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To the University Council:

The Dissertation Committee for Aaron J. McDonald certifies that this is the final approved version of the following electronic dissertation: "An Examination of Innovation in Tennessee's Charter Schools."

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AN EXAMINATION OF INNOVATION IN TENNESSEE'S CHARTER SCHOOLS

by

Aaron J. McDonald

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Psychology and Research

The University of Memphis

August 2011

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## Abstract

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Similar to other states, charter schools in Tennessee were established to improve student learning, provide options for parents, encourage the use of innovative methods, and provide new opportunities for teachers. With the passage of the TN Public Charter School Law, the first four charter schools opened in the 2003-04 academic year. Since that time, evidence has accumulated that this cohort of schools has been able to demonstrate many of the purposes outlined in the TN charter school law. For example, teachers and parents have generally reported positive experiences with the schools as well as satisfaction with key outcomes. Additionally, although student achievement results have been mixed, the schools have all successfully renewed their charters.

The extent to which the charter schools are being innovative, however, has not been well documented. Using a qualitative collective case study approach, the goal of this paper was to examine if the first cohort of TN charter schools is utilizing innovative methods. The resulting themes across the schools included the use of extended learning time, engaging students as individual learners, adopting a holistic view of education, high-levels of support for the school's mission coupled with participative decision-making, and purposeful parent and community involvement with the schools.

When examined in isolation, the charter school practices appear to be well-founded in the research literature, but do not ostensibly seem to be truly new. When the combination of practices is examined, however, then each school appears to provide a unique approach to educating their students, the vast majority of whom are economically

disadvantaged and educationally at-risk. Additionally, the schools offered educational methods and opportunities that may not have otherwise been provided in their respective communities. This holistic, contextually-based examination of innovation also offers lessons for adoption and scale-up of practices by other schools.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 reflected an ongoing history of federal educational reform initiatives in the United States that have emphasized improving the achievement of at-risk students. Despite continued funding for programs aimed at assisting disadvantaged students, “closing the achievement gap” between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students remains a priority. While there certainly have been successes in educational reform, many reform initiatives have been inhibited because of factors such as low teacher buy-in, inadequate resources, insufficient professional development, lack of clear mission, and failure to demonstrably raise student achievement (Berends, Kirby, Naftel, & McKelvey, 2002; Ross, 2001; Snipes & Casserly, 2004).

In light of the uneven successes of prior reform initiatives, charter schools have become an increasingly popular method aimed at bridging the achievement gap. Under the No Child Left Behind legislation, for example, children who attend schools identified as needing improvement have the opportunity to enroll in charter schools located within their district (USDoE, 2001). Using a broad definition, charter schools can be characterized as “nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The charter establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success” (US Charter Schools, n.d.).

As the definition notes, autonomy and accountability are two of the key charter school reform concepts. Autonomy is realized by increasing site-based management and decision-making pertaining to numerous areas including curricula, instructional strategies, schedules, professional development, and hiring of faculty and staff. Accountability is enhanced because schools are subject to fiscal audits as well as meeting academic goals. If a charter school fails in either of these areas, then the charter can be revoked by the authorizing agency. Additionally, a charter must be renewed every 3-5 years on average by demonstrating satisfactory progress.

The basic theory of action for the charter school concept is that increased flexibility in running a school, combined with fiscal and academic accountability will lead to innovative practices within schools as well as increased parental “choice” amongst schools. These factors will, in turn, lead to enhanced student achievement and satisfaction amongst teachers, parents, administrators, and students. My representation of the charter school theory of action is summarized in Figure 1.

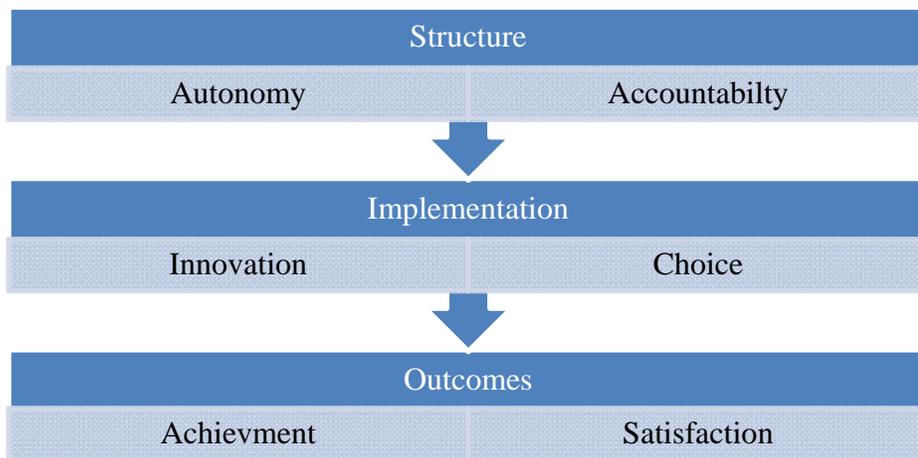


Figure 1. Charter school theory of action

As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, there is still an ongoing debate regarding the extent to which this theory of action is being demonstrated. An overview of the Federal Charter School Program and the charter school law in Tennessee is provided next.

### *Federal Charter School Program*

Although the concept that autonomy and accountability will ultimately facilitate educational improvement and choice is appealing, the charter movement received an important implementation jumpstart from the Federal Charter School Program. This program first received authorization in 1994 under an amendment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (U.S. Department of Education (USDoE), 2004a). The program was then amended in 2001 under Title V, Part B of the No Child Left Behind Act, with the overall purpose noted as being:

To expand the number of high-quality charter schools available to students across the Nation by providing Federal financial assistance for charter school program design, initial implementation, and planning; and to evaluate the effects of charter schools, including their effects on students (in particular, on student academic achievement), staff, and parents. The program also encourages, through the use of funding priorities, the creation of strong charter school laws, in the States, that are designed to provide for the establishment of high-quality charter schools. (USDoE, 2004a, p.6)

The exact definition of a public charter school is ultimately up to each state. To receive federal funding, however, a State Educational Agency (SEA) must have a charter school law that includes the following criteria for approved charter schools: the school must pursue a specific set of educational objectives as authorized by the chartering agency; provide a program of elementary and/or secondary education; operate tuition free; be non-sectarian; comply with Federal and state laws; and have a written performance contract (USDoE, 2004a). Complying with federal requirements is to the

financial advantage of SEA's and individual charter schools because the FY 2009 appropriation to the Charter School Program was \$216,031,000 with an average award to SEA's of \$5,000,000. In general, SEA's apply to receive the federal funds. If awarded a grant, the SEA then provides sub-grants to local charter schools. If an eligible SEA does not apply, then a charter school may directly apply for a federal grant. Grantees receive up to three years of assistance, of which a charter school can use up to 18 months for planning and program design with the remainder of the time and funds used for the initial implementation of the charter school (USDoE, n.d.).

#### *Charter Schools in Tennessee*

The TN Public Charter School Act of 2002 was signed into law by the Tennessee legislature on July 4, 2002. As described by the TN Department of Education (TDoE) (n.d.), the purposes of the law are to:

1. Improve learning for all students and close the achievement gap between high and low performing students;
2. Provide options for parents to meet the needs of students in high priority schools;
3. Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods, and provide greater decision making authority to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance;
4. Measure performance of pupils and faculty, and ensure that children have the opportunity to reach proficiency on state academic assessments;
5. Create new professional opportunities for teachers; and
6. Afford parents substantial meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children.

In compliance with federal funding guidelines, TN charter schools operate as public, nonsectarian, non-religious schools. According to the TN Department of Education (n.d.), the following are also requirements:

- A governing body must be appointed with control of instruction under the general supervision of the chartering authority and in compliance with the charter agreement and the charter school law.
- Public charter schools must administer state assessments and meet the same performance standards and requirements adopted by the state board of education for traditional public schools.
- The meetings of the governing body of a public charter school shall be deemed public business.
- All teachers in a public charter school must have a current valid Tennessee teaching license, or meet the minimum requirements for licensure as defined by the state board of education.
- Public charter schools are subject to state audit procedures and audit requirements.
- Local Education Agencies (LEA) must allocate 100% of state and local education funds to the charter school on the per pupil expenditure of the LEA.
- The governing body of the public charter school shall make at least an annual progress report to the sponsor of the school, the chartering authority, and the commissioner of education.
- Charter agreements shall be for five-year periods. Public charter school agreements may be revoked or denied renewal by the final chartering authority.

In Tennessee, there are two methods to form a charter school. First, a sponsoring individual, group, or organization can submit an application to establish a new school. The sponsor cannot be a for-profit entity, a private school, or promote the agenda of any religious denomination. Post-secondary institutions who serve as a sponsor must be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The second method to form a charter school is to convert an existing public school. A public school can convert to a public charter school if the parents of 60% of the children enrolled at the school or 60% of the teachers assigned to the school agree by signing a petition seeking conversion and the LEA agrees to the conversion. An additional conversion method can occur when a public school is in the “Restructuring 2 — Alternative Governance” stage of improvement. For these schools, the Commissioner of Education has the option to convert the school to a public charter school following the fifth year of improvement status. Private, parochial, cyber-based, and home-based schools cannot convert to charter status (TDoE, n.d.).

The LEA (district) is the authorizing entity for charter schools in TN. If an application is rejected, then the sponsor can submit an appeal to the TN Department of Education.

In terms of the students who are eligible to attend a Tennessee charter school, the TN General Assembly amended the original law in 2008 and then again in 2009 to include (TDoE, n.d.):

- Students who were previously enrolled in a charter school; or

- Students who are assigned to, or were previously enrolled in a school failing to make adequate yearly progress, as defined by the state's accountability system, giving priority to at-risk students; or
- Students who, in the previous school year, failed to test proficient in the subjects of language arts/reading or mathematics in grades three through eight on the Tennessee comprehensive assessment program examinations; or
- Students who, in the previous school year, failed to test proficient on the gateway examinations in language arts/reading or mathematics; or
- Students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and who are enrolled in LEAs that have an average daily membership (ADM) of at least 14,000 students and have three or more schools that have missed the same benchmark for adequate yearly progress for two or more consecutive years resulting in such schools being designated as high priority schools; a caveat to this criteria is that any LEA operating in TN may choose by a two-thirds majority vote of the LEA to allow students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch to be eligible to attend charter schools; or
- Students who are under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court and who, in the court's judgment, would benefit from an approved work experience and career exploration program.

Following the launch of the first cohort of TN charter schools in the 2003-04 academic year, there has been evidence that several of the purposes of the TN charter school law are being realized. For example, with regard to providing options and opportunities for parents to meet the educational needs of their children, the TN General

Assembly has revised the state law on two occasions to broaden the definition of eligible students (with the most recent adjustment in 2009 described above). Parents have continued to avail themselves of the charter option with the number of charter schools in TN increasing from four in 2003-04 to 29 during the 2010-11 academic year. During the 2010-11 school year, charter schools served approximately 6,800 TN students in grades K – 12. Of the 29 charter schools, there were 22 in Memphis, 5 in Nashville, and 2 in Chattanooga (TDoE, 2010).

Survey results indicate that parents are very satisfied with the charter schools (Morrison, Ross, & McDonald, 2008). Parents of students attending TN charter schools noted that positive aspects of the schools were the smaller class sizes and positive learning environments, expectations that all students can achieve at high levels, rigorous curricular material, and highly qualified and caring teachers. While actual involvement levels varied across schools, the majority of parents agreed that they were provided with opportunities to participate in school activities and that their child's school regularly communicated with them.

With regard to the goal of providing professional opportunities for teachers, a report from the TN Comptroller's Office found that charter school administrators do give teachers increased professional flexibility along with increased responsibility for instruction and decision-making (Do, 2008). Survey and interview results from TN charter school teachers also reflect generally positive perceptions and experiences. Across schools, teachers showed strong agreement that they fully understand and support the educational mission and program of their school, and that the school is having a positive impact on students. Additionally, while there was variation between schools, a

majority of teachers indicated that they had adequate resources and professional development opportunities. A theme across the schools was also that the teachers appreciated the autonomy that they had as charter school teachers (Morrison et al., 2008).

Another purpose of the TN charter law is to improve learning for all students and ensure that children have the opportunity to reach proficiency on state academic assessments. The results from a rigorous matched treatment-comparison group study showed mixed achievement outcomes for the TN charter schools (Zoblotsky, Qian, Ross, & McDonald, 2008). Some charter schools showed significantly higher achievement scores when compared to similar non-charter schools, while other charter schools showed comparable performance or even slight deficits in some areas. Despite these mixed results, most charter schools have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as measured by the TN Comprehensive Assessment Program Achievement Test (grades 3-8) and Gateway Examinations (high school). The notable exception to this trend has been one school, which closed in August 2007 after failing to make AYP in Algebra I for two years (TDoE, 2010).

The one area of the charter school law that does not appear to have been thoroughly examined is if the charter schools are being innovative. Although the TN charter law says that charter schools should be “laboratories of learning” and the Metro Nashville Public Schools Policy states that “charter schools are expected to serve as centers of reform and innovation from which educators, parents and community members can learn new, successful dynamics and methods that could ultimately be replicated” (Do, 2008, p. 8), it is not clear if the charter schools are fulfilling these purposes. This lack of information is reflected in a report from the TN Comptroller’s Office that concluded

there was no mechanism in TN to identify or disseminate charter schools' best practices (Do, 2008). Given this finding, charter schools cannot serve as effective laboratories even if they are being innovative. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine and document the extent to which TN charter schools are implementing innovative practices, if at all.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

The passage of the first charter school law and subsequent start-up of a Minnesota charter school in 1991 was not without debate. The debate has not waned over time, and in fact, charter school advocates and critics have seemingly become more entrenched in their respective views. Despite the ongoing deliberations, charter schools have clearly become increasingly popular since their inception. In 2007, for example, President Bush noted that he was committed to seeing charter schools open in every state, and provided \$1.4 billion to the Federal Charter Schools Program and more than \$262 million on charter school facilities over the course of his presidency (U.S Department of Education, 2007). More recently, the federal government allocated over \$216 million dollars to the FY2009 charter schools program (USDoe, n.d.). As of October 2010, there were 40 states with charter school laws, with over 4,985 active charter schools serving approximately 1.5 million students (Center for Education Reform, 2010).

#### *Charter School Rationale*

As previously noted, charter schools often operate with increased autonomy in comparison with “regular” public schools, under a charter (contract) held by a public entity (e.g., school district, university, state department of education). The charter schools are also typically responsible for attaining or making demonstrable progress toward the goals set forth in their charter within a set amount of time. The underlying philosophy or rationale for the establishment of this type of education reform is that freeing schools from normal bureaucratic regulations (i.e., providing them with more autonomy) will allow increased time for experimentation with curriculum, instruction,

and organization (Collins, 1999; Gross, 2011; Therriault, Gandhi, Casasanto, & Carney, 2010). A related principle that many charter schools are founded upon is that the increased autonomy and flexibility is also associated with increased accountability (Gil, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, & Booker, 2007; Mead & Rotherham, 2007). For example, many charter schools must have their contracts renewed every five years (though the period varies from state to state) by demonstrating satisfactory performance. In addition to the more formal accountability requirements, charter schools are also “accountable” for meeting the needs and demands of consumers; namely parents and students (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Gross, 2011).

One of the most important foundational assumptions for charter schools is that the combination of autonomy and accountability will facilitate the development of high quality instruction which will then be implemented in the classrooms. These innovative, accountable, and autonomous schools will in turn, it is proposed, lead to improved student achievement as well as increased satisfaction among stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, teachers, administrators) (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Gross, 2011). Based on this assumption, these schools of choice will then rely on the market principles of supply and demand. Specifically, the ability of parents and students to choose schools will reinforce the existence of successful schools because these “consumers” will be more likely to demand high quality schools while less successful schools fail to remain in operation because they are ultimately abandoned (Betts & Hill, 2006; Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001; Gross, 2011; NCREL, 2002).

In addition to improved achievement, instruction, and satisfaction at the schools themselves, charter school advocates also propose that charter schools will be beneficial

to the educational system in general. One such benefit, as discussed above, is that parents and students will have increased choices amongst schools that offer a unique philosophy, climate, and/or curriculum that may be better suited to their needs. Another benefit is that charter schools may serve as examples of innovation for other schools. Thus, improvements to education in general may occur through a “ripple effect” or innovation-diffusion (Hadderman, 1998) as other schools learn from and attempt to compete with charter schools.

### *Criticisms of Charter Schools*

While these theoretical underpinnings do appear to form much of the basis of the increased charter school growth, opponents of charter schools raise challenges to many of the concepts. For example, some critics note that parents do not solely choose schools based on academics. Instead, parents also factor in items such as the location of the school, work schedules, and after-school care (Bell, 2009; Collins, 1999). Another criticism is related to the competition resulting from charter schools. One proposed negative aspect is the possibility that the increased competition for a limited amount of per pupil funds may result in financial losses to a school district because their overall costs may not be reduced but their funding will be. Critics also note that the school district or board may be legally responsible for a school that they do not actually control. This possibility, and others factors, may make district personnel resentful of and/or resistant to charter schools (Bulkley & Fidler, 2002; RPP International, 2001).

Another often cited criticism of charter schools deals with equity. Some detractors contend that charter schools have the potential for becoming elite organizations by “creaming” or selecting only higher achieving students. Similarly, the schools may

admit only certain racial, ethnic or less disadvantaged groups of students (Collins, 1999; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011). A recent national study of KIPP charter schools also noted that attrition was higher at KIPP schools than local district averages, especially for African American males. This led the researchers to conclude that the KIPP schools are very successful in educating the students who stay at the school, but this may not tell the full story of their success because it does not include the students who leave the schools (Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011). Interestingly, a separate study found that KIPP schools do not have higher attrition when compared to similar district schools and the students who leave are not systematically different from those attending district schools (Nichols-Barrer, Tuttle, Gill, & Gleason, 2011).

#### *Findings and Trends from Charter School Research*

As demonstrated in the above KIPP example, existing research has helped to address some of the issues raised by advocates and opponents, but not all of the questions associated with charter schools have been definitively answered. One likely reason for some of the unanswered questions is that there is no “typical” charter school. The schools developed to date have been very diverse in organization, structure, and purpose. Additionally, the laws that each state creates to authorize and govern charter schools are very different (Center for Education Reform, 2011; Mead & Rotherham, 2007).

Despite the uniqueness of the schools, the existing research does reflect trends across many of the schools. For example, the majority of charter schools are newly created as opposed to conversions of existing schools. Another trend is that charter schools tend to have smaller student enrollments. Notably, the enrollment trends in terms of student demographics do not seem to support charter school opponents’ concerns

about equity (Gill et al., 2007; Hill & Lake, 2010; Rattermann & Reid, 2009; Ritter, Jensen, Kisida, & McGee, 2010). Charter schools in general have student demographics similar to other public schools in their district and/or state. In fact, many schools have been created to specifically serve “at-risk” students. It should be noted, however, that not all charter schools are designed to serve specific populations (a common misconception) and there is a wide variance in student demographics between each school.

In addition to demographics, another “trend” across charter schools is higher reported levels of satisfaction from key stakeholder groups. Parents and students often choose to attend charter schools based on factors including dissatisfaction with public schools, emphasis on higher standards, smaller size, and a supportive learning environment (Collins, 1999; Morrison et al., 2008). After their children are enrolled in charter schools, parents have tended to report high levels of satisfaction in comparison with local public school parents and have also rated the schools as superior to their children’s previous school in important attributes such as school and class size, quality of instruction, and curriculum (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Gill et al., 2007; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010; Morrison et al., 2008). It is also noteworthy that parents tend to be more involved at charter schools than other public schools (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002; Schwartz, 1996), though there is substantial variation between schools (Morrison et al., 2008). Similar to their parents, students have also expressed satisfaction with aspects of charter schools. For example, students attending charter schools were significantly more likely to indicate that they “like school a lot” in comparison with matched students attending traditional schools (Gleason et al., 2010). In an analysis of student satisfaction data, Bulkley and Fisler (2002) found that charter student dislikes tended to focus on non-

academic matters but some students did express lower satisfaction with some curricular offerings.

Teachers have also expressed satisfaction with working in charter schools. Malloy and Wohlstetter (2003) found that teachers are attracted to charter schools because of increased instructional freedom, flexibility, and empowerment. Additionally, teachers cited smaller class sizes, shared decision-making, and the opportunity to work with colleagues who held similar educational philosophies as positive aspects of charter schools. While these teachers did express general satisfaction, they also articulated dissatisfaction with issues related to salary and benefits, the longer working hours, increased workload (ironically often due to the shared decision-making), and less job security.

Outside of general demographic and satisfaction trends, it is more difficult to make broad statements about charter schools. For example, the central concept of autonomy – the ability of individual schools to make decisions regarding internal and external operations – varies widely between states. Some states give charter schools full authority over budget, personnel, organizational, and curricular decisions, while in other states the decision-making power exists partially or fully outside the schools (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001; Mead & Rotherham, 2007). Interestingly, Bulkley and Fisler (2002) found that preexisting schools that converted to charter status and those that are sponsored by local education agencies tend to have less autonomy. Along with the varying amount of autonomy provided to schools, the research does not clearly show if more autonomy is better. For example, some schools that had greater autonomy were able to create and sustain learning goals, but others spent much more time dealing with

managerial and administrative issues (Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1998 as cited in Bulkley & Fisler, 2002). This sentiment was reiterated in a later study where charter school personnel noted that the autonomy helped facilitate the schools' ability to address different issues as they arose, but the autonomy also created new and more complex governance concerns. Ultimately, the school leaders that had more site-based management experience before coming to a charter school were better able to navigate the requirements and "tensions" that occurred (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001).

Another area of debate between charter school proponents and detractors that research has not been able to fully resolve is the impact of charter schools on student achievement. Simply stated, despite a growing number of studies, the achievement results are mixed (Berends et al., 2006; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; CREDO, 2009; Dobie & Fryer, 2009; Gill et al., 2007; Imberman, 2007; Ratterman & Reid, 2009). Some studies show positive effects for charter schools while others show no differences or a negative effect. Also interesting is that the same studies are sometimes used to support both sides of the argument, or more commonly, the appropriateness of the research methods and/or findings are questioned if they do not support a particular viewpoint.

There are several factors that likely contribute to the current lack of definitive achievement findings. First, like any broad education reform effort, charter schools are generally unique in their actual implementation, with some being successful while others are not. Also, past educational research suggests that there can be an initial decline in test scores when a student attends a new school. This may have confounded some of the results that were based on schools in their early implementation phases or many of the preliminary studies of charter schools (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002). Another factor

impacting the mixed achievement results is that some of the analyses do not take into account the students' prior education background or the fact that charter schools may target low-performing or at-risk students (Greene, Forster, & Winters, 2003). Along these same lines, Mead and Rotherham (2007) contend that simply comparing test scores is a relatively blunt assessment of progress because this approach can fail to account for variation between schools or differences in student populations. Additionally, Bulkley and Fisler (2002) note that factors such as a lack of a common assessment measure across states, student turnover, lack of student-level achievement data, and the "appropriateness" of using standardized tests may all impact the achievement results that we have seen to date.

#### *Need for Additional Contextual Studies*

The lack of definitive achievement outcomes, criticisms of existing studies, and the continued popularity of charter schools have all contributed to the increased call in the research literature to move beyond "black box" achievement studies. A black box is a term used when achievement results are analyzed, but the results do not consider the contextual variables that may have mediated the effects or outcomes. Few current studies have been successful in examining what is taking place inside schools. For example, Goldring and Cravens (2006) note that few charter studies have looked specifically at curriculum and pedagogy. Additionally, the authors of a U.S. Department of Education report regarding charter school outcomes noted that their study could not determine why charter schools were having positive effects and that additional studies are needed to focus on the factors influencing observed effects (Gleason et al., 2010). A review of studies pertaining to charter schools and public vouchers led RAND researchers to

conclude “future research should not only examine the effects of different charter policies, but should also seek to get inside the black box of charter school operations to learn what explains differences in effects for different schools” (Gill et al., 2007, p. 110). Along these same lines, some researchers have said that asking “if charter schools work” is the wrong question; instead, the question should be “under what conditions do charter schools work?” (Berends et al., 2006). Similarly, Imberman (2007) contends that charter schools may be realizing positive outcomes that have not been captured in the previous achievement studies. These viewpoints are summarized by a consensus panel on charter school achievement that concluded future research needs additional, detailed information about the contextual variables that are occurring inside charter schools (Betts & Hill, 2006).

### *Research Question*

Based on the review of the literature, including recent studies of TN charter schools, this study was designed to fill the current information gap regarding what is occurring inside TN’s charter schools, and specifically, if the charter schools are being innovative laboratories as intended by the 2002 TN law. As such, the primary question for this study was: Are TN charter schools demonstrating practices that are innovative, and if so, what are they?

### *Issues of Innovation*

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2011) broadly defines innovation as the introduction of something new; a new idea, method or device. Despite this straightforward definition, there is no clear classification in the literature regarding what charter school innovation “is.” Some have argued that charter school innovation is

reflected in its institutional methods (e.g., school operations) while others suggest it should be the teaching and learning that is innovative (Lake, 2008). As Bulkley and Fisler (2002) note, charter schools are more of an institutional innovation which operates under a different structure as opposed to an attempt to endorse a particular learning strategy or curriculum.

Given this debate, portions of the Framework for Charter School Site Analysis that has been put forth by the U.S. Department of Education (2004b) was used in this study. The Framework was developed by an expert panel from their analysis of research on charter schools and organizational effectiveness. The Mission, School Operations and Educational Programs, and Accountability portions of the Framework were applicable to this study, and included the following guiding questions:

1. Is the school's mission clear, concise, and achievable?
2. What is innovative about the school's structure and programs?
3. How does the school meet the needs of its student population?
4. How has the school built organizational capacity?
5. How do the conditions of chartering (flexibility, accountability, choice) influence the school's operations and its success? (USDoE, 2004b, p. 4)

This framework provided the vehicle to characterize and profile what is occurring in the charter schools. These descriptions, in turn, were then compared to the educational practices of traditional public schools in the research literature to shed light on the possible innovations utilized by charter schools in Tennessee. More detailed information regarding methodology is provided in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

To examine the potentially innovative practices of the charter schools, a collective case study approach was utilized (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Stake, 2000). In this approach, different cases are studied at the same time to examine a phenomenon. It is not necessarily known on the front-end if the cases exhibit the phenomenon. Instead, the cases are selected and examined with the goal of better understanding the characteristic of interest.

The case studies were primarily developed from a secondary analysis of data that were collected as part of a longitudinal state-wide evaluation of TN charter schools. A secondary analysis can be very useful for identifying gaps in knowledge as well as examining differences or trends across data sources (Stewart & Kamins, 1993). The secondary analysis in this study is important for two reasons. First, the data that were originally collected were not analyzed with the intention of examining innovative practices in the charter schools. Instead, the focus was addressing formative questions including the following: What is the frequency of usage of various teacher- and student-centered instructional strategies?; What is the climate at the charter schools?; To what degree to the schools self-rate program implementation progress?; What are stakeholder (i.e., principal, teacher, parent, student) reactions to the charter schools?

In addition to examining the data with specific attention given to innovative practices, an additional reason for the importance of the secondary analysis is that several relevant data sources were collected, but not explicitly analyzed during the initial study.

These data sources include note sheets that researchers completed during classroom observations as well as school documents such as school improvement plans.

The secondary data sources were supplemented with publicly available data from sources such as school and TN Department of education websites. The various data sources will be described in further detail in the instrumentation and data section.

A goal of the data analysis was to develop a “case study profile” for each charter school. The profile was used to describe each charter school in terms of instructional practices, curricular activities, and organizational strategies. The profiles were sent to the school principals with a request for any needed revisions as a “member check” to verify the accuracy of the profile. Follow-up phone calls were also made to the principals. Ultimately, one principal was interviewed using a semi-structured guide to review the profile, while also asking questions aimed at eliciting additional information about potential innovation at the school.

The final case profiles for each school were compared to examine themes and patterns across schools. As noted by Patton (2002), using a combination of data sources (i.e., documents, interviews, observations) increases validity of findings because the pros of one approach compensate for the cons of another. Ultimately, the mixed-methods approach facilitates triangulation, data cross-checking, and a more comprehensive perspective of the issue being examined (Patton, 2002).

### *Research Sites*

The study focused on the first cohort of charter schools in TN. These schools have been operating since the 2003-04 academic year. The rationale for selecting these schools was two-fold. First, this group includes both elementary, middle and secondary

schools, as well as schools located in the cities where the vast majority of Tennessee's charter schools are located. Second, the schools have all successfully overcome the initial start-up obstacles and have had time to implement innovative practices. The time element is important because Griffin and Wohlstetter (2001) found that schools in their first two years of operation focused primarily on developing (a) basic curricular and instructional programs, (b) a meaningful accountability system, and (c) management and leadership systems. While high quality instruction was always a priority, schools found it difficult to develop coherent instructional programs during the first two years of existence. Such development was complicated by sometimes vague mission statements as well as the need to quickly create curricula and subsequent instructional programs (Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001). Related to this is the fact that many new charter schools often lack resources, particularly start-up funds (Hadderman, 1998). An overview of the charter schools is provided in Table 1. See the appendix for the school profiles.

Table 1

*Overview of the First Cohort TN Charter Schools as of the 2009-2010 Academic Year*

	Schools			
	School A	School B	School C	School D
<i>Start-up year</i>	2003-2004	2003-2004	2003-2004	2003-2004
<i>Mission</i>	Empower children to succeed through a holistic approach to education	Equip students with skills to be competitive in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century	Produce lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and productive members of the global community	Ensure every child advances using their own learning style to the fullest academic and personal potential
<i>Setting</i>	Large city	Large city	Large city	Large city
<i>Grades</i>	K-5	6-8	6-12	K-4
<i>Students</i>	169	216	685	240
<i>Student to teacher ratio</i>	20:1 (~10:1 with aides)	19:1	19:1	20:1 (~10:1 with aides)
<i>Non-white students</i>	99%	99%	98%	99%
<i>Students with free/red. lunch</i>	97%	81%	81%	95%
<i>Extended learning time</i>	Tutoring before and after school; some Saturdays	Longer day, week, and year	Longer day, week, and year	Tutoring after school; summer program

### *Data Sources*

The data for the secondary analysis included the following sources: semi-structured one-on-one interviews with school principals, focus group interviews with teachers and students (separate groups), observations of instruction, open-ended survey responses, and official school documents. The interviews and focus groups utilized an interview guide that specified the wording and sequence of questions. The questions were used to direct the interviewees to different aspects of being a charter school administrator, teacher, or student, as applicable. In all three interview guides, the basic questions concerned experiences during the year, differences from regular (non-charter) schools, reactions to major school components (e.g., teaching methods, curriculum, parent involvement, resources), perceived strengths and weaknesses of the school, and recommendations for programmatic/school improvement. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. There were 5-9 teachers and students in their respective focus groups. The interviews took place at each school, with each interview being summarized by the interviewer in a question and answer format.

The open-ended survey responses were drawn from a questionnaire that was administered to teachers at each school. The questionnaire prompts were as follows: What do you see as positive or most successful aspects of your charter school?; What do you consider to be negative aspects or areas in need of improvement at your school?; In your opinion, what makes a charter school (like this one) different from a regular public school?; and, Any other comments you would like to make regarding your experiences as a charter school teacher? Teacher responses to the questions were transcribed verbatim.

The observations of instruction utilized the School Observation Measure (SOM) which was developed to determine the extent to which different common and alternative teaching practices are used throughout an entire school (Ross, Smith, & Alberg, 1999). There were six observations conducted at each school. Each observation visit lasted approximately three hours, with a different classroom observed every 15 minutes. Notes were taken for each 15-minute period relative to the use or nonuse of 24 target strategies. At the conclusion of the three-hour visit, the observer summarized the frequency with which each of the strategies was observed across all classes in general on a data summary form. In the original study, the classroom notes were only utilized to summarize the frequency of different strategies. The present secondary analysis examined the descriptive classroom notes to characterize the types of activities utilized for instruction.

The primary school document analyzed was the TN School Improvement Plan (TSIP), which is mandated for all public schools by the TN Department of Education. This document is intended to enable school teams to document and monitor school goals; learn to effectively use data to determine student performance goals and to use research to identify strategies and interventions to achieve these goals; and to include all constituencies involved in the school in school planning (TDoE, 2007). The TSIP addresses five components: Collaborative Process; Data Collection and Analysis/Synthesis and School Profile Development; Beliefs, Common Mission and Shared Vision; Curricular, Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness; Action Plan Development; and School Improvement Plan and Process Evaluation. Additional documents, which supplemented the TSIP, included school calendars, staffing plans, and charter school applications. In the original study, these documents were collected, but

only utilized to write a brief description of each school. The documents were not systematically analyzed prior to the present study. Current schedules, demographic information, and staffing plans were also gathered from school and TN Department of Education web sites.

The member-check/profile review interview utilized a guide that specified the wording and sequence of questions. Though the questions were developed in advance, they were designed to be open-ended and as free of pre-suppositions as possible. The questions were used to review and refine the case study findings and also elicit any additional information regarding innovation at the school. The guide contained prefatory statements and probes. The prefatory statements were used to indicate transitions points in the interview to assist with maintaining rapport and continuity in the interview. The probes were placed after questions to remind the interviewer to explore for deeper meaning if needed, but the respondents were allowed to take the “conversational lead.” The interview was tape recorded using a speaker phone and then transcribed verbatim. A summary of the data sources is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

*Summary of Data Sources and Data Collection Timeframe*

Data Source	Timeframe	Description
Principal Interview	Spring 2008	Semi-structured interview with each school principal
Teacher Focus Group	Spring 2008	Semi-structured group interview with 5-9 teachers at each school
Student Focus Group	Spring 2008	Semi-structured group interview with 5-9 students at each school
School Observation Measure	Fall 2007 and Spring 2008	Descriptive observations of instruction
School Improvement Plan	Spring 2008	Document outlining school goals and related activities
School Schedules, Demographic Information	Early spring 2011	Various descriptive school documents
School Profiles	Early spring 2011	Case profile of each school
School Profile Review Interview	Spring 2011	Interview with School C Executive Director to review case profile

*Data Analysis*

All of the data sources were examined utilizing content analysis. The material was read and excerpted with a sentence being the unit of analysis. Although a line-by-line approach was used, an excerpt can consist of more than one sentence if the topic does not change and the material is relevant. An excerpt was selected if it presented a topical change and also if new and relevant information was offered. Because the focus of this

study was on innovation, the excerpts were targeted if they represented a practice that is not common or prevalent in traditional public schools or if the respondent characterized the practice as innovative. Excerpts were also included in the effort to characterize and profile each charter school, even if the practice was not necessarily innovative. After excerpting, coding took place where the codes represent both the latent and manifest meaning contained in the excerpt. After all of the excerpts were coded, the codes were then compared, with similar codes clustered into categories. Based on the literature which contends that charter school innovation can manifest in instructional, curricular or organizational practices, I started with three predetermined “etic” categories of instruction, curriculum, and organization. These categories represent my classification of the data and not necessarily an “insiders” perspective (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). After the primary categories were developed, they were examined to see if subcategories could be developed. During this examination, the properties of each category were assessed to see if finer, more detailed groupings could be developed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## Chapter 4

### Results

Although each school has many unique characteristics and features, commonalities across the schools did emerge when then case study profiles were compared. These themes, which are discussed in this section, are: Focus on Students as Individual Learners; Holistic View of Education; Extended Learning Time; Parent and Community Involvement; and Teacher Input, Buy-in, and Flexibility. It is important to reiterate that the aim of this study was not to judge the quality or frequency of the methods utilized by the schools. Instead, the goal was to document potentially innovative strategies to begin to fill the gap in information regarding what is occurring inside the schools.

#### *Focus on Students as Individual Learners*

A clear theme across schools was the emphasis on meeting each student's individual educational needs. As one School C teacher noted, "Students are like different pieces of clothing that must be hand-washed separately; students and their situations must be handled individually." The many strategies that were utilized to attain this goal are discussed next.

*Co-teaching and lower student/teacher ratio.* The majority of schools used some form of team-teaching to reduce the overall student to teacher ratio, with the goal of providing individual attention to students. At School D, for example, each classroom has a teacher, teaching assistant, and foster grandparent. The assistant or grandparent works with individual students that need additional attention to master skills or concepts that are being taught. A School D teacher noted, "We have a teacher's aid and a foster

grandparent making one-on-one more easy; this allows us to teach at individual levels and re-teach.” Similarly, at School A, a fulltime highly qualified paraprofessional is used in each grade-level to assist teachers with providing students with instruction at their own level. Interestingly, approximately 44% of the faculty members at School A are males, which is not common in elementary schools. Parents especially liked this because it provided a positive male role model, which is missing for some students. Teachers at School C noted that they used co-teaching, while also taking advantage of the technology at the school to communicate with each other. One teacher commented that they used technology to “communicate with each other by email through their laptops. We can quickly inform each other about students' specific needs or discipline issues.”

The co-teaching approach, and subsequent lowered student to teacher ratio in general, was held as a unanimously positive aspect of the charter schools. A teacher in the School C focus group noted, “The small classroom sizes allow for a closer relationship between teachers and students; it also helps me evaluate the students' progress daily.” The School A principal noted, “School A is dedicated to recognizing the unique value of each student, the lower student-to-teacher ratio allows students to receive extra help.” Numerous comments were also made by School B parents to the effect of “the classes are smaller and my child receives more attention.”

*Mastery learning and differentiated instruction.* The central concept of mastery learning, which is all children can learn if they are provided with appropriate and adequate opportunities, was evident across the schools. This is exemplified by two of School A's stated core beliefs that, “All children can learn and achieve at higher levels when they are actively engaged and instruction is differentiated” and “Teachers must be

equipped to modify instruction to match students' individual needs.” In practice, School A provides targeted (remedial) and accelerated instruction based on student performance, re-teach weeks to review and master concepts, and individualized plans of achievement for students who obtain a C or lower at a 6-week grading period. At School D, teachers also use individual learning plans for students to address the strengths and weaknesses of students. It was noted by the principal that “students in the same classroom will have different homework assignments.” A School D student remarked, “Teachers keep going over things until they (students) learn them ...teachers don't give up.” School D also uses a non-graded curriculum where students move at their own pace and are given the opportunity to self-correct or redo assignments with poor grades. A School D teacher commented, “We provide a curriculum that meets the child where they are and then help them to develop the skills they need.” Furthermore, the School D school improvement plan reflected the need to diversify instruction by stating “we use kinesthetic, auditory, visual and tactile learning modalities; we have found that our students perform well when learning involves movement and interaction.” The multiple intelligences approach was reiterated by the School A principal who noted, “Teachers at School A use the children's intelligences to plan activities that are more specific to children's needs.”

The mastery learning approach is also utilized at School B, where a teacher noted that “students have the ability to review a lesson and/or skill until they have mastered it.” A student reiterated this by commenting, “Teachers help us understand the things we have trouble with.” Additionally, the school improvement plan noted that “mastery learning instruction is organized around a sequence of measurable learning objectives with frequent testing to assure satisfactory process.” This method is reflected by a

teacher who said, “We make a concerted effort to meet the academic needs of each and every child. No child is left behind at this school and our students go on to the next academic level stronger, achieved and prepared.” The School B principal agreed that mastery learning was unevenly implemented when the school first adopted this practice, but noted “during the last couple of years, I have been listening to the students describe how they are taught and re-taught concepts. This indicates the school’s success with mastery learning.” A School B teacher echoed the sentiment that implementation was slow, but ultimately successful by commenting, “a strength of our school is the instructional program! Our IP contains all of the essential elements to achieve student success at the state level. I have been here long enough to see the IP manifest itself in the realm of what's expected of successful schools. It has taken a long time. There is no quick-fix to a good education.” Another teacher reiterated that “mastery learning and differentiated instruction have become very important in our classrooms.” The fully implemented mastery learning approach led to many positive parental comments, as exemplified by one parent who wrote, “The strength of School B is the commitment the principal and staff have to provide a high quality education for each student regardless of learning abilities.”

*Frequent formative student assessment.* To assist with meeting the needs of individual students, the charter schools all engaged in regular assessment of student progress, concept mastery, and standard attainment. The assessment results were then used to modify instruction (as noted above) or provide targeted assistance. The schools used a combination of assessments including technology-based tools (i.e., Reading Success, READ 180, ALEKS, ThinkLink, Voyager, Saxon Math, Renaissance Learning),

teacher made tests, and performance assessments such as student portfolio and project reviews. At School D, the principal noted that “student portfolios are reviewed each week to chart progress and develop interventions as needed.” Grade-level teachers at both School D and School B meet weekly to examine individual student progress in comparison with grade-level expectations. If needed, assignments are modified or re-teaching is employed to meet student needs. At School C, the assessment results are utilized to identify students who need help, who then take remedial/assistance classes during elective periods. As one School C teacher noted, “We use ThinkLink tests to make sure students are on-track and provide personal tutoring for those who do not do well on the tests.” At School A, the student assessment results are used to develop individualized plans of achievement and to tailor instruction using “multiple intelligences.” This approach was favorably commented upon by a School A teacher who said, “Compared to other places I have worked, I receive more information on individual students, and am able to give more personalized instruction.”

*Student grouping strategies.* A variety of student grouping strategies were used at the schools. Several schools used between-class and/or multi-age ability grouping to form subject level (e.g., reading, math) groups so that teachers could pace their instruction for the whole class instead of having to worry about a wide-range of abilities. An exemplar of this approach was noted in the School D school improvement plan:

[a school strength is] the flexibility to move students across grade levels and classrooms to put them in an environment that will best fit what they need. For example, a fourth grade student that is reading on a third grade level may be placed in a third grade classroom for reading to ensure success and instruction in skills that he or she may not have mastered. This also benefits students that are excelling above their current grade level. Kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade students that are reading fluently may move to first or second grade classes to receive instruction that is more appropriate for their needs.

Along with this, schools also used the related approach of within-class ability grouping. Instead of forming classes based on ability, teachers regrouped students into “like-ability” groups within a class. The additional teaching assistants and paraprofessionals were then utilized to provide individual instruction to the various groups. All of the ability grouping strategies utilized the results of the frequent student assessments to re-form groups as needed.

Mixed-ability cooperative learning groups were employed at the two elementary schools during the regular school day and at all schools during extension/service learning-type activities. In general, students would work together to solve a problem and/or produce a group project. The goals of these types of activities were to develop students’ social and communication skills, help students to learn to respect others, deliver content/subject area material via active learning, and provide the opportunity for all students to experience success.

A final grouping strategy was observed at School C, where 9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms are grouped based on gender. As noted by the principal, “students are placed in same-sex groups in some grades in order to focus on learning with less social pressure.”

#### *Holistic View of Education*

Along with taking an individualized approach to instruction, the charter schools also utilized a holistic view of education aimed not only at meeting academic standards, but also in developing social and real-world skills. This perspective is characterized by teachers at School A and School D who commented, respectively, “The most successful aspect of our charter school is the significant emphasis on developing the whole child. Character education, service learning, cultural awareness and unique and engaging

instructional strategies are just some of the factors that make School A successful and able to reach and develop every child” and “What I love about this school is that everyone involved are willing and able participants in the students' learning. Our students come from different economic, social and academic backgrounds and for many, the lower end of the spectrum. We make it our mission to give every student a fighting chance. We not only provide them with academic opportunities, but life-skills that will continue with them into adulthood.”

This holistic focus is also evident in the mission statements of the various schools: “Empower children to succeed through a holistic approach by providing an education that increases capacity, maximizes potential, and evokes success” (School A); “We believe that it is the responsibility of School D to ensure that every child advances using his or her own style of learning to the fullest academic and personal potential” (School D); “Produce lifelong learners, critical thinkers, effective communicators and productive members of the global community” (School C); “Equip students with the necessary skills to be competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (School B).

*Nurturing environment.* As a foundational step to implementing the above mentioned mission goals, all of the schools emphasized the development of a safe, orderly, and nurturing environment as a key ingredient to educating the at-risk children attending the schools. Parents at all schools noted that strengths were the safe and caring learning environments at the school. One teacher at School C also noted during the focus group, “The spirit and the attitude of the staff are positive and the care and concern for students is noticeable.” Another noted, “It is much safer than [district] as a whole. Since the children are safe, they feel much more comfortable; therefore, the learning process

can occur.” A School A teacher commented, “The overall climate of the school is comfortable, supportive, more personable and personal. The students have trust.”

Another teacher at School A remarked, “This school is different from others in that faculty and staff members truly care about their students and parents. Typically, interactions at other schools are transactional but here they are transformational.” This nurturing sentiment was further reiterated by a School B teacher who said, “The difference [at this school] is the love and care that you can almost feel instantly upon entering the doors. The dedication of staff and support of administration is remarkable.”

The students attending the schools seemed to appreciate the caring attitude of the faculty and staff members. At School C, for example, one student commented that a positive aspect of the school was “the attention the teachers give you. If you don't understand or you have problems, you can go to the teachers and they will help you with anything.” A School A student said of the school, “it is peaceful and safe,” while another noted “teachers help when we don't understand. They help us through family problems.” Another School A student succinctly stated, “This school disciplines us, but they love us.”

A unanimous theme across all data sources was that the nurturing environment also needed to maintain high academic and behavioral expectations for each student regardless of their background. To this end, a School A teacher said, “At School A, students are empowered. They are given the freedom to continue to learn and excel. Students gain a sense of self, build identity, become more forward thinking and continue to challenge themselves academically.” This is echoed by a School D teacher who noted, “Our teachers truly care for the students' learning and well-being. Each teacher has high

expectations for their students and believes that each student can learn. We provide a curriculum that meets the child where they are and helps them develop the skills they need to move forward.”

*Student behavior and esteem.* A hand-in-hand component of developing a safe and nurturing environment is establishing appropriate student behavior. The focus on behavior at the charter schools is exemplified by the three “school rules” at School D: “Self Control; Obey our Teachers; Work before we Play.” All schools used incentives and rewards such as praise, field trips, participation in extra-curricular activities, and formal recognition for academics, attendance, and behavior. A teacher at School C noted, “We motivate students through positive reinforcement and teaching respect for all cultures.” The School A principal also mentioned that they try to accentuate positive behaviors and that “the school has fostered relationships between students through cooperative learning, a culture of collaboration, and friendships.”

Along with incentives and positive reinforcement, teachers at School D use a daily behavior sheet to document and track behavior, while communicating with parents to seek their input and suggestions to address problem areas. School D also uses a conflict resolution program where students are encouraged to solve their problems via a mediator.

As a flip-side companion to positive reinforcement, School C implemented a “zero tolerance” policy for violence where students are suspended or expelled based on the severity of an infraction. The combination of positive reinforcement and zero tolerance led a student focus group participant to comment, “The school is a secure place

and we do not have to deal with students fighting.” Another noted, “The principal is very strict. So, if you don’t do things the right way, it is the highway.”

The impact of strict student behavior policies were also reflected in School B student comments. For example, one student said, “The rules are enforced here and we have more rules.” Another noted, “I was in fights and got in trouble at my old school. My mom said I needed to go to School B.”

*Student mentoring.* All of the schools used various forms of mentoring, often involving external partners. At School D, for example, the school has developed several mentoring programs (STARS, Black Male Mentors, Black Girl Mentors), that use community members, teachers, staff, and parents as mentors. At School A, character education is built into the curriculum through the Voices Balanced Literacy program. Additionally, parents are assigned to be classroom mentors as part of their volunteer hours. At School B, the school has formal after-school programs aimed at providing mentoring and community-based projects. One such program is the Girls Empowering Minds in School (GEMS). The GEMS program provides a wide variety of activities designed to teach responsibility for girls at the school, such as etiquette sessions, mother-daughter brunches, and coordinating school activities such as dances and festivals. The mentoring program, designed for boys at the school, is named for a School B student who was murdered. This (non-school related) act of violence was a depressing but urgent reminder of the need to provide mentoring-related services at the school. The program uses community volunteers to provide weekly sessions on topics such as esteem, attitude, behavior, and careers. Along with mentoring programs, speakers from the health-science related fields give presentations and career-oriented mentoring at the school. A School B

student noted that a positive aspect of the school was that “we have a lot of speakers and sponsors that come to our school.”

*Extra-curricular activities.* To supplement the core academic courses, most of the schools have offered an increased number of extra-curricular activities. At School B, for example, a variety of athletic programs (e.g., football, basketball, track, volleyball, baseball, cheerleading) and clubs (e.g., journalism, dance, student government) are sponsored by the school. Additionally, students have an opportunity to sign up for one mini-course per semester, which are held each Friday from 2:15 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Mini-courses include such topics as creative writing, dance, chess, car repair, art, yoga, culinary arts, and martial arts. To facilitate real-world learning, School B and a Career and Technical Center have worked together to provide career-based training courses in Health Sciences and Banking. Along with this, School B students are involved in at least two service-learning projects throughout the school year. Service learning projects give students an opportunity to connect what they are learning in the classroom with the real world. A recent service learning project was oriented around health and fitness where students learned about stress management, exercise, and nutrition.

Students at School C are required to participate in either a sport or an activity during each of the four academic quarters. The school offers 11 sports-related programs, 10 Fine Arts (e.g., band, ballet, violin, poetry), and 10 student activities/groups (e.g., student council, speech, chess, mock trial). The school also offers dual-enrollment classes with a local university so students can experience college-level classes. The emphasis on providing educational experiences beyond the core subjects is noted by a School C teacher who remarked, “The school is able to offer student’s different activities

and field trips to places like Orlando, Atlanta and even France. In this way they provided students with more exposure to the outside world than they may be able to get elsewhere.”

At School A, students can participate in violin, percussion, ballet and tap dancing, foreign languages, musical theater, and piano. These activities are seen as crucial to education as noted in their school improvement plan which states, “Fine Arts are an integral part of the curriculum and play an important role in developing the whole child.” School A also offers service learning opportunities. A recent example is when students created a cookbook to provide to parents and community members.

#### *Extended Learning Time*

All of the schools provided structured extended learning time through a variety of formats. The additional time was generally spent for (a) tutoring and remediation or (b) enrichment and application activities. For example, School D provides tutoring before and after the school day. Approximately 90% of the students attend the after-school program, which is from 3 – 5 pm. The program provides homework assistance and tutoring based on student’s needs. Although the school does not provide Saturday classes or a longer school year, it does provide a summer program for students who have academic deficiencies. Similar to School D, School A follows the standard LEA school year calendar. The school extended the school day, however, by 45 minutes to provide tutoring and homework assistance. Additional tutoring sessions are held on Saturdays (Super Saturday Tutoring) for students who need additional assistance.

Unlike the elementary schools, the two secondary schools offered both extended school days and academic calendars. At School C, the school day is from 8:00 – 4:30

(recently changed from 5:30 because of funding issues). The daily schedule is arranged with the afternoon designated for “study sessions” involving the material covered in the morning sessions. During this time, students are provided with tutoring, homework assistance, research projects, educational games, role playing, and lab work. According to the principal, “Afternoon sessions give students the opportunity to ask questions and press their understanding of lessons.” A School C teacher reiterated this point of view by commenting, “The lengthened school hours help the teachers reinforce crucial curriculum areas.” A well-liked extension activity at School C is TCAP Madness. This is a game-show like tournament that goes on throughout the year and consists of questions related to state standards. There are different prize levels, with a grand prize one year being a trip to Six Flags amusement park. School C also offers periodic Saturday classes that primarily use project-based learning to apply concepts introduced during the school week.

At School B, the school day is from 7:30 – 4:00. After-school care is provided from 4:00 – 6:00. The after-school program provides tutoring and homework assistance. For students who require additional assistance, a program takes place on one Saturday a month during the first semester and every Saturday during the second semester to provide tutoring and targeted remediation. The classes offer a 5:1 student-to-teacher ratio along with personalized educational plans. Service learning activities are also scheduled on periodic Saturdays for all students to provide hands-on, community building projects. A School B teacher commented, “Our Service Learning Days on Saturdays are really positive experiences for both teachers and students. Parents also really appreciate this

alternative to the usual Saturday schedule.” With the Saturday sessions, School B has an academic schedule of 200 instructional days.

### *Parent and Community Involvement*

The schools all valued parental involvement, although actual levels of involvement varied across schools. To communicate with parents, the schools used a variety of methods including newsletters, calendars, websites, daily/weekly/grading period progress reports, parent-teacher conferences, and Teacher Ease, which is an online grade book that can be accessed at any time by parents. All schools also had active Parent Advisory Boards and/or PTSA’s which represented the interests of parents and were also responsible for disseminating information to parents. To facilitate parental involvement, two of the schools (School A and School B) utilized formal involvement contracts that outlined volunteer obligations (approximately 20 volunteer hours per year) and activities. While there were no mandated volunteer hours at School D, the school does have parents sign a School/Parent Compact and Policy that details school and parent responsibilities, vision, and activities. Along with these front-end agreements, all of the schools provided a wide-range of parental involvement activities. These comprise academically focused activities such as tutoring, reading to classes, writing workshops, spelling bees, and family math and science night, as well as non-academic events such as “muffins with mom”, father/son BBQ, mother/daughter pampering, helping with school events (dances, festivals), and mentoring.

While there are far too many activities to list, a few of the exemplary items are further discussed to illustrate the diversity. At School B, the school holds periodic Family Math and Science Nights that use hands-on projects to apply math and science

concepts. Additionally, the school partners with two non-profit organizations to provide service and community-based volunteer activities for students and their families. The school also recruits parents to participate in mentoring programs. At School D, a monthly family literacy project is provided to allow parents and students to work together on a project that encompasses several Tennessee State Academic Standards. At School A, parent involvement is integrated into the everyday life of the school. The school developed a program called Village Collaboration. In this program, parents are assigned various roles within a classroom, including communicator, business coordinator, motivator, historian, cultural promoter, elder counselor, and academic monitor. The communicators, for example, are responsible for disseminating information to other parents who have students in the village (classroom). The business coordinators serve as the liaison between the village and “school adopters.” Each classroom is responsible for obtaining at least 10 businesses as sponsors. The business coordinators help obtain the sponsors, coordinate the donated resources, and also hold a one day “business affair visit” for businesses to come visit the village. Along with the Village Collaboration Program, School A has also established a Parent Resource Center at the school. As noted in the school improvement plan, the center is “designed to encourage, enrich, and support parents’ efforts to be more involved in their child’s education.” The center provides books, videos and activities regarding an array of topics such as discipline, responsibility, homework help, and attention deficits.

In addition to parental communication and involvement, the schools all placed heavy value on community partnerships. Some of this was based on necessity because the schools all relied on community businesses and organizations for monetary donations,

in-kind services, and other resources. These resources were used for classroom materials, food for after-school programs, and to help offset the daily costs of operating the schools. Along with this, each school regularly partnered with institutions of higher education for practicum and other hands-on experiences for students enrolled in teacher education programs. The external partners also served as tutors and mentors, as well as sponsors for school activities. At School D, community groups sponsored an annual International Festival, basketball skills seminars, a KiddiePreneur program, after-school reading programs, and a Health and Wellness program. The school also partnered with a senior citizens group to provide a foster grandparent in each classroom. This greatly facilitated School D's goal of providing individual attention for all students.

Along with mentoring students at School C, speakers were often brought in to the school to discuss careers in science, technology, and engineering, especially in the bioscience sector. Similarly, School B regularly utilized health-care professionals to speak with students. Additionally, organizations such as the NAACP and Delta Sigma Theta partnered with School B to sponsor youth leadership and empowerment conferences, community clean-up projects, and talent shows.

At School A, a local hospital sponsors the fine arts program, which is viewed as an integral part of the curriculum. To help coordinate volunteer activities, School A developed a comprehensive Volunteer Resource Book. This book catalogs volunteer interests and availability so that school faculty and staff can contact volunteers based on mutual needs, skills, and interests.

### *Teacher Input, Buy-in, and Flexibility*

Resounding themes across all schools involved the importance of teachers believing in the mission of the schools, being involved in decision-making, and having the flexibility to modify and deliver instruction based on the needs of their students.

*Belief in mission.* The schools all reported that some teacher attrition occurred in the early years of the school because people did not fully understand the vision of the schools and related time demands. Presently, however, the schools have a stable cadre of teachers who all believe in the mission of the school. This transition is noted by the School B principal who commented, “There has been a growth in the School B culture. The staff says things like, this is the School B way.” Similarly, the School D principal said, “The climate is excellent as all teachers understand the mission and vision of the school and are empowered to move children forward. Teacher support for the school and programs improve each year.” The shared-vision was also noted by a School D teacher who commented, “Teachers all support the mission and approach of the school.” The School D principal noted that the school uses a flexible contract where “teachers can leave or be fired at will” because the school does not want teachers who are not fully bought-into the school’s plan. A School C teacher noted that “the most positive aspect of School C is the togetherness and the strength of the staff. Generally the staff acts as family and helps one another to make sure that all goals are achieved.” Another School C teacher commented, “The school has impacted teacher relationships because they are all on the same page and like working with each other.” The collegial spirit was also reflected in a comment made by a School A paraprofessional who noted, “The school has impacted teachers in that it is a collaborative, supportive learning community. I have

never felt like a Teacher Assistant. All are part of a team. Teachers believe in the school's mission and realize its purpose. Every day they live for that purpose.” Another School A teacher commented, “The staff buys into the overall goals of the school. Because of this belief, teachers go the extra mile to ensure success for the student.”

*Active voice in decision-making.* Administrators and faculty across the schools all agreed that it is critically important to provide teachers with an active role in decision-making. For example, all of the teachers, staff, and administrators at School D serve on the School Improvement Plan Committee. Additionally, teachers at School D meet at the beginning of the school year to map-out and prioritize the curriculum. Grade-level teams then meet weekly to adapt the plans as needed. Along with this instructional planning, teachers are encouraged to participate in school-level planning with administrators. As noted in the School D school improvement plan, “during weekly meetings, issues are discussed and teachers are given the opportunity to talk about how to resolve the issues ... and the responsibility of the group as a whole is to comprise a working solution.” The valued input from teachers is highlighted when one School D teacher commented, “The administration is constantly requiring updates on problems both academically and behaviorally. There is always administration/peer teachers support if you need it.” The importance of teacher input was also reflected in School C teacher comments. For example one teacher noted, “The ability of the teachers to work with the administration allows the school to be truly innovative.” Another commented, “The principal is open to new ideas, listens to what teachers have to say and lets them know why if he disagrees with them.” School C also developed an Assessment Committee comprised of teachers, parents, and students. The committee meets monthly to examine school progress and

make recommendations for action if problem areas are found. At School B, the Leadership Team is the vehicle by which teachers provide input into decision-making. The team is comprised of the principal, school activities coordinators, and team leaders (grade-level/ subject-area teams). Teachers at School B also have weekly grade-level planning sessions to develop integrated units, lesson plans, re-teaching strategies, and student activities. One School B teacher commented about their expanded responsibilities, “Teachers have more accountability. We learn more about curriculum development and data assessment.” Similar to School B, School A also utilizes a leadership team comprised of teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. Along with this team, the school has also implemented a Professional Learning Communities model where a leadership committee is assigned to different priority areas (e.g., parent involvement, student achievement). All teachers participate in at least one leadership committee, which has responsibility for setting and monitoring benchmarks as well as action planning. The School A principal noted “teachers research constantly and communicate with administration their findings and innovations that they want to try.”

*Flexible classroom instruction.* Similar to their input into school-level decision-making, teachers across the schools also greatly appreciated the flexibility and autonomy that they were given in terms of the curricula and instructional methods they chose to utilize to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. Teachers commonly noted that they were responsible for addressing state academic standards, but the methods of teaching the standards were up to them. This flexibility empowered teachers, while also enabling them to meet the needs of their individual students. A teacher at School C, for example, said, “The school uses standards-based education, but the ways in which the

standards are taught are at the discretion of individual teachers. Our role in implementing the school's programs is as facilitators and communicators of what the students need to know.” This flexibility is also reflected by another School C instructor who said a strength of the school is “the ability to adapt and change. There is not a lot of bureaucratic red tape.” This sentiment was also commented on by School B teachers who noted, “The autonomy and self-governance are wonderful. The ability to create and change curriculum if needed helps the students and teachers be successful” and “I appreciate the autonomy to do what I need to do to make my students successful.” The flexibility in instruction was also seen in the two elementary schools. School A teachers participating in the focus group described their role in the implementation of programs as being more facilitators or organizers rather than “directors of instruction,” which is similar to the School B description of the teaching role. Another School A teacher noted, “All elements of the teaching program have their place. They [teachers] have to grab onto what each child needs. They may have to use something with one group or child this year and another next year.” The School D principal endorsed teacher empowerment by noting, “Teachers have the flexibility to use what works, monitor and adjust as needed.” The School D teachers clearly appreciated this view. One commented, “As teachers, we are given the flexibility to teach the students. With the state standards as a guide, we create leveled, interactive, and meaningful lessons that encourage student achievement. Teachers collaborate on a daily basis to improve student success. Teachers use a variety of teaching methods to meet student needs as well as placing students in appropriate leveled groups.”

## Chapter 5

### Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Similar to other states, charter schools in Tennessee were established to improve student learning, provide options for parents, encourage the use of innovative methods, and provide new opportunities for teachers and parents. With the passage of the TN Public Charter School Law, the first cohort of four charter schools was launched in the 2003-04 academic year. This cohort of schools was diverse in terms of grade-levels served, encompassing elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Similarly, while all of the schools were developed to provide education to at-risk students, each school was unique in its approach to meeting this goal. Some schools took a back-to-basics approach to bring their students up to grade-level, while others focused on workforce development and college preparation.

Evidence has accumulated that the first cohort of schools has been able to demonstrate many of the purposes outlined in the TN charter school law. For example, teachers and parents have generally reported positive experiences with the schools as well as satisfaction with key outcomes (i.e., involvement in school activities, school climate, discipline, smaller class sizes, student learning). Although student achievement results have been mixed, the schools have all successfully renewed their charters.

The extent to which the charter schools are being innovative, however, has not been well documented. The goal of this study was to examine this area of the charter school law as it was translated into practice (or not) at the first cohort of TN charter schools.

The results of this study suggest that the charter schools are utilizing several promising practices. For example, mastery learning and differentiated instruction have been tied to higher student achievement, increased retention of knowledge, and positive attitudes about school (Walker & Williamson, 2009). Additionally, a mastery learning-type approach is best implemented when there are clear learning objectives tied with standards, the use of diagnostic pre-assessments coupled with progress monitoring, grading incentives, and enrichment activities (Guskey, 2010; Lalley & Gentile, 2009). The charter schools in general utilized these features in their instructional programs, with individualized instruction, remediation, re-teaching, formative assessment, extension activities, and incentives being common across the schools.

Another charter school practice supported in the research literature is the use of smaller student-to-teacher ratios. In a review of studies examining reduced class size, Orfield (2003) concluded that smaller class sizes reduced classroom disruptions, helped teachers individualize instruction, positively impacted student achievement and graduation rates, while also helping to reduce the achievement gap between African American and white students. Orfield also noted that drawbacks of this approach were the cost to hire additional teachers and the need for teachers to modify their instructional methods from a traditional direct instruction approach. To address these challenges, the charter schools examined in this study often relied on paraprofessionals and parents/community volunteers to help lower to student-to-teacher ratios. Additionally, many of the teachers described their role as a facilitator of instruction, while making concerted efforts to meet the individual needs of the students in their classroom. Consistent grade-level/team planning was also evidenced across the schools to

intentionally implement team teaching, differentiated instruction, and to ensure everyone was “on the same page” regarding students and strategies. Interestingly, a recent study suggests that teachers working in small groups to review student data had fewer data interpretation errors, increased dialogue, and more enjoyment than teachers working alone. This collaboration and data-driven instructional decision-making was then supportive of school improvement practices (USDoe, 2011).

Parental and community involvement is also well documented in the research literature. For example, family involvement with schools has been linked with increased student achievement, graduation rates, and enrollment in higher education, along with decreased behavior problems and dropout rates (Caplan, 1998). Some of the keys to developing involvement are (a) ensuring consistent two-way communication exists between the school and parents/community members, (b) making families and community members feel welcomed, (c) providing a variety of activities that facilitate involvement with the school, and (d) using parent and community involvement to foster academic support and enrichment activities for students (Bathgate & Silva, 2010; Caplan, 1998; Orfield, 2003). The charter schools seemed to demonstrate these items by providing a variety of communication methods (e.g., weekly updates, websites, conferences, PTSA) as well as both academic and non-academic activities for parents and community members. The schools all also developed policies, committees, and programs that were aimed at proactively fostering parental and community involvement. Some of the schools even mandated required volunteer hours for parents or a minimum number of “school adopters” that needed to be obtained for each classroom. The school partners provided needed resources such as materials, money, and manpower. Along with this, the

partners also provided opportunities for students to be involved in community activities. In this way, the school/parent/community partnership provided a mechanism for involvement with the schools but also a pathway to engage students and school staff with the broader community.

The importance of teacher support and buy-in as a facilitating factor to the success of educational programs and reform efforts has also been well documented. For example, school reform literature shows that a lack of teacher support for a program can greatly limit implementation and subsequent positive outcomes (Berends et al., 2002; Ross, 2001; Snipes & Casserly, 2004). Conversely, successful schools are often characterized by a school staff who shares a common vision of mission, a sense of camaraderie and collegial support, and a belief that they are positively impacting their students (Inger, 1992; McChesney, 1998). Across the charter schools in this study, teachers greatly supported the mission and educational approach of their respective schools, with frequent comments related to the faculty and staff being a united family working toward common goals. Importantly, teacher perceptions that they are an effective instructional team (“collective teacher efficacy”) have been linked with higher student achievement (Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, & Gray, 2004). Related to support and buy-in, is an active role in decision-making. The teachers at the charter schools all had direct decision-making regarding “how” they were going address state academic standards for their students. Additionally, the charter school teachers were also participants in school-level decision making. Involving teachers in decision-making can increase overall positive school climate and teacher attitudes (Rhodes, Camic, Milburn, & Lowe, 2009). The positive attitudes, in turn, encourage teachers to take on additional

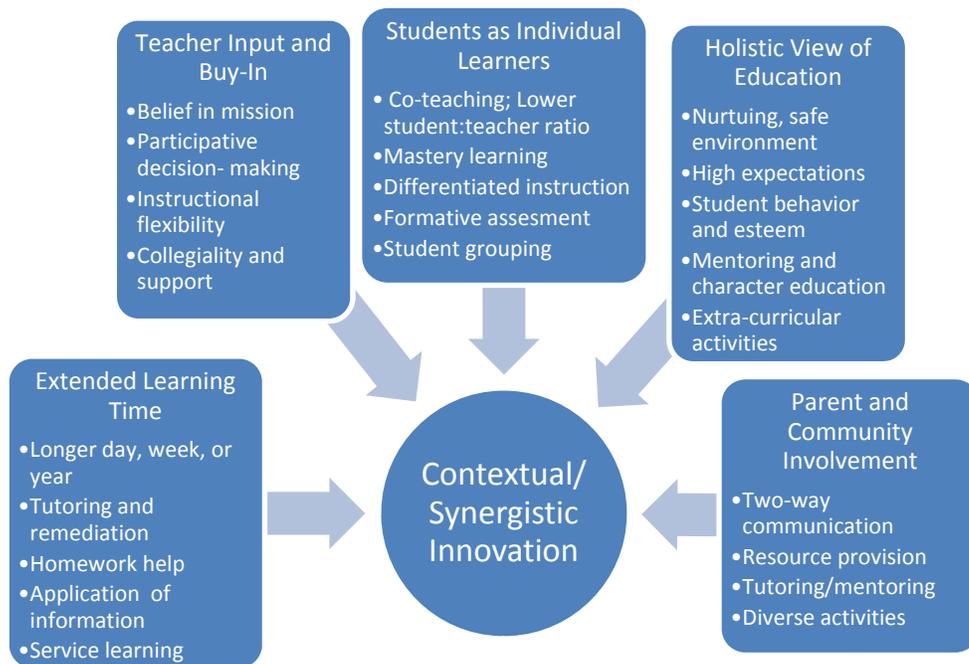
leadership roles and ultimately invest more time and effort in achieving school goals (Bogler & Somech, 2005). Additionally, this type of input can lead to increased teacher retention at a school, resulting in a more stable cadre of dedicated faculty members (Thornton, 2004).

*Where is the Innovation?*

Given that many of the practices seen across the charter schools do have support in the research literature, one conclusion may be that the schools are not meeting the definition of innovation as “a new idea, method or device.” This dictionary definition, however, may unfairly restrict the view of innovation in educational settings. In light of this, there have been alternate definitions proposed to examine charter schools.

*Combination of strategies as innovation.* Prior charter school research as well as the results of this study suggest that while charter schools can be different from traditional schools in terms of governance and administration (i.e., school schedules and calendars, teacher roles), the instructional practices may not be dramatically different (Lake, 2008; Morrison et al., 2008; Reynolds, 2000). Some researchers contend, however, that even if classroom instruction does not routinely look new or different in charter schools, the unique combination of strategies (i.e., instructional, curricular, organizational) that charter schools adopt can still be considered innovative because they often end up looking very different from other schools (Lake, 2008; Reynolds, 2000; USDoE, 2004b). The innovation in this sense is realized in the school’s unique response to student needs, as well as the effort to sustain proven practices that are effective at each school (Lake, 2008). The findings of this study suggest that while there were common themes across schools, each school tended to implement the themes with diverse methods

and approaches. In fact, one of the overarching themes was that the schools recognized the importance of trying different approaches to meet the individual needs of their at-risk students, and then maintaining the methods that worked. Some schools, such as School D, took a back-to-basics approach, while others relied on proven practices including mastery learning, tutoring, and multiple intelligences. Innovation viewed from this standpoint can be best summarized as the “aggregate re-packaged whole” is greater than the sum of the parts. Figure 2 is my representation of charter school innovation at this cohort of schools when viewed as a holistic, synergistic, context-specific phenomenon.



*Figure 2.* Innovation at the first cohort of TN charter schools viewed from a contextual perspective

*Contextual implementation as innovation.* Another view of educational innovation is that even if a practice is not “new” it may still be innovative if it has not been previously offered in a community (Lake, 2008; Manno, Finn, Bierlein, &

Vanourek, 1998; Reynolds, 2000; Schroeder, 2004). From this standpoint, the charter schools have been innovative in expanding educational options for parents, students, teachers, and school leaders. For example, the charter schools offered longer school days and calendars, mentoring and character education programs, individual educational plans, an ungraded curriculum, service learning opportunities, fine arts integration, myriad extracurricular programs, college-level courses, and introductions to fields such as health sciences and bioscience. Additionally, the schools provided safe learning environments as well as opportunities for parents, teachers, and community members to be directly involved with school activities. While none of these activities may be truly new, it is less likely that they would have been introduced if the charter schools did not exist.

### *Conclusions*

The ultimate answer regarding the extent to which charter schools are being innovative depends on the definition that is used. There are undoubtedly incidences of truly innovative practices at charter schools, as there are at non-charter schools. Looking for occurrences of isolated innovation, however, may be a myopic approach. Instead, innovation may be better examined from a holistic view of the unique and potentially synergistic combination of strategies that each school is utilizing, as well as the extent to which the practices are new for the school community. This broader contextual examination can still facilitate the goal of having charter schools be research and development laboratories. For example, if a school would like to enhance parental involvement, then there are lessons to be learned from the first cohort of TN charter schools. The school can start with making parental involvement a key priority, as all of the charter schools have done. Standard items such as PTA's and parent/teacher

conferences could be implemented. Then, the school could utilize communication tools such as the online, real-time grade book utilized by School B and School C. This could then be supplemented with the daily behavior and performance folder employed by School D. Mandated parental involvement requirements could then be implemented such as those at School A and School B. Along with this, parents can be given roles and responsibilities within each classroom, similar to the School A program. These core parental responsibilities could then be augmented with a wide variety of academic and non-academic activities that were seen across the charter schools. These activities may also include a parenting center such as the one at School A, with the goals of enhancing parenting skills and centering the school as a community resource. The final combination of strategies that is ultimately adopted by a school should be developed through (a) an assessment of the needs of the school consumers (students, parents, teachers, staff, administrators), (b) an examination of what has worked in similar educational settings, (c) continued input from key stakeholders, and (d) experimentation with activities until a sustainable best fit is realized.

This approach seems to be the method employed at the charter schools, all of which have experienced varying degrees of success as outlined by the criteria in their charters. Even if the schools are not reinventing the wheel, they do seem to be developing a combination of strategies that is unique when a holistic and contextual examination is employed.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

Regardless of whether a contextual or isolated innovation examination is employed, it will be important for future research to facilitate the diffusion of practices

that charter schools are using. While it may not be possible for all schools to extend their school hours, for example, there are still practices that can be adopted by non-charter schools to address challenges that most schools face (as noted by the parent involvement example above). If charter schools are going to be research and development centers, then questions for future charter school research can transition from “are charter schools being innovated?” to “what combination of factors is working for each school?”; “why are they working?”; “how are they being sustained?”; and “what strategies can be reasonably implemented at non-charter schools?” Related to this, future research would also benefit by looking to see if there is a sequence or pattern of methods utilized by the charter schools. It is plausible that successful schools first address core issues such as facilities, funding, hiring, and basic curricular and instructional programs. They can then turn their attention to enhancing the core programs as well as addressing additional issues such as facilitating school climate, parental involvement, and “extension-type” extra-curricular activities. Similarly, there may be areas that are best developed concurrently. For example, if a school wants to focus on individualizing instruction, then training teachers on data-driven decision making is a logical companion. It might also be worthwhile, however, to also facilitate parental involvement to gain allies at home as well as additional information about the students’ background. While there is not likely to be a one-size fits all pattern, it would be interesting to see how successful charter schools have developed the facets of their program so that other schools can use this as a framework to examine their own challenges or as a potential roadmap to goal attainment.

Future research should also consider the barriers to innovation that charter schools face. For example, the schools in this study all spent a considerable amount of time

procuring funds, adequate facilities, and needed resources through grant writing, school-adopters, and negotiations with the local school district. Additionally, these schools all face closure if adequate yearly academic progress is not made. It may be possible that the accountability feature of charter schools is hampering innovation by encouraging schools to use proven best practices instead of truly novel practices. These factors, and others, may be impeding some of the instructional innovation that policy-makers may have envisioned.

A final area for future investigation should center on special needs students. There seems to be a general lack of information in the research literature regarding how charter schools are serving this population. Given that charter schools are intended to be innovative, however, there is an opportunity for special populations (remedial, gifted, ESL) to be educated in a new way; or at least using a uniquely repackaged combination of proven strategies.

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## Appendix: School Profiles

### School A Profile

#### *Background and Demographic Information*

- Established during the 2003-2004 academic year as the first elementary charter school in Tennessee.
- Serves approximately 168 students in grades K - 5. The majority (99%) of students are African-American and eligible for free or reduced price lunches.
- Designated as a Title I school.
- The student to teacher ratio is approximately 10:1 with classroom paraprofessionals.
- The school is staffed by a Principal, Assistant Principal, an Exceptional Children Director, Administrative Assistant, nine teachers and nine co-teachers. Of the 18 faculty members, eight are males, which is not common in elementary schools.
- The only existing charter school to have SACS accreditation.
- Classrooms are called villages.

#### *Mission and Focus*

- The mission of School A is to empower children in grades K-5 to succeed through a holistic approach to education by providing an education that increases capacity, maximizes potential, and evokes success. The aim is to ultimately cultivate leaders who function productively and excel in an ever-changing society.

- Guiding Beliefs:
  - All children can learn and achieve at higher levels when they are actively engaged and instruction is differentiated.
  - Teachers must be equipped to modify instruction to match students' individual needs.
  - Assessment must be varied, relevant, and correlated with standards that have been taught so that students are successful.
  - Decision-making must be done in the best interest of the children we serve through collaboration with stakeholders.
  - Fair and consistent policies must be developed in order for the organization to be effective.
- Focus on developing each child through literacy development, individualized instruction, and the provision of a caring and nurturing environment.

#### *Governance*

- The mission of the school's sponsoring agency is to revitalize a targeted community in the city in which the school is located. The focused goals of the organization are to increase the availability of affordable housing and provide social services, advocacy, and support for families.
- The school's Board of Directors approves budgets, obtains funds, and provides support and oversight for the school.
- The principal is responsible for the day-to-day management of the school, with support by a business manager and other administrative personnel.

- Teachers play an active role in decision-making, with participation in Professional Learning Communities and various leadership committees.

#### *External Partnerships*

- External partnerships are developed for financial assistance, resource donation, and student mentoring/tutoring.
- Sample partners include a local manufacturing business, hospital, and university.
- The school has developed a Volunteer Resource Book that lists volunteer interests and availability. This assists with the effective utilization of volunteers.

#### *Parental Involvement and Communication*

- Parental involvement is a priority for School A.
- The school uses various communication tools including newsletters, school website, conduct reports, and calendars.
- The school provides a wide array of activities to facilitate parental involvement.
- Each parent must spend 20 hours in voluntary service at the school each year. This expectation is established via a signed parental involvement contract.
- The school established a Parent Center at the school that contains resources for enhancing parenting skills.
- The Parent/Teacher Advisory Board is very active.
- The school uses a parent involvement program called “Village Collaboration.” Each class has a network of parents that have established Centers of Excellence. Parents have various roles in the school/classroom such as motivator, historian, communicator and academic monitor.

### *Curriculum*

- State standards are the foundation of the curriculum.
- Literacy development is a key area of focus.
- The school takes a holistic approach by trying to nurture each child academically, socially, culturally, and physically.
- There are many extracurricular programs during and after the school day such as Fine Arts, violin, ballet and tap, foreign language, piano, and musical theater.
- Character education and cultural awareness is integrated into the everyday curriculum. Incentives and rewards are used for behavior, attendance, and academics.
- Voices Balanced Literacy program is used with the goal of building reading, writing, and communication skills while also developing cultural awareness and character.
- Saxon Math is used to develop math and higher order thinking skills.
- An overall goal is to eliminate achievement gaps by addressing the needs of individual learners and developing a positive school environment.

### *Instruction*

- Each teacher has flexibility on how the academic standards are addressed in their classroom.
- The use of a teacher and co-teacher in each room facilitates individual student attention and instruction. This includes targeted interventions, accelerated instruction, re-teach weeks, tutoring, and mentoring.

- All lesson plans are developed using Teacher Ease. This software allows for alignment of standards, as well as the ability to indicate which instructional strategies will be used.
- The school uses a wide variety of instructional strategies including direct instruction, cooperative learning, team teaching, small groups, centers, and project-based learning.
- Frequent student assessment is utilized to gauge student progress and individualize instruction if needed. Saxon Math, Voyager Benchmarks, Voices Benchmarks, portfolios, Renaissance Learning, and teacher-created assessments are all used.
- Each child that receives a C or lower at a 6-week grading period receives an individualized plan of achievement.
- Brain-compatible learning techniques such as multiple intelligences and multisensory learning are used to differentiate instruction for each child.
- Service learning is utilized to give real-world experiences and civic engagement.

*Extended Learning Time*

- The school day is from 8:00 – 3:45. The extra 45 minutes is devoted to tutoring.
- Tutoring sessions are held on Saturdays (Super Saturday Tutoring).

## School B Profile

### *Background and Demographic Information*

- Established during the 2003-2004 academic year as one of the first charter schools in Tennessee.
- Serves approximately 216 students in grades 6 – 8. The majority of students are African-American (98%) and eligible for free or reduced price lunches (81%).
- Designated as a Title I school.
- The student to teacher ratio is approximately 19:1.

### *Mission and Focus*

- Equip students with the necessary skills to be competitive in the 21st Century. Students will demonstrate the ability to read, write, speak and calculate with clarity and precision.
- Successful transition to high school is a primary goal.

### *Governance*

- The mission of the sponsoring agency of the school is to improve the quality of life of targeted communities, and enhance educational and economic opportunities for all African-Americans. This is accomplished through the intellectual development of youth and the economic empowerment of the African-American community based upon the following precepts: respect for family, spirituality, justice and integrity.
- The Governing Board is responsible for general oversight, budget review, fund raising, and support for the school. The day-to-day management of the school is led by the executive director, principal and leadership team.

- The School B governing board consists of the following committees: Accountability Committee, Finance Committee, Facilities Committee, Curriculum and Instruction Committee, and Nominating Committee. Each committee is responsible for developing rules and policies in its area of operation.
- The Advisory Board consists of 20 members and serves as a sounding board for ideas. The Board also provides support and resources in key operational areas for the school.

#### *External Partnerships*

- Partnerships have been developed with local hospitals, health centers, specialty medical groups, the NAACP, a local university, and a local community volunteer agency.
- External partners provide resources/donations, tutoring, mentoring, and information about careers in targeted fields.

#### *Parental Involvement and Communication*

- Communication tools for parents include newsletters, school website, and an online grade book that can be accessed by the parents at any time.
- There are numerous parental involvement activities such as tutoring, science fairs, and Family Math and Science nights.
- A parent contract is used to detail required volunteer hours.
- The School B Parent Council is a parent/teacher organization that represents the interests of parents and the community. The Council meets twice per month.

## *Curriculum*

- Students at School B take seven academic subjects. Four of them—Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies—are core subjects. All students take Reading as one exploratory class. Other exploratory classes include PE/Health and Spanish/Word Study.
- All curricula are aligned with state content and performance standards.
- Students have an opportunity to sign up for one mini-course per semester, which are held each Friday from 2:15 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Mini-Courses include such topics as: creative writing, dance, chess, car repair, art, yoga, culinary arts, and martial arts.
- Service Learning is used as a form of experiential learning where students apply academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to address genuine community needs. Students are involved in at least two service-learning projects throughout the school year. Service learning projects give students an opportunity to connect what they are learning in the classroom with the real world.
- The establishment of a safe, orderly, and secure environment that facilitates learning is a key priority.
- Mentoring programs are utilized to enhance character education.
- School B and a Career and Technical Center are working together to provide career-based training courses in Health Sciences and Banking.
- A variety of athletic programs and clubs (journalism, dance, student government) are sponsored by the school.

### *Instruction*

- Mastery learning and a focus on students as individuals are important.
- Through mastery learning instruction is organized around a sequence of measurable learning objectives with frequent testing to assure satisfactory progress. Re-teaching, lesson modification, and tutoring are utilized as needed.
- Teachers have the ability to adapt lessons to student's individual needs.
- Many instructional strategies and programs are utilized including READ 180 and ALEKS, sustained silent reading, direct instruction, one-on-one and peer tutoring, performance assessments, ability grouping, and experiential learning.
- Smaller class sizes are used to facilitate individual attention.
- Block scheduling (70 or 90 minute blocks) is utilized for the core subject areas.

### *Extended Learning Time*

- The year-round schedule has 200 instructional days. Of those 200 days, 180 are mandated by the state and the additional 20 are used for Saturday school (Service Learning Days) and Enrichment Academy.
- Homeroom begins at 7:30 a.m. and school ends at 4:00 p.m. After-school care is provided from 4:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.
- Students who are deficient in reading, math, or a content area participate in a remediation program on Saturdays. These classes have a 5:1 student to teacher ratio. Each student has a Personalized Educational Plan.

## School C Profile

### *Background and Demographic Information*

- Established during the 2003-2004 academic year as the first charter school in Tennessee.
- Serve approximately 685 students in grades 6 – 12. The majority of students are African-American (97%) and eligible for free or reduced price lunches (84%).
- Designated as a Title I school.
- The student to teacher ratio is approximately 19:1.

### *Mission and Focus*

- Produce lifelong learners, critical thinkers, effective communicators, and productive members of the global community.
- This is accomplished through a focus on state and national standards, strong industrial partnerships, numerous research opportunities, continuous technologic improvements, and a staff committed to social awareness, excellence, and personal responsibility.

### *Governance*

- The sponsor of the school is focused on building science-related industry.
- The Board of Directors is comprised of various school and business leaders in the Memphis area. The board is responsible for policy setting, fund raising, financial reports, developing external partnerships, and providing resources and facilities.
- The Executive Director, School Directors, and Leadership Teams oversee the day-to-day management of the school, as well as the implementation of the curriculum and instructional program.

- Teachers play an active role in decision-making.
- There are three defacto schools within School C: the middle school, 9<sup>th</sup> grade academy, and high school. Each has their own administrative teams and teachers.
- Geographically, School C has two campus locations. The middle school campus houses the sixth and seventh grade. The eighth grade and high school campus is located at a different site that has been renovated for the purposes of the school.

#### *External Partnerships*

- Partnerships are developed for financial assistance, resource donation, and student mentoring.
- Sample partners include local hospitals, universities, and science-related businesses.

#### *Parental Involvement and Communication*

- Communication tools include newsletters, school website, and an online grade book that can be accessed by the parents at any time.
- There is an active Parent/Teacher/Student Association.
- The school established a committee to examine student and school progress consisting of students, parents, and faculty members.

#### *Curriculum*

- State standards are the foundation of the curriculum.
- School C offers curricula for reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, health/physical education, fine arts, and foreign language. Additionally, a variety of electives in the areas of mathematics, science, technology, and engineering are offered.

- Dual enrollment and advanced placement classes are offered.
- Students are placed in same-sex groups in some grades in order to focus on learning with less social pressure.
- High expectations for all students.
- In addition to academics, there is an explicit focus on safety and student behavior. No tolerance for violence.
  - Positive reinforcement and incentives are used for good behavior
- The overarching curricular goal is to prepare students for the workforce, higher education, and to succeed in a global economy.
- A particular emphasis is on training students for a career in science, math, engineering and technology.
- There are over 20 extracurricular groups/activities at the school.
- All students are required to participate in either a sport or an activity during each of the four annual academic quarters.

### *Instruction*

- Each teacher has flexibility on how the academic standards are addressed in their classroom.
- Morning sessions begin with reading instruction and then progress to direct instruction in various subject areas. Afternoons are often dedicated to practice exams, tutoring, hands-on/project-based work, and role-playing. Afternoons are for students to apply and extend their knowledge.
- The school developed a game-show like tournament that goes on throughout the year and consists of questions related to state standards.

- Technology is emphasized. Students have laptops available on carts and electronic textbooks.
- Frequent student assessment is used to gauge progress and target needed remediation.

#### *Extended Learning Time*

- The school day is from 8:00 – 4:30, recently reduced from 5:30 because of budget cuts. The school hopes to increase the school day to 6:00 pm if funds are available.
- Periodic Saturday classes are also held.
- The current calendar has 180 academic days, reduced from 192 because of budget issues.
- The extended learning time is for homework assistance, tutoring, remediation, and extension activities such as research projects, educational games, lab work, and various experiential activities.
- The daily class schedule also designates time in the afternoon for study sessions involving material from the morning class periods.

## School D Profile

### *Background and Demographic Information*

- Established during the 2003-2004 academic year as the first charter school in the district.
- Serves approximately 240 students in grades K – 4. The majority of students are African-American (99%) and eligible for free or reduced price lunches (95%).
- Designated as a Title I school.
- The student to teacher ratio is approximately 20:1. With teaching aides/ paraprofessionals, the student to teacher ratio is 10:1.

### *Mission and Focus*

- To serve at-risk students and to make sure every child advances using his/her own learning style to the fullest academic and personal potential. The academic program focuses on developing grade level skills in reading, writing and math as a foundation for future success.
- The three key rules for students are:
  - Self Control
  - Obey Our Teachers
  - Work Before Play

### *Governance*

- The mission of the sponsoring organization is to provide education for children at-risk of school failure.

- The school is led by:
  - An Administrative Team (Principal, Testing Coordinator, Business Manager, Executive Director, After School Coordinator) which handles the day-to-day activities of the school
  - Board of Directors which is a subset of the sponsoring agency. The Board handles fund raising, authorization of funds, and general oversight of the school including evaluation of the principal.
- The district acts as the fiscal agent.
- Teachers and school administrators meet regularly to provide faculty and staff with opportunities for input into school decision-making.

*External Partnerships*

- School D values and actively seeks out external partnerships. A representative sample of school partners is as follows:
  - Local businesses and community agencies – food for after school programs and incentives
  - Local business – student Health and Wellness program; International Festival; parenting skills programs; library donations
  - Local universities and various high schools – mentoring/tutoring during afterschool program; practicum experiences for Teacher Education Program students
  - Police Department – in-service activities for teachers; student mentoring
  - Local businesses – free electrical assistance

- Local school district – Special education services; administrative services (background checks); fiscal agent; professional development
- Community agency – Foster Grandparent Program where volunteers read in the classroom and assist teachers

*Parental Involvement and Communication*

- School-wide monthly family literacy project that allows parents and students to work together on a project that encompasses several of the Tennessee State Standards.
- Monthly calendars and newsletters distributed to parents.
- Parents are informed of the behavior and academic progress of their child in a Daily Sheet that goes home each day.
- Parent-teacher conferences.
- Parental advisory council meetings.
- Parent volunteer activities such as reading.
- A formal School/Parent Compact and Policy that details school and parent responsibilities, vision, and activities.

*Curriculum*

- School D uses the TN Department of Education approved standards as the basis of its curriculum and lesson plans.
- Reading, writing, and math are the key curricular areas of focus.
- A non-graded curriculum is used where students are given the opportunity to self-correct or redo poor grades.

- Teachers are given a large role in mapping the curriculum and then making adaptations as needed.
- Formative student assessments are used during weekly meetings to adapt instruction and material to the needs of each student.
- In addition to academics, a focus is also placed on student behavior and self-image.
  - Positive feedback
  - Assemblies and incentives to recognize behavior and achievements
  - Motivational speakers and mentors
  - Conflict resolution programs
  - Daily behavior sheet

#### *Instruction*

- The overarching instructional goal is to continually assess each student's knowledge and progress, and then adapt instruction to meet individual needs.
- Each classroom has a teacher, teaching assistant, and foster grandparent, which facilitates one-to-one instruction.
- A variety of instructional strategies are used including: direct instruction, cooperative learning, projects, peer tutoring, and individualized instruction and assignments for students.
- Multi-age and ability grouping are both utilized.
- Teachers have flexibility to choose methods and materials based on what works for each student.

- Teachers use Reading Success, ThinkLink tests, and teacher-developed assessments to monitor and adapt instruction
- Special education students are served using inclusion and pull-out programs.

*Extended Learning Time*

- School D follows the LEA school calendar.
- The school day is from 8:00 – 3:00.
- After school program is from 3:00 – 5:00, which provides tutoring and homework assistance. This program is attended by approximately 90% of the students.
- Tutoring is also offered before school.
- There is a summer school program for students who require additional academic assistance.