

GEORGIA CONVERSION CHARTER SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
CONVERSIONS AND REVERSIONS OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

by

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(Under the Direction of Catherine Sielke)

ABSTRACT

This research documents the charter school phenomenon occurring in state of Georgia. This study investigates and identifies why conversion charter schools revert back to the traditional public school models and explores what the consequences may be when conversion charter schools “unconvert.” Qualitative interview methodology is used to identify the factors of influence for the conversion and reversion of Georgia charter schools, which allows the “why” and “how” questions to be posed within a real-life context. Consistent with qualitative study methodology, interview, document analysis, and data analysis and interpretation were used to gather data in my research Data collection includes six interviews with state officials, district and school leaders, and document analysis. This investigation of Georgia conversion charter schools results in three primary findings: (1) The intent for many conversion charter schools in Georgia is more monetary than actual needs based. (2) Conversion charter schools are realizing that there are other avenues of flexibility available. (3) Conversion charter schools are not “true charter schools,” thus, few, if any, changes are made when a reversion occurs.

INDEX WORDS: Charter School, Conversion Charter School, Start-up Charter School, Charter System, Reversion, School Choice, Autonomy, Flexibility, Accountability, The Charter School Program

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# GEORGIA CONVERSION CHARTER SCHOOLS: A CLOSER LOOK

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## DEDICATION

For my loving and supportive parents.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

Since their first appearance on the American educational scene two decades ago, charter schools have grown drastically serving almost a million and a half children across 41 states (National Charter School Resource Center, 2012). Charter proponents offer predictions of the ways that choice and competition will enhance the existing educational system, assuming innovation and commitment will raise overall levels of achievement and substantially narrow educational gaps. Charter school skeptics claim that charter schools draw resources away from those in the regular public school system, which translates directly into competitive force that causes a disinvestment in the public education system. Whatever the stance, the charter movement has expanded the idea of school choice across the American education system with three major goals: equity, innovation, and competition (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010).

In 1991 a coalition of Minnesota progressives and conservatives proposed and passed the first state charter legislation that created the beginning of the first two charter schools in the United States. As of 2013, some forty states have embraced this reform. As schools that are publically funded but free of much of the traditional education bureaucracy that characterizes district-run public schools, charter schools are part of a larger deregulation reform agenda in public policy that has seen broad political support.

Despite the billions of dollars and decades of change, achievement appears stagnant, large gaps remain between groups, and American schools slip in international rankings. Lubienski and Weitzel describe the design of charter schools as “game changers” that are—

“uniquely positioned to break the cycle of ineffective reform” (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010, p. 2).

Unlike most public schools that are tied to a school district, Lubienski and Weitzel state that charter schools are not about curriculum or pedagogy, but rather they are focused on changing the fundamental governance and management structure of schooling: “unleashing the creative potential of educators and communities, nurturing diverse options for families, encouraging parents to choose what is best for their children, and making schools directly accountable to the people who use them” (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010, p. 2).

As the charter school movement approaches the start of its third decade, the body of research is improving with larger numbers of charter schools to consider. Many organizations have studied the performance of America’s charter schools and argue that research indicates that these schools do not outperform traditional public schools in terms of academic achievement by their students. The recent Center for Public Education study, *Charter Schools: Finding Out the Facts*, examines the most sound research to date and reveals that charter schools do not justify the level of promotion and support they are receiving (The Center for Public Education, 2010).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2003 pilot study on charter school students’ achievement revealed that in most cases charter school students are not performing as well as other public school students. According to the reading scores, there were no measurable differences in scores between charter school students and traditional public school students. Data also showed that in math students attending a charter school performed lower than other public school students (Nelson, Rosenberg, & Van Meter, 2004).

A 2009 CREDO study (Center for Research on Education Outcomes) from Stanford University found that just 17 percent of charters outperformed traditional public schools, while

46 percent performed the same and 37 percent did worse. In other words, 83 percent of charter schools were no better than traditional public schools academically. CREDO also found a wide variance in the quality of the nation's several thousand charter schools with, in the aggregate, students in charter schools not faring as well as students in traditional public schools. Specifically in the state of Georgia, the study revealed that math gains were significantly lower in charter school students compared to their traditional public school peers, while there was no discernible difference in reading performance (CREDO, 2009).

The 2010-2011 Georgia Charter Schools Annual Report released by the Georgia Department of Education concluded that Georgia charter schools are not outperforming traditional schools. The comprehensive overview of the academic performance of Georgia charter schools compares Georgia's charter school performance to national averages for the first time. During the 2010-11 school year, Georgia had 162 charter schools in operation serving 56 districts. The study shows 70 percent of these charter schools made Adequate Yearly Progress, while 73 percent of traditional public schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (Georgia Department of Education (b), 2011).

### *Georgia Charter History*

In 1993 the Georgia General Assembly enacted legislation creating charter schools in Georgia for the first time. Public charter school legislation was officially passed in Georgia on April 19, 1993, which created the legal basis for the beginning of the Georgia charter school movement. The Charter Schools Act of 1998, located in Title 20 of Georgia Code, is the law that governs Georgia charter schools today. The legislative intent of the act is "to increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation by encouraging local

school systems to utilize the flexibility of a performance based contract called a charter” (Charter Schools Act of 1998, 20-2-2062).

Originally, the Charter School Act of 1993 only permitted the conversion of existing traditional public schools into charter schools, requiring a two-thirds vote by school faculty and attending families, and only granted three year charters. Individuals, parents, and private corporations were not permitted to petition for a charter. The first amendment to the act occurred in 1995, and resulted in the lowering of the voting requirement to a majority of faculty and families, and increasing the charter length to five years. The General Assembly has amended and expanded the state charter school laws numerous times since its initial inception (Kindler, 2009; Cochling, 2010).

In the spring of 2007, the groundbreaking Charter Systems Act was enacted with the passage of Senate Bill 39, which allows districts to apply to become charter school districts. Section 2 of Senate Bill 39 states:

The General Assembly finds that schools and school systems should be given high flexibility to tailor their educational programs to meet the unique needs of their communities. In furtherance of this, schools and school systems should be encouraged to use innovative educational programs including local management of schools and should be provided resources to help design and implement innovative programs. The General Assembly further finds that schools and school systems shall be held accountable for student achievement (Georgia General Assembly, Senate Bill 39, Section 2, [http://www1.legis.ga.gov/legis/2007\\_08/versions/sb39\\_AP\\_10.htm](http://www1.legis.ga.gov/legis/2007_08/versions/sb39_AP_10.htm)).

Presently, Georgia has 14 charter systems. Table 1.1 lists all of the charter systems and the year of conversion (Georgia Department of Education [a], 2011).

**Table 1.1: Georgia Charter Systems**

Year of Conversion	School District
2008	City Schools of Decatur
2008	Gainesville City Schools
2008	Warren County Schools
2008	Marietta City Schools
2010	Cartersville City Schools
2010	Floyd County Schools
2010	Putnam County Schools
2010	White County Schools
2011	Barrow County Schools
2011	Calhoun County Schools
2011	Dawson County Schools
2011	Dublin City Schools
2011	Gordon County Schools
2011	Morgan County Schools

Since the initial enactment of charter school legislation in 1993, Georgia's Charter Schools Act has been amended and supplemented numerous times to further increase the availability of charter schools. Over the last decade, 119 schools and 14 school districts have been granted charters in the state of Georgia. In 2010 Governor Sonny Perdue announced that Georgia was selected as a winner by the U.S. Department of Education for the second round of



“Race to the Top” grants, and the state is projected to receive \$400 million over the next four years in exchange for specific implementations such as national standards, new teacher evaluation systems, and strong support for charter schools. Additionally, Georgia was one of the 12 states to receive the federal Public Charter Schools Program Grant, awarding the state \$13 million, and with this significant amount of funding, Georgia anticipates opening 40 new charter schools during the two-year grant program (Georgia Department of Education, 2010). With federal funding pushing for competition between state education systems, charter schools seem like the natural solution for innovation and an effective learning environment.

### Statement of the Problem

With charter schools at the forefront of today’s national education reform push, why are nearly half of Georgia’s conversion charter schools reverting back to their traditional public school models? Since the passage of the 1993 law, the state of Georgia has approved a total of 57 schools and school systems to convert to charter status as of April 2010. Among those conversion charter schools and systems, 42 percent of the schools have reverted back to traditional public schools. Almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools are reverting back to the traditional model, but hardly any significant research has been conducted on why this is occurring. One of the objectives of this study is to examine the underlying reasons for the notably high turnover rate.

### Definition of Key Terms

Key terms are defined below in order to clarify further discussion about charter schools. The definitions are taken from the Charter Schools Act of 1998:

1. *Charter*—a performance contract between a local board and a charter petitioner, the terms of which are approved by the local board and by the state board in the case of a local charter school.
2. *Charter petitioner*—a local school, private individual, private organization, or state or local public entity that submits a petition for a charter.
3. *Charter school*—a public school that is operating under the terms of a charter.
4. *Charter system*—a local school system that is operating under the terms of a charter.
5. *Conversion charter school*—a charter school that existed as a local school prior to becoming a charter school.

### Theoretical Framework

The assumption that school decisions are linked to internal organizational objectives and external institutional environment is supported by research on charter school outcomes. The framework for this study is based on action theory, institutional theory, and the literature on charter schools.

Valach, Young, and Lynam (2002) argue that the dominant feature of action theory is the concern with processes across time: “action theory emphasizes that action is unfolded in time, that the course of action refers to the sequence or steps that are involved in action” (p. 21). The charter school movement contains multiple theories of action. Huerta and Zuckerman present three distinct theories concerning local control, market forces, and management recentralization; these specific theories of action reflect assumptions about educational change advanced by charter school reform leaders. Local control comes in the form of teachers, community-based organizations, parents, and social service agencies that all share a specific mission or vision. Market forces depend on competition and corporate efficiency as the key to better education.

Management recentralization is a term used to describe centrally directed nonprofits that manage networks of schools, typically in one region or one state, using common instructional models and school designs to achieve consistency and alignment across specifically targeted schools (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009).

Institutional theory emphasizes the influence that an organization's cultural environment has on structure and behavior, that seeks to understand the ways in which environmental cultural rules shape or constrain organizational action (Scott, 2003). As charter school leaders pursue new and different forms of schooling, they are challenged by well-established bureaucratic rules and norms that define what being a legitimate school means. Micro-level institution-building efforts, however, may represent viable alternatives to the institutional order of public education as charter school leaders attempt to achieve scale (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009). The institutional theory assists in explaining how internal goals of a school and external demands of their institution affect decisions made relating to charter status of schools in Georgia.

Depending on who is questioned, explanations and answers for the research questions of this study may vary. An entity responsible for monitoring performance measures for charter schools, may argue that these conversion charter schools reverted back to the traditional public school model because they simply did not meet the projected achievement targets set forth within their respective charter contracts. While charter school supporters may argue that conversions are rarely ever "true" charter schools in that they had a pre-existing staff, student base, and governance structure that preempts true school-level, mission-driven autonomy. As a result, to "revert" back to a traditional public schools does not equate with any meaningful change; it's simply a continuation of what's always been.

This study presents a conceptual framework rooted in institutional and action theory with an aim to determine the challenges of sustaining charter school status within the much larger institutional environment of public schools.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate why conversion charter schools in Georgia revert back to the traditional public school models. By identifying factors that influence conversion and reversion, this study analyzes why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools follow this pattern, and also explores what happens to the conversion charter schools when they “unconvert.”

### Research Questions

The following research questions help guide the study:

1. What factors influence the conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status?
2. In the opinion of state officials and school administrators, why did some Georgia charters revert back to public school status?
3. What consequences might conversion charters have once they revert to public school status?

### Significance of the Study

While literature on charter schools reflects much research that explores concept and effectiveness, there are no current studies that carefully consider the reasons Georgia conversion charter schools are reverting back to the traditional public school model. Researchers continue to examine the growth of the charter school phenomenon and charter school performance but fail

to recognize that almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools are not maintaining their charter status. The intent of my study is to help Georgia policymakers clarify why the charter option is rarely sustainable for some schools. In order to do so I examine 1) the reasons schools initially choose to convert to charter schools, 2) the reasons why so many Georgia conversion charter schools have opted to revert back to the traditional public school model, and 3) what happens when schools “unconvert”.

### Overview of Research Procedures

My research uses an interview qualitative study methodology to understand the underlying reasons behind Georgia public school decisions to convert and revert to and from charter school status. Creswell (2009) states “qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (p. 4).

Consistent with qualitative study methodology, interview, document analysis, and data analysis and interpretation were used to gather data in my research (Stake, 1995). This facilitates multiple vantage points with which to view the case. Participants in the study include Georgia state officials (GA DOE-Charter School Department, GA Charter School Association, Boards of Education—districts of conversion charter schools) and schools leaders (school district superintendents, principals and assistant principals) of schools and districts that have any association with charter schools in Georgia. In addition to interview data, this research also

draws on document analysis such as state legislation, charter contracts, and published state reports, which provide further insight into the Georgia conversion charter school phenomenon.

### Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One describes the background and rationale of the study, the statement of the problem, definition of key terms, the theoretical framework, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance of the study, and overview of the research procedures.

Chapter Two reviews current literature on the history of the charter school movement, summarizes national charter school studies, outline Georgia charter school laws, reviews Georgia charter school performance, and presents an in-depth look at Georgia conversion charter schools.

Chapter Three describes the research strategy and methods in detail, including the theoretical framework, research questions, rationale for qualitative study, design of the study, data sources, and an analysis and summary of the data. In Chapter Four, the findings from the data and an analysis of the data are presented. Chapter Five summarizes the previous chapters and discusses the findings as they relate to the research questions, presents implications of the study, concluding thoughts, recommendations, and implications for further study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify why conversion charter schools in Georgia revert back to the traditional public school models. The study identifies the factors that influence conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status, why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools have opted to revert back to the traditional public school model, and what happens to the conversion charter schools when they “unconvert.” A brief review of the history of charter schools, national studies conducted on charter schools, and the current policy and trends among Georgia charter schools is necessary precursor for an informed investigation.

#### History of Charter Schools

The charter school movement’s roots can be traced back to a number of education reform ideas throughout American history. The ideas of school choice, magnet schools, vouchers, privatization and community-parental empowerment all played a role in the structuring and creation of charter schools.

#### *Roots of the Contemporary Charter Movement*

In May of 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its historic decision against school segregation as a result of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The landmark decision declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students as unconstitutional. The decision overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, which allowed state-sponsored segregation. Over the next decade, southern states continued to rebel against the Court decision,

and political leaders affirmed that they would never desegregate their schools. Some school districts in the South responded to the Court's pressure to desegregate by adopting "freedom of choice" policies. Under these "freedom" policies, a parent could enroll their child in any public school they wanted to, which effectively kept public schools in the South segregated; white students continued in all-white schools and black students continued in all-black schools (Jackson, 2007; Ravitch, 2010).

When the federal government and the federal courts began to encourage segregated districts to reassign black and white students to integrated schools, public officials in some southern states pushed for a new option: private schools. These private schools, which at the time were known as "segregation academies," were created for white families who did not want their student to attend integrated schools, and as a result, many academies drastically reduced the number of white students in the public schools (Ravitch, 2010). TIME correspondent Jack White (1975) investigated these "segregation academies" and reported that in Memphis, "25,000 whites ha[d] fled the public schools for private academies in the past three years, tipping the racial balance from fifty-fifty to 70% black and frustrating court orders for desegregation" (p. 1). The rise of private schools essentially made it impossible for public officials to integrate the two races, especially considering that few black families had the money to afford private tuition, and those that did had no inclination to send their children to schools where they were not wanted.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, tensions between public and private schools developed over federal aid. At this time, the controversial issue in education was whether or not Catholic schools should be allowed to receive federal aid. While Catholic school proponents insisted that excluding their children would be religious discrimination, public school organizations, such as National Education Association, and advocates of the separation of church



and state continued to adamantly oppose any federal aid to religious schools. To resolve this issue, economist Milton Friedman recommended another form of school choice, vouchers (Friedman, 1955; Ravitch, 2010).

In 1955, Milton Friedman proposed that government supply universal vouchers to every family so every student could attend a school of their choosing. Friedman believed that the free market was a better way to determine the allocation of goods in a society than government policy. In “The Role of Government in Education,” Friedman argued that an education system based on universal vouchers would not only widen the range of options for parents and students but would also bring about an age of educational innovation and experimentation.

“Government,” wrote Friedman, “preferably local governmental units, would give each child, through his parents, a specified sum to be used solely in paying for his general education; the parents would be free to spend this sum at a school of their own choice, provided it met certain minimum standards laid down by the appropriate governmental unit. Such schools would be conducted under a variety of auspices: by private enterprises operated for profit, nonprofit institutions established by private endowment, religious bodies, and some even by governmental units” (Friedman, 1955, p.11). He further predicted that vouchers would give low-income Americans, those traditionally trapped in the worst public schools, a better chance at receiving a good education while minimizing inefficient government spending. Vouchers “would bring a healthy increase in the variety of educational institutions available and in competition among them. Private initiative and enterprise would quicken the pace of progress in this area as it has in so many others. Government would serve its proper function of improving the operation of the invisible hand without substituting the dead hand of bureaucracy” (Friedman, 1955, p.11)

### *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*

Congress passed the milestone Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. The expansive education bill was a part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." As a former teacher who had witnessed poverty's impact on his students, Johnson believed that equal access to education was vital to a child's ability to lead a productive and successful life. During President Kennedy's time in office, a number of proposals were developed to ensure that American students were competitive with those in other countries and that every American received a good education regardless of religious, racial, or class background. After Kennedy's assassination in 1963, President Johnson, along with Congress, shaped the bill that became the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) from Kennedy's proposed legislative agenda. The law passed in only 87 days and became the centerpiece of Johnson's legislative agenda (Baily & Edith, 1968; Jeffrey, 1978; Jennings, 1995).

Johnson hoped ESEA would help children escape the ghettos and that poorer states would benefit from the federal funding. Along with permitting needy students in religious schools to receive federal aid for remedial services, the ESEA also forced southern districts to dismantle segregated public schools, threatening to withhold federal dollars if they did not desegregate. As the federal government increased the pressure for desegregation, some school districts began to encourage voluntary desegregation through other forms of school choice. At this time magnet schools—public schools with specialized courses or curricula—opened up to encourage white students to attend urban schools that would otherwise be comprised of a predominantly black student bodies (Baily & Edith, 1968; McLaughlin, 1975; Jennings, 1995).

Until the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980, the issue of school choice remained outside of the mainstream, viewed by most as means to keep public schools segregated. After Reagan was elected, he openly advocated for school choice, specifically vouchers. Ronald Reagan was directly influenced by Milton Friedman's ideas of freedom, deregulation, market-based solutions, and privatization and, subsequently, appointed Friedman as one of his advisors.

During Reagan's first term in office, he focused on the idea of vouchers, through which he intended to help low-performing students. During his second term in office, he backed away from the voucher idea and instead promoted public school choice. Reagan's first secretary of education, Terrel H. Bell, did not join in Reagan's advocacy of vouchers and school prayer. Bell took office committed to abolishing the Department of Education. In August of 1981, Bell sent the White House a detailed plan in which he recommended downgrading the department to a foundation along the lines of the National Science Foundation. He also became increasingly convinced of the need for a Cabinet-level education agency. After Bell resigned in 1985, he was succeeded by William J. Bennett as secretary of education. Bennett enthusiastically embraced school choice and included it as one of his "three C's": content, character, and choice (Johnston, 1996; Ravitch, 2010).

The Democratic Party controlled the House of Representatives during both of Reagan's terms in office. The Democrats were closely allied with two national teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), both of which viewed school choice as a threat to public education and a step towards privatization. However, state and local think tanks such as Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation continued the battle for school

choice. In 1982, Congress rejected Reagan's proposals for school choice, as well as his plan to eliminate the Department of Education (Ravitch, 2010).

Although ideas from Milton Friedman's market-driven approach to schooling, specifically vouchers, continued to be opposed by teacher unions and rejected by Congress and the majority of voters, public school choice programs began to gain ground in the 1980s when Cambridge, Massachusetts, Montclair, New Jersey, and District 4 in East Harlem, New York all adopted public school choice plans. In 1988, Minnesota became the first to adopt a state-wide program of "open enrollment," allowing "K-12 students to move across district lines as long as the receiving district has room and the movement does not harm desegregation efforts" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 118).

### *1990s*

As the 1990s approached, the school choice movement gained new momentum when John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe published their book *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools*. The book reports on a research project involving an analysis of several national data bases in an attempt to determine what factors lead to high levels of academic performance. Chubb and Moe concluded that problems of academic performance in schools would not be changed through the various reform movements as the problems are a direct result of the structure of American public schools, specifically their control through democratic processes (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Chubb and Moe present a three pronged argument: (1) private schools have lower levels of bureaucratic influence, (2) less bureaucratic influence make school organizations more functional, and (3) better organized schools produce greater achievement gains among their

students. Chubb and Moe further argue that public schools can never be fundamentally changed as long as they are subject to democratic control. As a result of Americans choosing to exercise direct control over their schools, academic performance suffers. The authors assert that the only way to bring about change in the American public schools is through school choice. Chubb and Moe claim choice “has the capacity *all by itself* to bring about the kind of transformation that, for years, reformers have been seeking to engineer in a myriad other ways” (Chubb & Moe, 1990, p. 217).

Although Congress and voters continued to reject the idea of vouchers, Chubb and Moe’s argument for school choice convinced two urban school districts, Milwaukee and Cleveland, to use vouchers as a tool to raise student achievement. At the time, proponents for vouchers believed that the system would expand educational opportunities to low socioeconomic students and empower parents at the same time. When the voucher system was first put into place in Milwaukee, the program enabled low-income students to attend private schools as long as they were specifically nonreligious private schools. Anti-voucher forces mounted a lengthy legal challenge in state courts, but ultimately voucher supporters won the battle. In June 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court in *Jackson v. Benson* ruled that the voucher program did not violate the federal establishment clause or the Wisconsin Constitution and permitted religious schools to accept voucher students (Peterson, 1995; Ravitch, 2010).

In the early 1990s, proponents of school vouchers had found a new, less controversial form of school choice: charter schools. The idea of charter schools began to gain popularity as proponents campaigned for state legislatures to pass laws authorizing charter schools. According to [uscharterschools.org](http://uscharterschools.org) (2010), legal definitions of charter schools vary state to state, but essentially charter schools are:

nonsecretarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The “charter” establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school’s mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which the charters are granted varies, but most are granted 3–5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school’s contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor—usually a state or local school board—to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them, and the public that funds them.(uscharterschools.org)

The term *charter school* traces back to the writings of Dr. Ray Budde, a former professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, in his report “Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts” in 1988. In this report, Budde describes the shift of responsibility and control over student learning away from the removed administrators to those who do the teaching. In his plan, those who received a charter would have an opportunity to explore innovative ideas of their own and research rather than replicate what was already being done within schools (Budde, 1988).

In addition to an emphasis on systemic reform, the idea of school choice garnered increasing attention in the 1990s. President George H. W. Bush’s America 2000 proposal included publically funded vouchers for parents to enroll their children in private schools. Charter schools offered yet another option in the school choice arena. Relatively early in the

Bush administration, the charter school movement gained support from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which had previously opposed the idea of school choice. In a 1988 New York Times column, AFT president Albert Shanker described charter schools as a promising front in improving education. However, despite the growth of interest in charter schools, no legislation was enacted during the Bush administration to support them (Shanker, 1998; Thernstrom, 1991).

As the charter movement began to grow, its supporters pointed to Shanker as a founding father. Those who invoked his name overlooked the fact that Shanker withdrew his endorsement of charter schools in 1993 and insisted that the biggest problem in American education was “the absence of a clear national consensus about the mission of the schools” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 124). At the same time, the charter movement became increasingly hostile towards unions. Charter school operators wanted to be able to have more control in the areas of hiring and firing teachers at will, setting their own salary schedule based on performance, controlling the work environment, and requiring longer work hours.

Although the charter movement was losing support from teacher unions, they continued to appeal to all sides of the political spectrum. Conservatives saw them as a means to deregulate public education and create competition for the public education system, while liberals embraced them as a tool to stop the use of vouchers, and, as a result, charter schools proved to be more popular than vouchers (Ravitch, 2010).

### *Clinton to Bush*

As part of President Clinton’s 1994 education legislation, Congress established a program to award federal dollars to spur the development of new charter schools. According to the

Center for Education Reform (2001), by the fall of 2001, some 2,300 charter schools had opened their doors, enrolling nearly half a million students. By 2009, the Center for Education Reform reported that there were about 4,600 charter schools with 1.4 million students enrolled. From 1999–2000 to 2007–2008 school years, the number of students enrolled in charter schools in the United States more than tripled from 340,000 to 1.3 million students. As of February 2010, charter schools were operating in 40 states and the District of Columbia (Center for Education Reform, 2010).

### *Obama Administration*

In February 2009, with the support of President Obama and the United States Department of Education, Congress enacted the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 which provided \$4.35 billion for the Race to the Top fund.

“Race to the Top Fund, a competitive grant program designed to encourage and reward States that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, including making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring student preparation for success in college and careers; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 2).

One of the criteria for the grants is “[e]nsuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools” (p.11). Among other things, this criterion includes consideration of the extent to which (1) “[t]he State has a charter school law that does not prohibit or effectively inhibit increasing the number of high-performing charter schools,” (2) the



State has laws that “encourage charter schools that serve student populations that are similar to local district student populations, especially relative to high-need students,” and (3) the State’s charter schools receive “equitable funding compared to traditional public schools, and a commensurate share of local, State, and Federal revenues” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p.11).

With \$100 billion in stimulus funding for education, including \$4.35 billion in the highly competitive Race to the Top fund to improve the quality of public education, Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan offers a warning to states: Embrace charters or risk losing stimulus dollars. His signature program requires states to expand the number of charter schools and to implement value-added models of teacher evaluations based on student achievement to qualify for Race to the Top funding. Duncan told reporters, “States that don’t have charter laws or put artificial caps on growth of charter schools will jeopardize their applications under the Race to the Top fund. . . . Simply put, they put themselves at a competitive disadvantage for the largest pool of discretionary dollars states have ever had access to” (White, 2009, p. 1).

Throughout history, charter schools have been used to push various agendas whether they are based on social idealizations or educational idealizations. The basic idea of the more freedom to innovate at the school level leads to a better educational experience has been the core argument for proponents over the years. However, critics continue to emphasize the statistically proven ineffectiveness, as well as the inequities amongst all schools within the public school system.

#### National Studies—Charter School Effects on Student Achievement

2003 NAEP Pilot Study

*“The Nation’s Report Card: America’s Charter Schools”*

As the charter school movement continued to grow rapidly, interest in how charter schools function and perform academically also increased. Motivated by this interest, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which sets policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), asked the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to conduct a pilot study of charter schools. The pilot study was conducted as part of NAEP’s 2003 assessment of fourth-graders in reading and mathematics. NAEP also surveyed participating charter schools about their practices, structure, and governance (Nelson et al., 2004).

According to the Center for Education Reform (2003), in the 2002–2003 school year there were 2,695 charter schools in 36 states. Because of differences in state legislation and charter school laws, the number of charter schools differed state to state and posed a sampling challenge for NAEP. To ensure that reported statistics were unbiased estimates of the results for the nation’s charter schools, a sample of charter school students in the study were selected through a number of sources. Some of them include the 2000–2001 Common Core of Data, NAEP state coordinators, NAEP school questionnaires, and telephone interviews (Nelson et al., 2004).

A total of 150 schools were identified as charter schools in the 2003 NAEP Pilot Study. The school sample comprised of 150 charter schools and 6,764 public noncharter schools. Out of the 150 participating charter schools, a random sample participated in each of the reading and mathematics assessments. In the 2002–2003 school year, both charter school students and noncharter school students took the NAEP reading and mathematics assessments at the same time. Results for both fourth-grade charter school students and all other fourth-grade students were produced identically (Nelson et al., 2004).

### *Reading Results*

Results for all students were presented by gender, race/ethnicity (White, Black, and Hispanic), eligibility for free/reduced-price school lunch, and type of school location (central city, non-central city). According to the reading scores, based on a scale from 0-500, there were no measurable differences in scores between charter school students and traditional public school students (average reading score of 212 vs. 217). There were also no measurable differences between fourth-grade students in charter schools and other public schools in central cities (average reading score of 205 vs. 208) or in non-central cities (average reading score of 220 vs. 220) locations and no obvious difference between race/ethnicity either (White—227 vs. 227, Black—195 vs. 197, Hispanic—201 vs. 199) (Nelson et al., 2004).

Charter school students eligible for free/reduced-priced lunch, on average, scored lower than public school students eligible for free/reduced-priced lunch (average reading score of 195 vs. 201). Also, female students in charter schools scored lower than female students in other public schools (average reading score of 215 vs. 220) (Nelson et al., 2004).

### *Mathematics Results*

Similar to the average reading scores, average math scores were also presented by gender, race/ethnicity (White, Black, and Hispanic), eligibility for free/reduced-price school lunch, type of school location (central city, non-central-city), and on a 0-500 scale. The data showed that the average fourth-grade math student attending a charter school performed lower than other public school students (average math score of 228 vs. 234), which applied to both male and female students (male—229 vs. 235, female—228 vs. 233). However, there were no differences when comparisons were made for fourth-graders with similar racial/ethnic

backgrounds (White—242 vs. 243, Black—214 vs. 216, Hispanic—219 vs. 221) (Nelson et al., 2004).

The average score for fourth-graders enrolled in charter schools that were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch was lower than that of their traditional public school peers (average math score of 216 vs. 222). However, there was no measurable difference in fourth-grade students who were not eligible (average math score of 238 vs. 244). On average, fourth-grade students who attended charter schools in central cities, scored lower than those students who attended public schools in similar locations (average math score of 221 vs. 227). In contrast, there were no measurable differences when average math score comparisons were made between charter school and other public school students in non-central city locations (average math score of 236 vs. 237) (Nelson et al., 2004).

### *Summary of Findings*

When comparing the performance of charter and other public school students, recognizing the differences in common characteristics such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic background is of great importance. Within the 150 charter schools sampled, the highest percentage of fourth-grade students were Black and attended schools in central cities. As a whole, charter school students in the study did not perform as well as their public school counterparts (Nelson et al., 2004).

Because of the considerable difference in students and school characteristics, the NAEP survey designed for this study was only able to provide a snapshot of America's charter schools. The study presented that in reading, as a whole, there was no measurable difference in fourth-grade students attending charter schools and their counterparts in other public schools. When

mathematics performance was compared among White, Black, and Hispanic fourth-graders attending charter schools, there was also no measurable difference. As a result of this study, NAEP has improved its procedures for identifying charter schools and continues to research the difference in achievement between charter school students and other public schools (Nelson et al., 2004).

2004 Caroline M. Hoxby, Harvard University

*“Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences”*

In 2004, Caroline Hoxby released studies comparing the reading and mathematics proficiencies of charter school students with their neighboring district school peers and of students on waiting lists for charter schools who remained in the neighboring district schools. The study was based on schools that enrolled approximately 99 percent of fourth graders, a sample of whom were tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the 2002–2003 school year, who attended charter schools and compared them to the traditional public schools that their students would most likely otherwise attend. There were 36 states and the District of Columbia that had charter school students enrolled in the relevant grade in the 2002–2003 school year that were examined for this study (Hoxby, 2004).

Both charter schools and noncharter public schools took the same NAEP state exams. The study showed its findings in terms of proficiency levels, which all states and NAEP publish. The achievement levels were set by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) to help interpret student performance on NAEP. The three NAEP achievement levels include: Basic—denoted partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at a

given grade; Proficient—represents solid academic performance; Advanced—signifies superior performance demonstrating competency over challenging subject matter (Hoxby, 2004).

### *Simple Proficiency Differences between Charter School Students and Students at Matched Regular Public Schools*

The study reported that for the United States as a whole on the state's reading examination charter school students were 4.6 percent more likely to be proficient than their matched traditional public school counterparts. Charter school students were also 2.3 percent more likely to be proficient on their state's mathematics examination compared to their matched noncharter public school peers (Hoxby, 2004).

After taking into account the at-risk and gifted student population, adjustments were made to the outcomes. When these allowances were made, charter school students were 5.2 percent more likely to be proficient on their state's reading examination compared to students in their matched regular public schools. Charter school students were also 3.2 percent more likely to be proficient on their state's mathematics exam than their regular public school peers (Hoxby, 2004).

### *Proficiency Differences by State*

Proficiency differences between charter school students and matched regular public school students varied among states:

*Alaska*—charter school students are about 20 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and math

*Arizona*—charter school students are about 10 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and math

*California*—charter school students are about 9 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 5 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*Colorado*—charter school students are about 12 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 14 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*District of Columbia*—charter school students are about 12 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 13 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*Florida*—charter school students are about 5 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 3 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*Georgia*—charter school students are about 6 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 5 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*Hawaii*—charter school students are about 14 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 12 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*Illinois*—charter school students are about 16 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 21 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*Louisiana*—charter school students are about 33 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 29 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*Massachusetts*—charter school students are about 8 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and math

*Michigan*—charter school students are about 3 percent less likely to be proficient in reading and 1 percent less likely to be proficient in math

*North Carolina*—charter school students are about 4 percent less likely to be proficient in reading and math

*New Jersey*—charter school students are about 12 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 7 percent more likely to be proficient in math

*New York*—there was no statistically significant finding to report

*Ohio*—there was no statistically significant finding to report

*Oregon*—charter school students are about 14 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and there was no statistically significant finding to report for math

*Pennsylvania*—charter school students are about 9 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and there was no statistically significant finding to report for math

*Texas*— charter school students are about 7 percent less likely to be proficient in math and there was no statistically significant finding to report for reading

*Wisconsin*—there was no statistically significant finding to report

(Hoxby, 2004)

After examining differences among state proficiency averages, the study shows that charter school students are more likely to experience raised achievement if their state enacted a charter law early. This idea was supported by both by the Center for Education Reform's Ranking Scorecard in *Charter School Laws across the States 2004* and the Fordham Foundation's report *Charter School Authorizing: Are States Making the Grade?* The Hoxby study reiterates that charter schools do perform better when they receive more support, and states that enacted their laws earlier are likely to provide more adequate funding, more autonomy, and multiple chartering authorities (Hoxby, 2004).



### *Proficiency Differences by the Number of Years that a Charter School has been in Operation*

The study suggests that charter students are 2.5 percent more likely to be proficient in reading if their school has been in operation for 1 to 4 years, 5.2 percent more likely to be proficient in reading if their school has been in operation 5 to 8 years, and 10.1 percent more likely to be proficient in reading if their school has been in operation 9 to 11 years. For proficiency in mathematics for charter schools, similar increases in percent occurred as the years of operation increased (Hoxby, 2004).

When examined further, the study reports that the reason for increased performance over time may be because charter schools work out their snags in curriculum, management, and so on. The low-performing charter schools are also essentially “weeded-out” while the high-performing ones continue to contribute to the ranks of experienced schools (Hoxby, 2004).

### *How Proficiency Varies with a State’s Support for Charter Schools*

According to the study, a state is considered to be more supportive of charter schools if it establishes multiple, independent chartering authorities; if it exempts charter schools from local collective bargaining agreements and other rules that constrain school management; if it gives schools legal, operational, and fiscal autonomy; and if funding for charter schools is in the ballpark of funding for regular public schools. This part of the study examined whether the charter schools perform better when they receive more support. Results showed that charter school’s proficiency advantage was 6.4 percent greater in reading and 11.7 percent greater in math if its funding was at least 40 percent of that enjoyed by regular public schools in its state (Hoxby, 2004).

### *Do Charter Schools Improve Achievement More Among Disadvantaged Children?*

This particular part of the study examined whether charter schools' proficiency advantage was greater when a high percentage of students were African-American, Hispanic, or economically disadvantaged. The study concluded that charter schools' effects on proficiency advantage were 4.2 percent in reading and 2.1 in math. When charter schools operated in areas that were highly Hispanic, the proficiency advantage of charter schools was 7.6 percent in reading and 4.1 percent in math. Although the effects for charter schools that were in a highly African-American areas were a little greater than the effects for a typical charter school, the difference in effects were not statistically significant. Lastly, the study concluded that charter schools' effects on reading and math proficiency were greater when charter schools operated in areas that were disproportionately poor; the proficiency advantage of charter schools in areas where a high percentage of students are poor was 6.5 percent in reading and 4.8 percent in math (Hoxby, 2004).

### *Summary of Findings*

Both the reading and mathematics studies indicated that students in charter schools showed higher achievement than those who remained in the neighboring district schools, even after controlling for student background variables. The study also confirmed that students, who remain in charter schools that have been in operation longer, are more likely to have a proficiency advantage over their matched peers in neighboring public schools. The results also suggest that Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to experience increased achievement in charter schools than in the traditional public school they would otherwise be attending. Overall, the outcomes of the study highlight that students in charter

schools showed higher achievement than those who remained in the neighboring school districts (Hoxby, 2004).

## 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress

### *“A Closer Look at Charter Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling”*

In August of 2006, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) released a second national study on charter school performance. This report combined two separate analyses for both reading and mathematics: (1) a “combined analysis” in which hierarchical linear models (HLMs) were employed to examine differences between two types of schools when multiple student and/or school characteristics were taken into account and (2) a “charter-school-only analysis” in which charter school surveys were utilized to collect information about a number of areas related to school functioning (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2006).

### *Results from the Combined Analyses—Reading and Mathematics*

The combined analysis was employed to estimate the average difference in achievement between charter and public noncharter schools. The combined analysis is comprised of three phases: Phase 1—all charter schools are compared to all public noncharter schools, Phase 2—charter schools are classified into two groups based on whether or not they are affiliated with a public school district, and Phase 3—a comparison of public schools (charter and noncharter) having a central city location and serving a high-minority population (NAEP, 2006).

In the first phase, the average charter school mean for reading was 5.2 points lower than the average public noncharter school mean. After adjusting for multiple student characteristics,

the average charter school mean still remained lower with a difference of 4.2 points. Both differences were statistically significant. For mathematics, the average charter school mean was 5.8 points lower than the average public noncharter school mean. After adjustment, the difference in means was 4.7 points. Here as well, both differences were statistically significant (NAEP, 2006).

In the second phase, on average, the reading mean scores for charter schools affiliated with a public school district were not significantly different from those of public noncharter schools. In contrast, the reading mean scores for charter schools not affiliated with a public school district were significantly lower than the means for public noncharter schools, both with and without an adjustment. For mathematics, on average, the mean scores for charter schools affiliated with a public school district were not significantly different from those for public noncharter schools. In contrast, the mathematics mean scores for charter schools not affiliated with a public school district were significantly lower than the means for public noncharter schools, both with and without an adjustment (NAEP, 2006).

In the third phase, there were no significant differences in the reading average mean scores between charter schools and public noncharter schools. However, for mathematics, there were significant differences between the average mean of all charter schools and the average mean of public noncharter schools. These differences also appear between charter school means not affiliated with a public school district and public noncharter school means. In both cases, the differences in means favor the public noncharter school, but there were no significant differences between the average mathematics mean of charter schools affiliated with a public school district and public noncharter schools (NAEP, 2006).

### *Results from the Charter-School-Only Analysis—Reading and Mathematics*

In the report, the charter-school-only analysis is used to examine characteristics of charter schools associated with student achievement. Characteristics of charter school functioning includes policies from which the school had waivers or exemptions, areas in which the school was monitored, entities to which the school was required to report, student population served, and program content (NAEP, 2006).

The charter-school-only analysis in reading revealed that 57 percent of the variation among school means can be accredited to the disparity between students within schools. Difference variables among students include gender, race/ethnicity, disability status, status as an English language learner, and eligibility for free/reduced price lunch. The variance in mean scores of 27 percent was attributed to a reduced set of 10 school characteristics such as teacher experience, region of the country, areas in which charter schools are monitored, and whether or not a charter school was part of another public school district. Thus, overall, student and school characteristics accounted for about five-sixths of the variance among school reading means (NAEP, 2006).

The charter-school-only analysis in mathematics revealed that 55 percent of the variation among school means can be accredited to the disparity between students within schools. The variance in mean scores of 11 percent was attributed to a reduced set of 7 school characteristics such as waivers for certain requirements, areas monitored, and the charter granting agency. Thus, overall, student and school characteristics accounted for about two-thirds of the variance among school mathematics means (NAEP, 2006).

### *Summary of Findings*

After adjustments were made for student characteristics, public noncharter school mean scores in reading and math were higher, on average, than those for charter schools. According to the study, charter schools lag behind more so in mathematics than in reading. Comparisons of the results indicate that school-level characteristics of charter schools play a greater role in accounting for differences in student achievement in reading than do school-level characteristics of all public schools. Charter schools vary in many ways such as policies, areas and populations they serve, and program content. Such characteristics explain the variations in observed mean differences between charter schools and noncharter public schools (NAEP, 2006).

### 2009 Center for Research on Education Outcome (CREDO) Study

#### *“Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States”*

The Center for Research on Education Outcome at Stanford University recognized a strong national demand for more charter schools from parents and local communities. It acknowledged that charter schools are the largest vehicle for school choice in U.S. public education and stand at the forefront of school reform today. In 2009, CREDO released the national charter school study, entitled, *“Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,”* which presented a current and comprehensible analysis about how well charter schools are doing in terms of educating their students compared to their traditional public school peers. CREDO partnered with 15 state education departments, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado (Denver), Florida, Georgia, Illinois (Chicago), Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and the District of Columbia, to conduct an in-depth

analysis of academic outcomes for both charter school and traditional public school students (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2003).

### *Study Approach*

Together, these states educate more than 70 percent of the nation's charter school students. In order to create a comparison population that reduced the differences between charter school and traditional public school students as much as possible, researchers generated "virtual twins" for each of the charter school students in the study. Every virtual twin was created based on students who match the charter student's grade-level, gender, race/ethnicity, free or reduced price lunch status, English language learner status, special education status, and prior test scores on state achievement tests. The goal was to create a virtual twin study where all pairs of students were mirror images of one another, except for the location of where they were being schooled. Virtual twins were developed for 84 percent of all the students in charter schools (CREDO, 2003).

As for potential differences in accountability tests, the study circumvented those difficulties by standardizing test results from each participating state. The study recognizes that minor differences may remain after those adjustments, but their influence is small compared to the predominant degree of overlap that exists among the tests (CREDO, 2003).

The study included over 1.7 million records from more than 2,400 charter schools. For the analysis, researchers relied on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Math and reading were examined independently. The report presented the results of their analysis of five questions: (1) What is the overall impact of charter schools?, (2) Do the impacts of charter schools differ by school type?, (3) What are the impacts of charter schools for different student

subgroups?, (4) Does longer enrollment in charter schools affect student learning?, and (5) What are the impacts of charter school policies on student results? (CREDO, 2003)

### *Charter School Effects on Student Learning*

Gains on student academic learning in reading and math state achievement tests were examined in three ways:

1. A pooled nationwide analysis of charter school impacts
2. A state-by-state analysis of charter school results
3. An examination of the performance of charter schools against their local alternatives

In reading, charter students on average realized a growth in learning that was .01 standard deviations less than their virtual twins. According to the study, the less than 1 percent of a standard deviation is significant statistically but is meaningless from a practical standpoint. In math, the analysis shows that students in charter schools gain significantly less than their traditional public school counterparts. Charter students on average had learning gains that were .03 standard deviations smaller than their virtual twins. The observed differences in average math gains were both significant and large enough to be meaningful. However, in both reading and math cases, the absolute size of the effect was small (CREDO, 2003).

### *Charter School Effect by School Characteristics*

The reading results for all the grade spans were found to be statistically significant. For elementary charters, students realized a small positive gain over their virtual twins of .01 standard deviations a year. Charter middle school students also experienced a positive gain over their traditional public school counterparts of .02 standard deviations. However, the effect for charter high schools and multi-level schools was negative compared to traditional public school



students with .02 and .04 standard deviation reductions in overall gain, respectively (CREDO, 2003).

### *Charter School Effect by Student Characteristics*

For many charter school proponents, improving education outcomes for traditionally disadvantaged student groups is the ultimate goal. To measure the effect of charter schooling on groups of students, researchers used a consistent standard of comparison for academic growth. In all of the analysis in this examination, the average growth of various student groups were compared to the performance of an average traditional public school white student who was proficient in English, not receiving Special Education service, and was not in poverty (CREDO, 2003).

Charter school students with Special Education services performed, on average, about as well in reading as similar students in traditional public schools. However, Special Education charter students had significantly better outcomes for math relative to their virtual twins (CREDO, 2003).

Charter schools show distinctly different results for minority students. Black and Hispanic charter students did not fare as well in reading gains as their virtual twins. Both groups of minority students had significantly lower gains than their traditional public school comparison students (CREDO, 2003).

Charter students in poverty experienced statistically superior learning gains in reading compared to their virtual twins. While significant statistically, the effect is small. Impoverished students who attended charter schools realized the same relative outcome in math learning gains compared to their traditional public school counterparts (CREDO, 2003).

English Language Learners experienced the same favorable set of outcomes. For students with English language deficiencies, schooling in charter schools accelerated learning gains in reading by a significant amount. The same result was observed for math learning gains; charter school students had significantly higher gains than those obtained their virtual twins (CREDO, 2003).

#### *Charter School Effect by Starting Decile*

The comparison was done by grouping students according to initial scores on their baseline state achievement tests. The achievement tests for each state with year and subject divided into deciles and the students' baseline scores were sorted accordingly, and students were further divided into charter and traditional public school groups within each decile (CREDO, 2003).

For reading, charter school students showed significantly less growth than their virtual twins in deciles 2–8, and their growth was equivalent to that of their traditional public school peers in the lowest and highest deciles. In math, the negative effect was persistent across all deciles (CREDO, 2003).

#### *Charter School Effect over Time*

This part of the study focused on the effect that charter schools have on students' development the longer these students stay in charters. The overall charter school impact was disaggregated by the number of years a student had enrolled in a charter. In their first year, charter students generally experienced a significant negative impact on learning in reading. By the second year, charter school students had a positive and significant impact on learning and experienced even greater gains in reading after three years. The average student with three years

of charter schooling had a .02 standard deviation gain in learning. For math, students in their first year of charter schooling had gains that were -.09 standard deviations behind the average traditional public school gain. The second year of attendance made no difference in the degree of learning gains. For students who remained in a charter school for three years or more, mildly positive but significant impacts on learning gains in math were realized, about .03 standard deviations in the third year (CREDO, 2003).

### *Charter School Effect by State*

The report found that the effectiveness of charter schools varied widely by states. States with significantly higher learning gains for charter school students occurred in traditional schools of Arkansas, Colorado (Denver), Illinois (Chicago), Louisiana, and Missouri. States that demonstrated lower average charter school student growth in traditional schools included Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, and Texas. California, District of Columbia, Georgia, and North Carolina all had mixed results or results that were no different than the gains that would have occurred in their traditional school counterparts (CREDO, 2003).

### *Summary of Findings*

Overall, the national pooled analysis of charter school performance revealed that charter schools can expect to see their academic growth for students to be somewhat lower than their traditional public school peers. Academic growth of charter school students trails the growth of traditional public school students by .01 standard deviations in reading, and by .03 standard deviations in math (CREDO, 2003).

This report was the first of three that were released in 2009 by CREDO to study the impact of charter schools. While this report focuses on the effect of charter schools on the

learning of the students they enroll, the second report examines the influence of operational characteristics of charter schools in their performance. The final report examines the effect of charter schools on other schools in their immediate surroundings (CREDO, 2003).

#### 2009 RAND Education Study

*“Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition”*

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization that provides analysis and solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. This particular report was produced within a unit of the RAND Corporation, RAND Education. The funding was provided by several nonprofit foundations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the William Penn Foundation. The study aimed to inform the policy debate by examining four research questions in several geographic locations: (1) What are the characteristics of students transferring to charter schools? (2) What effect do charter schools have on test-score gains for students who transfer between traditional public schools and charter schools? (3) What is the effect of attending a charter high school on the probability of graduating and of entering college? (4) What effect does the introduction of charter schools have on test scores of students in nearby traditional public schools? In order to draw conclusions to these questions, longitudinal, student-level achievement data were examined from Chicago, San Diego, Philadelphia, Denver, Milwaukee, and the states of Ohio, Texas, and Florida (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass, & Witte, 2009).

#### *Key Findings*

RAND published eight key findings related to the various research questions in the study. These findings include (1) there is no evidence that charter schools are systemically attracting above-average students; (2) transfers to charter schools do not involve dramatic shifts in the sorting of students by race in any of the sites included in the study; (3) the average achievement effects of elementary charters are very difficult to assess in the absence of prekindergarten baseline test scores; (4) virtual charter schools, which use technology to deliver education to students in their homes and enroll a substantial portion of charter students in Ohio (and Pennsylvania and California), merit additional attention; (5) in most locations, charter schools have difficulty raising student achievement in their first year of operation, typically producing achievement results that fall short of those of local traditional public schools; (6) charter schools in most locales have marginally greater variation in performance than traditional public schools, as measured by the achievement-impact estimate for each school; (7) in the two locations with data on educational attainment outcomes (Florida and Chicago), attending a charter high school is associated with statistically significant and substantial increases in the probability of graduating and of enrolling in college; and, (8) there is no evidence in any of the locations that charter schools are negatively affecting achievement of students in nearby traditional public schools (Zimmer et al., 2009).

### Charter School Performance in Georgia

#### *Caroline Hoxby's 2004 Report*

At the time of Caroline Hoxby's 2004 report, "*Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences*," the state of Georgia had 1.7 percent of its students enrolled in charter schools. The total number of enrolled

students from Georgia used in the national study was 2,575 students. State proficiency data for Georgia was received from the Department of Education for the 2002–2003 school year fourth grade Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). Based on these scores, the study concluded that Georgia charter school students are about 6 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 5 percent more likely to be proficient in math than their matched regular public school peer (CREDO, 2003).

### *2009 CREDO Report*

The 2009 CREDO report, “*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*,” took a more in-depth look into charter school performance among individual states across the nation. The report first detailed a national assessment of charter school impacts, then concluded with a more specific analysis of 15 states and the District of Columbia by evaluating whether students who attend charter schools fare better than if they would have attended a traditional public school. A supplemental examination of the results for Georgia charter schools revealed that math gains were significantly lower in charter school students compared to their traditional public school peers, though there were no noticeable differences in reading performance. Charter schools had a larger and more positive effect on learning for low income students compared to their traditional public school peers. Hispanic and Black students performed considerably below their traditional public school peers in reading and math (CREDO, 2003).

Charter Schools Impact by Students’ Years of Enrollment—To explore deeper into the charter school effects, the study examined whether the academic success of students who enroll in a charter school varies as they maintain their enrollment. The results suggest that new charter school students initially face a loss of learning in both reading and math in comparison to their

traditional public school counterparts . As students continue in charter schools for the second year, they have an initial gain in reading but no significant impact in math. By the third and fourth year of consecutive charter school attendance, students showed an initial positive impact on their math scores in the third year, followed by no significant difference in the fourth year, and a significantly negative impact on their learning in reading both years (CREDO, 2003).

Charter Schools Impact by Race/Ethnicity—The study delved deeper into the achievement differences by racial and ethnic background. The baseline comparison is the performance of the average white student who does not qualify for Special Education services, English Language Learner support, or Free or Reduced Price Lunch subsidies. The results show that both Blacks and Hispanics do significantly worse in reading and math compared to their traditional public school counterparts (CREDO, 2003).

Impact of Charter Schooling on Students in Poverty—The study considered the impact of charter schools on students that are eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch. The outcomes show that students in poverty enrolled in charter schools do significantly better in reading and math compared to their traditional public school counterparts (CREDO, 2003).

Charter School Impacts With Special Education—At the time of the study in Georgia, the overall proportion of charter school students in Special Education was 11 percent. The study found that Special Education students in charter schools in Georgia receive no significant benefit from charter school in reading or math compared to their traditional public school counterparts (CREDO, 2003).

Effects of Charter Schooling on English Language Learners—The comparison of learning gains of charter school English Language Learners and their traditional school counterparts showed

that those in charter schools receive no significant benefits in reading. However, English Language Learner students in charter schools do significantly better in math compared to their traditional public school counterparts (CREDO, 2003).

Charter School Impacts With Grade-Repeating Students—The study focused on the outcomes of students who were retained. Retained students in charter schools in Georgia receive no significant benefit from charter school attendance compared to their counterparts in traditional public schools in reading or math (CREDO, 2003).

Charter School Impact by Student's Starting Decile—The study examined whether charter schools produce relatively better growth results than traditional public schools. The results show that charter schools do about the same as traditional public schools in most respects. The effect of charter school attendance on growth results in both math and reading is mostly insignificant across the deciles (CREDO, 2003).

### *Georgia Department of Education*

#### *Annual Reports*

The Georgia Department of Education releases an Annual Charter School Report every school year including an analysis of charter school facts, school performance, and student performance. The 2009–2010 annual report on Georgia's charter schools examined these categories over a four year period comparing them to state averages.

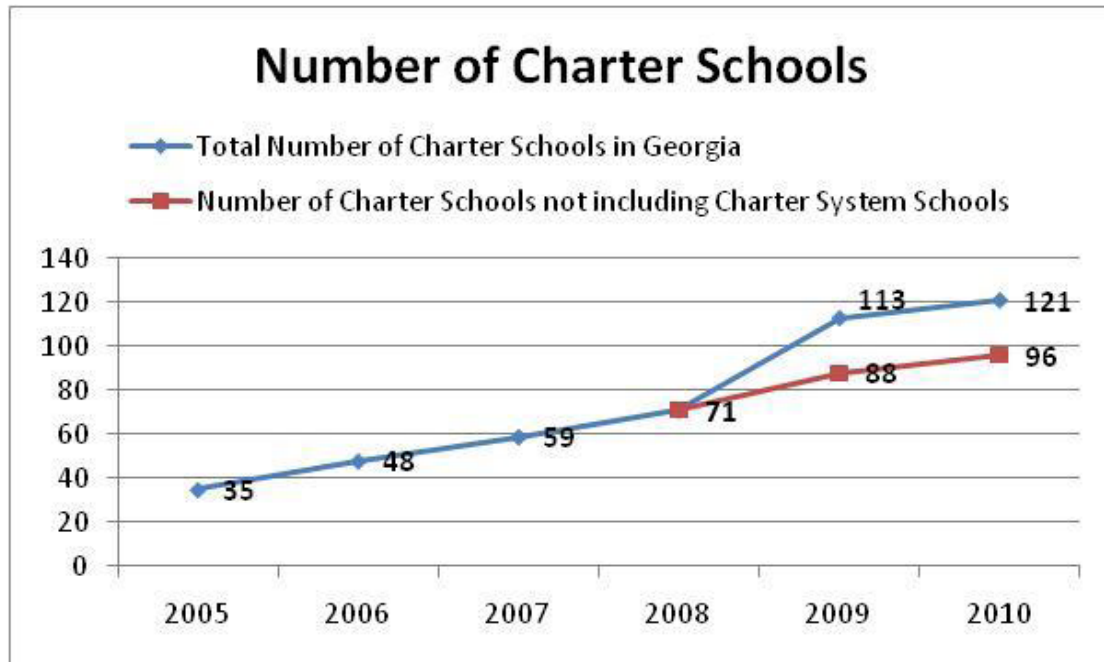
### Georgia Charter School Numbers

#### Number of Charter Schools



The number of Georgia charter schools continues to grow since their debut in 1998. In 2010, Georgia had 121 charter schools in operation. Of the 121 charter schools, 54% of them were start-up charter schools.

Table 2.1: Number of Charter Schools

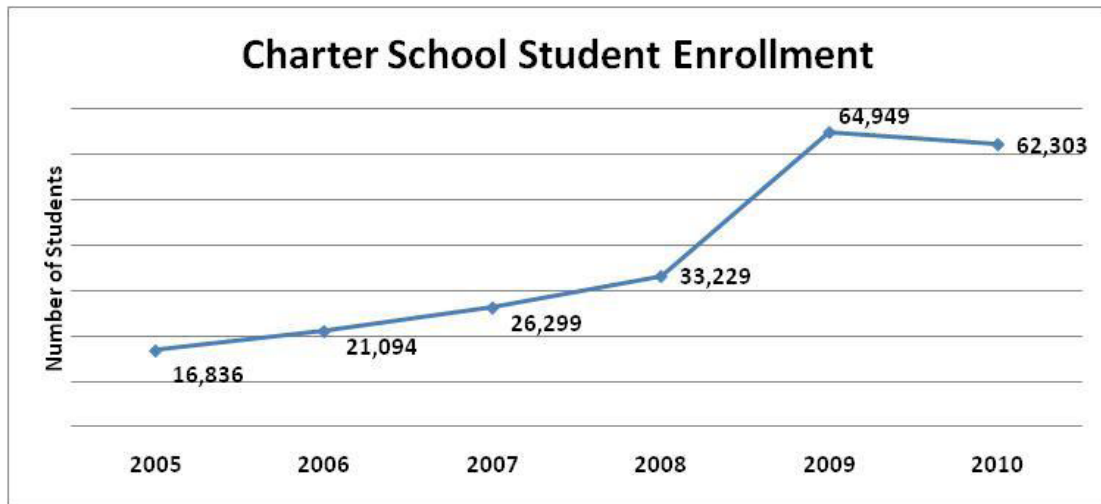


(Georgia Department of Education, 2009–2010 Annual Report)

#### Georgia Charter School Enrollment

With four school systems converting their schools to charter schools, the number of students enrolled in Georgia charter schools nearly doubled in the 2008–2009 school year. The 2009–2010 school year data displays a slight decline in student enrollment from the previous year. The overall percentage of Georgia students enrolled in charter schools is about 4%.

Table 2.2: Charter School Student Enrollment



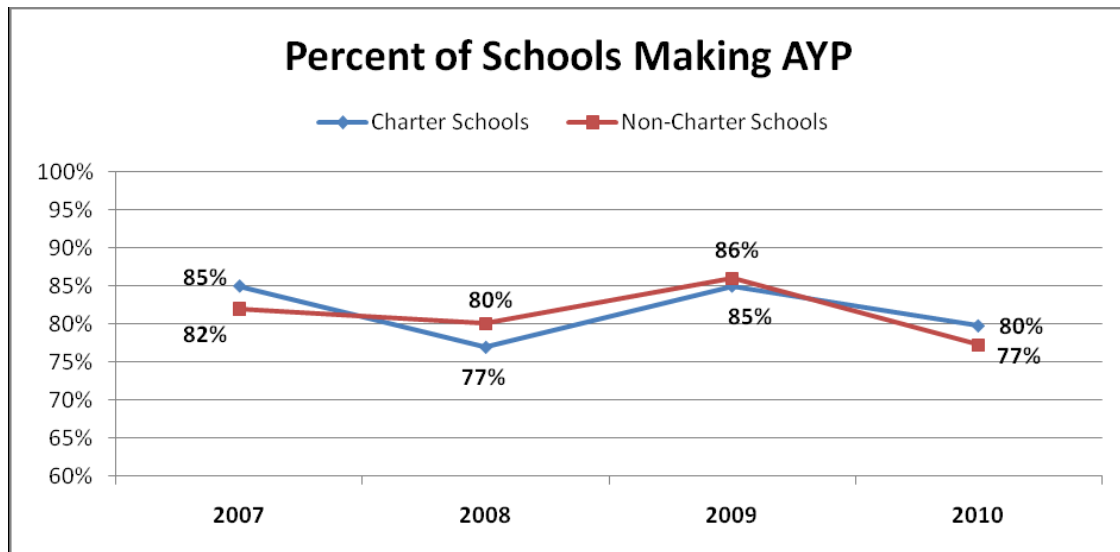
(Georgia Department of Education, 2009–2010 Annual Report)

### Georgia Charter School Academic Performance

#### Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Over the five year period, charter schools have performed similarly to their traditional public school counterparts. In the 2009–2010 school year, 74% of start-up charter schools made AYP while 78% of conversion charter schools made AYP for at least 3 years in a row. In terms of charter systems, both Decatur City Schools and Marietta City Schools made AYP in 2009–2010, while Warren County School District failed to make it for a third consecutive year. Gainesville City Schools also failed to make AYP in the 2009–2010 school year.

Table 2.3: Percent of Schools Making AYP

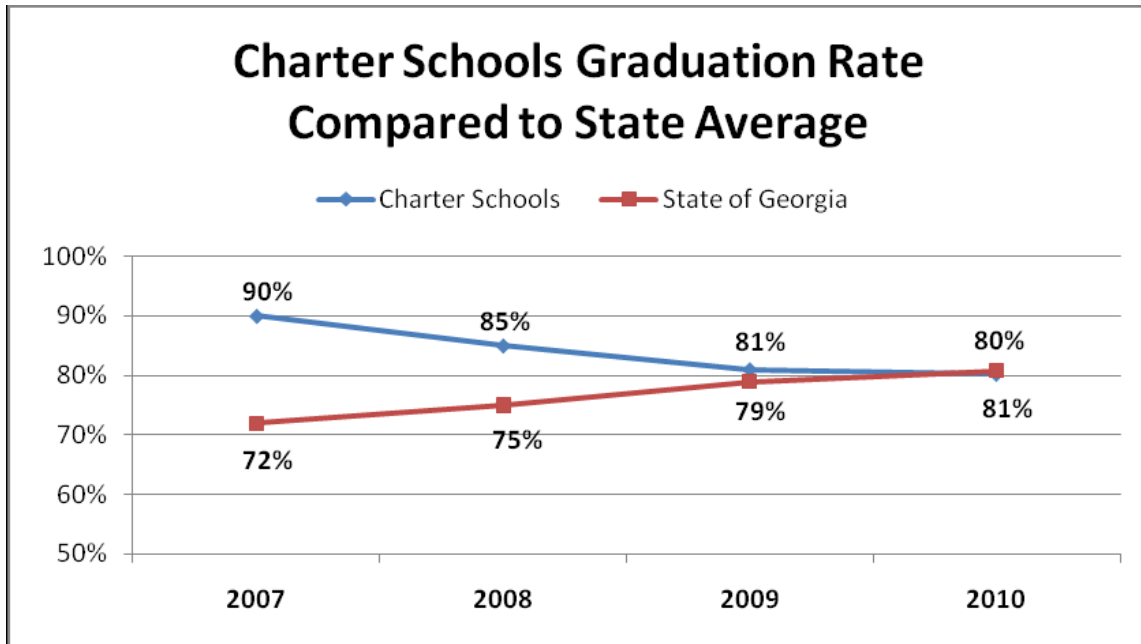


(Georgia Department of Education, 2009–2010 Annual Report)

### High School Graduation Rate

Though the average state high school graduation rate continued to increase, the Georgia charter high school graduation rate continued to decline. Georgia's charter high school graduation rate dropped 10% over a four year period, while the average Georgia high school graduation rates overall increased 9%.

Table 2.4: Graduation Rates

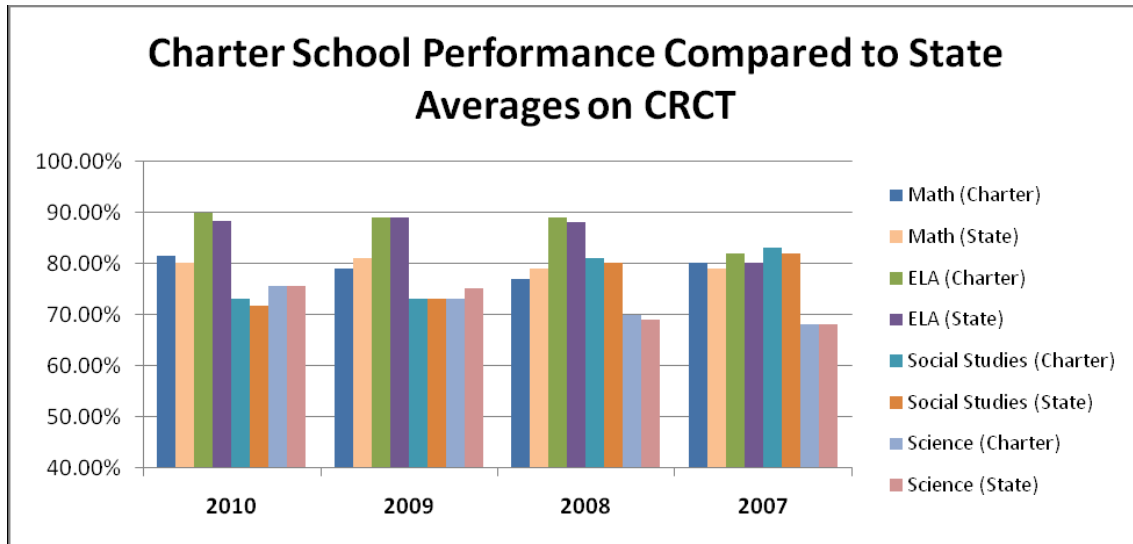


(Georgia Department of Education, 2009–2010 Annual Report)

#### Criterion Reference Competency Test (CRCT)

The Criterion Reference Competency data display that Georgia charter school performance has improved in most areas. According to the 2009–2010 annual report, Georgia charter schools have performed at a higher rate than their traditional public school counterparts in most CRCT content areas. Table 2.5 displays the achievement gap narrowing between charter schools and traditional schools in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, Georgia’s public schools outperformed charter schools. The following year, standardized test data reversed with charter students performing slightly better than the state average.

Table 2.5: Average CRCT Data

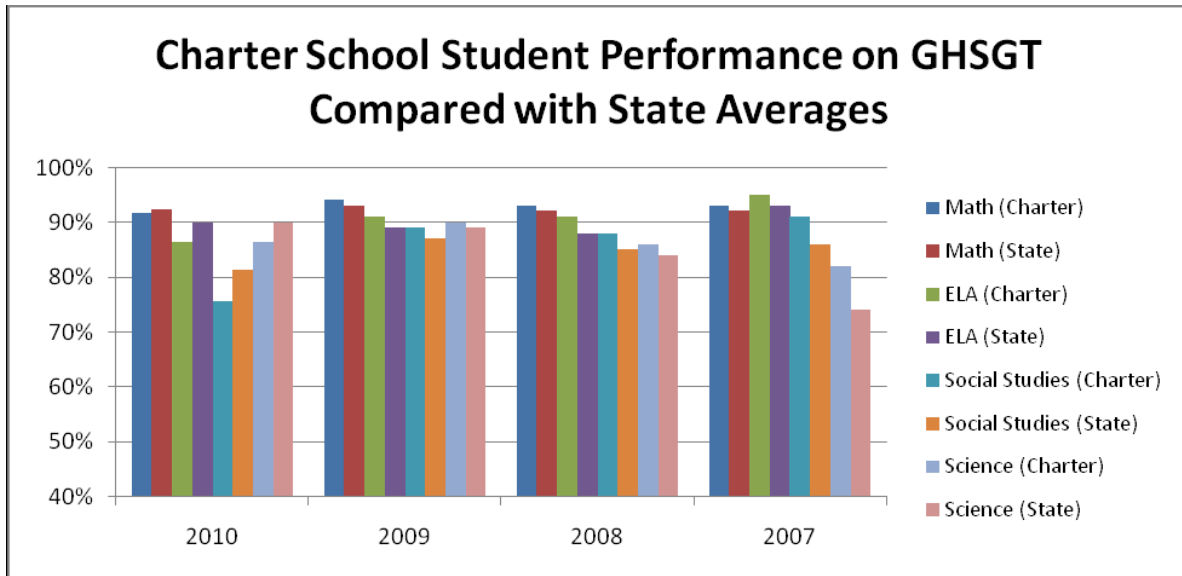


(Georgia Department of Education, 2009–2010 Annual Report)

### Georgia High School Graduation Test

Table 2.6 shows that Georgia charter school students performed worse than the state average in all four content areas on the Georgia High School Graduation Test in 2010. Georgia charter schools performed better than the state average in all four subject areas the previous three years. The data does not include career academy students' results.

Table 2.6: Average GHSGT Data



(Georgia Department of Education, 2009–2010 Annual Report)

### Why Do Schools Convert to Charter Schools?

1997 U.S. Department of Education

*“A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report”*

In May of 1997, the U.S. Department of Education released *“A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report”* as authorized by the 1994 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The four year study’s objective was to document and analyze the charter school movement from September 1995 through September 1999. The first-year report presents information collected and examined for the 1995–1996 school year. The report is based on telephone surveys of 89 percent of the 252 charter schools in operation across the nation as of January 1, 1996 and also on information collected during site visits to 42 charter schools that had been in operation by the beginning of the 1994–1995 school year (Minnesota Univ., & RPP International, 1997).

Part of the federal report focused on why charter schools were founded. When founders were asked what they thought was the most important reason to start a charter school, responses were coded into a number of smaller categories: (1) to advance an educational vision, (2) to have more autonomy over organizational, personnel, or governance matters, (3) to serve a special population, (4) for financial reasons, (5) to engender parent involvement and ownership, and (6) to attract students and parents.

The study found, for newly created charter schools, the three most frequent responses were to realize an educational vision—66.9 percent, to serve a special population—19.6 percent, and to have autonomy—7.7 percent. However, new and pre-existing schools emphasized different reasons for applying to become charter schools. The three most frequent responses for pre-existing public schools were to have autonomy—50.1 percent, to realize an educational vision—27.9 percent, and for financial reasons—10.3 percent. Lastly, the study found the three most frequent responses for pre-existing private schools were to realize and educational vision—35 percent, to attract students—35 percent, and for financial reasons—20 percent (Minnesota Univ., & RPP International, 1997).

Results from the study indicated that newly created, pre-existing public schools, and pre-existing private schools overall cited that the most important reason for founding their charter school was to realize an educational vision—51 percent. Respondents referred to particular instructional and/or curricular approaches and reforms such as project-based curricula, experimental learning, team teaching, instructional uses of technology, and many others (Minnesota Univ., & RPP International, 1997).

The second most common reason among these schools was the want of autonomy—more flexibility from laws, regulations, or conventional practices. Autonomy was cited by 20 percent of the total sample as their most important reason for wanting to become a charter school. Respondents felt that their ability to serve students was being hampered by district regulations, collective bargaining agreements, and/or state laws (Minnesota Univ., & RPP International, 1997).

Of the schools surveyed, 13 percent cited serving a special population as their first reason for becoming a charter school. Special populations include “at-risk,” language minority, disabled or ethnic and racial minority students. Financial reasons account for 6 percent of the schools, with the hopes to more easily raise funds for special projects and for reducing class sizes. Of the 206 surveyed, 10 charter schools cite forming some sort of family participation requirements, and another 10 mention attracting students (Minnesota Univ., & RPP International, 1997).

1998 How Charter Schools Are Different (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourek)

*“Charter Schools in Action” Project*

In the report “How Charter Schools are Different,” the authors provide background information on the “Charter Schools in Action” project, conducted by the Hudson Institute’s Educational Excellence Network, while taking a closer look at the operation and innovation of charter schools in comparison to traditional public schools. From the brief two year study of 71 charter schools in 13 states, the authors suggest that there are eight innovative design elements that most charter schools can be linked to: (1) Curriculum, instruction, and assessment, (2) School organization, (3) Leadership and governance, (4) Staffing, (5) Parent and community



involvement, (6) Scheduling, (7) Technology, and (8) Financing (Manno, Finn, Bierlein, & Vanourk, 1998).

The study concludes that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are at the core of any school, and apt to be the central concern of charter school finders. Individualized learning, project-based and hands-on learning, foreign language in the early years, unconventional approaches to special and bilingual education, and all manner of assessments, some prepackaged and some locally developed were all among the school reform initiatives observed during the study. In general, researchers found charter schools to be small in comparison to traditional public school organization. Charter schools organized in a variety of ways including small schools, small classes, self-contained classes, teams of teachers responsible for large groups of students, schools with multi-year “houses,” and teachers who move up the grades with their pupils (Manno et al., 1998).

Staffing differences not only included the way in which staff members were selected but also the professional development provided to the staff. Researchers observed differentiated staffing arrangements, master teachers, performance-based pay, and many other options. Charter schools had also found many ways to involve parents and the surrounding community. Some of the more interesting ideas observed include parent contracts, parents as instructors, courses for parents and community members, and the use of the school as a social-service center (Manno et al., 1998).

With the scheduling design of charter schools, researchers observed longer days, longer years, before-and after-school programs, and other ways of breaking the bounds of traditional school days and calendars. Charter schools also used technology in a variety of ways with

computers in the home, voice mail, e-mail, homework hotlines, and many other ways to support the instructional and managerial needs of the schools. In general, charter schools, like other public schools, face many financial constraints, but unlike traditional public schools, the charter schools observed had been enterprising in the search for ways to supplement their budgets and pay for needed improvements and expansions (Manno et al., 1998).

### Georgia Conversion Charter Schools

In hopes of providing greater autonomy in exchange for higher accountability from the public education system, in 1993 the General Assembly enacted legislation creating charter schools in Georgia for the first time. Public charter school legislation was officially passed in Georgia on April 19, 1993 under Governor Zell Miller. Originally, the Charter School Act of 1993 only permitted the conversion of existing traditional public schools into charter schools, requiring a two-thirds vote by school faculty and attending families and only granted three year charters. Additionally, individuals, parents, or private corporations were not permitted to petition for a charter. The first amendment to the 1993 Act occurred in 1995 with the lowering of the voting requirement to a majority of faculty and families and increasing the charter length to five years. The General Assembly has amended and expanded the state charter school laws numerous times since its initial inception (Kindler, 2009; Cochling, 2010).

The Charter Schools Act of 1998, located in Title 20 of the Georgia Code, is the law that governs Georgia charter schools today. The legislative intent of the law is “to increase student achievement through academic and organizational innovation by encouraging local school systems to utilize the flexibility of a performance based contract called a charter” (Charter Schools Act of 1998, 20-2-2062).

### Types of Charter Schools (20-2-2062)

Charter schools in Georgia are varied both in type and focus. Georgia law authorizes six distinct forms of charter schools. The Charter Schools Act of 1998 defines them as the following:

- *Charter system*—a local school system that is operating under the terms of a charter.
- *Commission charter school*—a start-up charter school authorized by the Commission and that is operating under the terms of a charter between a charter petitioner and the Commission.
- *Conversion charter school*—a charter school that existed as a local school prior to becoming a charter school.
- *LEA start-up charter school*—a charter school that did not exist as a local school prior to becoming a charter school and which was created by a local board as part of the existing local school system. The charter petitioner is the local board.
- *Start-up charter school*—a charter school that did not exist as a local school prior to becoming a charter school. The petitioner is not the local board.
- *State chartered special school*—a charter school created as a special school that is operating under the terms of a charter between the charter petitioner and the SBOE and which acts as its own public Local Education Agency for accountability purposes.

In the 2011–2012 school year, there were 119 charter schools in Georgia, and of these there are 88 start-up charter schools and 31 conversion charter schools. In addition, there are 14

charter systems in Georgia, which include 107 schools. (Georgia Department of Education (a), 2011).

The following table presents all of the conversion charter schools in Georgia since the passage of the 1993 law. It also lists the school district in which the conversion charter schools are located, the date of the charter approval, and whether the school reverted back to a traditional public school. The table was created based on data available by the Georgia Department of Education.

**Table 2.7: Georgia Conversion Charter School Activity  
(since the first charter school law passed in 1993)**

<b>School</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Charter Approved</b>	<b>Reverted to Traditional</b>
Addison Elementary	Cobb	May, 1995	
Charles Ellis Montessori Academy	Savannah-Chatham	May, 1995	June, 2003
Midway Elementary School	Forsyth	May, 1995	June, 1998
Bryant Elementary School	Cobb	July, 1996	June, 2001
Cartersville Elementary School	Cartersville City	July, 1996	June, 2001
Cartersville High School	Cartersville City	July, 1996	June, 2001
Cartersville Middle School	Cartersville City	July, 1996	June, 2001
Cartersville Primary School	Cartersville City	July, 1996	June, 2001
Eastvalley Elementary School	Cobb	July, 1996	June, 2001
Sedalia Park Charter Elementary School	Cobb	July, 1996	
Cloverleaf Elementary School	Bartow	January, 1997	January, 2002
Third Ward Elementary School (Futral Road Elementary School—1998)	Griffin-Spalding	January, 1997	
Adairsville Elementary School	Bartow	July, 1997	June, 2002
Druid Hills High School	DeKalb	July, 1997	June, 2002
Green Acres Elementary School	Cobb	July, 1997	June, 2002
Kingston Elementary School	Bartow	July, 1997	June, 2002
Mission Road Elementary School	Bartow	July, 1997	June, 2002
Mt. Bethel Elementary School	Cobb	July, 1997	June, 2002
Pine Log Elementary School	Bartow	July, 1997	June, 2002
Taylorville Elementary School	Bartow	July, 1997	June, 2002
White Elementary School	Bartow	July, 1997	June, 2002
Emerson Elementary	Bartow	May, 1998	June, 2003
Mercer Middle School	Savannah-Chatham	May, 1998	June, 2008
Trion Middle School	Trion City	May, 1998	June, 2003
Walton High School	Cobb	June, 1998	
Rainbow Elementary School	DeKalb	June, 1998	June, 2003
Kingsley Charter School	DeKalb	August, 1998	

Futral Road Elementary School	Spalding	November, 1998	
Taliaferro County Charter School	Taliaferro	September, 1999	August, 2008
Chesnut Elementary School	DeKalb	April, 2000	
Chamblee High School	DeKalb	December, 2000	
Woodland Elementary School	Fulton	March, 2001	
Peachtree Charter Middle School	DeKalb	May, 2001	
Spalding Drive Elementary School	Fulton	April, 2003	
Dunwoody Springs Elementary School	Fulton	March, 2005	June, 2010
International Studies Elementary Magnet School	Dougherty	April, 2005	
Morgan County Elementary	Morgan	August, 2005	
Morgan County Primary	Morgan	August, 2005	
Dooly County High School	Dooly	March, 2006	
Jenkins White Elementary	Richmond	May, 2006	
Ridgeview Middle School	Fulton	June, 2006	
Clubview Elementary School	Muscogee	September, 2006	
Morgan County Middle School	Morgan	March, 2007	
North Springs High School	Fulton	March, 2007	
Sawyer Road Elementary	Marietta City	March, 2007	
Murphy Charter Middle School	Richmond	May, 2007	
Dougherty Comprehensive High School	Dougherty	February, 2008	
Dougherty International Education Middle School	Dougherty	February, 2008	
Morgan County Charter High School	Morgan	June, 2008	
Riverwood International Charter School	Fulton	June, 2008	
The World Language Academy at Chestnut Mountain	Hall	June, 2008	
Wynnton Arts Academy	Muscogee	June, 2008	
Reese Road Leadership Academy	Muscogee	June, 2009	
Sandy Springs Charter Middle School	Fulton	June, 2009	
Sardis Enrichment School	Hall	June, 2009	
Smoke Rise Elementary	DeKalb	June, 2009	
Putnam County Charter System	Putnam	April, 2010	

According to the table, the state of Georgia approved 57 schools and school systems to convert to charter status as of April 2010. Among those conversion charter schools and systems, 42 percent of the schools reverted back to traditional public schools.

### Why Do Georgia Schools Want Charter Status?

In order to find out why traditional public schools convert to charter schools in Georgia, I examine the charter petitions of three conversion charter elementary schools, two conversion

charter middle schools, one conversion charter high school, and two conversion charter school systems. The charter petitions include those of Addison Elementary, Clubview Charter School, Dunwoody Springs Elementary School, Morgan County Middle School, Ridgeview Middle School, George Walton Comprehensive High School, Marietta City Schools, and Warren County schools.

After compiling all of the waivers from the conversion charter schools and districts, I code the most common organizational-level flexibility requests into seven smaller categories: (1) Staffing; (2) Curriculum and assessment; (3) Discipline; (4) Schedule; (5) Leadership and Governance; (6) Parent and Community Involvement; and (7) Budget and Purchasing. The table below shows which of these categories the conversion charter schools and systems cite according to their individual charter petitions.

**Table 2.8: Georgia Conversion Schools—Common Organizational-level Flexibility Requests**

	Staffing	Curriculum and Assessment	Discipline	Schedule	Leadership and Governance	Parent and Community Involvement	Budget and Purchasing
<b>Addison Elementary</b>	X	X		X	X		X
<b>Clubview Charter</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Dunwoody Springs</b>	X	X		X	X	X	
<b>Morgan County Middle</b>	X	X		X			X
<b>Ridgeview Middle</b>	X	X	X		X	X	
<b>George Walton High</b>		X		X	X		X
<b>Marietta City School</b>	X	X			X		X
<b>Warren County Schools</b>	X	X		X	X		X

All of the conversion charter schools and systems requested flexibility with curriculum and assessment. Requests include authority and responsibility to design and implement research based strategies, initiatives, programs, and models which best meet the needs of their students. Table 2.8 suggests that 88 percent of the conversion charter schools requested some sort of flexibility with leadership and governance. Requests varied widely among schools; some requested a waiver to use a governance board council, others requested smaller waivers such as the school administrator be in charge of making decisions about personnel use.

Flexibility in staffing was requested by 7 out of 8 conversion schools and systems. Most of these petitions requested teacher certification requirements to be waived in order to provide individualized instruction from requirements from non-certified teachers such as performing artists (dance and drama), adjunct college professors, or other specialists in various fields.

Flexibility with budget and purchasing was requested by 75 percent of the charter conversion charter schools and systems. Addison Elementary requested to be able to charge tuition for before and after school tutoring, while most other schools were more concerned about monies allotted to purchase text books and other learning resources. Three-fourths of the conversion charters requested flexibility with scheduling. Waivers pertaining to scheduling included requests for adjustments in the number of hours required for particular subject areas, longer school days, and/or a longer school year calendar.

Thirty-eight percent of the conversion charter schools emphasized the increase of parent and community involvement in their waiver with implementations of parent-school contracts, requirements of mandatory parent hours, and PTA memberships. One-fourth of the conversion charter schools and systems requested specific waivers in regards to discipline through a mandatory dress code.

## Summary

Chapter Two reviews the current literature on the history of the charter school movement, summarizes national charter school studies, outlines Georgia charter school laws, reviews Georgia charter school performance, and takes a more in-depth look at Georgia conversion charter schools. Chapter Three describes the research strategies in detail, including the theoretical framework, research questions, rationale for qualitative study, design of the study, data sources, and an analysis of the data presented. In Chapter Four, the findings from the data and an analysis of the data are presented. Chapter Five summarizes the previous chapters and discusses the findings as they relate to the research questions, presents implications of the study, concluding thoughts, recommendations, and implications for further study.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### Introduction

Using a qualitative research design, this study deepens the understanding of the conversion/reversion phenomenon occurring across Georgia public schools. Qualitative research is conducted when a problem or issue needs to be explored (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action. (Creswell, 2007, p. 37)

Creswell suggests that in order to begin qualitative research, the researcher must state the problem leading the study, formulate the central purpose of the study, and provide research questions (Creswell, 2007).

The following statement guides the problem leading this study:

With charter schools at the forefront of today's national education reform push, why are nearly half of Georgia's conversion charter schools reverting back to their traditional public school models? Since the passage of the 1993 law, the state of Georgia has approved a total of 57 schools and school systems to convert to charter status as of April 2010. Among those conversion charter schools and systems, 42 percent of the schools reverted back to traditional public schools. Almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools have or are in the process of reverting back to the traditional model, but there is limited research on the issue of why this is occurring. Therefore, one of the objectives of this study is to examine the underlying reasons for this high turnover rate.

The following paragraph is the central purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify why conversion charter schools in Georgia revert back to the traditional public school models from when they first appeared in 1998 to 2010. The study identifies the factors that influence conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status and why many of these charters revert back to public school status. This study analyzes why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools opted to revert back to the traditional public school model and explores what happens to the conversion charter schools when they "unconvert."

The following research questions guide the planning and design of the research on Georgia conversion charter schools:

1. What factors influence the conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status?
2. Why did many Georgia conversion charter schools revert back to public school status?
3. What may be the consequences when conversion charters revert to public school status?

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methods used to explore these research questions in seven sections, which explain the methodology of this study. They include the theoretical framework, research design and rationale, sample selection strategy, data sources, data analysis, validity and reliability, and limitations of the study.

### Theoretical Framework

Maxwell (2005) states the function of the conceptual framework “is to inform the rest of your design—to help you to assess and refine your goals, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods, and identify potential validity threats to your conclusions” (p. 34). This study presents a theoretical framework rooted in institutional and action theory that aims to discover the choices and challenges Georgia conversion charter schools face while maintaining charter school status as they try to survive within the much larger institutional environment of public schools.

#### *Action Theory*

Action theory addresses “the course of action, levels of action organization, attention processes, goal setting, cognitive steering, subconscious self-regulation, energizing of action, social control, values and attitudes, and action relevant knowledge” (Valach, Young, & Lynam, 2002, p. 20). Action theory focuses on processes occurring across time. Valach, Young, and Lynam (2002) suggest action theory “emphasizes that action is unfolded in time, that the course of action refers to the sequence or steps that are involved in action” (p. 21). Using action theory to frame this study assists in exploring the beliefs and attitudes of both Georgia state officials and school leaders in two broad categories: (1) What factors influence the initial conversion of

Georgia public schools to charter status?; and, (2) What changes occur over time that lead Georgia conversion charters to revert back to the traditional public school model? Essentially, the researcher wants to identify what agents are causing the action (changes in charter status).

*Action theory applied to the conversion of charter schools*

Market forces encourage schooling organizations to strategically outsmart their competition in ways that improve the quality of teaching and learning (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Competition encourages strategic action. Joe Nathan offers seven central goals for charter schools across different states: (1) Improve student learning; (2) Encourage the use of different and innovative learning and teaching methods; (3) Increase choice of learning opportunities for pupils; (4) Establish a new form of accountability for public schools; (5) Require the measurement of learning and create more effective, innovative measurement/assessment tools; (6) Make the schools the unit for improvement; and (7) Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to own the learning program at the school site (Nathan, 1996, p. 207–208). These seven goals serve as agents for traditional public schools' desire to convert to charter schools. In this study, the researcher specifically examines public conversion charter schools in the state of Georgia and the agents that brought about the initial change (action) to become a charter school.

*Action theory applied to the reversion of charter schools*

Studies have shown that most charter school failures occur for nonacademic reasons; governance and finance continue to be the two primary reasons for failure to create and sustain successful charter schools (Ziebarth, Celio, Lake, & Rainey, 2005). Wohlstetter and Smith state, "Charter school leaders have consistently reported implementation and operational challenges

exacerbated by insufficient financial resources, limited expertise, and inadequate facilities” (2010, p. 147). Because charter schools do not have school districts to look “up” for assistance and support, they often have to look “out” to other organizations for essential resources they need to survive and thrive (Wohlstetter & Smith, 2010). These operational challenges create incentives for charter schools to cooperatively solve issues or face reverting back to the traditional public school model, which depends on district central offices for needed resources and support.

Action theory provides a clearer picture of school decisions. In action theory, human and group behavior are considered goal-directed action (Valach, Young, & Lynam, 2002). The goal of an action can be derived from superordinate goals. In the setting of public schools in a market driven environment, becoming a conversion charter school is the main goal, while the seven central goals by Nathan (1996), are the superordinate goals. The final part of goal setting implies “a decision to pursue a goal or to give it up” (Valach et al., 2002, p. 24). In this study, the researcher examines what factors led decision makers in Georgia to give up on charter status and pursue reverting back to the traditional public school model.

### *Institutional Theory*

Meyer and Rowan (2006) state that “the purpose of an institutional analysis is to tell us why—out of this stupendous variety of feasible forms—this or that particular one is ‘selected’ and whose interests might be best served by that selected arrangement” (p. 4). The institutional theory illuminates how school organizations, such as charter schools, are responsive to their institutional surroundings. The theory also reveals charter schools as not only a product of market force, but also of an institutional formation surrounded by competition.

In the 1970s and 1980s, institutionalists portrayed schools as “loosely coupled” and “isomorphic,” arguing that this organizational form had been institutionalized over the last century (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). Over the past two decades, the environment of education has altered by privatization along with testing and standards movement, allowing markets to become a dramatic transforming force on schools (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Through the institutional perspective, Chubb and Moe (1990) extend the idea of markets, “which scarcely operate in the public sector, but which act on private schools to discourage bureaucracy and promote desirable forms of organization through the natural dynamics of competition and choice” (p. 190). American society deems choice as a matter of public importance and voices choice through democratic control and markets. Chub and Moe (1990) state that “public schools are subject to direct control through politics” (p. 189). This study was designed to construct knowledge behind the choices made by Georgia state officials in the converting and reverting public schools to and from charter status. The institutional theory assists in depicting a clearer picture of addressing the “why” and “how” of Georgia conversion charter schools

Chubb and Moe (1990) suggest that the most sensible approach to a genuine educational reform regarding effective schools is “to move toward a true institutional solution—a different set of institutional arrangements that is compatible with, and indeed actively promotes and nurtures, the kinds of schools people want” (p. 191). This is where the alternative market becomes particularly attractive because it provides an environment in which these organizations may flourish.

A market system is not built to enable the imposition of higher-order values on the schools, nor is it driven by a democratic struggle to exercise public authority. Instead, the authority to make educational choices is radically decentralized to those most immediately involved. Schools compete for the support of parents and students, and parents and students are free to choose among schools. The system is built around decentralization, competition, and choice (Chub & Moe, 1990, p. 189).

Schools controlled by the market are free to organize any way they want, and an environment of competition and choice gives them strong incentives to move toward the kinds of effective school organizations that academics and reformers would like to impose on the public schools. The institutional theory provides an understanding of how charter school organizations respond to the broader institutional environment in which they operate (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Through the lens of the institutional theory, this study finds that school decision-making is linked to both internal organizational objectives and the external institutional environment.

### Research Design and Rationale

Using interview qualitative study methodology, the research details charter school activity in Georgia to identify what factors influence conversion and reversion of charter schools. The qualitative study methodology was chosen as the primary research tool because of the “why” and “how” questions being posed within a real-life context.

For qualitative studies, five components of research design are particularly important: (1) a study’s questions; (2) its propositions, if any; (3) its unit(s) of analysis; (4) the logic linking the data to the propositions; and (5) the criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2003). Yin

suggests that the form of a study's question—in terms of “who,” “what,” “where,” “how,” and “why”—provides an important clue regarding the most relevant research strategy to be used. Stating study propositions directs attention to what should be examined within the scope of study. The third component, unit of analysis, is related to defining what the research consists of and to the way the initial research questions are defined. Both the logic linking the data to the propositions and the criteria for interpreting the findings indicates what is to be done after the data have been collected (Yin, 2003).

For this study, I examine two different points in time: (1) the initial conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status, and (2) the reversion of conversion charter schools back to the traditional public school model. The interview qualitative study approach assists in analyzing the change of conditions over time to reveal how and why these changes occur (Yin, 2003).

### Sample Selection Strategy

In qualitative research, the typical way of selecting settings and individuals is purposeful sampling, also known as criterion-based selection. Consistent with the qualitative research design protocols of purposeful sampling, I selected individuals for this study based on their ability to inform an understanding of the research problem. Purposeful sampling assists in making decisions about “who or what should be sampled, what form the sampling will take, and how many people or sites need to be sampled” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). In qualitative research, this purposeful sampling ensures that data represents diverse and multiple views and sources relevant to the case study.



Maxwell (2005) suggests that there are four goals for purposeful sampling: (1) achieving representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected; (2) adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population; (3) deliberately examine cases that are crucial for the theories that you began the study with, or that you have subsequently developed; and (4) establish particular comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals (Maxwell, 2005, p. 89–90).

Purposeful sampling is a strategy in which “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). This study applies one criterion to select participation in the interview qualitative study: Education leaders associated with charter schools in Georgia. Furthermore, participants can be separated into two targeted populations: (1) State officials (GA DOE-Charter School Department, GA Charter School Association, Boards of Education—districts of conversion charter schools), and (2) School Leaders (school district superintendents, principals and assistant principals).

#### Data Sources: Informants and Document Analysis

According to Yin (2003), evidence for qualitative studies may come from six important sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. For this study, both documentation and interviews are used as the leading data sources.

#### *Identification of Informants*

Targeted informants were identified based on their formal positions and on their role in Georgia’s charter school movement. Additional informants were identified through a snowball procedure, where each of the targeted informants are asked to identify other relevant actors associated with Georgia charter schools.

Targeted informants were identified through three different data sources: (1) charter school petitions to the state of Georgia, including contracts; (2) websites created to support the Georgia charter school movement, including the Georgia Charter School Association; and, (3) websites of government agencies, including the Georgia Department of Education.

The snowball or chain procedure “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich,” expanding the pool of informants based on the recommendations of current participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). This procedure allows researchers to quickly find other knowledgeable individuals in a specific field that they may not have ever known about. From the interviews conducted in this research study, the snowball procedure expanded the participant population by three participants.

Collecting information using a variety of sources and methods is one aspect of triangulation. This strategy “reduces the risk that your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific source or method, and allows you to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues you are investigating” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93–94). Triangulation of interviews and documentation analysis provide a more complete and accurate account than either method could alone.

### **Table 3.1: Distribution of Interview Participants**

Georgia Department of Education staff	2
Georgia Charter Schools Commission	1
Georgia Charter School Association staff	1
The Governor's Office of Student Achievement	1
The University of Georgia	1
TOTAL	6

Out of 38 possible informants, only nine responded with willingness to participate in this study. Because of the limited time frame, three of the nine respondents were not interviewed due to the need of district clearance in order to participate. Table 3.2 describes the professional characteristics of the six respondents in this study.

**Table 3.2: Professional Characteristics of Respondents**

Respondent	Previous Positions	Current Position
Louis Erste	COO, District of Columbia Public Schools, CEO, Chief of Staff, COO, Senior Advisor to the Superintendent, Cleveland Municipal School District	Charter Schools Division Director, Georgia Department of Education
Bonnie Holliday	Innovation Fund Accountability Manager, The Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Accountability Program Manager, Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Executive Director, The Governor's Office of Student Achievement
Andrew Lewis	Communication and Development Director, Georgia Charter School Association, Lead Teacher, Dekalb Charter School	Executive Vice President, Georgia Charter School Association

Jack Parish	President, Georgia School Superintendents Association, Superintendent, Henry County Schools	Executive Director, Georgia Association of Educational Leaders, Lecturer, University of Georgia
Jennifer Rippner	Executive Director, Governor's Office of Student Achievement, Education Policy Advisor, Office of the Governor, Georgia, Charter Schools Program Manager, Georgia Department of Education	Senior Policy Advisor, Nelson Mullins, Chair, Georgia Charter School Commission
Linda Zechmann	Representative, RESA District in the Georgia Association for Gifted Children, Board Member, Waycross Middle School PTA and Band Boosters	Member, Georgia Board of Education, Georgia Department of Education, Chairs the Charter School Committee and member of the Operations Committee

### *Interview Protocol*

Stake (1995) suggests that in qualitative research, “the interview is the main road to multiple realities” (p. 64). He recommends the interviewer have a strong, advanced plan that includes a short list of issue-oriented questions because “the purpose for the most part is not to get simple yes and no answers but description of an episode, a linkage, an explanation” (p. 65). I implement a semi-structured interview protocol, which focuses on the overall charter school movement in Georgia, to ensure consistency across all interviews.

Creswell (2009) proposes six components of an interview protocol: (1) a heading (date, place, interviewer, interviewee); (2) instructions for the interviewer to follow so that standard procedures are used from one interview to another; (3) the questions (typically an ice-breaker question at the beginning followed by 4–5 questions that are often the subquestions in a

qualitative research plan, followed by some concluding statement or a question, such as, “Who should I visit with to learn more about my questions?”; (4) probes for the 4–5 questions, to follow up and ask individuals to explain their ideas in more detail or to elaborate on what they have said; (5) spaces between the questions to record responses; and (6) a final thank-you statement to acknowledge the time the interviewee spent during the interview (p. 183). The interview questions for the study were designed to aggregate perceptions and knowledge over multiple respondents. Appendix A is the interview protocol, including prompts and relevant questions.

Telephone interviews were the most practical and useful type of interviewing in providing answers to the proposed research questions for this study. They provided the best source of information when I was unable to have direct access to individuals. Creswell (2007) suggests drawbacks of this approach “are that the researcher cannot see the informal communication and the phone expense” (p. 133).

Most educational, data gathering research involves at least a small invasion of personal privacy (Stake, 1995). Therefore, I sought approval for the proposed research study and received a waiver from the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB) of written documentation of informed consent. For this study, the interview confirmation email serves as the informed consent form (see Appendix B). Informed consent was also obtained using a verbal script (see Appendix C) read by the interviewer to the participant before the start of the formal interview. Prior to the formal interview, participants in the study were sent two emails: (1) the recruitment email (see Appendix D), providing a general outline of the study and participant risks and responsibilities, and (2) the interview confirmation email (see Appendix B), confirming the date and time of the interview and serving as a verbal consent form. Upon completion of the

interviews, participants were sent a thank you email (see Appendix E), thanking them for their participation and reiterating the purpose of the study and that participation is voluntary.

The duration of each interview was estimated to be approximately 45 minutes. The average interview lasted 32 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and selected interviews were transcribed. During and after the interview, I took extensive field notes on the interview protocol. A draft of the preliminary findings was emailed to the participants to give them the opportunity to review any direct quotations and provide any feedback.

### *Documents*

Beyond the interview data, oftentimes “documents serve as substitutes for records of activity that the researcher could not observe directly” (Stake, 1995, p. 68). This research study draws on additional pieces of data to inform the data analysis process. Documents, such as state legislation, charter contracts, and state reports provide additional information about the decisions made by school leaders relating to Georgia conversion charter schools.

### *Data Analysis*

In qualitative research, “data analysis consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2007, p. 148). Creswell (2007) recommends creating a detailed description of the case and its setting, followed by an analysis of the sources of data. In addition, Stake (1995) advocates four forms of data analysis and interpretation in case

study research—categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, patterns, and naturalistic generalizations.

Categorical aggregation and direct interpretation are “two strategic ways that researchers reach new meanings about cases through direct interpretation of the individual instance and through aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class” (Stake, 1995, p. 72). The researcher also establishes patterns through searching for meaning. Stakes (1995) suggests, “[s]ometimes, we will find significant meaning in a single instance, but usually the important meanings will come from reappearance over and over” (p. 78). Lastly, the researcher develops naturalistic generalizations from analyzing the data in the study. These generalizations are intended to provide readers with insight to apply to either themselves or to a collection of cases (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

Because this research seeks to understand both the reasoning behind applying for a charter and the reasoning behind Georgia schools reverting back to a traditional public school model after receiving charter status, I use a combination of the four forms of data analysis suggested by Stake (1995). After the initial step of listening and reading rough observation note, Maxwell (2005) suggests a number of analytical options arranged into three groups: (1) memos, (2) categorizing strategies (such as coding and thematic analysis), and (3) connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96).

In qualitative research, the main categorizing strategy is coding. Rossman & Rallis (1998) define coding as the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information (p. 171). Organizing the data into broader themes and issues is another form of categorizing analysis (Maxwell, 2005). Data from interviews and

documentation was coded into emergent themes that related to each of the study's three research questions.

After identifying themes during the coding process, a description of them is represented in a qualitative narrative detailed with tables and figures. The final step of data analysis involves making interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) suggests asking, "What were the lessons learned?" when construing the data (p. 189). The lessons learned may include the researcher's personal interpretation, meaning derived from a comparison of the findings with information gleaned from the literature or theories, or suggestions of new questions that need to be asked as a result of the data analysis (Creswell, 2009).

### Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability represent the standards of quality in qualitative research. Both validation and reliability approaches vary considerably among researchers. Creswell (2009) recommends eight primary validity strategies to incorporate into a research study: (1) Triangulate different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes; (2) Use member checking to determine accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate; (3) Use rich, thick description to convey the findings; (4) Clarify the bias the researcher brings to the study; (5) Also present negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes; (6) Spend prolonged time in the field; (7) Use peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the account; and (8) Use an external auditor to review the entire project (p. 191–192). In order to increase validity in this study, I triangulated different data sources of information by examining evidence from the



respondents and using it to build a clear justification for themes, used member checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report back to the participants, and used peer editing to enhance the accuracy of the account through reviewing and questioning the qualitative study (Creswell, 2009, p. 191–192).

Yin (2003) notes, “the goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and biases in a study” (p. 37). Essentially, the objective of reliability is to be sure that if another investigator were to use the same research methodology and procedures, the same findings and conclusions would appear (Yin, 2003). This research addresses reliability by providing a clear description of the case study, documenting detailed research procedures, and using a strong case study protocol (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003).

### Limitations of the Research

The limitations of the study are those features of the methodology design that in some way impact the application or interpretation of the results of the study (Creswell, 2009). This study exhibits two major limitations. First, the results of the study are limited to the research selection size of participants. This study does not capture all perspectives of conversion charter schools in Georgia. Conversion charter school leaders and others directly involved at the local level of conversion charter schools lack representative data. Secondly, the time period for this research impacts the results of the study. The study only captures the initial existence of conversion charter schools in Georgia from 1998 to the year 2010.

### Chapter Summary

Chapter Three explains the methodology used in the research and describes the theoretical framework, research design and rationale, sample selection strategy, data sources,

data analysis, validity and reliability, and limitations of the study. Chapter Four presents the data and reports the research findings. Chapter Five discusses the findings, the importance of the study, implications of the findings or policy, implications of the findings for practice, and suggestions for further areas of research.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS**

The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify why conversion charter schools in Georgia revert back to traditional public school models. The study identifies the factors that influence conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status, why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools have opted to revert back to the traditional public school model, and what happens to the conversion charter schools when they “unconvert.” As described in Chapter One, the following research questions guide this study:

1. What factors influence the conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status?
2. In the opinion of state officials and school administrators, why did some Georgia charters revert back to public school status?
3. What may be the consequences when conversion charters revert to public school status?

#### **Characteristics of the Selection**

Targeted informants were identified based on their formal positions and on their role in Georgia’s charter school movement. Additional informants were identified through a snowball procedure, where each of the targeted informants are asked to identify other relevant actors associated with Georgia charter schools. Targeted informants were identified through three different data sources: (1) charter school petitions to the state of Georgia, including contracts; (2) websites created to support the Georgia charter school movement, including the Georgia Charter

School Association; and, (3) websites of government agencies, including the Georgia Department of Education. Initial contact for a telephone interview was made through email. Out of 38 possible informants, only nine responded with willingness to participate in this study. Because of the limited time frame of this study, three of the nine respondents were not interviewed due to the necessity for district clearance in order to participate. Table 4.1 describes the professional characteristics of the six respondents in this study.

Table 4.1  
*Professional Characteristics of Respondents*

Respondent	Previous Positions	Current Position
Louis Erste	COO, District of Columbia Public Schools, CEO, Chief of Staff, COO, Senior Advisor to the Superintendent, Cleveland Municipal School District	Charter Schools Division Director, Georgia Department of Education
Bonnie Holliday	Innovation Fund Accountability Manager, The Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Accountability Program Manager, Georgia Charter Schools Commission	Executive Director, The Governor's Office of Student Achievement
Andrew Lewis	Communication and Development Director, Georgia Charter School Association, Lead Teacher, Dekalb Charter School	Executive Vice President, Georgia Charter School Association
Jack Parish	President, Georgia School Superintendents Association, Superintendent, Henry County Schools	Executive Director, Georgia Association of Educational Leaders, Lecturer, University of Georgia
Jennifer Rippner	Executive Director, Governor's Office of Student Achievement, Education Policy Advisor, Office of the Governor, Georgia, Charter Schools Program Manager, Georgia Department of Education	Senior Policy Advisor, Nelson Mullins, Chair, Georgia Charter School Commission
Linda Zechmann	Representative, RESA District in the Georgia Association for Gifted Children, Board Member,	Member, Georgia Board of Education, Georgia Department of Education, Chairs the Charter

	Waycross Middle School PTA and Band Boosters	School Committee and member of the Operations Committee
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According to Creswell (2007), the core elements of qualitative data analysis include coding the data (reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments), combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables, and charts (p. 148). In this chapter, each research question is presented followed by a table of recurring themes from respondents and a narrative summary.

### Findings Related to Research Question One

Research Question One explores what factors respondents believe influence the conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status. Table 4.2 presents recurring themes that emerged from the interview data.

Table 4.2  
*Factors that Influence Conversion to Charter Schools*

Autonomy and Flexibility	Money (Federal Grant Dollars)	Desire for Change to Improve Quality	Community Support	Lack of Accountability
- Schools want charters to do things that state laws or rules would prevent them from doing. Areas of flexibility may include teacher certification, curricular, instructional program, length of the school day and year, and requirement of parental	- Schools see the federal implementation dollars as an opportunity to assist their own individual school needs with some additional funds.  - Federal Implementation Dollars for conversion charter schools in Georgia	- Schools use charters as a vehicle to start something new and improve the quality of their school.  - School districts that want to improve the quality of schools typically consider the conversion charter model	- Communities are proud to say that they are charter schools.  - Part of the requirement for converting to a charter school is to demonstrate that you do have community and parental support.  - Schools use	- Conversion charter schools that are not able to fulfill the obligations set forth in their charter, run the risk of losing their charter and reverting back to a traditional public school.

involvement. - Schools want charters to “get central office off their backs.” - State law requires charter schools have an autonomous governing board. - Schools convert to charters to avoid centralization.	range from anywhere between \$200,000 and \$300,000. -Public school systems that convert to a charter system receive an additional \$100 per student.	rather than a start-up charter model.	waivers to customize their school to the wants and need of their particular community.	
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### *Autonomy and Flexibility*

The value of chartering “is that schools get the flexibility to do things that state laws or rules would prevent them from doing by waiving state law” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). Traditional public schools see this as an opportunity to gain flexibility from state law and to consider the charter option as an avenue to attain true independence. State law requires conversion charter schools to have an autonomous governing board, and the governing board is typically comprised of people with an expertise in areas that would enable them to make informed decisions on all aspects of operating a school such as education, law, finance, marketing, non-profit management or any other background that is considered critical to fulfilling the vision of the charter school. The independent governing board is responsible for ensuring that academic performance measures set forth in the charter are met. The governing board’s duties and responsibilities include “school-level decision-making, fiscal management, and a variety of school operations such as personnel decisions” (GaDOE website-frequently asked questions, <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/Pages/Home.aspx>).

Traditional public schools go through the process of converting to a charter “to get central office off their back” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). Consistent with Erstes’ belief, Bonnie Holiday also agrees:

When the first charter school act was passed in 1993, there had been a lot of top-down reform. Things were becoming much more centralized then it had been in the past, specifically with things like Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding. At the time, the QBE was a relatively a new funding formula, and had only been around for a little under ten years. Schools were becoming familiarized with the QBE, adapting to new curricular reform, and adjusting to new federal accountability requirements. There was a lot of push back from districts about centralization because they were used to so much more autonomy, and we know that Georgia is a state that prefers strong local control. When the first bill passed, it had bipartisan support from both chambers of the legislature in Georgia, partly because it was just a nod to the districts to say “here is a little of your autonomy back” after the gradual centralization that had occurred over the last decade. In some ways that contributed in some districts embracing chartering because it was a way for them to have more control over how they spend, and how they run a school. (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013)

Schools are oftentimes looking to free themselves from a lot of “bureaucratic red tape” to have the flexibility to do what they think is the best for their students (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013). There are a variety of flexibilities that schools are asking for in their charter petitions. One of the flexibilities relates to teacher certification. Many times there may be individuals who believe that highly qualified or highly effective teachers or individuals are capable of teaching who might not have certification through the Georgia Professional

Standards Commission. Charter schools are able to provide these individuals with opportunities to teach while the traditional school setting is unable to present such an opportunity (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012).

With relief from some of the policies and regulations that govern traditional public schools, charter schools try to offer a more innovative or non-traditional type of curricular or instructional program in the schools. Additional flexibilities charter schools typically ask for in their charter petitions include requirement of parental involvement in the school, and length of the school day and calendar year (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012 & L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012).

### *Money*

The most often cited factor that is believed to influence the conversion of the Georgia public schools to charter status is money. According to Lewis, the “intent for many of the conversion charter schools is more monetary than actual needs based in the state of Georgia” (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012). Schools that embrace the charter model are eligible for additional funding. The Charter School Program, administered by the United States Department of Education, is a competitive grant program in which each state is required to compete for available funding every three years. The federal funds are distributed to charter school developers to assist in the development and initial operations of newly established or conversion charter schools. For the years 2010–2013, Georgia was awarded approximately \$24 million in grant funds (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013 & L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). Over the past 10 years, Georgia has spent about \$100 million in creating charter schools (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012).



The purposes of implementation of grant funds are to “motivate people and provide the support necessary to make the change to become charter schools” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). When schools become a charter school in Georgia, they receive this federal charter school implementation grant from the state. Federal implementation dollars for conversion charter schools in Georgia range anywhere between \$300,000 and \$400,000—money which must be spent within the first two years of charter schools’ operation.

The grant money “is a huge incentive to consider conversion. Schools see the federal implementation dollars as an opportunity to assist their own individual school needs with some additional dollars” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). Andrew Lewis suggests that when looking at the history of chartering in Georgia, the original charter schools only converted for the additional dollars.

The first charter school was established in 1993. Our first charter school law only allowed for conversions and did not allow for start-up charter schools. In the first year of allowing conversions, we saw 26 traditional public schools convert to charter status. At the end of 5 years, 20 of the 26 did not renew to continue as charters. It is my opinion that those original charter schools saw \$150,000 – \$200,000 of federal charter implementation dollars as additional funding for their own individual schools (personal communication, December 14, 2012).

Lewis also suggests that some schools see the federal implementation grants as a means of becoming more attractive when competing with strong private schools:

After the first round of conversion charter schools in Georgia, there was a continued growth of conversion charters particularly in one area. The vast majority of individual conversion charter schools are located in North Fulton County, North Dekalb County,

and East Cobb. These areas happen to be the most affluent areas in Georgia. Public schools in these areas were competing for students with the strongest private schools in the Atlanta area. The students in those areas are choosing between very strong public schools and very strong private schools. So, the public schools began to convert to charters for the extra federal implementation dollars, allowing them to be more attractive and have the ability to be stronger schools. So, to me, it must be the monetary and the cache of wanting to be so attractive to the students and families within their geographic region (personal communication, December 14, 2012).

The current state law requires that school districts chose a flexibility model or declare themselves a “status quo” by June 30, 2015. There are two flexibility models available right now: charter system and IE<sup>2</sup>. Erste believes that “[a] charter system makes the most sense to do because when a system makes a decision to convert, all of the schools in the district have a choice: Do they want to be an independent charter school or give up and individual charter and become a part of the charter system. The majority of schools will join the systems rather than going through all of the trouble of the petition process because they realize they will have the same flexibility and will get some extra money because charter systems gives you about \$100 per student” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). Currently the state of Georgia has 16 charter systems.

#### *Desire for change to improve quality*

Improving the quality of a school is the driving factor behind the charter school phenomenon. Schools want to take the “opportunity to change everything they are doing or

change significant parts of what they are doing, and going through the process of converting to a charter school has them come up with their plan to actually improve their school” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012).

School districts that want to improve their schools find the conversion model more appealing than the start-up model. Start-up conversion schools are more autonomous, whereas conversion charter schools are more system-reliant; therefore, many districts embrace the conversion model before considering the start-up model. Conversion charter schools are also much easier to transition into, maintain momentum, and meet performance standards. When districts decide to convert a school to charter status, it already has the infrastructure of what was there previously, the staff, principal, and curriculum whereas start-up charter schools have to go out and recruit all new resources and select a curriculum (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013).

### *Community Support*

Part of the requirement for converting to a charter school is to demonstrate that there is both community and parental support. Schools are not generally as tightly embedded in their communities as they have been in the past, which provides an opportunity for a different type of schooling to surface: “one of the reasons charters are cool is that it allows you to re-embed your school into the community” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012).

Communities are very proud to say that they are charter schools; “When they have that label, they really hold it up like a feather in their cap” (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013). Parents and teachers are generally excited to do something different at a

school and through a charter; by using waivers, they have the control to customize their school to the wants and need of their particular community.

### *Lack of accountability*

The Georgia Department of Education states that “a conversion charter school is a charter school that previously existed as a traditional public school. The traditional public school entered into a charter to gain additional flexibility in exchange for greater accountability” (GaDOE website). Some respondents believe conversion charter schools are not held to the same “high” accountability as start-up charter schools. Lewis stated that “if a start-up charter school fails to meet the obligations set forth within its own charter, the school runs the risk of closure. School closure is considered the highest accountability. If a conversion charter school is not able to meet the obligations set forth in its charter, it runs the risk of losing its charter and reverting back to a traditional public school” (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012).

Andrew Lewis believes that the accountability piece set forth by the Georgia Department of Education is neither fair nor true accountability. Public schools that consider converting to charters do not have much to lose if the school fails, which leads some schools to take the “risk” of converting knowing there is no real penalty for failure (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012 & J. Rippner, personal communication, February 1, 2013).

If you look at overall results of charter schools, they are worse than the state’s in the 2012–2011 school year. It goes up and down. Sometimes they are better and sometimes worse. Conversion charter schools were a way to turn a school around and it didn’t work. That brings the results down, and we’re slowly filtering those schools out by either helping them get their act together to get a renewal or not giving them a charter renewal.

When conversion charter schools don't get a charter renewal, they simply go back to their traditional model. (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012)

Zechmann stated, "Prior to Erste being here, I think that renewals were approved without a lot of rigor. Kind of like if you have already been a charter, unless you had done something terribly egregious, you were probably going to be able to continue your charter. So, there was no real high bar" (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

### Findings Related to Research Question Two

Research Question Two explores the specific reasons respondents believe so many conversion charter schools are reverting back to the traditional public school model. Table 4.3 presents recurring themes that emerged from the interview data.

Table 4.3  
*Reasons that Conversion Charter schools are Reverting*

Unanticipated lack of flexibility and autonomy	Other avenues available for flexibility	Money	Loss of Support	Academic Performance	Lack of Resources
- Charter schools did not realize how much of a role the central office would continue to have in areas such as personnel, and budgeting or finance.	- More recently, other flexibility models have become available for public schools in Georgia, like IE <sup>2</sup> .  - Conversion charter schools can receive the same flexibility they are receiving from a charter through	- The federal implementation dollars can be viewed as a "money grab." Conversion charter schools would not be eligible for any additional implementation dollars.	- Charter schools face difficulty maintaining a high amount of support from parents and the community.  - "Founder's syndrome"—oftentimes conversion charter school lose the reason why they initially	- Charter schools see that their students are performing below or not significantly greater than their public school counterparts.	- Charter schools lack resources needed to meet individual needs of students with special needs or children whose first language may not be English.

	individual waivers under Title 20 of state law.		became a charter when the person who initiated leaves.		
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### *Unanticipated lack of flexibility and autonomy*

According to Erste, “To have true autonomy in a charter school, you have to have control of people, time, and money” (personal communication, November 8, 2012). Due to the lack of expectations of real autonomy from the Georgia Department of Education, many conversion charter schools became charters thinking that they were going to be “masters of their own destiny.”

Conversion charter schools thought they were going to have more independence or autonomy from their local districts than they actually received, particularly in the areas of personnel and budgeting or financing. So, they become charter schools. They soon come to find out that the central office is going to tell them who their principal is and what teachers are going to be in certain positions or whether or not they are getting a second person in the library or not. All those decisions still came from the central office where they thought they were getting that autonomy. Likewise with the budget; they thought they were going to have control of how they spent their money and they would find out there were still a lot of parameters they had to meet from the local districts. So, I think that they were disenfranchised. They just really didn’t get what they thought they were getting from the local board. (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013)

Conversion charter schools are more system reliant than start-up charter schools. Decisions such as the hiring and firing of staff, budgetary issues, facility issues, and oftentimes the length of the school day or school year rolls back to the Local Board of Education. Because the Local Board of Education makes the vast majority of decisions, the conversion charter school's governing board becomes more of a strong school council than an actual board that makes much needed decisions toward attaining autonomy (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012).

#### *Other avenues for flexibility*

Conversion charter schools are "beginning to figure out that the flexibilities that they are receiving as a charter are no different than the flexibility they can receive through individual waivers under Title 20 of state law" (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012). Schools are also realizing that they can accomplish some of the flexibility and innovativeness of the curricular instructional programs in a regular, more traditional school setting through either magnet school or a school within a school type of concept. This would allow schools to have some of those same types of innovations in place but simply not have to call it a charter school (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012).

According to Bonnie Holliday, additional flexibility models are now available that were not available when charter schools first appeared in Georgia. More recently, there are

IE<sup>2</sup> models that allow categorical spending flexibility, but the model retains governance to the district level which is very appealing to many districts. There are charter system models now. A lot of things have loosened up. There is intra district transfer policies now, there are waivers granted from the state board that may not have been granted 5

years ago. Because of the economy, schools are facing diminished tax bases so they do not have enough money and therefore the state board has been pretty lenient with several specific waivers. There's just more options available to districts now so that may influence why schools are not renewing conversion charter contracts. (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013)

### *Money*

“If conversion charter schools are doing it for the money, the federal implementation money was a one-time thing. So, when the money runs out, there is no incentive to renew” (J. Rippner, personal communication, February 1, 2013).

In the first year Georgia allowed conversion charter schools, 26 public schools converted to charter status. At the end of the five year term, 20 of the 26 schools did not renew to continue as charter schools. Originally, “there were no penalties and not enough oversight of who received federal charter implementation dollars. So many schools saw an opportunity to receive a substantial amount of money; and when their charter expired, there was no need to renew their charter because the school would not be eligible for any additional federal implementation dollars. Therefore, there is no desire to continue as a charter and the process of converting can be thought of as a money grab” (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012). Erste shares a similar view: “Conversion charter schools have to spend the grant money in the first two years and they have a five year charter. So, once they have spent it, they are like 'ok, we got the money and have made the change and now we are happy and don't need the charter’” (personal communication, November 8, 2012).



## *Loss of Support*

Part of the requirement for converting to a charter school is to demonstrate that the school has community and parental support. But, how long does that level of support remain or stay in place once a charter petition is granted or a school is converted to charter school? The requirements for community and parental involvement are greater in charters than in traditional schools. The initial support is there, but the question becomes a matter of how long will that support remain.

In any school as we know, students cycle through those schools. If you begin a charter elementary school, after 5 years, you have to understand that only one grade level of your students and parents are there at the end of 5 years. So, the individuals who had a lot of interest in that school originally may no longer be associated with that school. You're having to constantly bring in and gain that level of support from the incoming parents every single year. (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012)

Erste stated the following relating to support surrounding conversion charter schools:

The biggest challenge is it's all exciting at the beginning. It's all great and fabulous but then reality sets in and then at that point if it's not real, it does not last. Changes in leadership, faculty, parents . . . everyone recirculates out. The excitement for it all or the value may no longer be there. The drive or motivation is lost. (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012)

Andrew Lewis similarly noted that

parents and teachers will often say, because there has to be a vote for renewal, forget it, we don't support it. It was fun while it lasted. Dunwoody Springs Elementary School, a conversion charter in North Fulton, you had a principal that led the initiative of converting to charter school. She spent a great amount of time with her community getting buy-in from them, and doing some very interesting work with setting up a partnership with Georgia State University. When she left, a very strong founder of why that school became a conversion charter left with her and there was no one to continue with her same mindset. It's kind of a founder's syndrome. When a conversion charter school loses the reason why they initially became a charter because the person initiating that has left, the school struggles to hold onto the original vision of the conversion charter school. (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012)

### *Academic Performance*

Converting to a charter school does not always equate to greater academic performance when compared to their neighboring, more traditional operated schools. So, "if you are not truly gaining anything significantly academically, why should you continue to operate in the same manner?" (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012).

The innovations and flexibilities that conversion charter schools were originally afforded in their charter petition are not meeting the results that they had anticipated academically (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012). "Data on standardized tests may display that a conversion charter school is doing horribly and it knows there is no way that the state will approve them. Results may not meet the charter term. Therefore, the charter school ends their charter term" says Erste (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). Zechman

believes that academic performance is a major factor of reversion on behalf of the local and state board.

If a conversion charter school wants to continue to be renewed, but they have not had good student academic performance, their local board would challenge them on that I'm sure without any doubt. And, if they made it past the local school board, certainly Mr. Erste and the state board members would take a very serious look and be hesitant to renew one that has not shown student achievement progress." (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013)

#### *Lack of Resources*

Oftentimes traditional schools have more resources to offer. Questions have risen about charter schools being able to effectively educate all populations of students whether they are children with special needs or children whose first language may not be English. Additional resources would be more likely to be provided by more traditional schools (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012).

### Findings Related to Research Question Three

Research Question Three explores who or what key respondents believe encourages the decision to revert a conversion charter school back to the traditional public school model and provides some examples of possible outcomes when reversion occurs.

### *Decision for Reversion*

A charter contract is a three party contract between the governance board, the local board, and the state board. These are the people that initiate termination of the contract. Most often, the decision to revert is made at the school level.

If it is an issue of there are other avenues and we don't want to re-up our contract for another five years, then that would be a local board decision to revert because there are instances when the school is performing but the district or the school have lost interest in chartering for whatever reason and so they are going to go in a different direction. It's not necessarily the state board wouldn't have approved a renewal term, it's just that they are not interested in it anymore. (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013)

Occasionally, parents lead the committee to write the renewal petition. Addison Elementary, the first conversion charter school in Georgia, decided to "give up their charter because there was no more parent support for the school remaining a charter" (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). In this case the parents and teachers made the decision to revert the school back to a traditional public school model. The district can also decide they no longer want any more charter schools (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012).

### *Reversion Outcomes*

While some respondents were unsure of reversion outcomes, others believed there were no penalties and very little changes. Lewis stated, "There is no significant difference for a child or community when a conversion charter school reverts back. Typically, there is little or no outcry when a conversion charter school reverts back to a traditional public school model" (A.

Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012). Similarly, Holliday responded, “there is rarely a significant difference between a conversion charter school and a traditional public school. In terms of what would happen to their curriculum, staff, leadership, scheduling, or to their programs, there would be no significant shift if they reverted back to a traditional public school model” (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013).

There is in one case in which a conversion charter school’s term expired, and they didn’t come ask for a renewal. So, our staff contacted them asking them if they needed a renewal and the school was surprised. They had no idea that their school charter had terminated. And, so I asked the question to the staff to ask them if they are using any waivers because they cannot use them any longer for they don’t have approval for them anymore. I also asked them to ask the school what waivers they are using that they really need, and they couldn’t answer the question. So, I thought they aren’t even using the power of all the things they could have been doing with waivers. The school had no elements of a charter school. And that was a wake-up call. We need to watch out for people that want to be charter in name only. We need to always ask them what is it that they want to do and what plan they have of doing something that they are prohibited from doing under current state guidelines. If they don’t have some vision for that, they probably don’t need to convert to be a charter school. (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013)

### Chapter Summary

Chapter Four consists of three sections. The first section outlines the factors that influence the conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status. The second section explains why some Georgia charters revert back to the public school status. The third section explores the

consequences when conversion charters revert to public school status. Chapter Five discusses the findings, the importance of the study, implications of the findings or policy, implications of the findings for practice, and suggestions for further areas of research.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This last chapter includes a short review of the study, a report of key findings, and suggested implications for policymakers and future research.

#### Review of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate and identify why conversion charter schools in Georgia revert back to the traditional public school models. The study identifies the factors that influence Georgia public schools to convert to charter status and why many of these charters revert back to public school status. This study analyzes why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools have opted to revert back to the traditional public school model and also explores what happens to the conversion charter schools when they “unconvert.” The following research questions guide the study:

1. What factors influence the conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status?
2. In the opinion of state officials and school administrators, why did some Georgia charters revert back to public school status?
3. What consequences might conversion charters have once they revert to public school status?

#### *Major Findings*

## Conclusions about Research Question One

Educational leaders in the state of Georgia overwhelmingly agree that money is the driving force behind traditional public schools' decisions to convert to charter schools. Through the federal Public Charter Schools Program's competitive grant program, Georgia has been awarded federal funds to distribute to charter school developers to assist in initial developments and operations. The federal implementations "were put into place to be incentives, so we shouldn't be surprised to see public schools converting to charters for this financial incentive" (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013). Schools viewed the federal dollars as an opportunity to assist their own individual school's needs with some additional dollars (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012).

Additional responses included desire for change to improve quality, autonomy and flexibility, community support, and lack of accountability. Improving the quality of a school is the driving factor behind the charter school phenomenon. Typically, change is considered when better quality is desired. Erste emphasizes the point that schools want to take the "opportunity to change everything they are doing or change significant parts of what they are doing, and going through the process of converting to a charter school has them come up with their plan to actually improve their school" (L. Erste, personal communication, December 14, 2012).

With the desire for change to improve the quality of a school drives the need for the school to have flexibility and autonomy in order to execute necessary and anticipated change. Traditional public schools oftentimes view chartering as an opportunity to gain flexibility from state law and consider the charter option as an avenue to achieve true autonomy. Erste stated the value of chartering "is in that schools get the flexibility to do things that state laws or rules would prevent them from doing by waiving state law" (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8,



2012). Oftentimes schools are looking to free themselves from a lot of “bureaucratic red tape” to have flexibility to do what they think is best for their students and school community (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013). Schools are seeking a variety of flexibilities in their charter petitions, such as teacher certification, curricular or instructional programs, parent involvement requirements, and length of the school day and calendar year in order to improve the overall quality of the education (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012).

Schools use the flexibility waivers granted in charters to customize their school to the wants and needs of their particular community. Many communities come together and rally behind the idea of charter schools, and local community members along with teachers and parents view charter status as an “exciting tool to do something different” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012). Usually, charter communities are very proud of their charter schools. When communities have the charter label, “they really hold it up like a feather in their cap” (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

Lastly, the Georgia Department of Education states, “a conversion charter school is a charter school that previously existed as a traditional public school. The traditional public school entered into a charter to gain additional flexibility in exchange for greater accountability” (GaDOE website). Some respondents feel as though conversion charter schools are not held to the same “high” accountability as start-up charter school because conversion schools do not face a real penalty for failure. Lewis points out that “if a start-up charter school fails to meet the obligations set forth within its own charter, the school runs the risk of closure. School closure is considered the highest accountability. If a conversion charter school is not able to meet to

obligations set forth in its charter, it runs the risk of losing its charter and reverting back to a traditional public school” (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012).

In summary, educational leaders found five criteria related to why schools convert to charter schools models. These include money, desire for change to improve quality, autonomy and flexibility, community support, and lack of accountability.

### Conclusions about Research Question Two

The majority of educational leaders in this study also strongly agree that money is the number one reason conversion charter schools revert back to the traditional public school model.

When the funding stream dries up or decreases, that’s when you saw many of the schools not renewing their charters because they had converted from a traditional public school to a charter school thinking about the financial incentive. Not much about their governance model really changed. When there wasn’t additional funding available, some of these conversions thought, well maybe this isn’t worth it. (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013)

According to the federal implementation grant, charter schools are limited to a maximum of 24 months to spend implementation grant funds. Once the money is spent, conversion charter schools are not eligible for more funding. Therefore, “schools spend the money in the first two years to make the changes wanted, realize they are happy and no longer need a charter” (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012).

Additional reasons for reversions mentioned by respondents include an unanticipated lack of flexibility and autonomy, other avenues available for flexibility, loss of support, academic performance, and lack of resources. Due to the lack of expectations of real autonomy from the

Georgia Department of Education, many conversion charter schools became charters thinking that they are going to be “masters of their own destiny” (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013). Unfortunately, conversion charter schools are more system reliant than start-up charter schools. Major decisions, such as hiring and firing of staff, budgetary issues or decisions, facility issues, and oftentimes the length of the school day or school year, which they had thought they were going to have flexibility to make, roll back to the Local Board of Education (L. Zechmann, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

Conversion charter schools are “beginning to figure out that the flexibilities that they are receiving as a charter are no different than the flexibility they can receive through individual waivers under Title 20 of state law” (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012). Schools are also realizing that they can accomplish some of the flexibility and innovativeness of curricular instructional programs in more traditional school settings through either magnet schools or schools within a school-type of concept. This would allow schools to have some of those same type of innovations in place but simply not have to call it a charter school (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012). More recently, additional flexibility models are now available that were not available when charter schools first appeared in Georgia. For example, the IE<sup>2</sup> has appeal to many districts because the model allows categorical spending flexibility but it retains governance to the district level (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013).

Although community support may be very high in the early years of a charter school, oftentimes the community buy-in is lost when the individuals who had a lot of interest and time invested in a school originally but are no longer be associated with that school (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012). Conversion charter schools that lose the person

or people who had initiated the conversion struggle to hold on to the school's mission and vision (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012). Lewis refers to this occurrence as a "founder's syndrome." Conversion charter schools revert back to their traditional models when strong founders depart.

If a conversion charter school is not significantly gaining anything academically, why should it continue to operate in the same manner? Looking at some of the academic performances over time, some conversion charter schools may find that they really are not getting any greater academic performance than their neighboring, more traditionally operated schools (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012). Considering the 2010–2011 overall academic results of charter schools, charter schools in Georgia performed worse than the state's traditional public schools. Over the years, results have been sometimes better or worse but, "[in] the old days, conversion charter schools were a way to turn a school around and it didn't work" (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012).

Lastly, conversion charter schools may face a lack of resources and therefore revert back to their original public school model. Oftentimes, traditional public schools have more resources to offer. Questions have risen about charter schools being able to effectively educate all populations of students, whether concerning children with special needs or children whose second language is English. Additional resources are more likely to be provided by more traditional schools (J. Parish, personal communication, November 20, 2012).

In summary, educational leaders found six criteria related to why conversion charter schools revert back to the traditional public school model. They include money, unanticipated lack of flexibility and autonomy, other avenues available for flexibility, loss of support, academic performance, and lack of resources.

### Conclusions about Research Question Three

A charter contract is a three party contract between the governance board, the local board, and the state board. These are the key people who could initiate termination of the contract. Most often the decision to revert a conversion charter school back to a traditional public school model is made at the school level (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013).

As for reversion outcomes, there are no penalties and very little changes exist. According to respondents, there are no significant differences for students or communities when conversion charter schools revert back. Typically, there is little or no outcry when a conversion charter reverts back to the traditional public school model because there is rarely a significant difference between a conversion charter school and a traditional public school (B. Holliday, personal communication, February 15, 2013).

### Implications for Policymakers

This study carries three implications for policymakers. First, the number of conversion charter schools reverting back to the traditional public school model in the state of Georgia is greater than ever before. Louis Erste, director of charter school at the Georgia Department of Education, stated the following during the phone interview in response to Table 2.7:

Your research has actually put the issue on my agenda because the number I gave you back of 55% of conversion charters schools reverting back was worse than the number you gave me of 42%. My 55% is out of 66 conversion charter schools, and if I take off, subtract from the base, those whose charters aren't up for renewal yet, which takes me to the number 50 on the list, that would be 36 out of 50. That would be right at 72%. But, obviously someone could join a charter system but that's not what's happening because

most conversions join a charter system when their charter term is up. This is an interesting factoid for me and makes me wonder—Are conversion charter schools just a temporary thing? What is it that is working and not working? How much effort should we put into working with districts that want to become charter? (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012)

Second, while flexibility and autonomy are perceived to be the reason many public schools convert to charters, state education leaders believe money is the driving factor. Many advocates of charter schools promote the “innovative” aspects on charter schools, but educational leaders in Georgia are convinced that conversion charter school classrooms are generally not much different than traditional public school classrooms. Conversion charter schools do not seem to be developing new and innovative instructional practices that advocates had anticipated but are instead using federal implementation dollars to fund other school needs. Typically, Georgia receives an average of \$10 million a year from the Federal Charter School Program Grant.

For me, it raises a statewide policy issue—How much time and effort should we put into conversion charter schools? On one hand, it makes more sense to convert your schools and not become a charter system because the money through the implementation grant is guaranteed. So, we know that smaller districts are considering the conversion approach to help them make the changes and increase their quality of their gain academically. But, what happens when we run out of money to give them? There is no longer an incentive to convert. (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8, 2012)

The general purpose of the federal Public Charter Schools Program is to expand the number of high-quality charter schools available to students by providing financial assistance for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of charter schools; increase understanding of the charter school model; and evaluate the effects of charter schools, including their effects on students, student academic achievement, staff, and parents. While much of these objectives are being accomplished, they are not being maintained as a high numbers of conversion charters revert back to the traditional public school model after 5 years.

The federal implementation dollars serve as an incentive for public schools to seek a charter. Grant money continues to be awarded to schools as conversion rates increase in the state of Georgia. The state board needs to provide clearer communication so that schools have a better understanding of what they need to do and what the expectations are, provide more guidance on how to use the flexibility, and most importantly, hold schools accountable. The state board should be aware of where the money going and what is it funding. Charter authorizers in Georgia need to consider how the State can guarantee that these federal grant funds are spent wisely. According to Erste, the renewal process is a chance to filter and weed out the weak charter schools that do not want to do the work necessary to turn into high quality charter schools. But according to data, most of Georgia's conversion charter schools are reverting back to the traditional public school model before the renewal process and after the federal implementation dollars have been spent.

Lastly, no high accountability exists for conversion charter schools in the state of Georgia. Lewis states, "The highest form of accountability for a charter school is closure" (personal communication, December 14, 2012). If a conversion charter school were to lose its charter, the school would revert back to a traditional public school with no reprimand from the

state (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012). What motivation does a conversion charter school have to meet their obligations set forth within their charter term? Policymakers need to provide some form of high accountability for conversion charter schools in the state of Georgia.

### Recommendations for Further Research

During the research and the analysis process of this study, two opportunities for further research came about: a multi-state research study, and an increase in the research participant pool.

#### *Multi-state research study*

An additional research opportunity includes testing this framework in other states that have received the grant funding through the federal Public Charter Schools Program. Similar studies can look at reversion rates across other states. Some questions to consider may include: Is the high charter reversion rate unique to Georgia? Are traditional public schools across states converting to charters because of financial incentives? What factors influence the reversion of charter schools in other states?

“It is important to note that in other states, there are conversion charter schools that when the school converts to charter status, they receive full flexibility, autonomy, in exchange for high accountability no differently than a start-up charter school. So, I wonder if Georgia will eventually go down that same path” (A. Lewis, personal communication, December 14, 2012).

Further research includes examining how flexibility, autonomy, and accountability differ among states and how these variables affect the sustainability of a conversion charter school.



### *Increase research participant pool*

This study applies one criterion to select participation in the interview qualitative study: Education leaders associated with charter schools in Georgia. The participants could be separated into two targeted populations: (1) State officials (GA DOE-Charter School Department, GA Charter School Association, Boards of Education—districts of conversion charter schools), and (2) School Leaders (school district superintendents, principals and assistant principals). Unfortunately, I was not able to interview the second of the two targeted populations, school leaders, due to a limited time frame for the research. School leaders who replied to the initial recruitment letter requested that the researcher receive district clearance. Therefore, the present study does not examine perceptions of local level members of conversion charter school in Georgia. Participants to include in further study are the initial petitioners of conversion charters, school leaders, faculty and staff, parents, and local board members of conversion charter schools.

Another population to consider in further studies includes state legislators. State legislators may be able to provide a viewpoint from a practical policy stance that other populations in the study may lack. Because the intent of this study is to help policymakers clarify why the charter option is rarely sustainable for some schools, including state legislators in the research participants may not only bring further awareness of the issue, but also bring about policy changes.

### Conclusion

Overall, conversion charter schools in Georgia have not been successful in remaining charter schools. There are a variety of reasons and factors that play a part in why reversions are occurring. According to Louis Erste, the state of Georgia has invested about \$100 million over the past 10 years in creating charter schools (L. Erste, personal communication, November 8,

2012). As we now know, Georgia conversion charter schools are rarely sustainable and many times converted to charter status solely for additional funding. Therefore, two questions arise: (1) why invest millions of dollars into an idea that has not proven to be successful, and (2) where is the accountability and strong oversight for these schools that are receiving this additional funding? In Georgia, conversion charter schools set forth obligations in their charter terms, but face no real penalty for failing to meet them. If conversion charter schools in Georgia were required to define specific performance targets which would be scrutinized by stronger oversight and held to higher accountability standards similar to that of start-up charter schools, reversion rates may be lower than the current 72%.

The Georgia Department of Education continues to work towards its mission: improving student achievement by expanding public school options through the development of high quality charter schools (GaDOE website). Erste believes that “high quality charter schools produce the strong academic result,” but it can’t do that without the foundation of three things: financial stability, a well-trained high functioning governing board, and legal and regulatory compliance. As Erste and his committee continue to strive to sustain high quality charter schools across Georgia, it will be interesting to see if the trend of conversions reverting will continue and whether policies will be put into place to guarantee federal grant money is spent wisely and encourage conversion charter schools to remain charters.

Although so many of Georgia’s conversion charter schools are reverting back to the traditional public school model, the concept of chartering has Georgia’s traditional public schools thinking of how they can use waivers to gain some additional flexibility and customize their schools to fit the needs of their community. We are all interested in seeing education being successful for the students that we serve. If there were ways that the additional flexibility

produced greater student outcomes, then educators would all be extremely supportive. Charters can be viewed in some ways as a type of pilot approach. We talk about educational reform quite frequently, so if we see that there are some schools gaining a great deal of success by having greater flexibility in some areas, maybe those are then areas that we need to consider for a much larger number of schools. Charters can be looked at to observe what can be learned from them and can be shared with other schools. If it's successful, then why not use some of the school's methods in other schools? We can view chartering as one additional avenue to reach our goals to have quality public education for all of our students. Charters are one extra tool in that tool belt.

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## **APPENDICES**

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## **Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look**

### **Instrument #1: Interview Protocol**

Telephone interview for up to 10 willing participants in Georgia

*NOTE: all participants will receive the same questions, focusing on the overall charter school movement in Georgia, with modified prompts.*

*NOTE: Verbal consent script MUST be read first.*

1. What has been your role within the charter school movement in Georgia?
  - a. Prompts:
    - i. Change. How has that role changed over the time?
    - ii. Authority. What are/were your specific responsibilities now?
    - iii. Structure. Who do/did you work for?
2. Regarding Georgia's growth in charter schools, what factors do you believe influence the conversion of Georgia public schools to charter status?
  - a. Prompts:
    - i. Flexibility. What are examples of the types of flexibility schools are asking for? What are schools hoping to achieve with flexibility?
    - ii. Decentralization. What is the greatest priority regarding decentralization in charter schools? How has decentralization been implemented in Georgia charter schools?
3. Can you tell me about the specific reasons you believe so many conversion charter schools are reverting back to the traditional public school model?
  - a. Prompts:
    - i. Challenges. What do you see as the biggest challenges or barriers for conversion charter schools?
    - ii. History. Has there been a significant change from previous policy? How?
    - iii. Resources. Are there enough funds to support the needs of conversion charter schools? Are you aware of any additional beneficial funding given to charter schools that is not received by traditional public schools?
    - iv. Support. How much support are conversion charter schools receiving from their communities? Why?
    - v. Measurement. How are conversion charter schools performing academically? Why?
    - vi. Perception. How do administrators and staff perceive the flexibility granted through charters?
4. Who or what key people make the decision to revert a conversion charter school back to the traditional public school model?
5. What might be some examples of outcomes when schools "unconvert"?

- a. Prompts:
  - i. Stakeholders. What are the reactions of school community members? Is there broad support for conversion charter schools to revert?
  - ii. Impact. What substantial changes does the school community undergo? What effects does the reversion have on student achievement, morale, and every day procedures within schools? What happens to all of the flexibility previously granted through the charter?
- 6. Is there anything else you think I should know about conversion charter schools in the state of Georgia?
- 7. Who else would you recommend that I speak with about the state's charter school movement?
  - a. Prompts:
    - i. State policymakers
    - ii. District leaders
    - iii. Advocacy organizations?
    - iv. Business leaders?
    - v. Higher education?
    - vi. Others?
- 8. If I have any further questions, may I follow-up with you by phone or email?

Thank you for your time.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW CONFIRMATION EMAIL

## Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look

### Instrument #3: Interview Confirmation Email

Date

Dear Participant:

Greeting

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my research study. I am writing to confirm our interview and provide you with more information about the study itself.

The Study: My study is entitled *Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look*. The purpose of this study is to help Georgia policymakers clarify why the charter option is rarely sustainable for charters. The study will examine and explain why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools have opted to revert back to the traditional public school model. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research and there are no direct benefits to you.

The Interview: As we agreed, I will call you at [phone number] on [date] at [time] and will last approximately 45 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped. I am broadly interested in your work with the Georgia charter school movement and am specifically interested in your thoughts and opinions of why so conversion charter schools have reverted back to the traditional public school model.

Your involvement: Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The results of the research study may be published and, as a public official [or participant in a public policy process], your name and title may be used in the final report. You will have a chance to review a written draft of the case study before publication. Only the researchers will have access to the audio-tapes and, after they have been analyzed and within 36 months, the audio-tapes will be destroyed.

By participating in the interview, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project.

This letter serves as your consent document. Please print and keep this letter for your records. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your information will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at (706) 372-3626 or send an e-mail to [heena985@gmail.com](mailto:heena985@gmail.com). You may also contact the principal investigator, Catherine Sielke, by phone at (706) 542-9767 or send an email to [csielke@uga.edu](mailto:csielke@uga.edu). Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The

Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 629 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this project and I look forward to talking with you.

Sincerely,

Heena Patel  
[heena985@gmail.com](mailto:heena985@gmail.com)  
(706) 372-3626

## APPENDIX C

### VERBAL CONSENT SCRIPT



## **Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look**

### **Instrument #4: Verbal Consent Script (Read to participant prior to interview)**

Date of interview: [date] and [time]

Participant: [name]

#### **Script:**

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Catherine Sielke in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. Through this interview, you are participating in a research study entitled *Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look*. The purpose of this study is to explore the underlying reasons for why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools have reverted back to the traditional public school model.

Because this study meets the research standards of the University of Georgia, I am required to get your verbal consent to participate. Please bear with me while I review the consent requirements:

1. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
2. The results of the research study may be published and, as a public official [or participant in a public policy process], your name may be used in the final report.
3. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

By participating in this interview, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project. Do you agree to participate?

Finally, I would like to audio-tape this interview. Do you agree?

Thank you. Now, let's talk about the charter school movement in Georgia...

## APPENDIX D

### RECRUITMENT EMAIL

## Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look

### Instrument #2: Recruitment Letter

Date

Dear :

Hello,

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Catherine Sielke in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled *Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look*. The purpose of this study is to explore the underlying reasons for why almost half of Georgia conversion charter schools have reverted back to the traditional public school model.

Because of your role in Georgia's charter school movement, I would like to interview you by phone at your convenience in the next four weeks. Your participation should only take about 45 minutes and the conversation will be recorded.

The findings from this project may provide information on state education policy in the future. The results of the research study may be published and, as a public official, your name may be used in the final report.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at (706) 372-3626 or send an e-mail to [heena985@gmail.com](mailto:heena985@gmail.com). You may also contact the principal investigator, Catherine Sielke, by phone at (706) 542-9767 or send an email to [csielke@uga.edu](mailto:csielke@uga.edu). Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 629 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

Please let me know if you are willing to participate in this project and when you are available for a phone interview.

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Heena Patel  
[heena985@gmail.com](mailto:heena985@gmail.com)  
(706) 372-3626

## APPENDIX E

### THANK YOU EMAIL

## **Georgia Conversion Charter Schools: A Closer Look**

### **Instrument #5: Thank you email [email to participants following phone interview]**

Date

Dear        :

Thank you so much for participating in today's interview. I appreciate your willingness to share your experience and time with me.

The purpose of my study is to explore how why almost half of Georgia charter schools have reverted back to the traditional public school model. In the next few weeks, I will be sending you a draft of my study. I will welcome your feedback at that time. My research will be complete next summer, 2013 and I will be sure that you receive a copy of the final project.

As a reminder, your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at (706) 372-3626 or send an e-mail to [heena985@gmail.com](mailto:heena985@gmail.com). Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

Thank you again for your participation! Please keep this email for your records.

Sincerely,

Heena Patel  
[heena985@gmail.com](mailto:heena985@gmail.com)  
(706) 372-3626