finite: “It is a theory because it predicts something” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.31). As school leaders consider theories developed here and compare them to their own schools, they will mature and expand: “Comparative analysis for generating theory puts a high emphasis on *theory as process*; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product,” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.229). Furthermore, Charmaz (2006) described grounded theory as systematic guidelines for analyzing data to develop theories which are substantiated because of the qualitative data collected. Theories developed from this research will adapt as charter schools improve and perfect their systems, but can serve as a roadmap for this progress.

Following each interview, the recording was transcribed and then checked for accuracy. A review of notes and interview transcripts permitted identification and coding of topics as they developed among the schools using a color identification for systems, procedures, operational strengths, and problems or gaps among the three focus areas (compliance, financial viability, and
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student progress). Following the initial coding, a second review of the transcripts was completed where the coded data were copied into separate word documents sorted by category. Those documents were reviewed again in order to further analyze emerging themes. A final analysis was done to develop theory on the reasons charter schools are successful or result in closure. Lastly, the data were then used as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) "as evidence for conclusions, thus indicating how the analyst obtained the theory from his data" (p.228).

Impact on School Leaders

Glaser and Strauss (1967) discuss the reasons to develop theory focusing on the need and use of it. They outline four fundamentals to consider:

The first requisite property is that the theory must closely fit the substantive area in which it will be used. Second, it must be readily understandable by laymen concerned with this area. Third, it must be sufficiently general to be applicable to a multitude of diverse daily situations within the substantive area, not to just a specific type of situation. Fourth, it must allow the user partial control over the structure and process of daily situations as they change through time (p. 249).

The theories developed in this research project will be impactful for all school leaders working with public school academies regardless of their status (i.e. start-up, established, or veteran). Whether the school is self-managed, contracts some or all of their services, the theories included are directly applicable to the systems within their schools. The information presented provided tools for the school leader to control how systems and processes are developed and implemented in their systems, allowing for growth and continued development.
This case study research sought to identify the components that make for successful charter school operations. As explained earlier, for the purpose of this study successful school operation is identified as: (a) being in good standing academically (not falling into the Focus or Priority ranking), (b) being financially sound, and (c) satisfactorily meeting compliance requirements. These are the three areas charter schools are evaluated on annually in Michigan.

A pilot study was completed in order to fine tune the interview questions, and develop a timeline for completing the interviews. A total of nine interviews were completed. Two large authorizers, both from public universities participated. Both held more than 60 charter contracts and had closed more than 10 schools, providing an understanding of characteristics present both in successful and failing charter schools. Two educational service providers participated, one only providing full-service management for seven schools in two districts. The other held contracts with more than 30 schools and offered both full-service management and ala carte services inclusive of special education, curriculum development and implementation, board development, and hiring. At the school level, two school operations managers, a founder/principal and two school leaders were included in this study.

Originally, the study was to include staff from two closed schools, however neither authorizer maintained contact information for these staff after the school closed. Through additional research staff from one school agreed to participate, but later declined.

Participants

Female 1 was a school operations manager, newly hired for this role, only having been on the job for three months. The participant declined to include level of education. She worked in a 5-8th grade school serving approximately 445 students, 67% of whom qualified for free or
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reduced lunch. Having worked for the district for five years, she had an in-depth knowledge of systems within the district and demonstrated her ability to oversee programs and systems. Her responsibilities include developing and maintaining student records (including demographic, attendance, and enrollment), scheduling, staff and building compliance. She was selected because she was directly responsible for compliance and financial reporting as described by her educational service provider (ESP). The school uses their ESP for full management services inclusive of human resources, district budgeting, academic planning and support, district level compliance reporting, marketing, leadership support and fundraising.

Female 2 was a school operations manager who had been in this role for three years. Having a bachelor’s degree in anthropology, she has worked for this school for 10 years, her previous role evolved into this one. She worked in a K-5th grade school serving approximately 375 students, 80% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. Her responsibilities include management of the school budget, developing and maintaining student records (including demographic, attendance, and enrollment), staff compliance, building compliance, testing coordinator (scheduling, proctoring, and reporting all standardized testing for the building), and daily running of the building. She was selected because she was directly responsible for compliance, financial, and academic testing reporting as described by her educational service provider. The school uses their ESP for full management services inclusive of human resources, district budgeting, academic planning and support, district level compliance reporting, marketing, leadership support and fundraising.

Female 3 was the founder and current principal of a K-3rd grade school serving approximately 94 students, 97% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. She has been in this role for four and a half years, earned a Juris Doctorate and had significant experience in the
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business sector. As the founder she authored the charter application and approval process, and was the sole administrator for the first year. She continues to be the primary fundraiser and is the point of contact for the Authorizer, with whom she works to submit all compliance reporting. She maintains the budget, is responsible for maintaining student records (including demographic, attendance, and enrollment), and manages the facilities. She was selected for participation based on the recommendation of her authorizer. The school is self-managed, only using an Educational service provider for human resources.

Female 4 was the chief academic officer of a K-3rd grade school serving approximately 94 students, 97% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. She has been in this role for four years and holds a master’s degree in education. Her primary responsibilities include hiring teachers, training staff and managing student behavior. She was selected for participation because she filled the academic role not served by Female three. The school is self-managed, only using an Educational service provider for human resources.

Female 5 was the principal of a K-8th grade serving approximately 745 students, 8% of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch. Her school uses an educational service provider (ESP) for full management, who is responsible for all compliance, budgeting, human resources (including initial interviewing), marketing, development of the instructional model and curriculum. Her responsibilities included scheduling staff, managing her discretionary budget, hiring staff from a selection provided to her by the ESP, and student management. She was selected to participate based on the recommendation of her Authorizer.

Male 1 was the chief knowledge officer of an educational service provider. He had been in this role for approximately five years, having previous experience as school and district leader in traditional public schools. The company has a large portfolio of schools they provide a variety
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of services to, and fully manage two schools. This includes school board training and support, leadership support, human resources, budget development and input, accounting services, support with marketing and enrollment, teacher training and support, compliance reporting, facility management, charter application development and support through approval process, development and management of relationship with the charter authorizer. He was selected for a variety of reasons. His company provided management of a school chartered by one of the Authorizers participating, he had experience with the full scope of writing a charter application through opening the school, and the company’s portfolio is inclusive of a broad range of services.

Female 6 was the chief operations officer for an educational service provider. She has been in this role for eight years and held a graduate degree in finance. Her responsibilities included overseeing all business and operational related services. This is inclusive of developing and managing the district budget, and oversite of the following; all building budgets, student enrollment and related activities, talent recruitment, human resources, facilities management, and IT management. She was selected because all of the schools served by this ESP are chartered by one of the participating authorizers, and one of their schools was identified as a “notable school” in the Authorizers annual report in 2015.

Male 2wo was the director of the charter school office of a large public university who was identified as a “large” authorizer. This organization was one of the first in Michigan to charter a school and continues to push for stronger accountability for charter authorizers. They hold accreditation and have more than 70 schools in their portfolio. He was chosen in part due to his position in an authorizer having a large portfolio, which allowed for easier access to potential
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participants. Also, this authorizer has closed more than 10 schools provided the perspective of both successful and failed schools.

Female 7 was also the director of the charter school office of a large public university that has been chartering schools for over 20 years. Identified as a “large” authorizer, they hold more than 60 schools, providing for a large participant pool. They too were one of the first to authorize a charter school in Michigan and have closed more than 10 schools, again which provided perspectives on both successful practice and conditions leading to closure.

As described in the previous chapter, open-ended questions were used during interviews in order to analyze multiple case studies. Using the grounded theory approach, data were systematically collected and then analyzed to determine themes. Using purposeful sampling, two large authorizers (each holding more than six charters) were interviewed to explain, from their point of view, those key characteristics impacting successful operation. Both Authorizers had each closed more than 10 schools whom they chartered, giving them a clear understanding of both productive and unproductive systems and characteristics. Each authorizer recommended individual schools who had been labeled as successful. Originally, the study intended to include charter schools that had been closed as a comparison. However, during interviews with authorizers, it was discovered that once a school was no longer being chartered, all information regarding that school was removed from the Authorizer’s current records. One former school leader was located, but when contacted declined to participate. Further research was done to locate prior staff or board members of closed schools, but current contact information could not be located. Due to the time of year (beginning of the new academic year) and time constraints on school employees, many requests were not granted, reducing the number of interviews completed at some sites. Two educational service providers were included, each working with
multiple schools. One company has been in business for more than 15 years, the other offering school management for just over five years. School level staff members were interviewed from schools ranging in length of operation from 3 to 13 years in operation. When determining success, three evaluation areas were considered: academic progress, financial viability, and compliance reporting. Data were also gathered on length of time in operation, student enrollment and funding levels of the district to identify outliers and ensure integrity of the data. One school had considerably higher total funding and significantly smaller enrollment. These funds (32% of all funding) came from private donations. All of the schools, with one exception, had high rates of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. In all cases teacher attrition was significant, with 70% or more of their teachers having been with the school for five years or less. Administrative staff attrition was notably higher with half of the schools reporting approximately 50% of those staff members having been with the district for six or more years.

All interviews were audio recorded and completed via phone or video conference, (i.e. audio and visual). Following the interviews, transcriptions were completed and checked for accuracy. Those documents were then read and coded to identify themes. First, codes were transferred into separate documents consistent with the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2014). Constant comparison involved a recursive check of the code list to ensure novel code development. The code list was considered complete after reaching a point of theoretical saturation whereby novel codes were no longer necessary to interpret uncoded interview content. Second, codes were assembled into higher order themes based on shared meaning and content. Themes served as umbrella summaries of lower order coded meaning. Thus, themes provided an interpretive framework or “grounded theory” for the study sample.
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In addition to the two public university authorizers, this study included two education service providers, one a for profit and the other a nonprofit, and four schools serving students within the kindergarten through eighth grade range. The schools include *established*—three to five years old—and *veteran*—seven or more years old. All participants were presented with an approved institutional review board (IRB) informed consent form detailing the rights of participation and the nature of the study. Each participant verified understanding and consent to participate and be audio recorded prior to the interview. Results from the analysis are presented in this chapter, organized according to the research questions posed at the beginning of this dissertation. Data collected on each question are described using the three themes that emerged: (a) the need for significant planning both financially and organizationally, (b) thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities, and (c) the need for documented systems and cross training of staff.

**Operational Systems in the K-8 Public School Academies**

The need for significant planning both financially and organizationally. Often charter schools begin with the founder and expand as that person brings additional staff to the team. In all instances of schools in this study, this was a gradual process with little or no significant preplanning. In fact, all schools described an organic process where additional staff were brought on as the school and workload expanded, rather than developing from a set staffing plan which took into consideration compliance reporting, financial viability and academic gain measurements. Both authorizers described characteristics of successful charter schools as having organized back offices, but few schools had well developed organizational systems. According to authorizers, in start-up schools—those within their first two years—generally were overly
focused on academics at the expense of organizational systems. Often these schools did not have reporting systems in place to ensure thorough compliance reporting occurred.

Similarly, schools lacking comprehensive planning frequently did not meet their enrollment goals resulting in financial hardships. As a result, attention was drawn away from the educational aspect. An authorizer described this challenge: “They don’t have structure in place that allows them to really focus on the true reason that they’re there, educating kids, because they’re fighting fires on the financial side and the compliance side.” A management company with seven schools in their portfolio just began a tracking project to better plan long-term for the school’s needs. They began tracking students for their full 13 years (K-12) in all departments: facilities, furniture, equipment, supplies, transportation, programming, and technology. The goal was to identify trends in future needs so that preplanning and post-evaluation could be done. An added benefit was that it had inadvertently served the dual purpose of keeping the back office staff engaged in what was happening with the students and reminding them of why they were really there.

Thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities. The chief knowledge officer of a management company who had recently signed on with a school described the necessity of thoughtful and purposeful staffing decisions. “There isn't a strong structure to the system, the school…has been around for fifteen years and… as a result of hiring people over the course of many years that could do different things, they were just assigned tasks.” This resulted ultimately in a situation where responsibility and accountability were seriously lacking. Sarason (1972) addresses this adhoc staffing procedure. He discusses how this frequently occurs with start-up schools, and the negative long term impacts it can have, compared with thoughtful structuring of responsibilities. While this school did have a written
organizational chart, it was outdated and did not reflect everyday practice. Districts are required to submit organizational charts to authorizers annually as part of compliance reporting. Only two schools, both having full service management companies, had access to one that was accurate and reflective of daily practice. Unclear roles and expectations, and/or lack of organized staffing in the first few years, is common and can have serious consequences. The executive director at an established school—a school in years three through five—described the need to restructure their leadership team as they started their fourth year. While functioning as one group for the first three years, the need for separate instructional and executive leadership teams was necessary to fill a noticeable gap. Although, while the team was developed from a need, there was no strategic planning around how the two teams would support each other or work together.

Organizations must establish mechanisms for development and expansion. Failure to anticipate where conflicts will occur and how to deal with them when they arise results in lost time and resources and ultimately can be detrimental to the organization. Authorizers strongly emphasized the requirement of having separate leaders for academics and the back office (typically consisting of compliance reporting, finance, facilities, etc). Both authorizers interviewed agreed that without a strong, capable academic leader and business-minded operations, the charter’s focus would continuously be shifting. In fact, one founder explained that their school’s original application was turned down because while having significant business experience, they were lacking academic expertise. The authorizer directed the founder to find and hire a strong academic lead as part of the approval process. More often, the situation is reversed—lack of business experience.

*Hiring knowledgeable staff and providing consistent training.* A sub-theme that developed from the need for well-defined staffing roles. This sub-theme was addressed by each
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level---authorizer, educational service provider, and school---and identified the need to hire knowledgeable staff and provide consistent training. Access to a strong teacher and school leader pipeline, while being identified as a necessity for success, was also identified as an area of difficulty. Frequently charter schools rely on their principal to drive academic success while also managing the business and operations of a school. Principals coming from traditional school districts do not have this background, nor do new principals to the field. This lack of knowledge can result in the principal feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. When asked about her learning curve, one principal expressed her frustration: “There is no playbook and that is something that really stressed me out. How is there not something written down to tell me what I should be doing right now? And I just remember being so confused.” When further questioned how she gained the necessary knowledge to do the job she recalled her thinking at the time: “There is not really 12 different sources of information about the 12 different things I need to be doing…there’s no way I have to track down all these different people, no one is talking to each other.” The lack of a unified source of information can be overwhelming for new charters, which could be a contributing factor to new schools closing after just a few years. A founder of an established school—relayed their belief that while Michigan advertises the desire for small and innovative schools, they design the system in a way that prevents it. One authorizer reinforced this issue.

Yeah, it’s supposed to be an experiment. And we put these giant regulatory [obstacles in place] . . .but the consequence of that is all of a sudden it stifles our objective, which was to create innovation in the education sector. So somehow we need system entrepreneurs to come in and really understand the system and be able to manage the tension between innovation and accountability to move education forward.
The reality is that in order for a charter school to have long term success, they must hire staff who have a strong knowledge base and structure their organization in a way to attract highly skilled employees for all key areas including back office, academic leadership and teachers. Frequently newer teachers will be drawn to charter schools because of the desire to be innovative. If rookie teachers do not receive adequate coaching and support they leave the school, and frequently the profession. This requires academic leaders with a complete understanding of instruction, assessment, coaching and a system with a priority of providing support. One authorizer stated that if a school is not “able to hire the best teachers and give them the attention, professional development, coaching, and mentoring, then they’re not setting themselves up for success.” Notably, they continued to describe the schools in their portfolio who have the lowest attrition rate also provide the most significant support to both teachers and leaders.

**The need for documented systems and cross training of staff.** None of the schools included in this study had fully developed written processes and procedures. All had some sort of student or family handbook and a staff handbook, both of which are required by the state as part of compliance reporting. The veteran school had a different view for the need of documentation of systems and roles. The chief operating officer (COO) was intent that while their documentation wasn’t complete, it was a priority for them. She went on to describe that these records were living documents that would change over time and crucial to have in place for long term success. Comments were made regarding the importance of not just documenting but also ensuring processes were most appropriate and efficient for their programs.

“We didn’t just sit down and do it, we did a lot of research and looked up other charter schools, what were they doing? … We actually discovered things throughout that
process, like oh, they do it this way I’ve never really thought about that. Ok, let’s see how
that works.”

Meeting with other charter schools and talking with authorizers to see what successful schools
were doing was important in continued improvement in their back office. This strategy is
supported by Sarason’s (1972) work which discusses the importance of learning what other
organizations are doing and how they are doing it. He stresses that no school is doing this for the
first time and should use the experiences of others to improve their work.

For those schools who did have documented systems, discussion around the integrity of
using them was mixed. Two of the schools followed the systems as written for the most part and
worked with a team when changes or updates needed to be made for the betterment of the school
and the stakeholders they are serving. One veteran school had extensive policy and procedural
documentation but it was not being followed. As described by the schools chief knowledge
officer, “where there aren’t systems, it's really bad and it's glaring, where there are systems, there
are execution and follow through…with fidelity issues.” The result of this is an “overarching
theme of…no structural soundness, very haphazard, reaction-based [behavior]. There's no
infrastructure…[or] culture of accountability. Those things together, structural haphazardness and
the absence of a culture of accountability, execution and accountability are what is sinking this
ship.”

Each school stated they evaluated their programs and systems. However, in digging
deeper many were only evaluating those systems that were included in their school improvement
plan, and only to the level it was required as part of compliance processes. So, while some
academic systems were being evaluated at varying levels, most schools had no formal process in
place to evaluate operational or fiscal systems, aside from the annual required financial audit.
This audit, which is required to be completed by an outside agency, does provide feedback on compliance with funding regulations. It does not provide feedback around using funding to meet goals or district priorities. Many schools articulated what they called “experience evaluation,” knowing something doesn’t work after using it for a period of time. This form of evaluating and reworking systems where a gap was discovered was fairly common in younger schools.

**Operational Similarities and Differences Impacting School Failure**

The need for significant planning both financially and organizationally. While there was variation in the level of services contracted by the schools included in this study, there were distinct similarities among those deemed successful compared with the characteristics of struggling and failing schools as identified by authorizers and educational service providers. Schools identified as successful had strong organization allowing them to support the three key areas charters are evaluated on annually: academic achievement, financial viability, and compliance reporting. While instructional programming varied among all of the schools, those who regularly met their academic goals all had strong support systems in place. The schools participating in this study either had a full-service management company, or managed the financial aspects in-house (none contracted out only this service). Financial viability is inclusive of budgeting, management of monthly income and expenditures, marketing and enrollment, and grant management.

Enrollment was addressed repeatedly as a factor for success, both in the planning process and for continued success. Both Authorizers included in this study rated their charters on student retention and enrollment. As the biggest contributing budgetary factor for most schools, it is a fundamental piece when discussing financial success. Two of the schools expressed that they regularly met their enrollment goal and typically maintained a waiting list, allowing for a stable
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and reliable budget. The other schools expressed a range in meeting their enrollment goal starting at approximately 85% and higher. None of the schools had any research on how or why they were or were not meeting their enrollment goal, but all cited word of mouth as a primary factor in gaining students.

Authorizers and service providers did cite some reasons for declining enrollment in schools. Most common was that a school did not update or adjust their mission to match a changing community. One authorizer explained the reason several of their schools ultimately closed. “If you don’t have a good enrollment strategy and stable culture, you lose the focus, the vision for the school, and that’s where schools really start to get off track.” When this happens schools start to flounder and become unstable. “They go through different iterations, it won’t work out for the long term…people will jump ship because they aren’t really sure. . . they are looking for a stable learning experience and they don’t see it there.” Differences in these systems varied based on the size and experience of the school.

In almost every interview, facilities were addressed as a significant aspect for success or closure and were reported to be the factor on multiple occasions regarding whether a school opened or remained open. The expense of renting, purchasing, or building a facility is substantial. While all of the schools included in this study were now located in buildings they owned or were on inexpensive long-term leases, none of them started that way. Frequently reported was opening the school in rented space in a church building. Most often these facilities were not able to allow for on-site preparation of lunch, had little or no indoor recreation facilities, and sometimes did not even have an outdoor facility on site. Through significant fundraising efforts buildings had been purchased (or leased for a $1 a year in two cases) and major renovations completed. Both authorizers and Educational service providers (ESP) reported
that many charter schools have ballooning facility costs, take out bonds that cannot be repaid and failed to plan for capital improvements or maintenance costs. An ESP discussed their long-term plan comparing it to a condo association. They have repair and replacement schedules for buildings, fixtures and furniture, knowing all of these require long-term maintenance and replacement. This school had set up a similar plan for their facilities. Also common in successful schools was the receipt of significant funding to offset this major expense. Likewise, common in failed schools was a lack of meaningful outside funding and failure to properly plan long-term to pay off and maintain facilities.

**Thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities.** A frequent occurrence in unsuccessful schools is lack of clearly defined roles where one person is responsible for multiple areas. A common example was one school beginning its fourth year. The Founder was responsible for all budgeting, accounting, fundraising, enrollment, and grant management. Not having the resources to have multiple staff, they contracted out the human resources work. This is a very similar situation described by one of the service providers in one of their schools. When it first opened, there was one person responsible for all of those same roles, as it grew, they hired a part time bookkeeper, and then eventually a full time certified public accountant, and so on. Lack of, or undertrained, staff led to a sense of being overwhelmed, which often led to weak financial and operational departments. Compliance reporting, while viewed by some as the easiest of the three evaluated areas, was often reported as an early indicator for trouble in schools. One authorizer reported lack of knowledge and understanding around compliance resulted in repeated incomplete and late submissions, calling this situation “a red flag” that deeper issues were occurring, and often the first hints of a lack of overall organization at a school. The opposite extreme was that compliance reporting, while
always on time, lacked depth or full explanations. This was reported as an indicator that often
times there was one person on-site responsible who lacked the full scope of how it all fit
together. Reflective of someone who may be overwhelmed and focused on the “low hanging
fruit” to check things off of their list. This too was described as an indicator that the school was
lacking strong, knowledgeable leadership and a warning of problems in other areas.

Common in successful schools were designated leaders whose primary responsibility was
implementing quality academic programs. This was reinforced by one of the authorizers who
emphasized the need for specific academic leadership: “[What is needed is] … rigorous, robust
teacher feedback, high expectations for students, strong as far as very clear expectations.” He
also commented that, “it doesn’t really matter what instructional model [is being used] but there
needs to be some level of consistency across the school.”

**Hiring knowledgeable staff and providing consistent training.** Teacher turnover was
impacted by the level of support provided. One authorizer stated that “rapid teacher attrition is
definitely a component [of failure]. Whether that is directly responsible…[for] teacher leadership
turnover and the consequence of that on the school climate, … [it is] deleterious to a school.”
Those schools providing structured support programs at various levels also maintained higher
staff retention rates. While teacher retention is notoriously low in charter schools, strong
development and support programs were present where retention rates were higher. This was
supported by an authorizer’s description, when talking about a nation-wide system of charter
schools: “[They] typically have the lowest attrition rate, so as far as staff goes in our portfolio.
And I can attribute that to the professional learning opportunities they have.”

**The need for documented systems and cross training of staff.** Lack of documented
systems was fairly common in all schools. An educational service provider described the lack of
documentation when she joined her current company: “They didn’t have anything and because of some entrepreneurial way of thinking, everybody [was doing] something different.” Few included intentional cross-training of staff as part of their regular process. Of those that were weak in these areas, all expressed frustration and interruption to normal operating procedures when a leader (either academic or back office) left the organization. Ensuring there are back-up systems and staff in place provides continued stability for the school stakeholders should staffing changes or other unexpected events happen. Schools that ultimately close do not often have this sort of system in place.

**Dilemmas Leading to the Decision to Close K-8 Public School Academies**

The original design of this study was to include interviews with at least two charter schools that had been closed. The intent was to capture data showing differences between them and schools still in operation. During interviews with both authorizers, it was learned that once a school was closed their information was removed from the authorizer’s current files. Two former principals and one board member were located through other means and contacted, but all declined to participate in the study.

The Michigan Department of Education reports details around school closings are often not documented. In some cases, no reason is on record describing the cause for closure. Others schools’ reason are vague and incomplete. When talking to authorizers, it was stated that they didn’t believe they had the research to state emphatically the characteristics in common or that differ in successful and closed schools.

**The need for significant planning both financially and organizationally.** It was reported that consistently meeting enrollment expectations is a primary factor in the financial stability of charter schools. If a school repeatedly fails to meet expected enrollment, or it
significantly declines, the result is ultimately closure. Enrollment declines happen for multiple reasons. Authorizers expressed excessive turnover of teaching staff caused parents to feel uncertainty, and as a result, they would leave the school. More often though, the school was not keeping up with their community. One Authorizer described a situation where a school was ultimately closed because the surrounding community changed, but the school did not adapt to their market. Another example was a school who tried to adjust to the changing community, but in doing so frequently changed their mission and design. Ultimately this resulted in the belief that the school was unorganized and unstable. More often problems occur when due diligence is not given to determining the market share available. Hayes and Keller (2009) emphasized the need to do a market analysis and to conservatively estimate enrollment in the pre-planning stages. Founders often overestimate the number of students they will attract, assuming students will leave other schools to attend without determining if families are unhappy in their current situations. One founder was expressing her frustration with a potential authorizer when she was trying to open a second school. Other times, new schools do not take into consideration competitor schools that are close by. One Founder described her story of attempting to open a second campus. The authorizer would not grant a second charter because the planned location was across the street from one of their current schools. Her belief was that she had a better product and so would draw students away from the soon to be competition and stated, “I don’t care about your other schools, I care about good schools and your other schools suck and I’m going to open up across the street if I feel like it.” Ultimately, the location was moved in order to obtain charter approval. This lack of fully understanding what it takes to start and run a school was a concern addressed by both authorizers and Educational service providers. Both described
weak organizational structure and not having adequate or highly trained staff (inclusive of back office staff, leaders and teachers) as ultimate reasons for school closure.

Financial viability is an obvious reason for closure. Thus, it is essential to understand the multiple factors that contribute to unstable finances. Enrollment is frequently the most obvious, but cited repeatedly were the impacts facilities had on the school’s budget. Ballooning payments, inaccurately planning for growth and expansion, and lack of understanding around capital improvements and maintenance were cited as serious issues for start-up and established schools. When considering start-up schools, they must plan for the delayed payment structure in place by the state. Brouillette (2002) cited this as an area frequently overlooked. While a school’s fiscal year typically starts July 1st, state aid payments do not occur until October. How the school will cover payroll, order of supplies and curriculum, and how they will cover mortgage and utility bills must be planned for in advance. New schools without a credit history often cannot get a bridge loan to carry them until state aid payments begin, putting themselves in significant debt before the school year even starts. It was reported that when this occurs a result is a lack of focus on academics, putting the school in further danger of closure. These same concerns were reported in Loveless & Jason’s research (1998), and reinforced by participants in this study.

**Thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities.** Lack of evidence makes it difficult to identify with certainty the role poorly defined staffing responsibilities plays in closure of a school. Although this was identified consistently in successful schools as supporting success, data was not available to determine if this was missing from those schools who were closed.
The need for documented systems and cross training of staff. Due to insufficient evidence, it cannot be stated if lack of documented systems had an impact on the decision to close schools.

Dilemmas Leading to the Decision to Maintain Operation of K-8 Public School Academies

The need for significant planning both financially and organizationally. Appropriate budgetary planning, stable enrollment and facilities are the three largest impacts in this area. Start-up schools must plan multiple years out to ensure expenses are covered until aid payments begin and suitable facilities are secured. Leased buildings need to be compliant with safety regulations for a public school setting, which often requires renovations and updates. The Chief Operations Officer described their plan: “We have…a capital schedule for capital improvements and maintenance. You know the buildings aren’t going to last forever. The chairs aren’t going to last forever.” The facility must accommodate growth or have a plan in place for realistic expansion. In all of the schools identified as successful, significant fundraising or donations had occurred to cover the expense of purchase (or leasing) and renovation to facilities.

Most of the schools identified as successful met annual enrollment goals, often having a waiting list of students. Not only planning realistically but also maintaining stable enrollment means constantly being aware of the community surrounding the school and the impact it has on the school. While stability in the staff and educational programs are key, there must also be flexibility in the school to adapt when and where necessary to adequately serve its community (Almond, 2013). Long-term stability in enrollment requires regular assessment of the community to identify shifts and then accounting for them in planning and programming.

Student academic progress looked different at each school included in this study. All had formal assessments in place, often times because it was required by the state or charter authorizer
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(Finnigan, 2007). While varying levels of success were reported based on which assessment was being discussed, the common theme was consistency. Those having the most success had a constant system of assessments. In fact, one authorizer stated that it did not matter what instructional model was being used, only that it was rigorous and that consistent expectations were communicated regularly across the organization. Those schools that reviewed achievement data regularly for the whole district, and used it to adjust support programs for the following year were most consistently successful.

**Thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities.** Clear roles and responsibilities for both academic leadership and back office were evident in all successful schools included in this study. Separate knowledgeable staff who focused on academics and back office responsibilities (but not both). This was identified as an unconditional characteristic in successful schools by all levels: authorizer, educational service provider, and school level. In all of these cases well-defined roles were communicated to the staff, students, and families. One authorizer required a Founder to “find a great academic leader knowing I know nothing about academics.” Thus, the authorizer ensured both key areas had strong leaders to focus on them.

**Hiring knowledgeable staff and providing consistent training.** While hiring highly skilled teachers and staff was a concern identified by all participants, successful schools had a well-defined, rigorous hiring process. Authorizers emphasized those schools most successful “hire the right leaders, and hire the right teachers.” Furthermore, they put into place long-term, intentional professional development systems for the leaders and teachers that included tiered levels of support, focusing on areas identified by staff as a need or that were noted through observations and mentoring programs.
The need for documented systems and cross training of staff. Continued stability in schools relied on documented systems and procedures and cross training so that when turnover happened, negative impacts to the school and its stakeholders were minimized. An example of the absence of documented systems and procedures was evident with an educational service provider. He discussed it in the context of a school they were contracted to move from “turn around status” who had been notified of closure at the end of the coming year. The educational service provider reported the school, “[had] no clear systems in place for internal communication, work flow and support… no written processes or sort of protocols how some of these things will be done.” While financially strong with a sizable fund balance, the school was suffering from lack of academic progress. “Compliance reporting was weak and barely meeting expectations which were the reasons cited in their closure notification letter.”

Those schools with the strongest documentation of systems included cross training staff, both academic and back office, as a regular part of their system. A chief operations officer described the need to terminate a staff person responsible for payroll and that the ability to have someone else step in prevented a delay in payments being processed. She went on to describe that all major systems, from ordering to running a lunch shift had been included in their training plans to ensure their stakeholders would not suffer should a separation or other unexpected event occur.

Chapter Four described the findings that were uncovered through this research project. Using the research questions as a filter, data were gathered from nine participants who held varying responsibilities and roles within the charter school organization. As findings were gathered around each research question, and reviewed, clear characteristics of successful charter schools took shape through the themes presented. These data demonstrate that exhaustive
planning, inclusive of clear roles and expectations supported by documented systems provides the most stable environment for continuous operation of a charter school. Chapter five includes a summary of these findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future studies.
The purpose of this study was to identify the components that make for successful charter school operations. For the purposes of this study, successful school operation was identified as: (a) being in good standing academically (not falling into the Focus or Priority ranking), (b) being financially sound, and (c) satisfactorily meeting compliance requirements. This study analyzed data collected from authorizers, educational service providers, and charter school leaders to identify themes supporting charter school success. This chapter provides an overview of supporting theory and interpretations of the findings, followed by a discussion of implications and recommendations for further research.

The analysis of the data included multiple steps. Interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times and common themes were color coded. After copying common data into four separate documents, the data was reviewed again to ensure appropriate placement. Each document was then analyzed to develop the theories that are discussed below.

**Summary and Supporting Theory**

Charter schools were developed to be innovative, allowing for experimentation of educational systems and instructional techniques. There was a strong desire to improve educational performance by allowing independent schools to serve as lab schools, such that pioneering strategies could be tested and then shared with traditional public schools (Price & Jankens, 2015). Charter schools have become more prevalent in Michigan, and so it seems appropriate and necessary to identify those characteristics leading to their success or failure. Ideally, those planning for future public school academies, and those academies newly opened will use this research to evaluate their own organizations and make adjustments early to develop well defined long term plans inclusive of these areas.
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The research questions used to analyze the data collected were:

1. What operational systems are in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study?

2. What are the operational similarities and differences in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study impacting school failure?

3. What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to close the K-8 public school academies included in this study?

4. What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to maintain operation of the K-8 public school academies included in this study?

The inclusion of charter authorizers, Educational service providers, and school level employees provided descriptions of charter schools in varying lengths of operation, allowing for the observance of how charter organizations developed over time and what characteristics best served them. The literature supported the three primary themes that emerged from this research: (a) the need for significant planning both financially and organizationally, (b) thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities, (c) and the need for documented systems and cross training of staff.

**Interpretation of Findings**

**Research Question 1: What operational systems are in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study?** Significant planning both financially and organizationally is necessary. Operational systems varied among the schools included in this study. The schools who were managed by an educational service provider (ESP) had considerably greater structure and more fully developed systems in place. Those being managed by an ESP had organizational charts that were accurate, and reflective of actual practice. All schools were granted their
facilities in some way. An annual lease payment of $1.00, granted funds to purchase and renovate a building or the granting of the actual facilities were all characteristics of these successful schools. All schools also started with significant outside funding, indicating the start-up grant awarded by the state, not to exceed $310,000 over the three stages, was not sufficient to cover the necessary costs of a start-up program (Price & Jankens, 2015). These schools described the need to raise several millions within the first three years to maintain operations of their program.

Thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities were not consistent across all schools, but became more pronounced the longer the school was in operation. All had developed leadership teams inclusive of separate leaders for academic and back office responsibilities. It is important to note that most did not start out this way. Either a school realized the need and developed a system, or they were required to do so by the Authorizer. The need for documented systems and cross training of staff was recognized at different levels in all schools. While those in the higher leadership roles in the back office were primarily responsible for encouraging completion of these systems when it was missing, those on the front-line felt the negative impacts of it the most.

**Research Question 2: What are the operational similarities and differences in place in the K-8 public school academies included in this study impacting school failure?** In-depth planning both financially and organizationally was most prominent in *veteran* schools. At start-up and established schools little pre-planning went into what the organization would look like as it grew and developed, even when a planned maximum capacity had been identified. Sarason (1972) illustrates the importance of early discussions and planning of staffing expansion, roles and responsibilities. Every school included in this study started out small, with one or two grade
levels and had expanded over time. Each described lack of planning in the beginning years, offering an explanation of organic growth and adaptation. Veteran schools expressed regret over lack of such planning, detailing the high levels of frustration it caused, and the manifestation of incorporating more long term planning into their systems. While authorizers and educational service providers communicated the importance of such planning, they also discussed the absence of it for many schools in early years. Most schools described their first few years as organically growing and changing to allow for flexibility. They also described a significant level of stress and frustration followed by high turnover rates during the first few years.

While traditional public school systems in Michigan can authorize charters, the vast majority of charters are held by public universities according to the Michigan Department of Education. Because so many charters are small or one building districts, they face significant challenges related to available resources. The literature supported the extensive financial challenges encountered by charter schools. As mentioned earlier, charter schools in 2014 received $3,814 less per pupil than their traditional public school counterparts. Schools do not begin receiving state aid until approximately four months after the fiscal year begins. While most schools are ordering materials and supplies, paying staff and covering facility expenses in July, funding does not arrive until October (Michigan Department of Education). Obtaining facilities further complicates the opening of a new school, given the extreme costs. Unlike many other states, Michigan does not provide facilities to charter schools, offer grant programs or even tax incentives to new schools (Cunningham, 2011). Planning for these challenges and how to fill the funding gaps is crucial to charter school success. Often this is done through private fundraising. A founder described doing “a lot of fundraising nationally, [mostly through] private donors.” A distinct similarity among successful schools was the level of fundraising that occurred in the first
three years. This is inclusive of the donation and renovation of facilities. This area was routinely identified as a trigger impacting success or failure in start-up schools. While most participants described starting their first and sometimes second year by renting space from a church, by their third year they were all located in their own facility that had been donated or paid for with donated funds.

Most schools who participated in this study did not have thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities defined. Educational service providers described this as a regular part of their start-up process, and authorizers have begun emphasizing this in charter applications. A common theme for all schools described as successful was the clearly defined roles of separate academic leadership and operational or back office leadership. Having these separate roles ensured that appropriate focus and attention was given to all key areas of running the organization. Schools that had been closed, often lacked this structure, or staff in those roles were described as not having the skill set necessary. In the start-up and established schools developing these separate roles was done at the request of the authorizer.

Staff selection, training, and support differed between successful and failing systems. Those programs identified as strongest had well-developed hiring systems, clearly defined support structures in place, and provided regular and continuous development for staff, “not just for teaching and para staff but for school leadership as well.” This support included individualized training and support when needed as well as cross training of positions to ensure smooth transitions on both the academic and operational sides when changes occurred. While the content varied depending on the longevity of staff and individual needs, the level of importance placed on such training was high and consistent over time. The level of documented systems and cross training of staff varied among the schools. This practice was more common at
the veteran schools, described as something they had learned, and was an essential part of long-term success.

**Research Question 3: What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to close the K-8 public school academies included in this study?** Because contact with closed schools could not be made, definitive data were not present regarding the factors leading to closure. While authorizers stated they did not feel they could state empirically the reasons schools were closed, data collected from them and educational service providers were used to discuss factors contributing to the closures. It was reported that a lack of long term planning both financially and organizationally impacted approved charters from actually opening for operation. An educational service provider emphasized the need to plan ahead and “be super smart, [determine] what you want to do, and where you will get the money to do it.” Projected enrollment numbers not being met and lack of funds needed to staff and operate were also common reasons for lack of opening. This resulted from founders not doing due diligence in their market analysis, over emphasizing private funding they would receive, and not planning appropriately for the significant expense of facilities. An authorizer explained the need for “a stable financial plan” that ensured that purchasing or “facility lease costs aren’t ballooning…[which] could tank the charter school.”

Ultimately, these same reasons have caused school closures. Continued market analyses were not completed so adjustments were not made for the changing community. This led to enrollment numbers dropping, causing further instability in the schools, ultimately resulting in their closure.

The impact of thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities could not be determined due to the lack of data from closed schools. The need for documented
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systems and cross training of staff could not be determined due to lack of data. Nevertheless, it was emphasized through the data collected that well documented systems and fully trained staff across roles is essential for long term success.

Research Question 4: What were the dilemmas which led to the decision to maintain operation of the K-8 public school academies included in this study? As schools continued to operate the need for significant planning both financially and organizationally was realized. The most significant long-term planning took place in veteran schools. This planning included regularly evaluating their community for adjustments, consistently meeting enrollment goals, a leveling off of funding needs and sources, and developing long term plans for the maintenance of equipment and facilities. These same veteran schools have thoughtfully and purposefully developed staffing roles and responsibilities inclusive of academic and back office leadership. The needs of the stakeholders are regularly evaluated to determine the most appropriate roles and qualifications for them. While high talent pipelines continue to be a struggle for all charter schools included in this study, those with decidedly developed interview systems, and continuous staff development support structures not only retain the most teachers, but also attract appealing candidates. To emphasize this point while describing one of the schools included in this study an Authorizer described that the school “knows how to hire good teachers, they know how to hire good leaders and they know how to develop them when they get them.” While documented systems continue to be an area many charter schools struggle with, the reasons provided focused around lack of staffing time to complete them. Veteran schools tended to have more documented systems which included cross training of key staff, whereas start-up and established schools felt their staff would pitch in to cover a staffing loss or unexpected disruption to the normal operations. When asked, a founder described “a gap in our system was that we didn’t really have
a good onboarding plan.” She then went on to explain that by year three a plan had been developed and implemented.

**Implications for Charter School Leaders**

The findings reported here indicate the importance of a strong pre-planning phase beyond the start-up years of a school, clearly delineated roles and responsibilities, and well documented systems involving cross training of staff. The charter application includes a market analysis for potential students and demonstration of successful implementation of suggested instructional model, mission, vision, and curriculum model to be used. While important, planning must go far more in-depth and include research of the surrounding community and schools.

After determining the radius from which students will be drawn (in part based on transportation methods students will use), a socio-economic, cultural, and population study should be conducted. This would provide actual data to support enrollment projections and needed programming within the school. Using this data, a seven to 10-year plan could then be developed detailing the growth model including enrollment, human capital, facility needs and maintenance, equipment, and growth of programming. Once detailed, a reflective budget and fundraising plan should follow. Enrollment planning should be based on population trends and other schools within the market radius, taking into consideration 10% attrition in the first few weeks of school each year. A human capital plan should be constructed for both the academic and back office, inclusive of an in-depth interviewing process to target those with the necessary knowledge base, clearly defined roles, description of on-going support and training, and a plan for retention of staff. A research grounded plan to develop facilities, beginning with year one through expansion to capacity is necessary for long-term success. Visiting other schools, surveying families and staff, and considering current and future needs will permit a
A comprehensive plan that will become a working document to be used in annual planning and decision making. Included should be short-term lease expenses, long-term lease or purchase strategy, remodeling, scheduled capital improvements, and an annual rainy day fund. A strategic fundraising plan should be developed and started immediately upon charter approval.

A chief operations officer should be hired as soon as the charter is approved (not the principal which is traditionally the first employee). Their responsibilities should start with researching other charter schools’ systems and practices to develop documented systems inclusive of marketing and enrollment, fundraising, projected needs, and daily operations. Upon hiring an academic leader, they will begin to familiarize themselves with the goals and mission of the school including the purposed instructional model. Then, after hiring lead teachers or instructional coaches, they should work as a team to fully build out the instructional plan and pacing guides, so that when teachers come on board, there is an organized, standards based plan in place for them to follow. Lastly, continuous evaluation and adjustment to systems and processes should become normal routine to ensure those living documents serve all stakeholders of the school organization.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Charter schools are still a relatively new piece of our educational system. Because of this, little research currently exists around many aspects of the systems themselves. CREDO has published two studies on academic achievement in charters, both of which included Michigan schools. Their research supports the findings from The Productivity of Public Charter Schools published in July of 2014. While on-going research should be completed regarding academic models and strategies working in charter schools, we have much to learn in other areas as well.
Participants included in this study where authorizers from public universities, which is just one category able to charter schools in Michigan. Those being authorized by traditional school districts will have organizational structures and supports in place not available to independent charter schools. While the demand for higher standards of Authorizers is frequently heard in the press, a full analysis of the responsibilities of and expectations for authorizers should be completed. This will then allow for commonality of services and support provided to charters.

The role and development of charter school boards is also an area in need of research. While they are appointed by the authorizer, and most receive some training, it is still unclear whether school boards have a deep understanding of their responsibilities, how they interact with the authorizer, and their level of obligation around long term planning and daily management.

The educational service providers included in this study have mixed levels of experience. One, while having more than 12 years of experience only serves specific schools in the Metro-Detroit area. The other, while younger, serves multiple schools with different models both in and outside of Michigan. As discussed in this study, different educational service providers have varying levels of control over instructional design and finances. Future research done around these impacts would provide insight into this frequently questioned relationship.

Lastly, significant research around charter school funding is desperately needed. This should include the question of equality in funding, but also the ability to access bridge loans to cover the gap in start-up and arrival of state aid. A clear understanding of actual start-up and expenses over the first three years would provide for more realistic plans and possibly a higher rate of success among new schools. Further research in all of these areas would support the original plan for charter schools, which was for them to be small, experimental environments
where educators would practice innovative techniques and structures. Then by reporting out successes and failures, students, teachers and educational leaders would benefit from their research.
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http://doi.org/10.1177/1558689806298224


SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOL OPERATION


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Appendix A.

An Analysis of Successful Charter Schools Operations

You are being asked to take part in a research study regarding operational systems and procedures in Charter schools to identify successful practice. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study. Participants may withdraw at any time.

Purpose of Research: The research I am conducting is part of my Dissertation Research on identifying successful operational systems and procedures in Charter schools. My goal through this work is to gather data from a variety of schools around their systems, procedures, and communications in order to identify common themes among successful schools. My hope is to help pre-planning and start-up schools develop strong operational structures early in their schools’ career.

What I will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions regarding your experiences with the school’s systems and processes used in the three key areas of Charter school Evaluation; Compliance, Financial Viability, Student Progress. The interview will take about 60 minutes to complete. With your permission, we would also like to tape-record the interview.

Risks and benefits:
I do not anticipate any risks to you participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. There are no benefits to you personally. It is my desire to provide guidance to start-up and established Charter schools so that they may be successful long term.

I will use your responses for research purposes only. Your identity and information which could identify you will be kept confidential, if you so desire please indicate such on the consent form. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. You may also choose to not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we make public we will not include any personal information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records. Audio recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research project. Interviews will be audio recorded.
**Brief Background:** I have spent the vast majority of my educational career in Charter schools, much of it involved with operations. While at a Charter school in Detroit I was a Director of Operations for a number of years, and in multiple administrative roles took the lead on developing and maintaining operational systems and structures. I fully appreciate the complexity and importance of this role in charter organizations.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Margaret Ameel. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Margaret Ameel at mameel@emich.edu or at 586-212-1412. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Dissertation Committee Chair, Dr. Theresa Saunders at tsaunde6@emich.edu. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study. I know I may withdraw at any time during the study.

Your Name (printed) __________________________________________________________

Your Signature _______________________________ Date ________________________

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature _______________________________ Date ________________________

Printed name of person obtaining consent Margaret Ameel Date ________________

Signature of person obtaining consent ________________________________ Date ______________

*This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study.*
Participant Screener

Research Study: An Analysis of Successful Charter Schools Operations
Name of Organization: ________________________________

1. What is your role in this organization?

2. How long have you been in this role?

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   Diploma/GED
   Associates Major __________________________
   Bachelor’s Major __________________________
   Graduate School, Major ______________________
   Masters
   Specialist
   Doctorate

4. What is the perception of others in the school community about your job? What do they think you do all day?

5. What is the Organizational Design of your school? (please include grade levels and all models such as Montessori, age grouping, strict discipline, arts focus)

6. Does the school meet their enrollment goals each year?

7. What do you think contributes to that?

8. Has the school done any research on why students choose/leave the district? (if yes, please include source of research and key reasons for leaving)

9. What services does the school use an educational service provider for (full management, HR, Accounting, Compliance, school lunch) please list all services that may apply?

10. Please describe the organizational structure of your school, including major responsibilities for each role (attach a District Org Chart if possible). If completely self-managed, please include.
Appendix C.

Interview Questions

**Authorizer Level**
1. When considering the three key elements Charter schools are evaluated on, what elements used to evaluate Charter schools do you find they struggle with the most?

2. When thinking about your successful charters, what characteristics do they have in common?

3. When considering the charter schools you’ve had to close, what characteristics could you identify they have in common?

4. What are danger signs that you see early on in charter schools that ultimately are identified as failing?

**School Level**

**Principal/Operational Lead**
1. Outline for me your operational systems for: compliance reporting, financial maintenance/reporting, and instructional achievement.

2. How and when are these systems evaluated?

3. What organizational systems are currently in place that you feel are strong and work well?
   - In day to day operations?
   - In Student academic achievement systems?

4. Where do you see gaps in the current system that either still need procedures or they need to be updated?
Appendix D.

IRB Approval Letter

RESEARCH @ EMU

UHSRC Determination: EXPEDITED INITIAL APPROVAL DATE:July 26, 2016

TO: Margaret Ameel
Eastern Michigan University

Re: UHSRC: # 876308-1
Category: Expedited category 7 Approval Date: July 26, 2016
Expiration Date: July 25, 2017

Title: An Analysis of Successful Operational Structures in Charter Schools

Your research project, entitled An Analysis of Successful Operational Structures in Charter Schools, has been approved in accordance with all applicable federal regulations. This approval included the following:

1. Enrollment of 14 subjects to participate in the approved protocol.
2. Use of the following study measures: Participant screener; Interview Questions (Authorizer Level; School Level).
3. Use of the following stamped recruitment materials: Recruitment email
4. Use of the stamped: Informed Consent (Release) form

Renewals: This approval is valid for one year and expires on July 25, 2017. If you plan to continue your study beyond July 25, 2017, you must submit a Continuing Review Form by June 25, 2017 to ensure the approval does not lapse.

Modifications: All changes must be approved prior to implementation. If you plan to make any minor changes, you must submit a Minor Modification Form. For any changes that alter study design or any study instruments, you must submit a Human Subjects Approval Request Form. These forms are available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Problems: All major deviations from the reviewed protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may increase the risk to human subjects or change the category of review must be reported to the UHSRC via an Event Report form, available through IRBNet on the UHSRC website.

Follow-up: If your Expedited research project is not completed and closed after three years, the UHSRC office requires a new Human Subjects Approval Request Form prior to approving a continuation beyond three years.

Please use the UHSRC number listed above on any forms submitted that relate to this project, or on any correspondence with the UHSRC office.

Good luck in your research. If we can be of further assistance, please contact us at 734-487-3090 or via e-mail at human.subjects@emich.edu. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,
Jennifer Kellman Fritz, PhD Chair
University Human Subjects Review Committee