

HOW INTRA-DISTRICT SCHOOL CHOICE AND COMPETITION AMONG SCHOOLS  
IMPACTS SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL  
PRINCIPALS

by

Christopher M. Kohan

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2018

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APPROVED BY:

Ralph Marino, Jr., Ed.D., Committee Chair

Jared Bigham, Ed.D., Committee Member

Lisa Ueltzhoffer, Ed.D., Committee Member

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, explanatory case study was to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district responded to an environment of total school choice and how they made sense of their roles as a principal in the era of school choice. Hess's (2010) organizational theory was the theoretical foundation for this study as selective enrollment schools, such as magnet and charter schools, would have direct and indirect effects on traditional schools. The research questions for this study were: (a) How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals make sense of the competition generated by school choice options; (b) how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts their responsibilities as school leaders; and (c) how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts the long-term operations of the school? The results were from 11 individual principal semi-structured interviews, 11 administrative questionnaires, 11 school choice event observations, and artifact analysis were used as gathered data and were analyzed through hand coding and recoding. The participants universally felt that school choice had a nearly immeasurable impact on their job responsibilities. Principals expressed they had distant vision of what school choice policy meant for them and the school they would lead in the future, but they were uncertain if that vision would be attained.

*Keywords:* charter schools, magnet schools, principal leadership, school choice, school leadership, school marketing

## Dedication

It is with a degree of gratitude I could never express that I dedicate this research to my family. While there are a great number of family members that I owe a debt of gratitude, I have to start with those who had the most profound impact on who I am today. Amy and Lauren changed my life forever and changed it for the better. I could not ask for a better wife and daughter, but the changes you have brought have been life altering. Since you have entered my life, you have shown me that living for the benefit of others makes all of life more enjoyable.

I also need to thank my parents, John and Patricia Kohan. You always placed an importance on education that gave it the proper place in my life. I wish my mother could have lived to see me complete this journey, but I know she would be proud of me for finally getting it done. I owe a special thank you to my father who supported me through the good, and the bad and has been the strongest, wisest man I have ever met. I know that if I work at it for the rest of my life, I may someday be half the man that you are.

In addition, I need to thank the family that I have developed at work that has kept me in line and focused my attention on the areas where it needed to be. Kerri, Mike, Anthony, Sonja, John, Maddie, and Jim have shown me the power of working hard and doing things “the right way” in public education. I mean it when I say that the work you have all done has made you my professional heroes.

## **Acknowledgments**

I could not have completed this study without the guidance and support of the staff at Liberty University. The instructors of my classes provided a content that allowed me to take on research that I would not have thought I could complete. The patience and understanding that they demonstrated throughout the process allowed me to ultimately complete my dissertation.

I would like to personally thank Dr. Scott Watson for the role that he played in allowing me to return to the program after the distractions of life pulled me away for a time. I would like to also thank Dr. Ralph Marino, Jr. for his continued patience with me as I worked my way through the proposal phase of my research and led me to my defense. It has made me a better person. I would also like to thank Dr. Lucinda Spaulding for her role in refining my research methods and helping me to clarify the best way to research my topic. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Jared Bigham and Dr. Lisa Ueltzhoffer for their valued input and support throughout this process.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

The American Educational Research Association (AERA)

English Language Learners (ELL)

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA)

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)

The Delaware Neighborhood Schools Act (NSA)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Researchers have stated secondary school principals have a complex job that requires more from them than at any time in American education (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Researchers have posited the pressures of the job are compounded by well-meaning policies that add to school principals' stress (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), which is especially true at the high school level (Harvey & Holland, 2011). When leaders have applied the policy of school choice to expand parental school or improve educational outcomes, they have applied another stressor to an already difficult occupation (Hess, 2002). Understanding how principals perceived their leadership as influenced by school choice and the corresponding competition among schools could influence how leaders adopted and applied public education policy.

This chapter includes the background with an introduction of school choice and school reform pressures created by the model to bring about change. The background is provided in a historical, social, and theoretical context. Context is provided in the situation to self, as well as the problem and purpose statements. Also included in this chapter is an introduction to the research questions guiding the study, and a description of this qualitative, explanatory case study research plan. The chapter concludes with definitions that will aid in understanding.

### **Background**

Ash (2014) posited some students, parents, policy makers, legislators, and those in the general public preferred the concept of school choice. Proponents of school choice have attempted to apply the concept of free will to education and presented a strong argument in favor

of allowing those vested in attending the best school possible to select a public school (Hess, 2010).

### **Historical Context**

School choice proponents first appeared in the 1970s and successfully propelled the concept of school choice to a widespread education reform movement for the current education system (Fleming, 2012). Leaders initially wrote this method of reform into law as portions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (2002). The passage and implementation of NCLB led to a decade of reforms that would alter the course of school accountability (DeVita, 2010). Leaders continued these reforms by passing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015.

### **Social Context**

While leaders can use school choice to create competition between schools (Ash, 2014; Anast-May, Mitchell, Buckner, & Elsberry, 2012; Cavanagh, 2011), researchers have presented mixed evidence on whether competition between schools leads to school improvement (Arsen & Ni, 2012; Carpenter & Medina, 2011; Holley, Egalite, & Lueken, 2013; Zimmer & Buddin, 2009). In the history of education in the United States, school choice is a relatively new phenomenon. Research that has been done on the varied forms of school choice must be viewed in that context. As of 2017, research conducted on students who leave traditional schools through school choice and those who remain in traditional schools have demonstrated changing schools to have had minimal impact, if any (Bettinger, 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2008; Chakrabarti, 2008; Hoxby, 2000; Imberman, 2010; McMillan, 2004; Ni, 2009; Rothstein, 2007; Sass, 2006). Evidence has indicted the idea that effective school leadership is one of the most influential factors that increases student achievement (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). The school leader has the greatest positive

impact on student achievement when they can focus on the areas of need within a specific school to build and share leadership capacity with other employees in the school (Louis, Leithwood et al., 2010). Fullan (2014) supported maximizing principal impact. Fullan posited the role of the most effective principal fell between micromanaging and the autonomy granted in conjunction with high stakes testing. School leaders must determine how the time spent responding to the competition created by school choice impacts current school leaders. School leadership, particularly at the secondary, high school level, has become a more complex task in the previous decade (Archer, 2004; Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010).

### **Theoretical Context**

Education leaders and policy makers would benefit from knowing how high school principals respond to the current environment of competition created by school choice policies, as well as whether these are beneficial to traditional schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and school systems (Oplatka, 2007). Researchers have focused on the ability of school types and school leaders to increase student achievement (Betts & Tang, 2011; C. Campbell, Gross, & Lake, 2008). Researchers have focused on the effect competition among schools has on student achievement (Bettinger, 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, Gilpatric et al., 2008; Chakrabarti, 2008; Hoxby, 2000; Imberman, 2010; McMillan, 2004; Ni, 2009; Rothstein, 2007; Sass, 2006). A gap existed in the research on how principals made sense of the roles they played in an educational landscape where they must compete for students and take on the role of image-building and marketing schools. While principals play a key role in the day-to-day operation of schools, their decisions create the secondary school culture of the school district (Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010). I conducted an analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the school leaders to add greater understanding of the district I studied. School leaders, school systems, and policy

makers would benefit from understanding the unique and multifaceted roles required by principals to compete in school choice systems.

### **Situation to Self**

Prior to enrolling in the doctoral program at Liberty University, I worked as a teacher and administrator in schools impacted by the growing school choice movement in Delaware. This growth in school choice included leaders opening magnet schools and charter schools. The broadening of school choice options influenced the traditional schools and stakeholders involved with those schools. The secondary school principals saw the traditional role they had as school leaders change. I wondered if existing research in the area of school choice and competition among schools influenced the jobs being done by secondary school principals. I wanted to understand how these school leaders perceived the impact on their own school leadership.

My role in the research was to serve as an interpreter of the data collected to make sense of the perceptions of the school principals regarding their feelings about school choice and competition. I used sensemaking to interpret the school principal's perceptions. Weick (1995) defined sensemaking as a cognitive process where individuals attempted to understand unexpected, surprising, or confusing events. As a social constructivist, I sought to understand the world around me by forming meaning from participants' interactions in this study. The participants' perceptions were varied and unique to the position in which they served. I generated a theory and made meaning of the data that the participants provided.

As an interpretivist, I gathered data with exploratory orientation. I tried to learn what was happening in particular situations to arrive at an understanding of the distinctive orientations of the subjects involved. This understanding allowed me to develop views separate from any prior assumptions.



## **Problem Statement**

The problem this study addressed was how secondary school principals responded to school choice and made sense of their roles in an environment of total school choice. School choice refers to a policy that U.S. leaders have implemented to create competition in schools (Maranto, Milliman, & Hess, 2010). Hess (2002) stated that policy-created school competition could provide the stimulus for schools to improve performances, instructional methods, and outcomes to remain viable when leaders implemented school choice on a large scale.

Researchers have demonstrated that schools that must compete for students can implement programs that appeal to parents and students (Arsen & Ni, 2011; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel 2009; Maranto et al., 2010; Teske, Schneider, Buckley, & Clark, 2001).

Leaders have most frequently implemented changing school leadership, opening magnet schools, or creating new programs that appeal to parents, such as full-day kindergarten, after-school care, and extracurricular activities (Arsen & Ni, 2011; Lubienski et al., 2009). An atmosphere of competition may stimulate school reform. However, researchers have demonstrated that in many cases, school choice and competition has no discernible impact on stimulating districts and schools to change (Maranto et al., 2010; Teske et al., 2001).

Opinions are mixed on whether competition and school choice as policy initiatives stimulate change; however, a paucity of research has indicated ways the pressure of these policies affect school leaders (Maranto et al., 2010; Oplatka, 2007; Teske et al., 2001).

Secondary school principals have difficult jobs to perform, but they face competition and choice policies that leads to a struggle for resources, funding, students, and public opinion (Oplatka, 2007). Few researchers have provided in-depth understanding of the context for how secondary school principals perceived school choice and competition as impacting their roles. Research

was needed to understand further how the current expansion of competition and school choice impacted the perceptions and experiences of high school principals in a singular school district. Therefore, the problem this study addressed was how secondary school principals responded to school choice and made sense of their roles in an environment of total school choice.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, explanatory case study was to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district responded to an environment of total school choice and how they made sense of their roles as a principal in the era of school choice. At this stage in the research, school choice was generally defined as the competition between traditional, magnet, and charter schools for the enrollment of the same population of students within the district. The theory that guided this study was Hess's (2010) organizational theory; Hess (2010) stated that competition usually either overwhelmed an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forced organizations to take preventive measures to improve.

### **Significance of the Study**

The focus of this research project was the sensemaking of high school principals regarding their own perceptions of how responding to the competition created by school choice impacted their own job performance. Weick (1995) defined sensemaking as a cognitive process where individuals attempted to understand unexpected, surprising, or confusing events. When school principals have implemented new policies or faced new pressures, they have engaged in sensemaking (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002). The principals could construct their own realities from an ongoing flow of events within their environments.

I documented the perceptions of all high school principals in a district committed to allowing school choice for all students in the district, as well as any student from outside the district who wished to utilize inter-district school choice. This study had several practical implications. I informed the policymakers adopting school choice and competition policies. These policies, as well as others that were often combined with these, altered the outcomes of schools by creating a varied system of public schools comprised of traditional schools, vocational-technical schools, magnet schools, and charter schools but with conflicted outcomes about efficacy.

The study filled a gap in the literature. A paucity of research existed that examined intra-district school choice and competition. School choice and competition are often applied inter-district, but most school district leaders do not impose these forces on their schools from within. A gap also existed in the literature in the area of principal sensemaking (Coburn, 2005), which had overlooked sensemaking in secondary school leaders' perceptions of school choice and competition.

This study had theoretical significance. I expanded Hess's (2002) theory; Hess (2002) stated this type of school competition could provide the stimulus for schools to improve performances, instructional methods, and outcomes to remain viable when leaders implemented school choice on a large scale. I added the perspective of the school principal who must implement the policies that created competition through school choice. Principals controlled the schools influenced by policies used to generate the outcomes that Hess (2002) defined. Understanding how principals made sense of the policies and responded to implementing these indicated the outcomes of expanded school choice and competition between schools in the same public school district.

I identified the barriers principals faced when performing all required tasks, while also responding to the pressures placed on them due to competition from the school choice program. The goal of this qualitative study was to examine the high school principal's perceptions to determine if they perceived the impacts of school choice competition differently in traditional, magnet, and charter schools. I then evaluated the findings to identify solutions or additional areas of need. I examined additional quantitative data to analyze any effect of the school choice competition on student enrollment, staffing, curricular changes, and marketing of schools.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** In an environment of total school choice, how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals make sense of the competition generated by school choice options?

This question sought to interpret the target principals' perceptions to determine what impact school choice and the competition had on their job performances. I collected data on whether the participants believed that competition for students existed and their roles in participating in that competition. Principals make sense of phenomena based on what they know from their own backgrounds, school histories, and the roles they play as an intermediary between teachers, staff, central office administrators, and their principal peers (Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002). This sensemaking is often done socially and is based on one's past experiences; one can use sensemaking to understand ambiguous or new information (Weick, 1995). In understanding how principals made sense of this policy, I could obtain better understanding of ways they responded to implementing the policy.

**RQ2:** How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of school choice impacts their responsibilities as school leaders?

The system of school choice and competition was created by legislation at the federal and state levels (14 Del. C. § 401; ESSA, 2015). The role of school principals traditionally did not involve taking steps to compete for students. Even with the most recent revision of school leadership standards, competing for students was not included. Leaders placed current standards to call on school leaders to set a vision for learning; developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources; collaborating with families and community members; acting with integrity; and understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2008). I used these questions to make meaning of principals' perceptions of this mandate for legislation. I explored their perceptions of the competition of school choice.

**RQ3:** How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts the long-term operations of the school?

Hess (2002) stated that competition usually either overwhelmed an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forced organizations to take preventive measures to improve. These long-term operation issues included selecting and implementing a mission and vision for learning; developing a school culture and instructional program through hiring and staffing; ensuring management of resources; and understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context of the school (CCSSO, 2008). I used this question for participants to describe how they viewed implementing total school choice, which influenced school operations.

### Definitions

1. *Campbell's Law* - This law refers to an adage that the more one uses any quantitative social indicator for social decision-making, the more one faces corruption pressures, and the more one may distort and corrupt the social processes one is intended to monitor (D. Campbell, 1979).
2. *Charter schools* - Charter schools are publicly funded schools that leaders have granted a higher degree of autonomy from regulations and policies (Baker & Miron, 2015).
3. *Magnet schools* - Magnet schools are designed to attract students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds to reduce racial isolation or provide an academic or social focus on a specific theme (Hoffman, 2003).
4. *Organizational theory* - Organizational theory is based on the idea that competition usually either overwhelms an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forces organizations to take preventive measures to improve (Hess, 2010).
5. *School choice* - School choice refers to a policy that allows parents to select the school most appropriate for their child to create competition in schools. In this setting, competition can provide the stimulus for schools to improve performances, instructional methods, and outcomes (Hess, 2002).
6. *Sensemaking* – Weick (1995) defined sensemaking as a cognitive process where individuals attempted to understand unexpected, surprising, or confusing events.

### Summary

Few researchers have provided an in-depth understanding of ways intra-district school choice and competition have influenced principals' leadership practices. The purpose of this qualitative, explanatory case study was to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school

principals in one Delaware district responded to an environment of total school choice and how they made sense of their roles as a principal in the era of school choice. Specifically, the aim of this study was to answer the questions: (a) In an environment of total school choice, how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals make sense of the competition generated by school choice options; (b) how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals view the competition of school choice impacting their responsibilities as school leaders; and (c) how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals view the competition of school choice impacting the long-term operations of the school? I then evaluates the findings to identify solutions or identify additional areas of need.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Since the earliest origins of the school choice movement, researchers have posited providing a free public school option to parents may create competition between schools, thereby reforming the public school system through the application of free-market principles (Hess, 2002). Hess (2010) stated choice would replace monopolistic school bureaucracies or at least add a higher degree of flexibility, competition, and quality control. This review of relevant literature focuses on the most common school choice reforms, the directions that these reforms are currently taking, and the impact these have on schools in Delaware. These reforms include a review of literature on market based school choice, magnet schools, charter schools, school leadership, and competition. Each reform plays a part in school leaders' perspectives and the changing roles that they occupy because of the implementation of school choice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this study was Hess's (2010) belief that selective enrollment schools, such as magnet and charter schools, would have direct and indirect effects on traditional schools. Hess (2002) stated this type of school competition could stimulate schools to improve performances, instructional methods, and outcomes to remain viable when leaders implemented school choice on a large scale. Researchers have attributed the direct effects on traditional schools to the flexibility and higher degree of autonomy granted to selective enrollment schools (Eberts & Hollenbeck, 2001). Researchers have posited the indirect effects of selective enrollment schools derive from the increased productivity and efficiency of traditional schools due to new competition with selective enrollment schools (Eberts & Hollenbeck, 2001; Betts, 2009).



Traditional school leaders do not want to lose students to enrollment in magnet and charter schools. If they fail to adapt to competition, they will cease to remain viable and may no longer continue to exist (Hess, 2002). To prevent the loss of students, traditional school leaders must improve their existing practices to retain their current students and attract new students. The indirect effect of school competition may create a greater variety of more effective and efficient schools (Friedman, 1962; Hoxby, 2003). Traditional school leaders' beliefs and actions will influence the benefits of competition from selective enrollment schools. Traditional school leaders' actions will be stimulated by the perceived threat of the loss of student enrollments to magnet and charter schools. This loss of student enrollment will be accompanied by a loss of funding from each student who leaves. Traditional school principals may be motivated by the perceived threat of competition to improve student outcomes in the traditional schools (Hoxby, 2003). Hess (2010) used the organizational theory to state that competition either overwhelmed an organization to change, or it forced organization leaders to take preventive measures to improve. This perceived threat of competition and the principals' responses to it were the focus of this study. Expanding this theory to the system of public education could alter the results of the system, but the outcomes of change or extinction depended on many factors within the specific local education agency.

## **Related Literature**

### **School Choice**

School choice refers to a method of reforming schools that has evolved over time (Rossell, 2005). In its earliest origins, parents could choose a privately funded education or to have a child attend publicly funded schools. The dichotomous decision of which type of school a parent would select began to change; additional options in public education occurred with the

opening of the first magnet schools in 1968 (Rossell, 2005). While leaders designed the first magnet schools to integrate public schools using market-like incentives, instead of federal court actions, magnet schools appeared to serve as a model for new methods of teaching (Rossell, 2005). School leaders adopted policies that permitted intra-district school choice. State leaders also passed legislation allowing inter-district school choice. Delaware, the focus of this study, began to allow inter-district school choice in 1996 (14 Del. C. § 401). The multiple school choice options for education in private schools, traditional public schools, and magnet schools continued to grow into the 1990s. The first publicly funded charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992. More than 6,400 charter schools existed in 42 states and the District of Columbia (Ash, 2014). This amount added to the growing list of options that parents could choose as the best education for their children.

As magnet schools and charter schools continued to expand and grow in number, the idea of being assigned to a specific school based solely on geographic location had begun to wane. As market forces took effect in schools, the leadership of the schools had to reassess the priorities of school leaders. The job of school principals evolved; therefore, responding to the competition caused by new school choice options could hasten that change.

### **Magnet Schools**

Magnet schools began to appear in the 1970s as a response to court-issued desegregation orders that required school district leaders to establish more racially diverse schools. Leaders created magnet schools to limit White flight and attract White students to schools that had been racially identifiable prior to becoming magnet schools (Blank, 1989; Gamoran, 1996). In the ensuing two decades, the number of magnet schools increased dramatically. Researchers have posited the greatest increase during this time occurred in urban areas (Steele & Levine, 1994).

Researchers have defined magnet schools as a public school option leaders created to offer advanced or themed programs to a self-selected group of students (Steele & Levine, 1994). To fill these selective programs, magnet school leaders often have unique admission requirements that require students to demonstrate interest, aptitude, or even audition.

Determining the exact number of magnet schools can be problematic, as district leaders gave many of the programs and schools that fit the definition given differing names (Hoffman, 2003). Hoffman (2003) defined magnet schools as “schools designed to attract students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds for the purpose of reducing racial isolation or to provide an academic or social focus on a specific theme” (p. 38). This broader definition expands the existence of magnet schools to Arizona, Boston, Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Houston. When these schools were included, 30 states operated over 1,770 schools that were magnet schools because of the special focus and ability to select students for enrollment (Sable & Hill, 2006).

Magnet schools differ from traditional schools where students are assigned by geographic location (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Magnet school leaders have the ability to draw students from beyond the traditional neighborhood feeder patterns. The demand for a magnet school comes from a specialized theme popular enough to draw diverse students to attend a school outside their own geographic feeder pattern. While striving for racial diversity, magnet schools also met the growing demand for variation in traditional public education options.

From 1982 to 2013, the number of magnet schools increased from 1,019 to 3,254. Magnet school enrollment nearly tripled from 441,000 to 1.2 million students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education (2014) aided the growth of magnet schools by creating a funding mechanism called the Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP). MSAP provided funding for the expansion of magnet schools from 1985 until present,

with the most recent revisions in 2013. There are more than 3,000 magnet schools serving approximately 2.5 million children (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

With magnet schools well established throughout the country, the focus of many of the programs began to transform. Racial composition faded as the goal and the focus changed to student achievement, modeling innovation in instructional techniques, and increasing levels of parent and student satisfaction. Researchers have expressed renewed interest in magnet schools to increase student achievement, school choice, and school turnaround (Fleming, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Fleming (2012) noted that using magnet schools expanded due to education innovations that could result in school turnarounds. Often, this use occurred by converting low performing traditional public schools into magnet schools. Magnet schools are now included in the options that public school districts provide, as district leaders try to offer a portfolio of options to parents; therefore, parents can pick the best option for their children (Fleming, 2012).

The growth of magnet schools continues as a means of educational reform. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated, "Magnet schools help increase public school options for parents and students in communities across the country. These grants will help students gain access to challenging curricula that will help prepare them for college and 21st century careers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, para. 2). The growth of magnet schools coincided with the award of \$89.8 million in MSAP grants to 27 school districts in 12 states. The awards will help school districts increase public school choices for parents and districts attract a diverse group of students from throughout their communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While the results of magnet schools have been generally promising with the original mission of

desegregation, magnet school funding lags behind when compared with the exponential increases set aside for charter schools that can lead to racial and economic segregation (Eaton, 2010).

### **Charter Schools**

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that leaders have granted a higher degree of autonomy from regulations and policies (Baker & Miron, 2015). In exchange, leaders designed these to be accountable to their authorizing agency, and the parents and students who chose to attend. Charter schools differ from traditional schools in that students, with input from parents, choose to enroll. They are not assigned geographic feeder patterns, and they must convince and recruit students to select the unique school that they offer. The teaching staff at a charter school chooses to work there, in most cases, free of labor unions and collective bargaining for employees. Charter schools can also be closed if leaders do not fulfill their charter or maintain an enrollment sufficient to fund their operation. Because of this issue, the significant features of charter schools that differ from traditional schools are choice, autonomy, and accountability directly to stakeholders (Miron, Cullen, Applegate, & Farrell, 2007).

The federal government through the U.S. Department of Education (2013) provided a definition of charter schools. This definition outlines the requirements that must be included in the formation of any charter school. The NCLB-Charter Schools Program Title V, Part B Non-Regulatory Guidance defined charter schools in concrete terms (Tice, Princiotta, Chapman, & Bielick, 2006). That definition was carried over into the ESSA of 2015. ESSA defines the term charter school as a public school exempt from significant state or local rules that inhibit the flexible operation and management of public schools, as created by a developer as a public school or adapted by a developer from an existing public school, which is operated under the public supervision and direction. A charter school must be nonsectarian in its programs,

admissions policies, employment practices, and all other operations, and it is not affiliated with a sectarian school or religious institution. Charter schools cannot charge tuition. Charter schools must meet all applicable federal, state, and local health and safety requirements to operate in accordance with state law (ESSA, 2015).

Federal law provides a working definition from which all state charter school policies must adhere to remain in compliance at the federal level. Compliance is a requirement if the charter school leaders want access to federal funds. The first charter schools were based on the free market ideas of economist Milton Friedman (1962). Friedman believed that the ability of parents to select a school for their children that was privately run and publicly funded could reform the entire system of public education. Friedman's theories were largely untested until 1988 when President of the American Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, spoke before the National Press Club and proposed a new type of school that he referred to as a charter school. Shanker (1988) proposed that charter schools would be formed by small groups of teachers and parents to fill a void that traditional education could not reach. He believed these should be innovative and employ strategies that had not been used in the existing public school system.

Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law in 1991. The law allowed charter schools to open in the state but deviated from Shanker's (1988) model because it did not require state certification of teachers and did not allow teachers' unions to form in the charter schools (Junge, 2012). There are now more than 6,400 charter schools in 42 states and the District of Columbia (Ash, 2014).

The laws that establish charter schools vary widely from state-to-state (Baker & Miron, 2015). This variance can create differences in mission, purpose, appearance, and operation of charter schools. The two most important aspects in examining charter school laws include the

degree of autonomy granted to schools to free these from education bureaucracy and the capping of the number of charter schools that leaders can authorize. States with a high degree of autonomy and no caps are deemed to have strong charter laws (Baker & Miron, 2015). States with less autonomy or caps are deemed to have weaker charter school laws (Baker & Miron, 2015).

A review of literature has shown that there are systematic processes unique to charter schools. Horn and Miron (1999) examined charter schools in Michigan and identified eight characteristics or programs and practices found in charter schools. These included a desire to involve parents in the school, an increase in student enrollment, acceptance of students across geographic boundaries, an identified focus of the school, construction of more affordable school buildings, lower student-to-teacher ratios, increased emphasis on the school administrator, and involvement of teachers in decision making around the area of instruction.

The growth of charter schools has created a greater opportunity for parents and students to engage in school choice and select the school that they feel best meets their unique needs. By 2010, 40 states and the District of Columbia operated more than 5,400 charter schools, serving over 1.7 million students (Center for Research on Education Outcomes [CREDO], 2009). This number continues to grow as additional state leaders have authorized the establishment of charter schools. In return for the benefits they offer, charter school leaders are held accountable to a higher degree. Charter school leaders must produce evidence of meeting the mission defined in their charters and maintain student enrollments or risk having their charters revoked and being closed (Miron et al., 2007).

Charter school supporters have cited reasons why charter schools can find success when traditional schools did not find success (Bulkley, 2011). Bulkley (2011) identified areas where

charter school leaders had some successes that outpaced traditional schools. These included the idea that supporters viewed charter schools as more effective at serving children with needs not met by traditional schools, especially low-income urban students. Supporters have also cited that charter school leaders operate under a greater level of transparency because they must apply and renew their charter periodically (Ash, 2014; Bulkley, 2011).

Charter school opponents have shown the opening and expanding of charter schools has placed a financial burden on traditional school districts (Arsen & Ni, 2012; Ash, 2014). This evidence occurred in smaller districts, such as Erie, Pennsylvania; Albany, New York; and Buffalo, New York (Ash, 2014). Even when financial stress on a traditional district is in place, researchers have shown no shift of resources to achievement oriented activities. This evidence led to little reform-minded impact on the traditional schools (Arsen & Ni, 2012).

The mixed reviews on the impact of charter schools have little impact on the expansion of charter schools. The increase in school accountability at the federal and state levels has added to this growth by calling for government intervention in the lowest performing schools. Both NCLB (2002) and the Race to the Top grants called for mandatory interventions in low performing schools. This requirement of mandatory interventions altered the landscape of education reform in a manner which has lived on after the expiration of the legislation that created the requirement. The conversion to a charter school is an approved intervention under both of these federal mandates (Lytle, 2012). As more schools are identified in need of intervention, the charter model will be implemented more often.

### **Inter-District and Intra-District School Choice**

School districts, states, and the federal government have also offered vehicles for increasing school choice among existing traditional comprehensive public schools. The passage



of the NCLB of 2001 (2002) required states and districts to offer school choice to students in persistently dangerous schools, and schools that have failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state assessments. While using AYP as a measure was eliminated under the current ESSA of 2015, the requirement of school choice remained. Researchers have posited inter-district and intra-district school choice was limited; researchers have stated intra-district and inter-district choice in isolation does not appear to increase student achievement significantly (Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, & Koedel, 2006; Lauen, 2009). Evidence has indicated that when students transfer via school choice from low achieving schools to high achieving schools, they may demonstrate modest gains in achievement (Rowley Phillips, Hausman, & Larsen, 2011).

Inter-district and intra-district school choice can be implemented as stand-alone reforms, or these can be combined with other types of school choice. Traditional, magnet, and charter schools may be included in district and state school choice programs. Evidence has shown that enrollment into a magnet school resulted in significant gains in reading and math achievement for urban students (Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009). While this study only examined inter-district magnet choice in Connecticut, the results are promising for implementation in other areas (Bifulco et al., 2009).

In Delaware, Miron (2007) stated the following:

This program (school choice) requires each local school district to have a policy that specifies which schools are open for “choice” and which schools are not. The traditional public school districts vary widely across the state in their policies for accepting intra- and inter-district choice students. (p. 139).

Miron (2007) also found that the choice options varied by region, with leaders in urban areas offering the most choice options for families. Rural area leaders did not appear to face the same

competition from school choice as urban areas. Due to the demographics of the state, this finding also indicated a division between the rural southern portions of the state and the urban norther portions (Miron, 2007).

### **School Leadership**

The role of the school principal is important to the success of any school, especially at the high school level. Researchers have documented the difficulty of school leadership in the success of a school (CCSSO, 2008; DeVita, 2010; Harvey & Holland, 2011; Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010; Rice, 2010). Evidence has shown the role of the principal requires an individual with the ability to be successful in a multitude of areas (CCSSO, 2008; DeVita, 2010; Harvey & Holland, 2011; Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010; Rice, 2010). The CCSSO (2008) adopted a series of standards for school leaders created by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) in 1996 and updated in 2008. The ISLLC standards require principals to set a vision for learning; develop a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; and ensure management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. Principals must also collaborate with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, to mobilize community resources; act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and understand, respond to, and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (CCSSO, 2008). Each of the standards is listed with a series of functions and examples of effective school principals' responsibilities. When viewed in the context of the jobs they are asked to perform, principals must be leaders of education mission and vision, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment leaders, disciplinary experts, leaders in community

engagement, public relations experts, budget experts, facility managers, legal experts, contractual negotiators, policy makers, and members of the larger district leadership team (DeVita, 2010).

Researchers have also found the role of the school principal is often one of the most important in making a school successful (Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010). The role of the school principal as the leader of the school is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student achievement (Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010). Classroom instruction is taken as a whole of the school while the influence of the principal depends on the abilities of a single person. Even with that in mind, a principal has the opportunity to impact the lives, of anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand students in a single year (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011).

The job of a school principal has grown in scope and difficulty over time. Rice (2010) stated, “The principal’s job is complex and multidimensional, and the effectiveness of principals depends, in part, on how they allocate their time across daily responsibilities” (p. 2). This complexity increased when the requirements of the job were impacted by the expansion of school choice. The options created by school choice and the competition that derived from those options required principals to take leading the marketing efforts of their schools (Oplatka, 2007). Principals must change their focus as they become responsible for the survival of the school. To do this, principals must become responsive to consumers, create a competitive edge over other schools, manage the budget in an efficient and cost effective manner, and manage conflict that arises out of this new focus (Robenstine, 2000).

In a comprehensive study of school leadership, Harvey and Holland (2011) identified five job responsibilities of school principals. They shaped a vision of academic success for all students by creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of effective interactions prevail; cultivating leadership in others for

teachers and other adults to assume their part in realizing the school vision; improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and managing people, data, and processes to foster school improvement. These areas of responsibility make up the bulk of a principal's job, but these do not form an all-encompassing list (Harvey & Holland, 2011). Instead, these group responsibilities into areas where leaders could track time on tasks to identify where school principals devoted the time spent on their responsibilities.

### **Competition in School Choice**

School choice exists in different states and locales to achieve differing purposes that depend on local conditions. In some areas, leaders have used school choice to impact race and class segregation in schools (Bifulco et al., 2009; Hill & Lake, 2010; Levin, 2002). In other areas, leaders have created school choice to engage the community in civic awareness and create a sense of community and cohesion within the schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Levin, 2002). While this research added to the scholarly research available, the main focus of academic research was in the area of student academic achievement (Abdulkadiroglu, Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, & Pathak, 2011; Betts et al., 2006; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, Sass, Gill, & Zimmer, 2008; CREDO, 2009; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010; Hoxby & Murarka, 2009; Imberman, 2010; Lauen, 2009; Lubienski, 2006; Ni, 2009; Rowley et al., 2011; Witte, Carlson, Cowen, Fleming, & Wolf, 2011). This large volume of research has not produced clear evidence that school choice is responsible for increases in individual student achievement or student achievement through an entire educational system.

Cavanagh (2011) used existing research to create a competition index to determine what areas were the most open to school choice. Cavanagh determined that highly urban areas were

the most open to school choice, with New York City; Chicago; and Duval County, Florida having the most permissible policies. This finding was supported based on the availability of charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, and the transportation to the schools.

Researchers have focused on charter schools when considering school choice, so much that the names are often used interchangeably. Researchers have demonstrated that some individual schools generate beneficial results. However, the research on charter schools has provided mixed results (Bettinger, 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005; Lubienski, 2006).

The opening and expanding charter schools for school choice generates multiple responses from a traditional school district. Some reactions are constructive, such as expanded district-charter cooperation, expansion of unique academic programs, and improved efficiency in the traditional school district. Other reactions are obstructive, such as blocking charter access to buildings, delaying payments to charter schools, and using regulations to restrict school choice. A third less studied response involves having no response to charter schools (Holley et al., 2013).

Existing evidence has shown increased student achievement at the middle school level for students in charter schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2009). CREDO (2009) used a large sample size released and found that overall student achievement gains in charter schools in 15 states and the District of Columbia were comparable to the gains of students in traditional schools. When considering the data, CREDO determined that approximately 20% of charter schools produced greater gains compared to those observed in traditional schools. CREDO also found that approximately 40% of charter schools demonstrated lower gains compared to traditional schools.

The research did not indicate schools and systems experienced increased student achievement from school choice. However, evidence indicated school choice leading to achievement gains in demographic groups of students (Gleason et al., 2010). Minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds have experienced increased academic achievement through the school choice process (Gleason et al., 2010).

When researching the role of school choice in the improvement of an educational system, it becomes challenging to reach definitive conclusions. Education systems are multi-faceted and can be influenced by factors outside of the control of the system. These influences include a high degree of regulation from the local, state, and federal level that can limit the potential for improvement in education system. In a sense, free market policies are being applied to a market that is not actually free. The degrees to which free market principles can be applied often depend on the relative strength of the charter school laws in a given state. Merrifield (2006) indicated strong charter laws attracted students away from private schools, left public schools unchanged, limited autonomy as charter schools increased in number, and used resources that could benefit other school reform strategies. This regulation may be strong enough to limit the impact of free market principles.

Carpenter and Medina (2011) examined the choice schools in Colorado to determine if charter schools encouraged academic achievement and increase efficiency. The results indicated academic achievement gains occurred, but there was no evidence of increased efficiency (Carpenter & Medina, 2011). The mixed results might have occurred due to the small sample of choice school enrollment. Additional researchers have shown that a minimum of 6% of school enrollment must be in a school of choice to create the competition needed to encourage improvement and reforms (Holley et al., 2013). In studies that did not consider a minimum

enrollment in schools of choice, principals expressed little pressure from competition and did not demonstrate any improvement in academic performance (Zimmer & Buddin, 2009).

When an adequate number of students enroll in schools of choice, competition occurs, but it does not always produce the outcomes that school choice proponents want. Principals perceive competition for the enrollment of students, but this perception leads to a negative feeling toward charter schools, and researchers have not demonstrated ways this affected principals time (Cannata & Vanderbilt University, 2011). In other studies, this competitive pressure has shifted principals to function as marketing managers aware of the importance of controlling the image of their schools but do not use marketing models or marketing jargon, as often attributed to a lack of formal training in marketing (Anast-May et al., 2012). Using outreach and advertisement has become the most common approach to dealing with school completion for school administrators (Kasman & Loeb, 2013). Evidence has shown that some school leaders have resorted to hiring additional administrative staff to take on roles, such as marketing, which take time from principals serving as instructional leaders in schools (Archer, 2004).

Competition from school choice can also have unintended consequences for schools and school leaders. Jennings (2010) found principals in New York City indirectly violated a prohibition on selecting students for school choice enrollment based on prior academic performance. A majority of school principals used networks within the principal network to circumvent this issue and enroll students to aid in reaching accountability targets (Jennings, 2010). In a study of Milwaukee school, Kasman and Loeb (2013) concluded that principals who felt the effects of competition did not make changes to curriculum and instruction to spur

achievement. Instead, they found that most principals expanded outreach and advertisements to enroll students who demonstrated higher levels of prior student achievement.

Researchers have studied students who leave traditional schools through school choice. Those who remain in traditional schools have demonstrated minimal impact, if any (Bettinger, 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker, Gilpatric et al., 2008; Chakrabarti, 2008; Hoxby, 2000; Imberman, 2010; McMillan, 2004; Ni, 2009; Rothstein, 2007; Sass, 2006). At this point, the research on the academic benefits of school choice is inconclusive.

### **Sensemaking**

Weick (1995) defined sensemaking as an approach to ascertain how individuals made sense of ambiguous situations. People use sensemaking to interpret the meanings of a situation differently. Weick developed the idea of sensemaking in his study of organizational disasters. People use the sensemaking approach to explain why different people can attribute different meaning to the same series of events, as explained through the seven properties of sensemaking. These properties include identity construction, retrospect, focus on extracted cues, plausibility, enactment, social, and ongoing thought (Weick, 1995). The characteristics are interrelated, but these can take on differing levels of dominance, as depending on the specific context of events.

Weick (1995) applied the concept of sensemaking to areas outside of organizational disasters to capture individuals' perceptions and beliefs when making sense of their complex environments. Researchers have applied sensemaking to K-12 educational settings (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002). In addition, researchers have focused on ways principals understand and interpret the context of their organizational environments (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002).



Coburn (2005) studied the sensemaking of teachers around professional learning communities, and then expanded into how a principal impacted teacher sensemaking. Coburn included the study of principals. However, Coburn only included them as a stimulus on the sensemaking of the teachers who worked in their schools.

Evans (2007) used sensemaking to explain how principals think, self-actualize, understand, and take action within their schools. Evans paid particular attention to race and demographics in the role of the school principal. Evans concluded that principals perceived their own identities based on organization ideology or values that reflected the desires of the school community.

Expanding on existing research, Spillane et al. (2002) examined four years of data from public school principals in the Chicago Public Schools. Spillane et al. found that principals' sensemaking was influenced by their professional biographies, school histories, and professional roles as intermediaries between district administration and classroom teachers. Spillane et al. also determined that a principal's relationships with other principals played a role in school leader sensemaking.

## **Delaware**

The charter school law in Delaware was passed in 1995. The stated purpose of the law is “to create an alternative to traditional public schools operated by school districts and improve public education overall by establishing a system of independent ‘charter’ schools throughout the State” (14 Del. C. § 501). From the beginning, the purpose was to not just provide newer or better or different schools, but to also improve public education overall. The charter school law also provided four additional goals: improve student learning; encourage using different and innovative or proven school environments, teaching processes, and learning methods; provide

parents and students with measures of improved school and student performance, as well as greater opportunities in choosing public schools within and outside their school districts; and provide for a well-educated community (14 Del. C. § 501).

The charter school law in Delaware placed no fixed limit on the number of charter schools that could open in the state. It also allowed existing school districts and the state Department of Education to serve as authorizers of charter schools (14 Del. C. § 503). The charter school leaders would have the legal status of public schools, but they would be organized and managed under the Delaware General Corporation Law. This law required the creation of a Board of Directors who would oversee all operational and instructional aspects of the charter school (14 Del. C. § 504). The law allowed for the creation of charter schools that are non-profit corporations and for-profit corporations. All charters that have been authorized and opened in Delaware have been nonprofit corporations.

The Delaware Charter School Law has been the topic of research when it is compared to charter school laws in other states. Miron (2007) stated, “Delaware’s charter school law is generally viewed as permissive in that it allows multiple authorizers, has no cap on the number of schools, and a wide range of groups are permitted to apply for a charter school (p. 6). Three different ranking systems of charter school laws (Center for Education Reform, 2006; Chi & Welner, 2008; Miron, 2005) indicated that Delaware had a strong charter school law. The reasons for the relative strength vary with the individual ranking.

There are currently 17 charter schools open and operating in the state of Delaware. There have been six charter schools shut down by the state Department of Education for failing to meet the criteria in their charters. One charter school voluntarily surrendered its charter and ceased operation midway through its first year of operating due to financial insolvency. As of the 2016

to 2017 school year, three of the existing 18 charter schools are under formal review by the Delaware State Board of Education for failing to meet the conditions of their charters (State of Delaware, n.d.). The conditions leading to the status of “Formal Review” are based on student achievement on the state mandated assessment and financial management irregularities documented by the State Auditor of Accounts. The status of “Formal Review” has been the first step in the closure of charter schools by the state board of education.

Table 1

*Delaware Charter Schools*

School name	Opened	Enrollment	Grades	Current Status
Academy of Dover	2003	290	K-5	Formal Review
ASPIRA Academy	2011	541	K-8	Good Standing
Campus Community	1998	410	K-8	Good Standing
Charter School of Wilmington	1996	970	9-12	Good Standing
DE Academy of Public Safety	2011	363	9-12	Good Standing
Delaware Military Academy	2000	568	9-12	Good Standing
East Side Charter	1997	418	K-8	Good Standing
Family Foundations Academy	2007	811	K-8	Good Standing
Gateway Lab School	2012	212	3-8	Formal Review
Georgetown Charter	2002	600	K-6	Closed by state 2015
Kuumba Academy	1999	464	K-7	Good Standing
Marian T. Academy	2000	536	K-8	Closed by state 2008
MOT Charter School	2002	869	K-9	Good Standing
Moyer Academy	2006	208	6-12	Closed by state 2015
Newark Charter School	2001	1,948	K-10	Good Standing
Odyssey Charter	2006	933	K-7	Good Standing
Pencader Charter	2006	650	9-12	Closed by state 2013
Positive Outcomes	1996	126	7-12	Good Standing
Prestige Academy	2008	246	5-8	Closed by state 2017
Providence Creek	2002	688	K-8	Good Standing
Reach Academy	2010	377	K-8	Closed by state 2015
Richard Milburn Academy	1999	N/A	K-8	Closed in 2000
Sussex Academy	2000	498	6-10	Good Standing
Thomas Edison Charter	2000	745	K-8	Good Standing

Delaware also allows the creation and implementation of magnet schools. These schools must be created and funded by a local education agency to meet a purpose that is determined at

the local level. To date, Delaware has four magnet schools. They are Lewis Dual Language Elementary School, Cab Calloway School of the Arts, Conrad School of Science, and John Dickinson High School International Baccalaureate Program. These schools are themed schools that were created by a single local school district. While other school districts in the state have magnet programs housed within schools, they do not rise to the level of being magnet schools. The existence of the magnet schools, when combined with charter schools, creates additional choices for parents and competition among schools for a limited number of student enrollments.

In addition to charter and magnet schools, Delaware has a separate system of vocational-technical high schools in the state. The vocational-technical high schools are represented by three districts, one in each of the counties in Delaware (14 Del. C. § 1029). The New Castle County Vocational Technical School District consists of Howard High School of Technology, Delcastle Vocational Technical High School, Hodgson Vocational Technical High School, and Saint George's Vocational Technical High School. In Kent County, Polytech High School houses all vocational technical programs in the county. In Sussex County, Sussex Technical High School houses all vocational and technical programs in the county. Each of the county vocational technical school districts are governed by a school board, and the school board has the ability to set the tax rate for the vocational technical school district without a referendum of the district taxpayers (14 Del. C. § 2601). When coupled with charter schools and magnet school, the vocational technical schools create additional choice for parents and competition among schools for a limited number of student enrollments.

When the public school choice options presented to parents are viewed as a whole, Delaware has 23,443 students attending choice, charter, and vocational technical schools. These represent 15% of the students in Delaware. Private schools in Delaware enroll 20,127 students

for 13% of the population. The remaining 111,489 students are enrolled in their feeder pattern public school. This finding represents 72% of the population (State of Delaware, n.d.).

The pressures created by school choice have a considerable impact on school funding. In Delaware, the funding for each student flows from the state and local taxes to the district that provides the educational services for the student. Delaware Code stated, “The district of residence shall, except as provided for in subsection (h) of this section, pay to the receiving district the lower local cost per pupil expenditure of the two districts” (14 Del. C. § 408). This creates a flow of funding made up of state and federal dollars from the sending school district to the receiving school district. This flow of funding creates a demand for students in an effort for districts and schools to remain financially viable for the students who remain in the sending school. This flow of funding does not include the students enrolled in private schools, as the local portion of funding is provided to the feeder school district and does not follow the student to a private school. This aspect has removed school funding loss as a reason to compete for students enrolled in private school. For that reason, private school choice was not a focus of this study.

School leaders often form an educational hierarchy that allow them to respond to competition in drastically differing ways. Researchers have defined the status of a school as the extent to which a school is viewed as a competitor by other school leaders who compete with it for students (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Schools that rank highest in this hierarchy are viewed by more schools as competitors for the same pool of students. This type of higher status can also come from previous high academic achievement or from being part of a larger charter management system. The self-awareness of a school and the leaders of the school can have an impact on the way that the school responds to competition. A high status school might not feel

the need to compete for students while schools of lower status might feel they lack the ability to effectively compete for students (Ladd & Fiske, 2003). The ability of a school leader to respond to the threat of competition can also limit the effects of competition. Some school leaders fail to recognize the need to compete and others lack the ability to identify methods that prove to be productive responses (Holme, Carkhum, & Rangel, 2013). This aspect may occur because of a lack of resources or the status of the school in competitive market. All schools may feel the pressure of competition, but the conditions within a school can impact the various strategies schools adopt to respond.

School leaders can respond in many ways to competition (Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998). Some focus on the adoption of academic and curricular strategies, though there is limited evidence that competition actually elicits this type of response (Kasman & Loeb, 2013). Some school leaders opt to change the allocation of resources (Arsen & Ni, 2012) to be more efficient. Some school leaders try to differentiate their products by focusing on programs or features that are unique and give them a niche in the market that other schools have not attempted to target. This would include the development of specialized programs to attract students that are drawn to the new programs (Woods et al., 1998). While new programs may prove a popular means of becoming more competitive, new programs do little to improve the quality of existing programs and offerings. Often, new programs provide motivation for increased marketing and promotion of the school and the new programs it offers (Lubienski, 2006). Other school leaders will use competition to alter the makeup of the student body through processes, such as selective recruitment, selective enrollment, and selective discipline of students (Jennings, 2010). The enrollment of students can occur based upon the location of the school (Lubienski, 2006),

marketing activities, or outright cream skimming of the most desirable students (Miron et al., 2007).

In addition, school choice in Delaware has resulted in changes to the study body of the schools affected by choice. Students who are classified as English language learners and special education make up a significantly higher percentage of students in traditional schools compared to in schools of choice. While traditional school demographics based on ethnicity have not changed, the charter schools in the state are equally segregated into high-income charter schools and low-income charter schools. On the school level, charter schools have become segregated by race (Miron et al., 2007).

### **Principalship in Traditional Schools**

As the system of public schools continues to offer choice options to students and parents, traditional schools must depend more than ever on high-quality school leaders to remain competitive options for school enrollment. A review of the existing research on the critical role of principals must focus on traditional schools and schools of choice. Existing research has found that the principalship plays a vital role in an effective school (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leone, Warnimont, and Zimmerman (2009) determined that the principal was the single individual responsible for the future course of the school. To follow this course, the principal must serve as an agent of change, develop community relationships, and focus on a productive future for all stakeholders (Leone et al., 2009).

Some researchers have concluded that responsibilities of educational leaders are increasing with the advent of the school accountability movement (Portin, 2000; Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). Public school administrators are expected to be instructional leaders, school managers, and accountability supervisors, while increasing the achievement levels of all students

(Portin, 2000; Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). The role of instructional leader has become the major focus of the principalship due to increased focus on raising the academic achievement levels of all students (Lynch, 2012). Researchers have described instructional leadership as the principal's primary responsibility (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mangin, 2007). With the rise in importance of school accountability with the passage of ESSA, increasing student achievement is expected of any principal to maintain job security. Meeting student achievement goals requires traditional school principals to serve as instructional leaders (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

While school principals are required to serve as instructional leaders, traditional public school principals cannot neglect the role of building manager as a leadership assignment (Franklin, 2002). Principals must remain aware that management issues can consume time that needed to serve other roles, such as instructional leader. This role requires that principals be efficient managers of the day-to-day operations of schools (Leone et al., 2009). These management duties often include supervising custodial tasks and dealing with substitute teachers, student discipline, scheduling, and transportation (Leone et al., 2009). When time spent on management issues and instructional leadership is considered, principals often spend up to 60 hours per week on the job responsibilities (Archer, 2004).

School choice environments add more leadership responsibilities to school principals. Options created by school choice can create additional roles that become the responsibility of school principals. One of the most common of these is creating marketing strategies to promote schools (Oplatka, 2007). Taking on the role of marketing can be difficult as principals have expressed concern that they are not adequately prepared to create a marketing plan for the school (Portin, Shen, & Williams, 1998). With the increasing number of school choice options available to students and parents, principals must market their schools or risk a decrease in



student enrollment. This decrease in enrollment leads to lost funding from students who select to attend alternate schools of choice (Oplatka, 2007). School choice has a significant influence on principals' roles in traditional school settings.

### **School Choice Leadership**

School leaders, in schools where the students must apply for school choice to attend, also face many of the job requirements faced by traditional school principals. These requirements include serving as an instructional leader, building manager, and being responsible for the school accountability. The additional challenges brought on in a school of choice are not optional requirements, but instead serve as the very means of survival for a choice school. Because schools of choice lack feeder patterns and default student assignments, attracting students to attend the school becomes an additional expectation of the school principal. To appeal to more students, principals in schools of choice must be more receptive to the wants of parents and students (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002).

Researchers have studied principals in schools of choice and demonstrated that principals devote time to school marketing (Hallinger & Hausman, 1993). The most common marketing strategies were school tours, promotional publications, and informational meetings (Hallinger & Hausman, 1993). While principals in all schools must involve all community stakeholders in school engagement, principals in schools of choice must devote additional time to engaging the community and attracting students (Crow et al., 2002). Existing evidence has supported that principals in schools of choice devote additional time to the recruitment of students through the use of traditional marketing (Hallinger & Hausman, 1993).

## **Magnet School Leadership**

The role of school leaders in magnet schools is an area that has been neglected in current research. Principals in magnet schools were examined at the end of the 20th century, but recent research is lacking. This early research found that magnet school principals feel the role of principal changes to more of an entrepreneurial business model as they attempt to market their school and attract students (Crow, 1993; Kerchner, 1988).

Hausman (2000) conducted the most comprehensive study of the role of magnet school principals. Hausman examined the role differences between principals in magnet schools versus nonmagnet schools. The findings indicated that principals in magnet schools did not experience different roles compared to nonmagnet principals. Hausman focused on entrepreneurial leadership, instructional leadership, responsiveness to parents, and parental or central office pressures. While Hausman did not find specific changes in the role of the principal, he noted that magnet school principals has to market schools to attract and retain an optimal sized student body.

The effect of principals taking on marketing responsibilities has broad implications for school leadership. Magnet school leaders have created marketing committees and marketing plans to recruit high achieving students who have an interesting in the school's specialization and can demonstrate success to other prospective students and parents (Padgett, 2007). The number of student that magnet school marketing campaigns must attract needs to be sufficient to generate enough funding to keep the school open and operating (Lubienski, 2007). This task is often complicated by the fact that the districts that create magnet schools are often competing to recruit students from the same pool of eligible children (Robenstine, 2000). These studies have shown

that the number of students enrolling in a magnet school impact the viability of the school, staffing, course offerings, and transportation (Lubienski, 2007; Padgett, 2007; Robenstine, 2000).

Hausman and Brown (2002) studied the differences between curricular and instructional differentiation among magnet schools and nonmagnet schools from the perspective of principals. Hausman and Brown found increased levels of curricular autonomy in magnet schools. Additionally, they noted that the principal's level of innovation in curricular or instructional differentiation was not distinctive in magnet schools. Finally, Hausman and Brown found magnet school leaders were more likely to experience changes in curriculum and instruction at the school level more frequently compared to at the individual classroom level. Hausman and Brown concluded that market forces did influence magnet schools, even at minimal levels.

### **Charter School Leadership**

Charter schools refer to schools of choice that are publicly funded, self-governing, and have additional flexibility to produce improved educational outcomes for students (Fusarelli, 2002). This unique type of public school is most often led by a principal who possess a graduate degree in education and has worked in the field of education to prior employment in a charter school. While they have experience in education, they often have less experience in school leadership than principals in traditional schools (Fusarelli, 2002). Charter school principals have been found to be younger than principals in traditional schools and to be more likely to have gone directly from being employed as a classroom teacher to being hired as a charter school principal (C. Campbell et al., 2008).

Charter school principals have similar responsibilities to public school principals. C. Campbell et al. (2008) found that overlap in responsibilities comes in creating a school vision, building trust with stakeholders, allocating resources, and dealing with pressure that develops in

the school environment. Dressler (2001) examined charter school principals to determine the degree of similarity between the job functions of the principals. He found that leaders in charter schools viewed their roles and responsibilities as the same as those in traditional schools. The charter school principals experienced working in both traditional and charter schools; they had an understanding of the job responsibilities of both types of school (Dressler, 2001). Charter school principals had to deal with issues that also existed in traditional schools, such as funding, parental engagement, dropout rates, graduation rates, and student discipline (Dressler, 2001). Charter school principals faced many of the same challenges as traditional school principals.

In contrast to the research that indicated similarities between charter and traditional school principals, there were many distinctions between the two roles. C. Campbell et al. (2008) found that charter school leaders face additional challenges that traditional school principals do not face. These included the recruitment of students and staff, acquiring and managing facilities, and managing school finances. These challenges are not as evident in traditional due to support from a district level of administration that is lacking in charter schools (C. Campbell et al., 2008).

Dressler (2001) found that charter school principals had the additional burden of ensuring sufficient student enrollment to keep the charter school from closing. Parent satisfaction played a role in maintaining a functional enrollment (Dressler, 2001). While maintaining enrollment was required of traditional schools to remain in operation, the existence of physical feeder patterns and district level oversight allowed traditional schools to revive a school that struggled to maintain enrollment. Charter schools received less time to improve and close at rates greater than traditional schools (Dressler, 2001).

Charter schools have been shown to create competition amongst traditional public schools in efforts to force these schools to improve. Teske et al. (2001) examined the effects of competition from charter schools on traditional public schools. They found that competition from the charter school movement caused traditional public schools to take action when traditional schools sensed being threatened. These changes often included educational procedures, instructional delivery, and the additional of new programs within existing schools (Teske et al., 2001). Zimmer and Buddin (2009) found that principals did not react to the threat of competition from charter schools. School leaders have expressed that they felt minimal competitive pressure from surrounding charter schools (Zimmer & Buddin, 2009).

### **Competition and Marketing in School Leadership**

Researchers have demonstrated that principals in traditional, charter, and magnet schools respond to a free-market school choice environment by engaging in purposeful marketing practices (Lubienski, 2003, 2007; Oplatka, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). In an educational context, marketing is defined as the analysis, planning, and implementation of programs designed to bring about exchange of values to achieve an organizational objective (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Marketing becomes a responsibility of the school principal and carried out along with other school management tasks (Crow et al., 2002; Foskett, 1998; James & Philips, 1995).

With implementing free-market principles using school choice, principals have been forced to compete for the enrollment of students. This need to market schools has led to increased tension, stress, and frustration for school principals (Bunnell, 2006). These feelings are compounded by the fact that most principals feel unprepared for formal marketing as they lack education and training in this area (Bunnell, 2006). Despite a lack of comfort or formal

education in marketing, principals organize marketing teams, develop promotional events, and attempt to control the public image of the school (Oplatka, 2007). Oplatka (2007) also found that the leadership style, vision, ethics, and physical attributes all correlated to marketing a school effectively.

Oplatka (2007) determined that school principals recognize the importance of marketing in a school choice environment, but they still express that they are not comfortable with the need to create a controlled public perception of a school. Principals are using marketing strategies despite their lack of comfort in doing so (Oplatka, 2007). There was a considerable body of research on educational marketing, but there was a paucity of research on the involvement of principals in marketing their schools.

While principals engage in marketing as a response to competition, not all researchers agree that doing so can be effect in the current environment. Hess (2001) stated that five factors artificially limited competition in education. He believes that a lack of fear of competition, shareholder accountability, reliance on subordinates, limited recourse for teachers, and a lack of formal training combine to place artificial limits on competition in education. These artificial limits keep education from functioning as a free-market (Hess, 2001).

Hess (2001) proposed a solution included one providing formal schooling in management and business administration as part of the principal preparation programs that school leaders went through to gain licensure. Oplatka (2007) found place a greater importance on formal training in marketing than they do on business management. This includes interest in public relations, internal marketing, and promotion (Oplatka, 2007). While some larger districts provided professional assistance in marketing, the assistance from districts for school leaders varied.

Whether assistance with marketing was provided to principals or not, leading a school required principals to remain competitive in an environment where school choice became the norm. Principals have to adjust and compete despite a lack of formal training to develop their skillset (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Adding marketing as an additional managerial function for principals places new requirements on an already limited amount of working hours. Despite the additional time commitment or the opportunity cost of developing a marketing plan, the competition of school choice requires that it must be done (Oplatka, 2007).

### **Summary**

In specific circumstances and systems, school choice has the potential to have a positive impact on student outcomes. The last three decades have demonstrated exponential growth in school choice options represented by magnet schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), charter schools (Ash, 2014; Baker & Miron, 2015), and intra/inter district school choice (Miron, 2007).

More research needed to be completed to determine if and how the growth of school choice would allow the various school choice options to interact with one another to create a true free market of educational options. Researchers have agreed that the job of school principal is multi-faceted (Rice, 2010) and undergoing rapid change (Hill & Lake, 2010). The competition among schools has influenced the leaders of the schools, often requiring different skills from previous school principals (Hausman, 2000; Lubienski, 2007). Competition and marketing have played expanding roles, but principal preparation has not prepared school leaders for this environment (Bunnell, 2006; Oplatka, 2007).

While there was a wealth of literature on traditional schools, magnet schools, and charter schools, there was a lack of research on how these individual components combine to put the

pressures created by school choice and completion on the school leader. The school principal must respond to these pressures, while carrying out all traditional responsibilities of a school leader. Evans (2007) used sensemaking to explain ways principals think, self-actualize, understand, and take action within their schools. Applying the concept of sensemaking to principals in the unique school choice environment in Delaware (Miron, 2007) allowed greater description of how principals perceived and understood their roles.



## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this study was to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district respond to an environment of total school choice and how they make sense of their role as a principal in the era of school choice. The selected principals participated in interviews to determine how they made sense of the school leadership priorities of their jobs. Investigating the leadership responsibilities of school principals in traditional schools, magnet schools, and charter schools allowed for a better understanding of how the school setting influenced the perceptions of the school principal. The design of the study was selected to describe how principals made sense of their professional roles and how their perceptions evolved from competing in a school choice environment. This chapter includes a discussion of the methods, design, and approach chosen to conduct the study. Also discussed in this chapter are the interview questions, site, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, and data analysis.

### **Design**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) identified five unique features that made qualitative research different from other methods. Qualitative researchers are naturalistic, use descriptive data, have concern for the research process, are inductive, and seek to develop meaning. Each feature may not be exhibited equally in every study, but the degree to which the features are used defines the inquiry as qualitative. Qualitative research is based on the belief that one can best explain social issues by collecting data with intensive study of specific instances. The data gathered in this manner are then subjected to analysis to determine meaning (Merriam, 1998).

This study met the criteria set by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) in all areas. The study was

naturalistic because it occurred in the setting in which the phenomenon naturally happened. District and school settings, where implementing school choice could exert free market pressure, was the only appropriate place to observe if the desired outcomes of the reform were achieved. Descriptive data were collected through interviews, observations, and collection of artifacts. The process of this research was more important than the outcomes, as the process allowed for a rich portrayal of the functioning of the principals in the Northern School District. The functioning of the principals was analyzed regarding their abilities to make sense of the complex environment in which they worked and where they actively constructed the situation they sought to understand (Weick, 1995).

I sought participants' perspectives on the extent that school choice had applied free market principles to education in their current schools. The participants included high school principals from seven schools that represented three traditional, two magnet, and two charter schools. These schools were located in a district of 30 schools made up of seven high schools, five middle schools, 16 elementary schools, and two special population schools. Qualitative researchers attempt to understand the meanings that the participants have created and how they use that meaning to make sense of the world in which they live (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, the design fit the setting used in the study.

Researchers have used several characteristics to define qualitative research (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998). The focus should be from the perspective of the participant, as opposed to the researcher. I was the primary instrument of data collection and data analysis. I used an inductive approach to analyze the data. The research is also conducted in a natural setting (Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998). These criteria were met through a reporting technique that was written using the participants' words and a thick

description for the reader to make original interpretations, as suggested by Stake (1995). The above criteria made intrinsic qualitative research the model that we appropriate for understanding social issues in education.

Researchers can use the case study as a documented form of qualitative research that allows for flexibility. This flexibility allows for one to use multiple methods for gathering, analyzing, and reporting data (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2003) defined case study as an empirical inquiry of a contemporary phenomenon investigated in its real life context. Most often, the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context were not clearly evident. This case study allowed the study of a specific bounded system with the emphasis placed on what would be learned from a specific case. Generalization beyond the specific case was not the goal. I designed this descriptive case study to understand better the complex sense-making of the individuals who participated in competing for student enrollment in a district that allowed total school choice at the high school level.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided this study:

**RQ1:** In an environment of total school choice, how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals make sense of the competition generated by school choice options?

**RQ2:** How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts their responsibilities as school leaders?

**RQ3:** How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts the long-term operations of the school?

## Setting

The setting for this study was the Northern School District (a pseudonym), a large public school district in northern Delaware. The school district was created in 1981 as part of a federal court order to desegregate the public schools in the city of Wilmington, Delaware. The court order dissolved the Wilmington School District and divided the city of Wilmington among four newly created school districts that included Northern School District. Because of the court action, the students who attended school in Northern School District came from the surrounding suburban community, the west side of Wilmington, and the north side of Wilmington. The two pockets from Wilmington were noncontiguous to the larger portion of the district. This feeder configuration was in place since the creation of the district in 1981.

The Northern Delaware School District was governed by an elected seven-member Board of Education. The district had a central office with a chain of command that flowed downward from the superintendent, to three assistant superintendents, to a director of secondary education, and to the high school principals. High school principals received a great deal of autonomy, but they reported directly to the positions above them in the district organizational chart. The two charter schools also had appointed boards that functioned as private Delaware General Corporations (14 Del. C. § 401). As with all charter schools in the state of Delaware, the charters were nonprofit corporations.

This setting was appropriate for the study because the leaders in the area began implementing full school choice program for the 2014 to 2015 school year. While there were previous attempts to implement full school choice at the high school level, these were only partially implemented due to a lack of capacity in the high schools. With the passage of a capital referendum and the construction of additional physical capacity, physical space allowed full

school choice to be a reality. Leaders implemented the school choice program after they determined the district leaders could comply with Delaware Neighborhood Schools Act if 40% or more of high school students used the school choice program to select and attend the high school of their choice. I used this setting to include results from principals of high schools that underwent the pressure of competing for student attendance, as the district allowed parents to select schools of attendance for their children.

Additional data were included through collecting artifacts, as school leaders attempted to market themselves to the public to maintain enrollment in an atmosphere of school choice. These data were augmented through observations of specialized school choice open houses, where leaders invited the public into each school to provide parents information about the schools, prior to having to make a school selection in January for the following school year.

The target school district had an enrollment of 17,816 students (Reports and Resources/Delaware School Enrollment Reports, 2017). Enrollment increased due to the State of Delaware's school choice program also allowing inter-district school choice. The change in student demographics occurred because of the district opening two charter high schools and two magnet high schools in 1996, 2003, 1992, and 2007, respectively. The opening of the specialized schools coincided with the long-term decision to make the school district operate entirely on a choice system at the high school level. The goal was to remove the traditional feeder pattern created by court-ordered desegregation, while complying with the Neighborhood Schools Act of 2000.

The district student population totaled 17,816 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 12 (State of Delaware, n.d.). The demographic description of this school district in 2017 to 2018 was as follows: 44.3% Caucasian, 21.2% African American, 25.3% Hispanic/Latino, 6.7%

Asian, .2% American Indian, and 2.3% multiracial (State of Delaware, n.d.). Approximately 10.8% of the students were serviced by the English language learner program (State of Delaware, n.d.). Thirty-five percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch and received both breakfast and lunch daily. Twelve percent of the students received special education services. There was a 16 to 1 student-to-teacher ratio in the school district (Reports and Resources/Delaware School Enrollment Reports, 2017).

The seven high schools within the district included three traditional high schools, two magnet schools, and two charter schools. The first traditional school (T1) opened in 1893 and had a current enrollment of 1,093 students. The second traditional school (T2) opened in 1959 and had a current enrollment of 744 students. The third traditional school opened in 1966 and had a current enrollment of 800 students. The first magnet school (M1) opened in 1992 and had a current enrollment of 953 students. This enrollment represented students in Grade 6 through 12. The second magnet school (M2) opened in 2007 and had a current enrollment of 1,195 students. This enrollment represented students in Grades 6 through 12. The first charter school (C1) opened in 1996 and had a current enrollment of 972 students. The second charter school (C2) opened in 2003 and had a current enrollment of 564 students (Reports and Resources/Delaware School Enrollment Reports, 2017).

Table 2

*Schools in the Northern School District*

School Name	Year Opened	Enrollment	Grades Served
Traditional School 1	1893	1,093	9-12
Traditional School 2	1959	744	9-12
Traditional School 3	1966	800	9-12
Traditional School 4	1963	898	6-8
Traditional School 5	1966	492	6-8
Traditional School 6	1973	779	6-8
Traditional School 7	1978	650	6-8
Magnet School 1	1997	953	6-12
Magnet School 2	2003	1,195	6-12
Charter School 1	1996	972	9-12
Charter School 2	2000	564	9-12

**Participants**

The participants in this study included the principals of 11 secondary schools in the Northern School District. Creswell (2012) noted that in qualitative research, “the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon,” which was best achieved by using purposeful sampling (p. 213). The Northern School District was selected using purposive sampling because it was the only school district in Delaware that had a combination of traditional schools, magnet schools, and charter schools at the secondary school level. Conducting this research in a district comprised of traditional, magnet, and charter schools allowed for conducting research within the context of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

Table 3

*Secondary School Pseudonyms*

School Type	School Pseudonym
Traditional School 1	T1
Traditional School 2	T2
Traditional School 3	T3
Traditional School 4	T4
Traditional School 5	T5
Traditional School 6	T6
Traditional School 7	T7
Magnet School 1	M1
Magnet School 2	M2
Charter School 1	C1
Charter School 2	C2

Table 4

*Principal Demographic Data*

Principal Pseudonym	Age	Year of becoming Principal	Highest degree attained	Gender
PT1	39	2009	M.Ed.	Male
PT2	51	2007	M.Ed.	Male
PT3	45	2014	M.Ed.	Male
PT4	57	2009	M.Ed.	Male
PT5	37	2007	M.Ed.	Female
PT6	38	2014	M.Ed.	Male
PT7	40	1995	M.Ed.	Female
PM1	51	1995	M.Ed.	Female
PM2	45	2008	M.Ed.	Male
PC1	48	2013	Ed.D.	Male
PC2	46	2013	M.Ed.	Female

**Procedures**

This study was undertaken in compliance with all policies for Liberty University and of general research involving human participants. Prior to initiating the research, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university. This ensured, in advance, that



appropriate steps were taken to protect the rights and welfare of humans participating as participants in this research.

Participants for the study were identified based on the location where they served as school principals in the target school district. The participation of the participants was voluntary. Prior to participating, they were required to sign informed consent forms (Appendix B) indicating their understanding and willingness to participate in the research.

Data were gathered from interviews, observations, and collection of artifacts that related to the role of the principal in making the school where they were employed competitive, when compared to the other high schools in the district. The data were reviewed with and provided to the participants in the study, and the findings of the study were shared with the participants at the conclusion of the research.

Data were recorded for the study in the form of audio recordings, descriptive and reflective notes, and in transcripts of recordings. These data were kept secure in multiple ways. Informed consent forms were kept separate from all other data, as these had information that included the identities of the research subjects. These were kept in hard copy in a locked file cabinet inside of a locked office in the residence of the researcher. A chart linking names of subjects with pseudonyms was stored separate from all other research data in an encrypted electronic file on a desktop computer that was in the office of the researcher. Field notes were saved electronically on a password protected system. Audio recordings were used for interviews, but the recordings were destroyed immediately after these were transcribed. The transcribed interviews were stored electronically on a password-protected system with care taken to secure the material. The security of the research material was paramount to the researcher in all matters whatsoever.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The topic applied to me personally because I was formerly employed as an administrator in the target school district that was implementing school choice and competition between schools. I am currently employed in a neighboring charter school district as an assistant principal. In my 10 years as an employee of the district, I worked with the participants of the study in a professional capacity, but I had no prior relationship to them other than being employed in the same school district. Being a former employee of the target school district also allowed me the access to any data that were relevant and required for the study.

Because I was the main instrument in qualitative research, my perspective helped to define the instrument of the study. I was 45 years old and a doctoral student at Liberty University. I earned a bachelor's degree in history education and a master's degree in secondary school administration. I was a secondary school social studies teacher for 10 years and a high school assistant principal for eleven years. During the course of this study, I was employed as an assistant principal at a high school in a neighboring school district supervising students in Grades 7 through 12.

While performing research in the target district, participants knew me as an assistant principal and a colleague. Data collection occurred throughout the academic year but with an increased volume during periods of recruitment of students for the upcoming school year. The participants were comfortable with my presence, possible because I was a district employee and required to attend many of the student recruiting events where observations occurred. These were held throughout the school year.

My role in the research was to serve as an interpreter of the data that were collected to make sense of the perceptions of the school principals regarding their feelings about school

choice and competition. As a social constructivist, I sought to understand the world around me by forming meaning from the interactions with the participants of this research study. The participants' perceptions were varied and unique to the position in which they served. I had the role of generating a theory and making meaning of the data that participants provided. As an interpretivist, I gathered data with exploratory orientation where I learned what was going on in particular situations to arrive at an understanding of the distinctive orientations of the subject involved. This understanding allowed me to develop views that were separate from any prior assumptions.

### **Data Collection**

In the qualitative research process, the human investigator is the primary instrument for the gathering and analysis of data (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). The human is an instrument who allows flexibility to capture the complex human experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this research, I conducted interviews, observations, and collected artifacts.

The interview questions were piloted to ensure that the questions collected the information that was intended as the object of this research. Using a pilot test with the interview protocol helped to identify any weaknesses, flaws, or limitations with the interview protocol or methods (Kvale, 2007). If any weaknesses, flaws, or limitations were detected in the pilot interview, these were corrected prior to the implementation of the qualitative study. A pilot test should be conducted on subjects with similar qualifications and background as the subjects who are part of the actual study (Creswell, 2012). The researchers can also use the pilot test to assist with refining the research questions, which are the primary mode of data gathering in qualitative interview procedures (Kvale, 2007).

A researcher reflexivity log was maintained while coding and searching for emergent

themes. I used this reflexivity log to keep a log of memos that captured my thinking and biases to neutralize bias. I used the process of writing down biases to recognize the bias and not allow the biases to play a role in the interpretation of the data.

Prior to conducting this research, I obtained the approval of the IRB (Appendix A) and the district superintendent (Appendix E) to proceed with the research. The initial interaction between the researcher and participants occurred in the form of an informational meeting. The purpose of the study and methodology were explained to the participants, and their interest in participating was attained. Because the participation was voluntary, a consent form was signed.

The data collection began with the identification of the high school principals to participate in the study. They were selected by purposive sampling. The school district was selected because of the policy it used to provide school choice to all high school students. The principals were selected based on their roles as a principal in traditional, magnet, and charter high schools in the target school district.

Qualitative researchers use purposive sampling of information-rich cases, rather than drawing on a representative sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The sample represented traditional high schools, magnet high schools, and charter high schools. Placement in building administrative positions was at the discretion of the district superintendent, but all principals were continuing in the positions they served in previously. Researchers can use a purposive to focus effort and deal with the contextual nature of the inquiry in a way that includes as much information as possible (Merriam, 1998).

I interviewed these principals to gather information on their experiences and perceptions of their leadership roles in an environment of school choice and competition. These participants were interviewed (Appendix C), and the data collected and coded. I developed the interview

questions, which were semi-structured interview questions. The participants were assigned corresponding alpha-numeric pseudonyms to protect their identities in the research process.

After the appropriate institutional approvals were obtained, I got an expert in the field to review the interviews with a small sample outside of this study sample to ensure clarity of questions and wording. Two current practicing principals in high schools in the state of Delaware reviewed the interview protocol and piloting of the questions. Feedback from these individuals was used to refine or clarify questions as part of the interview protocol.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were semi-structured, and I considered specific examples, detailed information, and avoided questions that usually resulted in yes or no answers, as suggested by researchers (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used the interviews to find details. I used open-ended questions, and I employed flexibility so participants could construct their own responses to questions being asked.

The flexibility in this semi-structured interview provided participants with freedom to express their thoughts beyond the prescribed questions prepared, as suggested by researchers (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). I selected 11 secondary school principals, based on a purposive sampling, to participate in a semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews. I intended to collect descriptive, rich data. I audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed these into a Word document through a contracted transcription provider.

### **Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. How long have you been principal at your school?
2. What were your work experiences before you became principal at your current school?

3. Have you ever been a principal at a traditional public school (for magnet or charter principals)?
4. Have you ever been a principal at a magnet school or charter school (for traditional school principals)?
5. Research indicates that school choice options have created competition in education. Is competition ever a factor while leading this school?
  - a. If it is, how has it impacted your role as the principal?
  - b. If it has not, how have you avoided the competitive pressures associated with the choice environment?
6. Do you feel a sense of competition with traditional schools? Magnet schools? Charter Schools? Private schools? Please explain.
7. How do you perceive that school choice competition impacts students and teachers? What are some things about the magnet program your school offers? What type of magnet do you offer at your school (i.e., is it a whole school or a program within a larger school)? What is the history of the magnet program?
8. What can you share about the application process to the magnet school?
9. What is the specific interest or specialized program(s) your school offers? What is the history of the charter school?
10. What is the application process to the charter school?
11. Describe your leadership responsibilities as the principal of your current school.
12. How are your students selected to attend your school?
13. Why do you think parents/students select your school over the other schools in this district?

14. What have been your greatest challenges while serving as the principal at your current school? How did you handle each of these challenges?
15. How have you dealt with the pressures of leading a school in the total school choice environment?
16. What are the differences between a magnet/charter school compared to a traditional school?
17. How do you think your role as a magnet/charter school principal is different compared to traditional school principal?
18. How do you think your role as a traditional school principal is different compared to a magnet/charter school principal?
19. Do you have to market your school? If so, how do you market your school?
20. What do you feel is the most effective marketing technique for your school and why (if applicable)?
21. Do you have any other concluding thoughts?

I used the interview questions to gather the data directly from the school leaders (see Appendix C). Questions 1 through 3 allowed me to establish the background of the principals and identify any notions or biases that they brought to the position from their own prior experiences. Principal perception is often determined by the prior professional experience of the school principal (Cannata & Vanderbilt University, 2011). I used Question 4 to identify to what degree the subjects viewed existing competition and what role it played in the daily performances of their job responsibilities. The degree to which principals viewed competition impacting job responsibilities could be tied to the perceived academic standing and public perception of the school, as suggested by researchers (Kasman & Loeb, 2013). I used Question 5

to determine which schools or types of schools the subjects' sensed they competed with and which they did not feel were competition. I used Question 6 to determine if the subject viewed the outcomes of competition in a positive or a negative way. I also determined the subjects' view of the role of competition regarding teaching staff. I determined if the responses to competition from school choice was constructive, obstructive, or elicited no response at all, as suggested by researchers (Holley et al., 2013).

Questions 7 and 8 were only applicable for the subjects who worked in magnet schools. I used these to determine the subjects' perceptions on the unique programs offered at the magnet schools and the requirements that students must meet to enter those programs. I determined the purpose for the founding and existence of the magnet school, as suggested by Fleming (2012).

Questions 9 and 10 were only applicable for the subjects who worked in charter schools. I used these questions to document subjects' perceptions of the history of the charter school and the specific interest that was a portion of the school mission. I documented the requirements that students must meet to gain admission to the charter schools, as these varied in each of the charter schools in Delaware, as suggested by researchers (Miron et al., 2007).

I used Question 11 to document the subjects' perceptions about how they defined their own leadership responsibilities, as suggested by researchers (Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010). I used Question 12 to gather data on how the students who met the criteria to attend the school were selected for enrollment in the school. The criteria to attend each school varied with the stated mission and purpose of the school, or the program within the school. These unique purposes could be found in the traditional, magnet, and charter schools in Delaware (Miron et al., 2007).

I used Question 13 to document the subjects' perceptions and why they believed students and parents selected the school they led for enrollment. I used Question 14 for subjects to



describe what they viewed as the greatest challenges of the job of principal in their current school. I used Question 15 to gather perceptions of how the subjects dealt with the pressure of leading a school with the pressure of competition that came from school choice. I used Question 16 to document the perceived differences between the three types of schools represented in this study. Traditional, magnet, and charter schools existed for different reasons and had unique missions (Miron et al., 2007). I determined principals' perception to determine if the type of school altered the perceptions or outcomes.

I used Question 17 to document the perceptions of the subjects regarding how the roles they were in differed from the other high school principals in the same Northern School District. When principals perceived that the professional role and responsibilities changed, they might shift the areas on which they focused, to those that they found comforting (Archer, 2004). I used Question 18 to determine if the subjects expressed they had to market their school and what steps they took to market their school, if any.

I used Question 19 to identify the perceived efficacy of the marketing techniques used by the school, if any. Researchers have found the transition of the principal from an instructional leader to a marketing manager as a common result of the increased need for marketing as a response to completion and school choice (Anast-May et al., 2012). I used Question 20 for the subjects to offer any concluding thoughts, clarify any information, and add additional information if they chose.

## **Observations**

Researchers can use observations to explain complex interactions in natural settings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, I observed school principal interactions while they were engaged with the greater school community presenting a series of school choice open houses. I

was a nonparticipant observer. In this role, I watched the presenters, while remaining neutral and avoiding an active role in what was happening, as suggested by researchers (Creswell, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Observations occurred on two occasions throughout the year. The observations were unscheduled with the participants, but these occurred on the two pre-assigned dates that the Northern School District selected as “Choice Open House” dates for each of the schools led by the 11 principal participants. I observed these events as a nonparticipant observer to document (Appendix D) the messages and actions of the participants as they encountered the public who were the targets of any recruitment process for the school choice period. The observations occurred with an open house in September and a final open house in November or December. I used these observations to gather descriptive and reflective notes. I used the observation protocol to gather vivid and detailed notes that verified emergent themes that came from the principal interviews (Appendix C).

### **Artifacts**

Researchers collect artifacts to analyze public documents and archival material to gain greater understanding of the topic (Creswell, 2012). In this research, I gathered artifacts that leaders distributed to the general public at each of the school choice open houses where I observed the school principals. I used this process to obtain a third viewing to seek congruence with what was stated in interviews, observed presented to the public, and distributed in written form to greater inform the school community. The artifacts reinforced the data that were collected in other formats.

## Data Analysis

I gathered data for this study through interviews, direct observations, and artifact analysis. I generated transcripts from the interviews through a contracted transcription provider. The transcripts included all questions, answers, and additional comments. Direct observations occurred at public events designed for the principals who were targets of the study to recruit students into their high schools and programs. These direct observations included open houses, special school choice nights, and presentations to the local school board prior to votes being taken on approving school choice for the upcoming school year. I used these observations to yield information that confirmed responses from the interviews. The information presented to the public also provided additional or conflicting information to that which the principals provided in the interview. Artifacts included all promotional materials made available to the general public that provided information about school choice, the school, or specific programs within the school. The promotional materials were under the direct control of the principal and provided documentation of the aspects of the school choice, schools, and programs that were discussed during the interviews and observed during public presentations.

Yin (2003) described interviews as 1 of the 6 sources of data critical to case study research: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. Data gathered from the individual interviews were comprehensively analyzed; these were transcribed from audio recordings, reviewed, member checked, organized, coded, recoded, summarized, and interpreted. Transcripts and audio recordings from the individual interviews were reviewed at least twice to ensure that I was familiar with all data. A contracted transcription service provider transcribed transcripts of the

recordings. The principals member checked the transcripts to ensure accuracy and full context of the responses provided during the interviews.

A systematic approach was taken to bringing meaning to the data. Researchers have recommended generating assertions to discover themes that emerge from the data (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). After review, I organized data into the different subthemes of information that emerged at the time. I used preliminary manual coding to place data into subthemes and the subthemes led to emergent themes, which began with a pawing of the data that involved an ocular scan method that ensured that the data were handled multiple times (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This initial proofreading included the underlining of key words and phrases in the search for emergent themes. I used first cycle and second cycle coding to determine the subthemes used to identify themes. This coding occurred on hard-copy printouts that allowed manipulation of the data on paper. I used pencil codes and highlighting markers for a visual depiction of the emerging themes. As I identified emergent themes within the date, I used multicolored highlighters to divide the data into themes. I reviewed the data multiple times to ensure that all emergent themes were identified. After I identified themes, I employed a cutting and sorting process to sort the data. This process led to the emergence of any subthemes that I needed to address in the analysis. This process continued until theoretical saturation was reached regarding emergent themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

I manually coded data gathered from the observations into subthemes. The data from the observations offered context to the information that was discovered through the questioning in the interview process (Merriam, 1998). The subthemes were the same subthemes that emerged from the interviews. I used the notes from the observations to verify the principals' perceptions. The coded data were compared to support the data collected during the interviews. Coded data

were reviewed and recoded as new subthemes emerged. I then determined if any of the subthemes fit together in broader themes. After analysis for the development of themes, I interpreted data to extract meaning.

The data collected from artifact analysis were used as comparative data. I used these to consider relationships in data when compared to subthemes and themes that emerged from the interviews and observations. Artifacts included documents used to recruit students at choice open houses, marketing campaigns, and school choice application data and documentation. I used artifact analysis to compare school demographics to monitor for any drastic changes during the period of open school choice.

### **Trustworthiness**

Researchers can use trustworthiness to address credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although researchers have provided standards of trustworthiness for qualitative studies, the trustworthiness of a study cannot be determined by following a standard set of procedures. In qualitative research, trustworthiness depends on the researchers' conclusions about reality and cannot be assured by any specific research method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Credibility**

I enhanced the credibility of this study using interview transcripts. The interview recording was transcribed as soon as possible after completion of the interview. The transcripts were taken from audio recordings to ensure accuracy. I taped the interviews to focus on the interviewee without having to write down every spoken word, which allowed me to consider capturing nonverbal cues of the participants, as suggested by researchers (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). I used member checks to increase credibility, ensure accuracy, and enhance understanding of the subjects' perceptions.

Using interviews, observation, and artifact analysis provided triangulation. Triangulation of data added credibility. I used triangulation through multiple sources of data and multiple data collection methods to confirm emerging findings. While triangulation can be used to ensure reliability, it may not lead to the generalizability of the results of the case study (Merriam, 1998).

I used a reflexivity log to identify bias to remove bias from the research. I kept the reflexivity log during the data analysis phase of the research. I recorded the thoughts that played a part in the coding of the data and the emergence of themes from the coding. This critical self-reflection allowed me to mitigate assumptions, worldview, biases, and relationships to the study by making the reader aware of the context of each.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Rich data were used to increase the dependability. Rich data were provided as evidence and included the detailed case study of the perceptions of the participants as the high school transitioned to total school choice and competition. I used the case study to depict the setting, participants, and experiences of the principals. I used the rich data so the conditions of the study could be replicated for further research. The rich data were supported with quotations from the participants of the study. I used the quotations to interpret outside the score of the present study. The quotations also allowed a vivid depiction of the perceptions of the participants of the study. I used observation to determine if the enrollment demographics of the students changed dramatically at any of the target schools. The dependability was increased through themes that emerged through the coding of data. The themes were supported by the coded data but served as guide to the areas of focus within the study.

## **Transferability**

Transferability for this study was derived from the conceptual framework and the study's design. This study was limited to 11 principals and their sensemaking of a policy within a single school district. Other principals in other school districts might make sense of school choice in different ways. I highlighted the ways in which leaders in a challenging organizational context made sense of a specific policy.

The purpose of this study was not to evaluate how principals implement school choice. Rather, I intended to identify the factors that influenced principals' sensemaking of school choice. I hoped that the findings from this study were transferable to other schools, districts, contexts, or policies.

## **Ethical Considerations**

I considered multiple ethical considerations with this study. Among these were the safety and confidentiality of the participants of the research. I employed data collected from school principals who were sensitive to the professional placement in which they were employed. I protected the anonymity of these individuals to protect all their rights. To that end, I obtained informed consent, and I protected the confidentiality of the participants through pseudonyms. I maintained and stored data used in the study without individual identifiers. Electronic data were password protected, and hard materials were kept locked in a secure environment outside of the school district in which the research was conducted. The privacy of the participants remained paramount through the research process.

All research complied with the ethical standards for research, as defined by the American Educational Research Association (AERA). The AERA standards protect the participants, researchers, and the field of educational research. I completed the research under the direction

and approval of the IRB at Liberty University, and I only continued with research once IRB approval was granted.

This research was undertaken in a manner that remained consistent with the ideals of the Christian faith. I used this faith to set aside any personal bias and accept the results of the research as determined and guided by the will of God. This process allowed the research to be truthful and reported in a manner that could contribute to the body of educational research that had not been intentionally altered or misrepresented. This honesty, sincerity, and commitment to the knowledge generated by research supported the Christian worldview that allowed for these research activities to exist. Research exists for the betterment of mankind in the image created by God and modeled for man by the Lord, Jesus Christ.

### **Summary**

For this qualitative case study, I interviewed 11 secondary school administrators in the Northern School District. Participants included seven traditional school principals, two magnet school principals, and two charter school principals. I recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed interviews to identify emerging themes. I observed each principal presenting information in a public meeting. I collected artifacts as presented to the public to confirm the information from the interviews and observations. I demonstrated trustworthiness in this study and ethical standards adhered to as evidenced in the procedures noted.



## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, explanatory case study was to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district responded to an environment of total school choice and how they made sense of their role as a principal in the era of school choice. Chapter Four includes the data collection procedures and the results of the data. Specifically, secondary school principal participants are described. I gathered and analyzed data from 11 individual principal interviews, 11 administrative questionnaires, 11 school choice event observations, and artifact analysis through hand coding and recoding. Pattern coding supported the developed themes through the repetition of comments (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Four emerging themes surfaced: (a) responsibility for the school image, (b) recruitment of students, (c) marketing responsibilities, and (d) stratified tiers of competing schools. Finally, principals' data and the themes are paralleled to the three research questions outlining the study.

### Participants

Eleven participants contributed to the results in this section, including seven traditional school principals, two magnet school principals, and two charter school principals. Principal observations, as well as artifacts collected from a choice recruitment night at each school, were collected. Finally, administrator initial questionnaires were collected prior to each individual interview to gather demographic data.

Three participants have titles that differed from the traditional term of *principal*. For instance, the administrative leader of Magnet School 1 was known as the dean of students. The administrative leader of Charter School 1 was known as the school president. The administrative

leader of Charter School 2 was known as the dean of cadets. Therefore, eight principal participants were included in this study with 11 interviews conducted. A thorough description of the participants maintained confidentiality using pseudonyms that did not reflect actual names. Pseudonyms used were realistic and reflected the culture of each of the participants. However, the details of each participant were truthful. To prevent inferential disclosure, significant details were utilized throughout the document.

### **Traditional School Principals**

**Traditional High School 1.** Martin was the principal of the oldest and most established traditional high school in the district. Entering his school required being buzzed in through security at the front door and waiting for his arrival in the main office. The interview was conducted in his office, which was the size of a full teacher classroom with its own individual restroom.

Martin was well dressed, thickly built, and athletic in appearance. He held a Master of Arts in Education Leadership. Martin was open and forthright during the interview, with a sense of calm and ease about his current professional position and his future plans to remain in that same position through his retirement. Once he revealed he had been in his current position for 10 years, his youth for that level of experience was apparent. Martin had a calmness about him as he shared answers to questions that reflected both positively and poorly on him and his school. He visibly enjoyed sharing honest answers about the harsh realities of his job and his work.

**Traditional High School 2.** Bryan was the senior-most member of the secondary administrators in the district. The interview occurred in his office. His office was located just off of the main office, and the main office was being renovated to add a buzzer access system, secure entry vestibule, and additional office space. He was in his current position for 11 years,

and he answered questions with a discomfort and honesty that set him apart from the other participants. He viewed the role of school choice through a political lens, and he viewed it as a topic that had done irreparable harm to public education, particularly his school.

He held a Master of Arts in School Leadership and served as an administrator in three school districts. He was large in stature and appeared to be in his 50s. He attributed one of the reasons he was hired for the job was due to his imposing physical appearance, and the reputation of the school as one where violence and fights required a physical presence to stop them. He viewed the disparity between schools created by school choice as unfair to all stakeholders, and he attributed his personal fight against that core tenant of his school district as the cause of his own professional burnout.

**Traditional High School 3.** Tom was at his current school the longest, but he worked at the school and a myriad of positions from paraprofessional, to co-teacher, to teacher, to academy coordinator, to assistant principal, and to his current role as principal. While entry in his school building was easy and included being buzzed into the main office through a newly installed secure entry vestibule, getting to his office seemed a never-ending maze through the “pods” that made up the school. The school was constructed in the 1960s in a nontraditional manner. His office was triangular in shape, as were all the rooms in the pods.

Tom was youthful, fit, and well dressed in a suit and tie. Tom was open in his wish to participate in this research, but he had great difficulty finding the time. Throughout the interview, he attempted to monitor what calls came over his radio, who called his office telephone through the caller ID, and what was going on outside of the windows of his office as students left to the busses. Throughout the interview, there was a pervasive feeling that “something was about to go wrong.” Tom provided thoughtful answers of the school choice

options in the district. He posited something was negative at one time, but the situation had forced the schools to adapt and now served as a positive pressure on schools.

**Traditional Middle School 1.** Nick was the oldest of the secondary principals in the school district. Nick held a Master of Arts in School Leadership and Innovation. He served as the principal for five years, after serving as the assistant principal at the same location for 15 years.

When entering his school building, the building—while of older construction—was well maintained and a great deal of care was given to the appearance. The office was orderly, well maintained, and devoid of students. The interview occurred in Nick’s office, which was directly off of the main office.

Throughout the interview, Nick kept the earpiece of his radio in his ear and turned to monitor the calls going over the radio. He had a business-like attitude and focused directly on the management of the building and the school. He was dressed in business casual attire, deviating from the norm of the district with male principals in suits.

Nick believed in the chain-of-command and arranged the interview after confirming with his supervisor at the district level that it was approved and supported at the district level. Nick seemed to provide direct answers to the questions asked without offering any of his own opinions. When responding to follow-up questions to generate additional data, Nick would frequently answer with the public relations information that the district leaders provided.

**Traditional Middle School 2.** Gloria was the youngest of the secondary principals in the school district. She held a Master of Arts in School Leadership and was completing the course work for her doctoral degree. She was vibrant and energetic, and she was excited to

participate in this research. She viewed the discussions and the research process as a valuable tool that she could learn from in her quest to be an effective new principal.

Entering the school to interview Gloria was a unique setting. The building itself was over 120 years old. The school had a beautiful stone front of the school and was located in one of the most expensive real estate zip codes in the country. Entering the school led to the revelation that the school was filled with almost entirely poor and minority students who did not reside in the location of the school. The interior of the school building was neat and clean, but it lacked the amenities of newer schools.

The interview occurred in Gloria's office, which was directly behind the main office. Her office was spacious with 14-foot ceilings. Gloria appeared to be in her 30s and dressed in a business casual style. All office staff in the school appeared to prefer business casual dress. The answers that Gloria provided were entirely centered on the current weaknesses of the school and what she could do in her present role to make improvements.

**Traditional Middle School 3.** Aaron was the newest secondary principal in the school district. He had a more youthful appearance than his age and position would convey. He was in his late 30s, but he could pass for 10 years younger. He had only been the principal for a year, replacing the previous principal on an interim basis, and then being hired in a permanent capacity.

While the school itself was older, the building and grounds were immaculate. The office was friendly and welcoming, and I entered through a buzzer system with a secure vestibule. Aaron expressed openness about participating in the research, but he did the interview while continuing his other duties. These duties included pausing the interview for making school-wide announcements, answering radio calls, and answering the telephone. He apologized but stated

that he needed to set the example to the rest of the school, and he knew he would always be judged more critically because of his age and youthful appearance.

**Traditional Middle School 4.** Latonya was an approachable, supportive participant who came off as reserved and apologetic. She was outwardly bothered by the fact that she cancelled appointments to be interviewed on two occasions due to personal tragedies in her own life. This situation made her set aside a larger block of time to complete the interview and might have led to her providing more detailed answers than were necessary. Her mood was melancholy. She attempted to be a happy, willing participant, but it was difficult for her to get through portions of the interview. When I asked how she dealt with the stress of the job in her personal life, she found it difficult to answer.

Latonya was in her 40s and held a Master of Arts in School Leadership. She was writing her own dissertation to complete her doctoral degree. She was dressed in professional attire, wearing a business pantsuit. The answers that Latonya provided were direct and authoritarian, but she also gave off a feeling that she cared about meeting the needs of the school. Her answers were frequently centered on school turnaround and school improvement, partly because her school had been slated for state takeover and had not made necessary improvements in student achievement.

### **Magnet School Principals**

**Magnet School 1.** Jen was in a unique setting for her school and her office. The school was a magnet school, housed in one half of the only public high school building in the largest city in the state. The building itself was formerly an urban high school that was shut down and repurposed to hold a performing arts magnet school and a charter school. The magnet school was located on the first floor of the building, and the charter school was located on the second

floor. These locations required using two main offices, two main entrances, and two parking areas.

Her office was directly off the main office, and the entire area was a congregating area for students and staff. The interview occurred in Jen's office, which was small and cramped with a conference area. Jen cleared the area of students and staff to disengage completely from the school functioning around her and devote all her attention to the interview.

Jen was the dean of students at the magnet school. Jen had been the only school leader for her school in its history. She had the unique experience of planning the program, opening the school, and leading it since its inception. The meeting marked Jen's 20th year in her current position. She was in her 50s and dressed in a business casual style.

**Magnet School 2.** Mark had a sense of calm and directness that set him apart from the other participants. Mark appeared in his late 40s and was dressed in a formal business suit. His answers were deliberate, well-thought out, and direct. His brevity of speech was apparent, and he chose his words to provide an answer using as few words as possible. Due to the brevity of his answers, clarifying questions were asked to get him to expand on his answers. Often, the clarifying questions were answered as briefly as the original questions. He set up the interview to take place in his office.

The magnet school he ran had a science focus and was in a stately 100-year-old brick building. The building was thoroughly renovated, but the buzzer access system was opened anytime a visitor rang the doorbell. The office was welcoming, and Mark was waiting for me at my arrival. He let his secretary know that he was not to be disturbed, and he devoted his full attention to the interview until it was complete.

## **Charter School Principals**

**Charter School 1.** Ron was in his 50s, and he was the only secondary principal in the district who held a doctorate in educational leadership. He dressed in business casual. He was authoritarian in nature, and he was loud and animated, often speaking while making rapid motions with his hands. Ron served as the president of the school with a set of responsibilities that was more comprehensive than that of a school principal. His title of *president of school* was more akin to a principal/superintendent of a single school district. He oversaw every aspect of the school operations. Many of the day-to-day leadership responsibilities of the school were shared with his assistant principal.

The office of the school was on the opposite side of the school as the entrance to the magnet school that shares the physical building with this charter school. The charter school was located on the second floor of the school, but because charter schools were 501c(3) organizations in Delaware, the charter school was required to pay rent to use the facility. Although it was not mentioned during the interview, the charter school faculty recently voted to unionize. No other charter school in the state had taken this step. In all other cases, charter school employees were “at will” employees, and leaders could dismissed them without cause. The news coverage of this event portrayed it as a movement against the leadership of the school president. Ron cleared his schedule, and the interview occurred in his office, without any interruptions.

**Charter School 2.** Katie served as the dean of cadets at Charter School 2. In this position, she was not the head of school but served as the academic leader of the school. The head of school had the title of commandant, but his role was that of the military leader of the school. Because this school was Navy Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (NJROTC) school, leadership followed a strict military chain of command.



Deb was in her 50s and held a Master of Education in School Counseling. She was not required to hold a degree in school administration because she reported to the commandant who was required to hold a degree in school leadership. Katie dressed in business casual but alternated that with the uniform required for staff at the military school. While staff dress was not full military uniform, a uniform was provided for staff members.

The interview with Katie occurred in her office located in the suite of offices off the main office. The school offices were small for the size of the school, but the school leaders had undertaken a building project to expand and add additional facilities. Katie was open to participating when the commandant deferred to her on matters of education, enrollment, and instruction at the school. Katie had been at the school since it opened as a business teacher, guidance counselor, and now dean of cadets.

## **Results**

Data were collected from 11 participants, which included 11 individual principal interviews from secondary schools in the Northern School District and 11 school observations at school choice student recruitments events housed at each school. Additionally, data were collected from an administrator questionnaire completed immediately prior to their individual interviews. Three participated with titles other than principal. Therefore, although eight principals were included in this study, 11 individual interviews were conducted with those who have responsibilities traditionally performed by principals.

Individual interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify emerging themes. Each participant was asked the same set of questions. However, due to the semi-structured format, some questions varied based on the responses and type of school of each

participant to avoid duplicate questions and a better flow of wording. As a result, some questions and responses prompted different responses.

Data were transcribed from audio recordings, reviewed, member checked, organized, coded, recoded, summarized, and interpreted. Transcripts and audio recordings from the individual interviews were reviewed at least twice. A contracted transcription service provider transcribed transcripts of the recordings. The principals member checked the transcripts to ensure accuracy and full context of the responses. A systematic approach was taken to bringing meaning to the data. I used preliminary manual coding to place data into subthemes, which led to emergent themes. First cycle and second cycle coding was used to determine the subthemes used to identify themes (Appendix F). I used pencil codes and highlighting markers for a visual depiction of the emerging themes. After identifying themes, I applied a cutting and sorting process to sort data. This process continued until theoretical saturation was reached regarding emergent themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Four themes emerged in the examination of the case study: school image, marketing responsibility, recruitment of students, and hierarchy of competition (see Table 5). Each of these four themes occurred during interviews with principals and observations at school choice events.

Table 5

*Emergent Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: Responsibility for the school image	1a. Safety and security 2a. Specialized programs 3a. Extracurricular opportunities
Theme 2: Recruitment of students	2a. Advertising 2b. Word-of-mouth
Theme 3: Marketing responsibilities	3a. Time spent recruiting students 3b. Energy devoted to recruiting students 3c. Focus on recruitment required of principals
Theme 4: Stratified tiers of competing schools	4a. Schools of choice 4b. Schools of last resort

Principal participants expressed that overall, working in an environment of total school choice influenced their job performances regarding (a) safety and security, (b) offering of specialized programs, (c) offering of extra-curricular opportunities, (d) advertising, (e) managing word-of-mouth in the school community, (f) time spent recruiting students, (g) energy spent recruiting students, (h) district level focus on student recruitment, (i) creation of schools of choice, and (j) creation of schools of last resort. Each of these subthemes was grouped into the four identified themes: school image, marketing responsibility, recruitment of students, and hierarchy of competition.

**Theme 1: School Image**

The theme of school image was recognized in numerous subthemes identified during the initial reading of all data, and then during the reread of each transcript. The responsibility of the school, more specifically the principal, to manage the image of the school appeared in every transcript and concerned the issue of school choice. While a principal faces maintaining the

school image as a responsibility, school choice has forced principals to confront the issue directly to remain a competitive or, in some cases, viable school. The theme of school image was a point of focus in all interviews. The subthemes for this theme included safety and security, specialized programs, and extracurricular opportunities.

Regarding the first research question, traditional, magnet, and charter school principals made sense of the competition generated by school choice options in basic terms regarding school image. There was a universal realization that every aspect of the image of the school played a role in parents and students' choices of which school they would attend. Bryan, the principal at Traditional School 2, served as a lead voice on the issue of managing the school image. Bryan articulated the naturally developing image of the school from the controlled image that school choice required principals to understand and control. While his voice was the strongest in this area, he was not the only one to address the issue.

Principals used sensemaking to address the issue, but the priority placed on it varied by school. The traditional school leaders placed safety and security as a higher priority compared to their magnet and charter school counterparts; however, all addressed school safety as a required area of the school image. For example, Bryan stated the following:

I would say first and foremost is to make sure that the school is safe and orderly. There are days and weeks here where that pushes almost everything else off of the plate.

One of the biggest challenges of being an administrator in a comprehensive public school these days since comprehensive public schools concentrate students with the greatest needs is that those students needs be they special education needs, or be they behavioral needs, or be they drug treatment needs, or be they, "I need to be safe from

people who are after me on the outside," needs, those needs require more time that there is in the day just to meet those needs.

While not all traditional school principals saw safety and security as a primary driver of school image, recent events in the country had forced the district to take action. This push was apparent from the buzzer systems installed in each school that were paired with a secure entry vestibule. Leaders had completed these construction projects at great expense to the local taxpayers and were being installed in the final schools at the time of this research. Tom provided an example of the pressure of these events:

Researcher: What have been your greatest challenges while serving at this school, and how did you handle the challenges?

Tom: There so many ways I could go on that. One of the greatest challenges right now is school safety and security. I mean that's just pressing on any school administrator right now. I've certainly felt that especially in the last month with the school walkout and what happened in Parkland.

While traditional school principals addressed dealing with issues of safety and security, the charter and magnet school principals tended to address the lack of these issues in their schools as one of the draws of students and parents through school choice.

Researcher: Why do you think parents select your school over other schools in the district?

Jen: Some of them select it because their kids want to be here because it's an art school. Some of them select it because it's a good academic school. Some of them, I'm sure, select it because they feel it's a safe environment, it's a good learning environment for their kids.

Jen expanded on that idea when comparing her job responsibilities to those of her traditional school colleagues. While she viewed her responsibilities as equally difficult, she seemed to minimize the long-term impacts of dealing with repeated issues of safety and security on the school image. Jen stated the following:

We don't have the significant discipline issues that a regular public school has. I know that I'm not dealing with the things that Bryan is dealing with at Traditional High School 2. My challenges are very different. My challenges aren't any less. My stress level is not less, I think, it's just different the kinds of things that we're dealing with. I don't have to worry about, in general, whether or not how many fights are going to break out today in my building.

The ability and willingness to offer specialized programs also played a role in the principals managing the school image. The district leadership created schools that existed due to specialized programs, while other school principals led initiatives to add specialized programs to improve the school image and remain competitive in an era full of school choices. Bryan articulated the impact that adding a single specialized program had on his school image and the corresponding enrollment in the school:

We are in our third year. It shouldn't surprise me, but it really does that our middle school is super popular. Even being housed within a high school which is super unpopular. It's popularity is due to a variety of factors. It's seen as a special program for special kids, and that's what parents in this particular environment want. We've got a waiting list now. In our third year, we'll be fully subscribed for the second year in a row, and our test scores are through the roof.

While Bryan was aware of the benefits of adding specialized programs to improve a school's image, he did not see the practice as one that guaranteed success or cured all other ills of school choice:

Researcher: Why do you think parents and students select your school over the other schools in this district?

Bryan: I think we're the only IB Program in the district. I think some parents really believe in IB. I think our IB Program is a draw there. It's not enough of a draw to bring what is perceived as a second-tier school to anywhere near the first tier. I think that separation is way too great for a single program like International Baccalaureate.

In contrast to Bryan, Jen attributed the specialized programming at her school as the main reason that parents and students selected her school. The school image was defined by the existence of the specialized programming, and the other benefits (e.g., high academics, low rates of discipline, and an image of inclusiveness and safety) played secondary roles. Jen stated, "But students are coming here primarily because they have an interest and a passion in the arts, so they want to dance, they want to play an instrument. We offer nine different majors, eight in the middle school."

Principals in a magnet school with a specialized program had to manage the school image to downplay the specialized programming and maximize that the special program would not take away from what parents believed a traditional high school experience should include. Mark, the principal at Magnet School 2, let his prospective students know they would receive specialized training, as well as a traditional school experience:

Researcher: Why do you think parents and students select your school over the other school choice options in the district?

Mark: What I believe is that students choose us because we offer a STEM and a life science specifically educational experience at the center of a traditional high school experience. So while we do have specific career interests and specific programs, we do not have an Art program for example, but we do have a traditional experience otherwise.

Gloria provided a final perspective on principals making sense of the role they played in selecting special programs for their school. After becoming the newly appointed principal of a traditional school, Gloria took inventory of what specialized programming did for a school image and the resulting impact that had on the school choice process:

As I looked around and I was watching my peers at their tables and seeing what they had to offer, I was seeing that while some of the schools are naturally more desirable because of their demographics or such, those schools were getting programs implemented.

Maybe it was a language, Chinese or Spanish. Maybe it was a special program such as AVID or something along those lines, and I, at that point, didn't have any of that. I felt like technically we should all be on the same level, but already they were starting to pull ahead of me because they had different programs that they were offering. I really just truly did have very traditional programs and classes.

While making sense of the need to offer specialized programming, principals did not discount the role of extracurricular activities and the role they played in crafting and maintaining the school image. Bryan stated the following:

That's where marketing leads you though because folks know that a really good marketer for your school is the record of your football team or the record of your basketball team. And that once you get that ball rolling in a good direction then that becomes a big draw for the children of affluent parents.



Aaron summarized using extracurricular opportunities to manage school image for school choice benefits. Aaron's traditional middle school offered many extracurricular activities, and his sense of competition and winning in the activities translated to winning an improved school image:

Academically, we beat them in math league for eighth grade; we were the math league state champs. We beat them in Science Olympiad; we were the Science Olympiad State Champs. We beat them in Mathcounts. And then we also fair better than they did at Technology Student Associate States and Business Professional of America States. So it is absolutely one of our biggest competitors and someone that -- when I'm marketing the school, our team is marketing the school -- we market them against private schools.

In addition to the principals' answers, all 11 of the schools provided hard copy handouts to every parent who attended a school choice event at the school. The handouts were collected and analyzed as artifacts to support the information gathered from principals' individual interviews. The artifacts ranged from simple lists of all extracurricular opportunities that the school offered for students, to major highlights from those opportunities. Two of the schools had student representatives available from each club and activity to provide firsthand descriptions of the opportunities available to students in that school. While a single page handout was prepared on a template by the school district central office, all schools expanded the template to provide additional information about offered extracurricular opportunities.

## **Theme 2: Marketing Responsibility**

All study participants discussed marketing responsibility. I recognized the marketing theme in the numerous subthemes identified during the initial reading of all data, and then

grouped these after the additional rereadings of each transcript. I identified subthemes as advertising and word-of-mouth.

Mark discussed marketing as a responsibility of the principal. He traced the role of marketing back to his earliest days of interviewing and being hired for his current principalship. Mark provided an example, stating the viability and survivability of a struggling school depended on the principal to market the school and increase applications and enrollments:

Researcher: What have been your greatest challenges while serving as the principal at your current school? And how did you handle them?

Mark: My greatest challenge -- I would answer that in two ways. One, when I got to the school in year two, there were not many applicants for the school. And there was a message from the district administration that we did need to market the school, we did need to increase the number of applicants of people interested in attending this school to keep the school viable in that format. We were successful with that.

Tracing the enrollment of Mark's school over time verified the success. The enrollment grew exponentially after Mark arrived at the school. Schools, such as Mark's school and other highly regarded schools (e.g., the magnet and charter programs in the district), did not need to market the school after enrollment and the creation of a waitlist reached a critical mass.

Jen led the other magnet school in the district and seemed in competition with Mark to enroll students. Her opinion on marketing her school was similar to Mark's current situation:

Researcher: Do you have to market your school? And if so, how do you market your school?

Jen: We don't really market our school anymore. We used to when the school was new when I first started. I had a person who was a PR person. We had brochures

that we created. We market our school just like any other public school does. I don't feel like I have to have a marketing budget to put things in the local newspaper, or to send things out, or to go resource fairs. They come to us now.

Jen's school opened in 1997, and Mark's school opened in 2003. The 6-year window allowed Jen's school to be well established by the time leaders created and opened a second magnet school. The magnet school principals expressed that they needed to market to advertise new schools and programs. They reported that their initial success led to more success, and then the need for marketing would dissipate.

While the magnet school principals experienced a great deal of success with their marketing, lessening the need for it, traditional school principals did not express the same results. As the principal of Traditional School 3, Tom connected the need for marketing to a feeder pattern school. A feeder pattern school was another name used for the traditional schools that drew the majority of their students to the school based on geographic feeder pattern. Geographic feeder patterns were the default for students who did not select another school through the school choice process. Tom stated, "I think we are focused on marketing and the brand and the message of our school. I think it's the nature and at the forefront of what we do. I do think that that's important for feeder schools."

In addition to the need of marketing differing for traditional schools compared to magnet and charter schools, leaders also employed the methods of marketing differently. Mark indicated ways his magnet school solved all marketing needs without exerting time and effort from himself or any education employees:

Researcher: Do you have to market your school, and if so, how do you currently market your school?

Mark: We market our school -- each year we update a choice folder that we produce on November 1st. It is sent out to a professional company that does the folder; there's a tri-fold inside of it, what makes us unique, different programs that go inside of it. So we spend on that type of paperwork, about 4,000 dollars. We then run a professional video for the middle school and the high school that appears on the center of our website from November through February.

The ability to effectively market one's school and programs does not end with the traditional workday. Marketing can frequently mean being an active member of the local school community and going out of your way to make sure that the school is always viewed in the best light. All parents with school-aged children must be viewed as possible consumers of the product that the principal is marketing, in this case, their won school.

Aaron: The biggest part is sell. You constantly have to sell your product in terms of -- obviously when you're at school, but also on the weekends. I'm a local member of this community so if I'm out at the Drip Cafe, or the ACME, or the Mexican Table, I'm constantly promoting H.B. and what a wonderful place it is. If people have questions, I always tell them to come visit.

In addition to informal marketing, leaders of individual schools, the school district, or outside organizations also hosted formal marketing events. These events brought large numbers of schools together to present what each could offer to parents and students. These events included resource fairs, open houses, or school choice nights. School leaders used these events to display their programs positively. Gloria described the preparation for these events and how she prepared marketing materials with a limited budget:

I always put together a really nice folder. Again, I feel that's a big piece, your presentation, so the folder. I'll put general information, dress code, we have a couple of programs that we've since implemented, AVID. I'll put information in there about that. There's nothing specific. Honestly, it's just a folder that looks nice, that the parents walk away with some information. I don't really want to provide anything that's the same as everyone else's. I don't feel the need to put a sheet in there that says, "We offer pre-algebra at sixth grade, seventh grade." Every traditional middle school does that. I try to put things in that potentially are different than what the other middle schools have.

There appeared stratification in how the resources for marketing were funded. The highest achieving schools were more likely to pay an outside entity to create and provide the material used for marketing. The traditional school leaders were more likely to create their own materials and develop their own plans to market schools. A school similar to Mark's magnet school would spend \$4,000 on marketing materials, while a traditional school similar to Gloria's would spend no money when creating all materials in-house.

Not all schools and principals addressed in the research engaged in the marketing of schools. The prime example of this was Bryan at Traditional School 2. Bryan viewed the marketing of schools as an immoral piece of the larger school choice movement that created a two-tiered system of public schools. He refused to engage in marketing that related to school choice; the enrollment of his school had dropped each successive year of his tenure:

Researcher: If it is, how has this impacted your role as principal?

Bryan: The first thing that comes to mind is that competition has created at least the perceived need for me to market the school and its programs. I have an enormous problem with the idea that school leaders should be marketing their schools and

programs. The primary reason that I have a problem with that is that marketing is about convincing people that things are in a way that's most sellable. Whether or not that most sellable thing is reality or fiction. So when you market a car you want to say that it has great gas mileage, and that it doesn't pollute the environment, and that it has lots of cargo space, et cetera, et cetera. That inevitably, as recent events have borne out leads to gaming the system and saying things that just aren't true. Especially, in an institution which is as difficult to quantify as a school. When people tell me they want me to market the school what people are telling me is that they want me to talk up the positive aspects of the school and minimize the negative aspects of the school. I think that's just plain unethical when it comes to schools because schools are where people send their children. And if my school, and it does, when my school houses some students who have dangerous behaviors it would be unethical for me to not say that to the parent of a prospective student. So the way that you play the competition game, one aspect of playing the competition game is this idea of marketing. I think marketing is, at the first or second step just blatantly unethical.

In addition to the role of marketing in advertising schools, principals also must account for the marketing that occurs through word-of-mouth conversation that could dominate the local school communities. This type of communication could occur through personal relationships, online via social media, or in the produce aisle at the local grocery store.

Anywhere parents of school age children gathered, they would discuss where children should attend school, and ways to increase their chances of attending the school of their choice seemed to dominate. Bryan stated the following:

But then you get it from the public as well. We have staff members here who have their own children here, and they regularly hear things like, "Wait, your kid is going to Traditional School 2? I know you work there, but you have to go there, and they pay you. Why would you send your kids there?" It's hard. It's hard, and it accumulates over time after years, and years, and years of working in a school like this it starts to wear you down. That being looked upon as if you were something less than the school around the corner that happens to be a charter or a magnet. But I find that when people are making decisions for their kids and without an in-depth knowledge of the mechanisms and the segregationist aspects of selective enrollment schooling people are going to listen to what they hear in the produce aisle.

While this example showed the damage negative information and stereotypes could have on a school over time, not all word-of-mouth marketing was negative. Many of the positive attributes of school and the successes fostered were communicated through this type of communication. Magnet School 1 developed a reputation over time for being open to all students, regardless of any social stigma. This belief about the school developed when the school welcomed multiple transitioning transgendered students prior to such issues becoming national issues:

Researcher: So the student members of the club sort of distribute that information?

Jen: I think because we've been in existence for such a long time that that has become -- like we're a safe environment. We say that. We're an inclusive school. When people come to tour, we say one the things that we pride ourselves on is that we allow students to be who they are. We don't tell kids they have to have a certain color hair. We don't tell kids they have to dress a certain way, as long as they are within dress code. There are things that are a little more flexible about an art school per se.

While word-of-mouth marketing was a very powerful tool, it could also be risky because the school could lose some control over the image shown to the public. The public seemed to rely on information provided by current members of the school community, especially when the person provided the information with no formal tie to the school, other than being a member of the school community. The following excerpt shows an example of this situation:

Researcher: If you don't have to do formal marketing of the school, what do you feel is the most effective marketing technique for your school at this point?

Katie: I think our kids. Our kids and our parents do most of the marketing. When our kids win the mock trial competition, that information getting out there and showing our success is really -- what we do on our website, what we do on Facebook, what we do on Twitter, those are important. That's what is primarily the mode of communication with people who are interested in our school.

The members of the school community do more than just market the school through informal communications. They have worked together to develop a reputation for the school. The reputation of the school was formed over time based on anecdotal evidence the public accepted as scientific fact. Several principals in the study expressed that once the reputation of a school was formed, they struggled to change public opinion about the existing reputation. Aaron stated the following:

I would say it's almost twenty-four seven of promoting the product and promoting what a great place this is. I think the biggest thing is that it's the reputation, but reputation is everything in education. Reputation is all that matters, and if people feel or the community feels great about what you're doing it's only going to continue to grow and grow. But in terms of marketing, I am marketing this school 24 hours a day, seven days a



week, and I feel like that's a big part of having a great school is marketing it appropriately.

### **Theme 3: Recruitment of Students**

All study participants discussed recruiting students. I first recognized recruitment of students in the numerous subthemes identified during the initial reading of all the data, and then through the rereading of each individual transcript. The subthemes for this theme included time spent recruiting students, energy devoted to recruiting students, and the focus on recruitment required of principals.

The recruitment of students was an issue for principals on many levels. To understand why the recruitment of students was so significant, one noted that in Delaware, schools' funding to operate generated from students attending that school; therefore, enrolling more students created more funding for the school to educate all students. In addition, staffing at each school was provided by the state of Delaware and was allocated based on a unit count. The unit count earned units used to hire and compensate employees. Hence, all school employees' jobs, including that of the principal, depended on enrolling enough students to make the school viable. Time spent focused on recruiting students not only created job security, but it also lost time needed for other educational needs. Bryan stated the following:

Then it becomes very difficult and time-consuming to do the other things that school leaders are supposed to do which is to ensure that teaching and learning is going on in every classroom, every day. To make sure that teachers are engaged in a process of continuous improvement of their professional practice.

Traditional school principals enrolled most of their students based on feeder patterns that existed prior to the system of school choice occurring. While traditional school leaders enrolled

additional students through school choice, the percentage of school choice students they enrolled was much smaller compared to the charter and magnet schools where all students were enrolled through school choice. State law required that a standard application be submitted to apply for choice. Several of the charter and magnet school leaders used additional admission materials that included standardized assessments, interviews, interest inventories, and auditions. The traditional school principals expressed that the work generated from this process took time away from education but allowed greater control over which students were admitted. Martin summarized the feelings of the traditional school principals:

I think many magnets and charters put a lot of energy in to the process of enrolling a new class of students. I wouldn't minimize the hoops through which some schools make students jump to gain entry in to their program. And managing those hoops, I'm sure, takes an enormous amount of time and energy. I don't think it's anything compared to the amount of time and energy that it takes to manage the behaviors of the other students.

While the time commitments devoted toward the recruitment of students was substantial, it was not as stressful or high stakes for some of the schools. All four of the nontraditional schools in the Northern District had more students expressing interest to attend than there were seats available. This surplus of interested students led to long waitlists and uncertainty about which students would accept which offers of admission. The charter and magnet school principals realized they would have a school filled to the capacity that they themselves set; for example, Ron stated, "And certainly, if I think about what schools we're competing with per se, I'm never worried about filling our seats."

The traditional school leaders universally devoted more time to recruiting and attempting to enroll enough students to maintain current staffing levels and building funding. Aaron

provided an example of how traditional school principals attempted to keep their school functioning with uncertain enrollments:

Researcher: How has that impacted your role as the Principal?

Aaron: It's impacted my role in a number of different ways. Specifically, I would say we're looking to get all the kids that live in our feeder pattern, and we're looking to get all of the best kids out here that want to be part of school family. So, specifically in Northern District, we can compete closely with the charter school -- I'm sorry, a magnet school. We also compete closely with an all choice comprehensive middle school, and then different charter schools throughout Northern Delaware. As a result of that, we do Tuesday tours where every Tuesday I take fifth graders around at 9:00 o'clock and we go in and out of our classrooms and show off how wonder H.B. is. And then also in terms of our marketing, we're always looking to market ourselves as the premier comprehensive middle school in the State of Delaware. So I would it impacts everything on a daily basis.

Recruitment energy refers to the effort that one places into recruiting students and parents. While this effort was required if school choice had a significant impact on schools, leaders faced an opportunity cost when they could not address other school issues due to time constraints. Ron and Jen were both principals of schools with long waiting lists who must decide which student would attend, and conversely which students would not attend. Because of this responsibility, their views on recruiting students was drastically different compared to traditional school counterparts. Ron stated the following:

Do I try and get out good information about the school? Yes, but one of the other problems I have with that whole idea of trying to be a salesman for the school is that my

energies, and the energies of my staff, and the energies of my teachers should go in to our kids. They shouldn't go in to promotional materials.

Jen added the following:

Researcher: How has that impacted your role as principal?

Jen: I think you have to continually be the best school that you can be. I don't feel like we have to compete for art students per se because if a student wants to come here because we're an Arts Magnet School, we don't have competition there. I feel like there's more pressure on the students than there are on us as a school because the students have so many different options. We know that we're going to always draw a decent number of students. We're always going to have a waitlist. So it's not like that kind of level of competition where we feel like we're vying for students. But the students have so much pressure to make choices about where they want to go. I feel like it's a bigger deal for them than it is for us at this point.

The energy devoted to recruiting students varied by school; however, leaders used a substantial amount of energy at each of the schools. They used some energy to develop content provided to each of the parents and children who expressed interest in the school. The materials provided range from a single basic brochure to extravagant kits that included sweatshirts, t-shirts, magnets, lanyards, pens, notebooks, binders, and many other promotional items. For the 11 principals interviewed in this study, the longer the waitlist to get into a school, the fewer promotional items were provided. The more challenging the school, the nicer the packet of items provided to those who expressed interest. Aaron stated the following:

So we have a nice folder, and from there, we have a map that gives them a bunch of different options of where they can go that night, in terms of what do they want to see. It

has four half an hour presentations. We also have a brochure that they can look through some of the different accomplishments of the school. We have an exit ticket where they can rate what they thought about the night, give us feedback, and what did they enjoy, what did they not enjoy. We'll give them a pencil and a magnet. But the main thing is for the choice open house; it's the meat and the potatoes of meeting the staff and getting to know what we do on a daily basis.

Operational dollars depended on the principals' recruiting efforts. Leaders of the Northern District embraced this process of parental school choice. The district accepted that recruiting was needed, and the principal must conduct recruiting tactics, which required a strong focus on effective recruiting to deviate from failure. This focus included recruiting students into schools from within the school itself, as well as the district recruiting students from outside of the district. The administrators at every level of the district experienced this top-down pressure to recruit and enroll students, which had the most ramifications for school principals. Gloria explained some commitments from being a school principal:

Really through social media. Putting together display stands, so at the choice open house, I have that information to share. Speaking to elementary schools, you know, so to get the information out to the students. But then possibly, the PTA is going to those to speak. Because it's really going to be different and I'm going to have to work on getting that information out.

The district level leadership did not expect principals to be entirely responsible for recruiting students. District level leadership conducting some recruiting themselves and attempted to offer resources to schools to ease principals' burdens. Latonya provided some examples of ways the district leadership improved supporting principals:

I will also say at our last principals' meeting, and there was a whole piece on marketing. So the district as a whole is really starting to evolve and think about that marketing piece, which really is all because of choice. Now the district has some tools, you know like they've typed up a template to start to get you thinking. The district is willing to send people out to take pictures and help you package your school. They're providing support like that. But I want to push the boundaries too. I just don't want to be a page in a pamphlet. I really want to get myself out once this program starts to evolve.

Despite district leadership efforts and the practical importance of recruitment, not all principals shared in the enthusiasm of the practice. Mark explained why he no longer needed to recruit the way he did in the past:

Having been at the school for ten years, I can say that the competition and the marketing involved in competing was a significant part of my job over the first five or six years of my tenure here. Since we've become established, the community sort of takes care of the marketing piece and neighborhoods and word of mouth tends to do a lot of the marketing. While we do market, and we do video, and we do a variety of things, the number of applicants is high, and that number has remained steady for the past five years.

Conversely, Bryan expressed that recruiting students went against what public school represented:

Well, I think in this particular environment where magnets and charters have been able to apply so many filters at the front end. They have been able to exclude so many kinds of kids for so many reasons that the biggest differences are that magnet and charters, and I include my own even with no other application requirements other than the State required school choice options form or whatever that thing is called. The main differences are in

the population of students that you serve. I think that it all boils down to Campbell's Law where as soon as you measure schools by the performance of students, and you combine that with an ability to select who comes to your school who are you going to select?

Wait, I'm going to be measured by kid's math scores? Well, I'm going to select kids who are good at math. Duh. Again, I think it's immoral and unethical on its face so no, I probably should market my school. I should probably suck it up and try and pour more energy in to attracting more children here, but I just don't have the heart for it.

#### **Theme 4: Hierarchy of Competition**

All study participants discussed a hierarchy of competition. This hierarchy theme was first recognized in the numerous subthemes identified during the initial reading of all data, and then through the rereading of each individual transcript. The subthemes for this theme included the creation of schools of choice and schools of last resort.

This theme was more elusive because the school leaders lacked a common vocabulary with which to refer to schools. Further readings of the transcripts developed the idea that all principals had a similar rank order of schools in mind of where parents would attempt to enroll their children. While the order was not always exact, the stratified bands of schools were the same in all references. Bryan stated the following when asked he felt a sense of competition with other traditional schools:

Yes, because the truth of the matter is, is that as the number of schools increases and as the number of selective enrollment schools increases we've run in to situations here where our high school enrollment in particular has gotten critically low. Where people in the district have begun to talk about, "What are we going to do about Traditional School 2?" And what they mean is, "What do we do because the enrollment of the school is 590,

and it has capacity for 1,200?" And that looks really bad in front of the school board. People are starting to talk about, "Why won't kids go there?" And, "It's such a bad school." So yeah, the fact of competition both with selective enrollment schools and with other public schools is reality. It's a sad reality because I should be a collaborator with my co-public school principals rather than a competitor.

Traditional school principals experienced competition from other traditional schools, magnet schools, charter schools, vocational-technical schools, and private schools. However, charter and magnet school principals did not have the same experience. As the academic achievements of the school increases, the number of schools they viewed as competition decreased. For example, Tom stated the following:

Yeah, in the same way with magnet schools. I feel that at least in Red Clay there is a very clear two-tiered school system in secondary schools. Selective enrollment schools are seen as higher quality and more desirable by the public. Comprehensive public schools are seen as second-tier. We could give boxes of chocolate to every student that walked through the front door and it wouldn't change a thing. The reality is that as long as comprehensive public schools are required to admit everyone in their attendance zones, and the fact that our attendance zones include some very high-poverty neighborhoods where things are very difficult there's not any actual real competition. There's a more desired school and a less desired school. Charters and magnets being more and comprehensive publics being less.

Expanding Tom's idea of the two-tiered system, Ron described the competition considered by students determining whether to attend his charter school. He did not address the



traditional schools as options for a student to consider. He viewed only private schools and selected high achieving programs as on par with his own school. Ron stated the following:

I think it has a significant impact on students because they have so many different choices; both private and public. They have to do a lot of research, "Do I want to go to a private Catholic School? Is a Catholic girls' school or private independent school the right choice for me as opposed to a charter or magnet school, or a specialized program?" So when you're looking at, especially high schools, those are the schools that kids have to really weigh, "What's going to be the best fit for me?"

Mark reiterated Ron's feelings on competition, leaving out all traditional schools. In his understanding, students created an order or hierarchy of schools; they then applied to all the schools from the top down. Mark stated the following:

I feel as though we're competing for -- there's a limited number of students out there that are competing for schools. My competition with other charters, and to some degree magnet schools, although the uniqueness of the performing arts school makes the students applying there a rather unique bunch. In the case of the military school and charter school, I find that many eighth grade students are trying to determine which of those three options is number one, and then two, and then three.

A significant portion of the district's enrollment did not come from these high achieving schools with long waitlists and extensive application procedures. Regarding the enrollment of students who did not meet the admission criteria of the more highly ranked schools, the schools often deemed "lesser" became options for enrollment. Martin explained the following about whether he competed with private schools:

I don't, really. I think private schools, and magnets, and charters are on a more level playing field. And that folks who choose privates over magnets and charters more and more become parents who are looking for either a real specific program, and the program that comes to mind is a local Quaker school. Or parents that really want exclusivity. They want a program that is very expensive and that will specifically exclude folks who aren't economically able to engage in that program. Comprehensive publics now in this two-tiered school system, I don't believe that comprehensive publics and privates really compete directly anymore.

The process of enrolling in the traditional school that served a students' geographic feeder pattern was often a secondary choice or a choice of last resort. Mark explained how many of the students enrolled in traditional schools serving feeder patterns never filled out a school choice application to be considered to attend other schools. Mark stated the following:

On the other hand, I think that because there is an achievement gap in students that fill out school choice applications versus those students that don't fill out choice applications, that there is an inherent pressure with feeder school leaders and administrators to meet the needs of a higher percentage of at-risk students. Therefore, they fall into categories of underperforming schools, and not necessarily any fault of their own from a leadership perspective.

Bryan expanded the idea of students who never considered leaving their traditional feeder pattern school. He included students who did choose to leave but were forced to leave their school of choice and return to their feeder schools. These often included students who had behavioral issues, attendance issues, or were academically at-risk. When questioned about ways traditional school students were selected to attend his school, Bryan explained the following:

They're more deselected, I would say, than selected. Our traditional school students are the ones who don't elect to go elsewhere and remain in the attendance zone or are removed from another educational jurisdiction. If a student, for example, is at a local private school and is found with drugs that local private school will, in some cases, ask them to go away quietly in lieu of expulsion. And then that student will find their way to my doorway. Some charters also have a habit of deselectioning students and counseling them back to their comprehensive public schools. I don't know if I'm supposed to mention specific schools by name here, but the military school in particular is famous for telling students that it's not a good fit at various points during the year. And that they should leave before they're made to leave. In the high school we really have two kinds of students. Students who choose to come here because of our IB Program and students who come here because their parents did not choose to send them elsewhere.

The stratification was viewed as being so ingrained that traditional school leaders would not consider competing for students who had the opportunity to attend one of the destination schools of choice. Tom summarized this feeling when he suggested competing with these other schools would never be a consideration, much less a viable idea. When asked whether he felt any competition from private schools, Tom responded with the following:

No. To clarify, I could never compete with a magnet school, or charter school, or a private school. So I don't feel competition because I don't feel that we would ever be selected over something like that; if the student had an opportunity to attend a magnet school, charter, or private.

While Tom did not feel his school could compete with the top tier school with good reputations, Gloria had a different view. Her high-poverty, high minority traditional school

reached capacity each year with students who chose it from other feeder patterns. She did not see students' choices to attend her school as winning any type of competition; instead, she viewed it as an act of convenience on the part of the parent. When asked about how many students choose her school, Gloria replied with the following:

What's interesting is that I said when I'm at those choice things not a lot of people come up to me. But we've actually had a waiting list for choice, and the reason that is -- the year that it happened I was like, "Why?" You know, no one comes, no one is calling for school visits, no one is coming up to the table. It's because the people that choice here don't really need to know much about the school. They're using school choice to move from the city, and it is closest to them. They don't want their students to go out to the other traditional schools that are far away and that they would not be able to easily get to. So it's interesting in that we've had that choice waiting list, but really we're being selected just on convenience, closeness.

Nick supported Gloria's assertion that the decision of where to attend school was often not made by the student but was what fit the parents' needs. Nick suggested this aspect limited the recruitment and enrollment of students from outside of the geographic feeder pattern for his school: "I don't think necessarily a lot of students select this school. I don't know. I've never got a strong impression that students are coming here because they necessarily wanted to come here. It's usually a parent decision."

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question was the following: In an environment of total school choice, how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals make sense of the competition generated by school choice options? I used RQ1 to investigate how the principals came to a

sense of understanding about their competition. Weick (1995) suggested a principal created meaning based on ways they constructed and interacted within their environments. In this study, each participant had varying views about total school choice and the roles they played in the school environment. Data were collected on whether the participants believed that competition for students existed, as well as their roles in participating in that competition. All participants acknowledged that school choice existed, had influenced the school district, had impacted their schools, and had impacted them personally.

Prior researchers have stated principals make sense of phenomena based on what they know about their own background, school history, and the role they play as an intermediary between teachers, staff, central office administrators, and their principal peers (Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002). The principals in this study were at 11 unique places in their personal and professional settings. The professional setting played a role in individuals' views of benefits and costs of a school choice and the competition it created. I did not expect the principals' personal views and lives to influence their abilities to make sense of their own environments. Personal political views and going through the school choice process with their own children had a much greater influence on the views of the individuals than I had anticipated.

Weick (1995) suggested people used sensemaking socially, based on past experiences, to understand ambiguous or new information. Bryan and Jen had opposing views of school choice based on differing prior experiences. Many participants' personal views remained similar. However, participants worked with different student populations, which might influence their views. Four principals generally viewed school choice as a positive policy; five principals generally viewed school choice as a negative policy; and two principals were neutral on school choice, seeing the benefits for some schools and the damage done to others. This finding

indicated the charter and magnet school principals favored school choice. The principal who saw school choice as a damaging policy led the five lowest achieving traditional schools. The two highest achieving traditional schools were neutral yet balanced on policy.

Understanding how principals made sense of this policy allowed better understanding of how they responded to implementing the policy. Principals who supported the policy led the highest achieving schools; additionally, they used every aspect of the policy to better their schools and their own professional settings. Principals who had not been in place long enough to implement the policy or refused to implement school choice based on their own personal views led the lowest achieving schools. These leaders struggles to remain competitive with the top tier schools. This finding might indicate that static order of Hess's (2010) organizational theory was correct: Competition usually either overwhelms an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forces organizations to take preventive measures to improve.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question was the following: How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts their responsibilities as school leaders? I used RQ2 to gather concrete examples of actions taken by principals resulting from school choice that might redefine the expectations of a secondary school principal. Even with the most recent revision of school leadership standards, competing for students was not included a responsibility of a secondary school principal. State leaders issued current standards for school leaders to set a vision for learning; develop a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; ensure management of the organization, operations, and resources; collaborate with families and community members; act with integrity; and understand, respond to, and influence the larger political, social, economic,

legal, and cultural context (CCSSO, 2008). Leaders of the Northern School District added to the list of what they expected from principals. They provided additional tools, financial support, innovative programs, and a system for students and parents to choose their schools. The role of school principals traditionally did not involve taking steps to compete for students. I concluded that had changed.

Secondary school principals in the Northern School District had to manage school image, take responsibility for marketing their schools, recruit students to attend their schools or programs, and compete to move up the hierarchy of schools within the district. In many ways, this finding indicated a need to redefine principals' roles. To compound the situation, all previously existing duties of a school principal remained.

### **Research Question 3**

This third research question differed from the first two research questions due to a time component. This third question was the following: How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts the long-term operations of the school? I used RQ3 to determine if the course set by the Northern School District and the principals in the secondary schools had permanent impacts or if school choice created a reordering of the schools based on the leadership at any given time.

Because I considered the perceptions of the participants and not the actual outcomes over a longer period, the question was answered. The principals in the magnet schools and the higher achieving traditional schools were comfortable in their jobs. Martin supported this assertion; Martin was a principal at the highest achieving traditional school when he stated the following:

I have been the principal here for 10 years, and I am still pretty young, all things considered. I can see myself remaining the principal here for another 10 years and then

retiring from this job. I like what I do and there is something to be said for working almost your entire career doing what you like.

Bryan contrasted Martin's positive, upbeat response; Bryan was the principal at one of the two lowest achieving traditional high school when he stated the following:

Broadly, I think the greatest challenge is sustaining effort in school change and school growth initiatives in the face of the daily grind which here is really exhausting. The hard part that goes right along with that, the other side of that coin is that there is so many more losses than wins here. Even things that you thought were wins can come back and become losses later on. That certainly wears you down, and I don't have any hesitation to say in to this tape recorder that I will be shocked if I'm here for an 11th year because I'm pretty sure this is what burnout feels like.

After the completion of this research, Bryan made this perception reality by leaving the principalship he held for 10 years to take an assistant principalship in a neighboring school district. That district's leaders did not embrace school choice but still used geographic feeder patterns to determine enrollment.

Hess (2002) stated that competition usually either overwhelmed an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forced organizations to take preventive measures to improve. Principals viewed the schools in the Northern School District as being in varied stages of improving or moving toward extinction. The principals at the successful schools who embraced school choice viewed their success as an outgrowth of their leadership or the decisions made by leaders prior to them attaining their current positions. The school leaders who struggled to survive or improve viewed the system as working against them. Some of these principals viewed this as a challenge to exceed. Others viewed it as a rigged game they would not play. Time will



prove if Hess's (2002, 2010) theory of change or extinction is the most likely outcome for these schools.

### **Summary**

The results in this section were based on 11 individual principal interviews, 11 administrative questionnaires, 11 school choice event observations, and artifact analysis. These were used to gather data analyzed through hand coding and recoding. The majority of participants in the study were excited to participate and willing to share their stories and experiences. Those who lacked excitement to participate found it difficult to dedicate time away from their job responsibilities or personal lives to participate. Some shared beyond what was asked in the interview questions, while others provided direct yet thorough answers to the questions. All participants felt they had a chance to have their voices heard.

The participants universally felt that school choice had a nearly immeasurable impact on their job responsibilities. The participants had specific feelings that allowed them to make sense of their situations regarding school choice, but they usually gave it little thought, even though it affected every aspect of their professional lives. Finally, principals expressed they had a distant vision of what school choice policy meant for them and the school they would lead in the future, but they were uncertain if that vision would be attained.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative, explanatory case study was to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district responded to an environment of total school choice and how they made sense of their role as a principal in the era of school choice. The theory that guided this study was Hess's (2010) organizational theory; Hess (2010) stated that competition usually either overwhelmed an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forced organizations to take preventive measures to improve.

This chapter includes a summary of the study findings and a synopsis of answers to each of the three research questions. This chapter also discusses the study findings in relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature from Chapter Two, as well as addresses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. Chapter Five includes specific recommendations for various stakeholders. A discussion of the delimitations and limitations of the study are included. This chapter concludes by providing recommendations for future research, along with a summary of the entire study.

### **Summary of Findings**

Eleven individual principal interviews, 11 administrative questionnaires, 11 school choice event observations, and multiple artifacts were used as gathered data and were analyzed through hand coding and recoding. Four themes emerged when examining the case study: school image, marketing responsibility, recruitment of students, and hierarchy of competition. Each theme continually occurred during interviews with principals, observations at school choice events, and artifact analysis. Each theme further supported the answers to the three research questions.

## **Research Question 1**

RQ1 was the following: In an environment of total school choice, how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals make sense of the competition generated by school choice options? I used the first research question to investigate how the principals came to a sense of understanding about their current roles. Each participant had varying views about an environment that allowed total school choice and their roles in that setting. Data were collected on whether the participants believed that competition for students existed. The participants universally accepted that school choice existed, influenced the school district, influenced their schools, and influenced them personally.

The principals in this study came from 11 different backgrounds that brought them together in the Northern School District. Each principal attempted to make sense of his or her role in the competition created by school choice. The topic was not discussed among or between the subjects or with the superiors in the district. Each principal was left to make sense of his or her role on his or her own. Therefore, principals expressed 11 different ideologies they used to make sense of the completion.

Four principals generally viewed school choice as a positive policy; five principals generally viewed school choice as a negative policy; and two principals were neutral on school choice, seeing the benefits for some schools and the damage done to others. This finding indicated charter and magnet school principals favored school choice. Traditional school principals had mixed views on the topic. The principals who implemented school choice policies with fidelity included all magnet school and charter school principals. Implementation in the traditional schools was mixed.

**Research Question 2**

RQ2 was the following: How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of how school choice impacts their responsibilities as school leaders? I used the second research question to provide concrete examples of actions taken by principals that derived from school choice and might redefine the expectations of a secondary school principal. Current standards do not address the role of principals in school choice environments (CCSSO, 2008).

Leaders of the Northern School District had greatly increased what they expected of secondary school principals. Principals had sole responsibility for maintaining the image of the school, creating marketing plans that increased demand for the school, recruiting students to attend the school, and monitoring how the school was ranked among the public relative to its peers. The role of school principals traditionally did not involve taking steps to compete for students. I concluded that role had changed. All principals in this study took steps to compete for students. The principals had varied explanations of this competition, and even questioned the morality and usefulness of the competition. Despite these expressed feelings, all principals still participated to varying degrees in competing for students. The competition was universal.

**Research Question 3**

RQ3 was the following: How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals perceive the competition of school choice impacts the long-term operations of the school? I used this third research question to determine if the course being set by the Northern School District and the actions of the principals in the secondary schools had permanent influences on the schools and the district. I explored the participants' perceptions and not the actual outcomes to answer the question definitively. The principals universally agreed that competition from school

choice had a major impact on the long-term operation of their schools. A split in opinions only occurred when the impact was quantified as positive or negative. Principals in schools that attracted large numbers of students through school choice viewed the impacts of school choice as positive. Principals in schools that struggled to attract students other than those assigned to them were likely to view the impacts of school choice in a negative light.

Hess (2002) stated that competition usually either overwhelmed an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forced organizations to take preventive measures to improve. The principals in the secondary school of the Northern School District agreed that competition had overwhelmed the organization. They were divided on whether it changed for the positive or negative, possibly causing the schools to fail.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study corroborated, extended, and diverged from the prior theoretical and empirical research in the field. This section contains a discussion of these findings.

#### **Theoretical Discussion**

Previous researchers have supported the notion that one could use school choice to create competition between schools (Ash, 2014; Anast-May et al., 2012; Cavanagh, 2011). This notion was confirmed by the research in this study. School choice was evident in the Northern School District, and the competition between schools existed in many forms.

Previous researchers have indicated that the indirect effect of school competition will create a greater variety of more effective and efficient schools (Friedman, 1962; Hoxby, 2003). While the question of efficiency is a matter of opinion, the results of this study corroborate that several effective and efficient schools exist as a result of the school choice policies in the

Northern School District. While the results among all schools are mixed, this holds true for the magnet and charter schools, at a minimum.

The perceived threat of competition will motivate traditional school principals to defend against the detrimental threat of losing students by improving student outcomes in the traditional schools (Hoxby, 2003). Principals expressed general motivation to compete, but this was not universally true. Most principals in this study responded to competition created by school choice, but not all did so in ways that improved student outcomes. At least one principal refused to engage in the competition, to the detriment of his school.

School leadership, particularly at the secondary, high school level, became a more complex task in the previous decade (Archer, 2004; Louis, Dretzke et al., 2010). I extended this research by identifying several areas where the task of leading secondary school became more complex. State leaders have assigned additional areas of responsibility to principals in all-choice school districts, thereby making jobs difficult to fill with a person trained in all required areas. The universal lack of formal marketing education was one example.

### **Empirical Discussion**

Previous researchers have demonstrated that some school leaders dealt with school choice by focusing on adopting academic and curricular strategies (Kasman & Loeb, 2013). However, there was limited evidence that competition elicited this type of response. I confirmed that finding in 9 of the 11 school leaders who participated.

In previous research, new programs provided motivation for increased marketing and promotion of the school and the new programs it offered (Lubienski, 2006). Other school leaders have used competition to alter the makeup of the student body through selective recruitment, selective enrollment, and selective discipline of students (Jennings, 2010). The

existence of increased marketing and the desire to alter the enrolled student through recruiting was universally found in the schools in this study.

Researchers have determined enrolling students in schools of choice occurred based on the location of the school (Lubienski, 2006), marketing activities, or outright *cream skimming* of the most desirable students (Miron et al., 2007). Each of these examples was evident in the Northern School District, though not all school leaders engaged in each of these reasons for increasing enrollment.

In addition, prior researchers have identified the need to market schools has led to increased tension, stress, and frustration for school principals (Bunnell, 2006; Miron et al., 2007). Most principals have felt unprepared for formal marketing, as they have lacked education and training in this area (Bunnell, 2006). This research extended the idea that tension, stress and frustration is rising when the pressure to market schools is one of the desired responses to competition created by school choice. This study diverged from this prior research in that principals did not feel unprepared for formal marketing, despite their level of actual preparation.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this qualitative, explanatory case study was to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district responded to an environment of total school choice and how they made sense of their role as a principal in the era of school choice. Though the research questions and qualitative design of this study were narrow in scope, the implications can be applied in a broader context. This research continues to fill the gap in the literature pertaining to how secondary principals make sense of the critical role that they play. There are limitations to the generalizability of this study to a broader audience. Several inferences can be made as a result of engaging in this study.

## **Theoretical Implications**

There are multiple theoretical implications that arise from this study. The focus of this study was the perceptions of school principals who were forced to respond to completion in a school choice environment. The participants of this study shared multiple reasons for varied responses to the forces of school choice that were thrust upon them. The effectiveness of those responses is not known in many areas and may not be known until enough time passes to look at the outcomes that those choices generated. Areas such as increased enrollment, demographic changes to the student body, changes in the level of academic achievement, and the ultimate success or failure of entire schools will be used to assess the effectiveness of principal responses.

The concepts of competition and school choice will be compared to the outcomes generated in the surrounding school districts that have opted to oppose school choice or adopt modified school choice policies. The Northern School District will be held up as a test case of what nearly unlimited school choice will do to a district when it is combined with the proliferation of charter schools and magnet schools in a single school district.

## **Empirical Implications**

The empirical implications of this study focus directly on the actions taken by the principals in response to competition and school choice. It is clear from the research that all principals take action regarding the threat posed by school choice. Understanding the actions taken by the principals could be beneficial to district leadership and members of the elected Board of Education that governs the school district. Many of the policy decisions that put the system of school choice in place were created by the actions of these leaders. While principals are on the front lines responding to the policies enacted by the others, it is the building principal who is evaluated based on the outcomes of those decisions.



The increased tension, stress, and frustration that results for secondary school principals can have a detrimental impact on the individual who can impact the greatest positive change for schools (Bunnell, 2006). Teachers and parents could influence individual students or classes, respectively. However, retaining a high quality principal could have a long lasting positive influence on an entire school community.

### **Practical Implications**

The most practical implication from this research was that there was a limited pool of effective secondary school principals. The job was difficult job and requires a dynamic person to fill all roles required. Creating artificial stress from competing for students and funding might not be the most efficient way to maximize human resources as valuable to organizational success as experienced secondary school principals.

Policies of school choice had a detrimental impact on principals. Additionally, one might question the effects of school choice on student populations. Claims of resegregation, the draining of resources from the neediest school, cream-skimming of high achieving students, and general inequities of educational opportunity might only be the easily visible outcomes of school choice policies. The moral issues of creating winners and losers in public education was a more complex topic that would require much closer examination and possible legal scrutiny. Leaders of states, districts, and schools considering competition from full school choice as a matter of policy should deeply examine the issue to consider all collateral issues that could arise from creating competition to spur school improvement.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

There were multiple delimitations associated with this study. The most significant delimitation was the design chosen for this study. I selected a case study design to provide a

deeper description of my subjects and their experiences making sense of the competition from school choice. However, with case studies, the findings were contextualized and case dependent (Creswell, 2012).

The second delimitation related to my sampling strategy. The Northern School District was the only district in Delaware that offered district sponsored magnet schools, charter schools, and traditional schools. This aspect created multiple settings in one bound in one environment. While the uniqueness of this single setting created a natural foundation for the study, it might also limit the generalizations of any implications. These choices added parameters to my sampling and ensured that I had a bounded group to research.

There were several limitations related to this study. The most clearly defined related to my sample. Several participants were individuals that I knew and had worked with as colleagues prior to conducting this study. As a result, there were possible limitations with my interviews and observations. My prior knowledge of my subjects as the researcher could have inhibited their level of honesty and openness. The participants could have also withheld information from their answers, believing that I already knew their feelings and responses. There could have also been an effect that would have made my presence more conducive for rich data collection. Subjects might have been influenced to disclose more to me compared to another researcher. Principals I knew well might have felt more comfortable providing information to me. The small number of participants (11) might have limited my ability to generalize the findings of my research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

After considering study findings, limitations, and the delimitations on this case study, I have several recommendations and suggestions for future research. My single-case study design

allows for rich description of my subjects and their perceptions, but the findings are highly contextualized as a result. Future researchers should consider a varied design that may include multiple cases

When conducting future research, the population selected can be more inclusive of all stakeholders in the school setting. While the perceptions of principals are informative, additional research can include the district level administration who make the choice to embrace competition to enhance school improvement. The perceptions of school stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and students, can be included to provide context to principals' perceptions.

Additional researchers can also approach the issue from a longitudinal standpoint and focus on the same topic for an extended time. This research may develop new outcomes. In this type of research, the principals' perceptions may play a secondary role to the outcomes generated. The effects of the reforms they select for the schools may also take on a larger role.

### **Summary**

This qualitative, explanatory case study was intended to describe ways traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district responded to an environment of total school choice and how they made sense of their roles as principals in the era of school choice. The perceptions and experiences of 11 secondary school principals in a single school district represented the views of traditional, magnet, and charter school leaders. The data collected led to identifying four identified themes: school image, marketing responsibility, recruitment of students, and hierarchy of competition.

This study filled a gap in the research regarding how principals made sense of the responsibilities they were tasked with in a choice environment. While, most school choice proponents have viewed competition as viable means to school improvement, the findings of this

case study might contribute to a renewed desire to implement or avoid similar practices. While competition could lead to school improvement, the details (e.g., school type, public perception, and support of initiatives by the school principal) indicated greater efficacy than simply creating a sense of competition. The findings indicated the details of the setting mattered as much as the policy.

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**APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 22, 2018

Christopher Kohan

IRB Approval 3145.022218: How Intra-District School Choice and Competition among Schools Impacts School Leadership: A Case Study of Secondary School Principals

Dear Christopher Kohan,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**The Graduate School**

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT

### Consent Form

#### Secondary School Leadership: How Do Principals Perceive Leadership is Impacted by Intra-District School Choice and Competition Among Schools?

Christopher Kohan  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of principals' perceptions of the effects of intra-district school choice. You were selected as a possible participant because you serve as an administrator in a Red Clay Consolidated School District High School. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Christopher Kohan, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to describe how traditional, magnet, and charter school principals in one Delaware school district respond to an environment of total school choice and how they make sense of their role as a principal in the era of school choice. The research questions for this study will be: (1) Given an environment of total school choice, how do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals make sense of the competition generated by school choice options? (2) How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals view the competition of school choice impacting their responsibilities as school leaders? and (3) How do traditional, magnet, and charter school principals view the competition of school choice impacting the long-term operations of the school? Data will be collected from a series of semi-structured interviews, observations, and artifacts. The data will be coded and emergent themes will be explored to form meaning within the context of the data.

At this stage in the research, school choice will be generally defined as the competition between traditional, magnet, and charter schools for the enrollment of the same population of students within the district. The focus of the study is on the role principals play in the competition. The theory guiding this study is Hess' (2010) organizational theory, as it states that competition usually either overwhelms an organization to the point of change or extinction, or it forces organizations to take preventive measures to improve.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1.) Participants will participate in a semi-structured interview to gather information about their perceptions of school choice and how school choice has impacted their job responsibilities and day-to-day job task performance. Consent to an individual interview to determine your perceptions of the impact of intra-district school choice on your job performance and responsibilities. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed and member checks will be used to ensure the intent of your responses. The interview data will be confidential with your identity know only to the researcher. The interview should last approximately one hour and will be scheduled at a time and location of your convenience.

2.) Each participant will fill out an information sheet to provide/confirm data about the participants that is available for the public (college degrees earned, years in education, etc.)

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The risks involved in this study are minimal and they are no more than any participant would encounter in everyday life.

The benefits to participation are indirect to the participants. The benefit will be to the body of knowledge around the job responsibilities of secondary school principals and how school choice can affect those responsibilities. The study will inform educators and policy makers in a way that may alter future views of job performance.

### **Compensation:**

You will receive no compensation for taking part in this study.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Interviews will be conducted in a setting that offers complete privacy and that will be selected by the participant. The recordings and transcripts of the interviews will be kept in a locked office inside of a locked file cabinet that only the researcher has the ability to access. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the privacy of the district, schools, and participants.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Red Clay Consolidated School District. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **How to Withdraw from the Study:**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### **Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Christopher Kohan. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at (302)593-3425 or [chris.kohan@redclay.k12.de.us](mailto:chris.kohan@redclay.k12.de.us). You may also contact the research's faculty advisor, Dr. Ralph Marino, at [rmarino@liberty.edu](mailto:rmarino@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX C: PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW

Secondary School Leadership: How do principals perceive leadership is impacted by intra-district school choice and competition among schools?

Traditional, Magnet, and Charter School Principals

General Questions

1. How long have you been principal at your school?
2. What were your work experiences before you became principal at your current school?
3. Have you ever been a principal at a traditional public school (for magnet or charter principals)?
4. Have you ever been a principal at a magnet school or charter school (for traditional school principals)?
5. Research indicates that school choice options have created competition in education. Is competition ever a factor while leading this school?
  - a. If it is, how has it impacted your role as the principal?
  - b. If it has not, how have you avoided the competitive pressures associated with the choice environment?
6. Do you feel a sense of competition with traditional schools? Magnet schools? Charter Schools? Private schools? Please explain.
7. How do you perceive that school choice competition impacts students and teachers? What are some things about the magnet program your school offers? What type of magnet do you offer at your school (i.e. Is it a whole school or a program within a larger school)? What is the history of the magnet program?
8. What can you share about the application process to the magnet school.

9. What is the specific interest or specialized program(s) your school offers? What is the history of the charter school?
10. What is the application process to the charter school.
11. Describe your leadership responsibilities as the principal of your current school.
12. How are your students selected to attend your school?
13. Why do you think parents/students select your school over the other schools in this district?
14. What have been your greatest challenges while serving as the principal at your current school? How did you handle each of these challenges?
15. How have you dealt with the pressures of leading a school in the total school choice environment?
16. What are the differences between a magnet/charter school compared to a traditional school?
17. How do you think your role as a magnet/charter school principal is different compared to traditional school principal?
18. How do you think your role as a traditional school principal is different compared to a magnet/charter school principal?
19. Do you have to market your school? If so, how do you market your school?
20. What do you feel is the most effective marketing technique for your school and why? (if applicable).
21. Do you have any other concluding thoughts?



**APPENDIX E: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**



January 21, 2016

**RED CLAY  
CONSOLIDATED  
SCHOOL DISTRICT**



Administrative Offices  
1502 Spruce Avenue  
Wilmington, Delaware 19806

Office of  
Research and Evaluation  
Office: (302) 552-3718  
Fax: (302) 633-1245



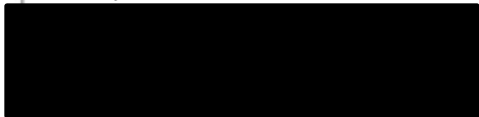
Mr. Kohan,

Thank you for submitting the Red Clay Approval Form for Data Collection/Research Data Confidentiality Agreement. We have reviewed your proposal and completed our approval process. Permission to complete your study on the role of the principal in the era of school choice is being granted, contingent on IRB approval from Liberty University.

For the approval to be valid, you must restrict your research as outlined in your proposal including the confidentiality and consent provisions. We understand from the proposal your work will involve structured interviews and artifact collection. We ask that all research activities be coordinated with principals at their convenience.

Please provide the IRB approval letter when it is received. We will look forward to receiving your findings in early 2017.

Thanks,



**APPENDIX F: GROUPING OF CODES AND THEMES****Responsibility for the school image**

Safety and security

Specialized programs

Extracurricular opportunities

**Recruitment of students**

Advertising

Word-of-mouth

**Marketing responsibilities**

Time spent recruiting students

Energy devoted to recruiting students

Focus on recruitment required of principals

**Stratified tiers of competing schools**

Schools of choice

Schools of last resort