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**WHY PARENTS, IN THE PENNS VALLEY AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT, CHOOSE
CYBER CHARTER OR CHARTER SCHOOLS OVER THE LOCAL PUBLIC SCHOOL
DISTRICT**

A Dissertation in
Educational Leadership

by

Sherri L. Connell

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The dissertation of Sherri L. Connell was reviewed and approved*
by the following:

Jacqueline A. Stefkovich
Professor of Education
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of the Committee

James F. Nolan
Professor of Education

Nona A. Prestine
Professor of Education

Roger C. Shouse
Associate Professor of Education

Gerald K. LeTendre
Department Head
Education Policy Studies

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

This research examines why parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, choose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. Why do parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, make the choice to consider charter schools?
2. How do parents learn about schooling options and what data do they use to make their decisions about where to send their children to school?
3. What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school?
4. What values drive parents' decisions to choose charter or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley's local public school?

In order to analyze parental decision making, Weiss's (1995) decision making framework was used as Weiss's framework takes into account the data or information collected, the beliefs of the parents as well as the ideologies which parents possess. Data were collected via parent focus groups as well as

individual interviews.

The study found that when parents in the Penns Valley Area School District become dissatisfied with the local public school option, they gather information via friends and other community members. This information, coupled with the parents' interest in a school that provides interaction between school and home, higher order thinking experiences, people outside the classroom participating in learning, individualized learning and career/interest opportunities, led parents to choose charter or cyber charter schools.

If local public schools want to lessen the exodus of students from their buildings, they must begin to think of parents and students as customers. These customers have specific interests and values which must be understood. This study provides the basis for that understanding for one school district, the Penns Valley Area School District.

Keywords: charter school, cyber charter school, enrollment, traditional public school, parental choice, parental decision making

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Many parents, if they have the financial means, have chosen to send their children to private schools for many years. In the 1960s, with the advent of magnet schools, school choice became a reality for the larger population (Schneider, Teske, Marshall 2000). Almost thirty year later, the first charter school, City Academy High School, opened in Saint Paul, Minnesota in 1992 and set the stage for the more than four thousand charter schools which are in operation today.

Pennsylvania's charter schools were established in 1997 when the Pennsylvania Legislature passed Act 22 with the intent that these self-managed public schools, which are awarded charters by the PA State Department of Education after approval by local public school boards, would increase student achievement for all students, encourage innovative teaching, and provide students and parents with expanded educational opportunities. Act 22 gave charter schools the ability to collect tuition from local school districts based upon the total expenditures per average daily membership of the school district of residence (P.L. 225, No. 22).

While charter school became popular, they were geographically constrained to larger cities where clients were plentiful. This problem lessened as computers became more affordable and people had more access to the World Wide Web.

This enabled charter schools to connect with students outside of their demographic reach via online learning. With charter schools offering online classes, the PA Legislature, in 2002, passed Act 88 which places Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), not the local school district, as the oversight entity for cyber charter schools. There were more than one hundred forty "brick and mortar" charter schools and fourteen cyber charter schools operating in PA for the 2014-2015 school year.

While charters are considered public schools, they have come up against criticism from traditional public school administrators, school boards, and teacher unions due to perceived lack of oversight and accountability, different standards, and budget accountability. Unlike public schools which are required to have 100% of the teaching staff highly qualified, Section 1724-A of the regulations only required charter schools to have seventy-five percent of the teaching staff highly qualified (P.L. 225, No. 22). PSEA (Pennsylvania State Education Association) has raised questions about the method by which the charter schools are funded, their economic impact on traditional public school districts, their ability to hire uncertified teachers, and the high rate of employee turnover; all which negatively impact student achievement (PSEA, 2010).

In the spring of 2010, four Pennsylvania, Centre County superintendents met to discuss their school districts' concerns about charter schools. The meeting focused on the almost five million dollars the districts are collectively paying to the charter schools and how the districts could work together to provide a better education for the more than four hundred Centre County students currently enrolled in either a cyber charter or a traditional charter schools. In reviewing achievement data over the past five years, all four traditional school districts are outperforming all but one charter school in all grade levels and all subject areas. This analysis is based on the PSSA data. Yet, each district saw, on average, a two hundred percent increase in students leaving traditional schools to enroll in these underperforming schools. Additionally, the meeting focused on the large number of students who leave traditional school only to return a year or two later academically behind their peers. This is even more of a concern with special education students. While there has been much speculation over why parents in these high performing schools are choosing to send their children to charter school over traditional public school, no specific data has been collected.

While Penns Valley Area School District, the smallest district in the county with just over fifteen hundred students, is one of the highest performing school districts in Centre

County, it has the highest percentage of students attending charter schools. This researcher was most interested in the Penns Valley Area School District as she is currently employed as the Assistant Superintendent in the district and as such is most concerned about the educational attainment of the students within the district.

Statement of the Problem and the Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to determine why parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, choose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. Why do parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, make the choice to consider charter schools?
2. How do parents learn about schooling options and what data do they use to make their decisions about where to send their children to school?
3. What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school?
4. What values drive parents' decisions to choose charter or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley's local public school?

Because this study focused on the Penns Valley Area School District, it was necessary to have an understanding of the district, the community, and the community beliefs about the school. These background data were gathered via achievement data, and community and parent surveys which are completed yearly as part of the district's Strategic Plan. Additionally, it was necessary to access information about the charter schools in which the students are enrolling. This information included achievement data and teacher qualifications. As the study unfolded, and parents' beliefs were determined, additional data were gathered as needed.

Since this study focused on parental decision making about schooling for their child, it is important to believe that parents are making decisions with the best of intentions. It is however important to distinguish between best intentions and what Stefkovich (2006) calls "best interests of the student" (p. 14). These are not interchangeable. While most people make decisions with the "best of intentions", not all decisions are made with the "best interest" in mind as, in order to do so, one must look at a situation from many different perspectives. Because it is difficult to define "the best interest" of the student, Stefkovich offers a model of rights, responsibilities, and respect to determine best interest (Stefkovich, 2006). Additionally, whether parents and public schools, including

teachers and administrators, have a mutual understanding of "best interest" must be considered.

In order to analyze parental decision making, Weiss's (1995) decision making framework was used as Weiss's framework takes into account the data or information collected, the interests of the parents as well as the ideologies which parents possess.

Conceptual Framework

For this study, it was necessary to modify Weiss's Four "I"'s of decision outcomes to include only three "I's", interests, ideologies, and information, as the fourth "I" involved is institutional decision-making, something which is not addressed in this study. This conceptual framework takes into consideration the varied resources different people bring to the decision-making table. Weiss's (1995) model indicates that these three "I's" interact to shape a decision. While it is the interaction of the three "I's" which Weiss believes are used in the decision making process, it is important to understand each individually before looking at the interaction among the three. Weiss does so by definition and example.

Weiss defines interests as self-interests. In terms of school choice, parents' interests could include giving their child access to an alternative curriculum based upon specific talents. It might also include wanting an academic advantage

or smaller class size. To some parents who choose cyber charter school, it might be the pull of the "free computer" and "free internet access" which is given to them upon enrollment. While self-interests might change, few people would make a decision which would be counter to his or her self-interest.

According to Weiss, ideology looks at principles, values, and philosophy. These provide the "emotionally charged orientation" to an issue, however, because most people have many values and principles, ideologies can sometimes be in conflict with one another, even when it is a single person who holds those values and beliefs. The interest in charter school might be because parents value discipline or languages charter schools offer. Parents might also value having their children at home and therefore choose cyber schooling.

Finally, Weiss describes information as the knowledge and ideas a person uses to make decisions and stresses that most of the knowledge a person has comes from experience. When looking at school choice, the information could be gathered from friends, the school or the media, or could be based upon personal experience as most people have attended school for twelve or more years and thus have much information on schooling.

Again, while individually defined, it is the interaction of the three I's that shape the decision making process. In

Weiss's framework, the interaction between ideology and information can be referred to as one's "beliefs"(p. 577). Two people can obtain the same information, but if their values differ, the information can be interpreted quite differently. For example, a school can receive high state test scores and depending on the beliefs of the person looking at the scores, one could decide that the school is only teaching to the test or one could decide that the school is preparing students very well. Both decisions were based upon the same information but different ideologies.

According to Weiss, "decision makers work out the specifications of their interests in light of the information they have" (p. 583). As people amass information, their perceptions may change and thus they may alter their self-interests. Similarly, a person's values are shaped by their self-interests and as these interests change, their values or ideologies may change as well. Using this framework, the intent of this study was to collect data to determine what ideologies, information and interests parents use to decide to send their child to a charter or cyber charter school instead of the Penns Valley Area School District.

Significance of the Study

Enrollment in both Cyber and Cyber Charter schools has increased over the past several years and now these charter schools play a prominent role in American education. These schools are founded by teachers or parents who want fewer guidelines and by for-profit companies looking for financial gains. While charter schools function outside of many of the policies and regulations which traditional public schools are required to follow, many concerns about the effectiveness of the charter schools have been expressed. Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) in *20/20 Vision for the Future*, cites concerns about charter funding, economic impact on traditional schools, qualified teaching staff in charter schools and the high rate of employee turnover in charter schools. (PSEA, 2010). All of these concerns have the potential to affect student learning.

While PSEA has valid concerns, the people ultimately responsible for the education of the child, the parents, must determine "the best interest" of the student. People tend to change course only when there is dissatisfaction with the current course. There is widespread dissatisfaction with today's educational system as can be seen in the media such as the movie, *Waiting for Superman*, and in the increased enrollment in private and charter schools. What is not clear is with what

are parents and the greater society are dissatisfied. While test scores and achievement data might provide some clue, in the case of the Centre County districts mentioned in this study, all schools were performing quite well. In almost all cases, the traditional public schools were outperforming all the charter and cyber charter schools which are attended by Centre County residents.

Critics of school choice, claim that "there is inequality among parents on their capacity to choose because certain parents may lack the information needed to participate in meaningful deliberation, and others may lack trust in authorities (Betebenner, Foster, Howe, 2005). How then are parents making the decision to send their children to charter or cyber charter schools?

While this study focused on answers given by Penns Valley Area School District parents, the questions which are posted in this research must be answered by all traditional public school districts if they want to keep students attending the local schools. With more options for parents and students, knowing the wants and needs of the customer is necessary. Moreover, as the public schools develop programming, write curriculum, and set goals for their Comprehensive Plans, data about how and why parents choose schools for their students is necessary to provide meaningful, relevant, education for all students.

The review of the literature provided the background needed to begin to study why parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, make the choice to consider charter schools? How do parents learn about schooling options and what data do they use to make their decisions about where to send their children to school? What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school? What values drive parents' decisions to choose charter or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley's local public school?

Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

This chapter reviews literature on school choice, charter schools, charter school debates, and parent decision making. Specifically, the literature review gives an understanding of the historical development of charter schools in the United States and particularly, Pennsylvania. Research will then be offered on the Charter School debate, including the rationale behind charter schools, student achievement in charter schools, and how the charter school movement affects public schools. Finally, research on parental decision making when determining how to educate their children will be reviewed.

Historical Development of Schools in Pennsylvania

As early as 1895, Pennsylvania established legislation requiring compulsory attendance in schools. These laws, the demand for white collar jobs, the interest in curbing child labor laws, and the decrease in the need for agricultural wages due to technology, increased high school diploma attainment by a factor of five from 1910 to 1940 (Goldin & Katz, 1997). In 1949, The Pennsylvania Legislature passed 24 PS 13-1327, Compulsory School Attendance Code, which further articulated the requirements for all children ages 8 to 17. Specifically,

every child of compulsory school age having a legal residence in this Commonwealth, as provided in this article, and every migratory child of compulsory school age, is required to attend a day school in which the subjects and activities prescribed by the standards of the

State Board of Education are taught in the English language (PDE, 1949).

This meant, with the exception of religious schools, most of which were Catholic, most families, unless they were wealthy enough to send their children to a private school, had little choice but to enroll their children in the local public school.

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation At Risk*, which declared that the United State's educational system had been "committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." The document made recommendations for sweeping educational reform including:

1. Increased content in Math, Science, and Foreign Language
2. Standardized testing
3. Seven-hour school days for at minimum two hundred days per year
4. Teacher competency requirements
5. Target needs of key groups of students; gifted and talented, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority and handicapped students (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

A Nation At Risk, began the discussions for school reform which included school choice for parents. Budde, in 1988, published *Education by Charter*, which laid out a ten-year plan for restricting the education system. Specifically, the plan

dictated a movement from "a four-level line and staff organization" to "a two-level form in which groups of teachers would receive educational charters directly from the school board" and would carry the responsibility for instruction. The idea received much attention and in 1992, the first charter school, City Academy High School, opened in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

Another publication by the Center for Educational Reform entitled *A Nation Still At Risk* was published in 1998. This document recommended more school choice, specifically charter and private schools for all students (The Center for Education Reform, 1998). Armed with these publications and recommendations, school choice and charter schools grew across the United States, including Pennsylvania.

Following the publication of these reports, Pennsylvania, under Governor Tom Ridge, advocated school choice in the form of vouchers. This increased the number of options for Pennsylvania parents to include free traditional public school, free charter schooling, private schooling at parental expense, limited access to vouchers, and home education.

The PA Legislature passed Act 169 in 1988 which permitted parents and legal guardians to educate their children at home. This choice option came with restrictions which included the local school district monitoring of the home schooling program

by the local school district. Specifically, the parent or guardian, must provide documentation of his/her high school diploma, must submit a program of study for the student, must submit a portfolio of materials used and a log of student class sessions. Additionally, the student must take a standardized test in grades five, eight, and eleven. Finally, a written yearly evaluation of student progress must be obtained from a certified PA educator at the expense of the parent or guardian.

In 1997, the PA Legislature passed Act 22 which regulated PA charter schools. The law was passed to develop a successful charter school system which would be "grounded in accountability for academic success with an emphasis on developing and broadly disseminating best practices, in the context of ensuring the flexibility and innovative atmosphere that are inherent to charter schools" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1997). According to Act 22, The Commonwealth's charter school system is intended to:

1. Improve pupil learning
2. Increase learning opportunities for all pupils
3. Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching Methods
4. Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site;
5. Provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system
6. Hold the schools established under this Act

accountable for meeting measurable academic standards and provide the school with a method to establish accountability systems. (P.S. 24, PA Act 22, Senate Bill 123).

The provisions of Act 22 allow individuals or groups to establish a charter school by petitioning the local school board and outlining the new charter school's mission and goals. These charters are then funded by the local districts based upon the number of students attending. While charter schools must comply with many PA regulations such as state testing, other requirements such as mandatory teacher certification for all teachers are waived. Only seventy-five percent of charter school teachers must be certified.

While Act 22 set the standard for "brick and mortar" charter schools, it did not have regulations in place for the new and emerging on-line schooling. These cyber schools, the first in PA being PA Cyber, began operation with little oversight. In 2002, the PA legislature passed Act 88, Cyber Charter School legislation which requires the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to oversee all cyber charter schools. Act 88, which was renewed in 2006, stipulates that, unlike charter schools, which are approved by local districts, PDE alone is responsible for approval and oversight of the cyber

charter schools. Specifically, the PA Department of Education must:

1. Annually assess if a cyber charter school is meeting the goals of its charter and must conduct a comprehensive review every five years prior to charter renewal.
2. Annually review the cyber charter's performance on PSSA, Keystone testing, and other academic indicators including graduation rates, and attendance rates.
3. Have access to records, instructional materials, and staff and student access.

Additionally, each cyber charter school must provide all equipment, including computer, printer, and internet services necessary for online delivery of an educational curriculum. As of 2015, there were at least twelve cyber charter schools operating in Pennsylvania. The first, PA Cyber, received its five-year renewal in 2014.

Rationales for Charter Schools

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office on Innovations and Improvement: "The promise charter schools hold for public innovation and reform lies in an unprecedented combination of freedom and accountability" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, 1). Within this promise and the tasks given to the charter schools by Act 22, one can find the rationales for Charter Schools. In reviewing each rationale for the

establishment of charter schools, one can find compelling arguments against their establishment or continued renewal. These arguments are the basis of the Charter School debate.

Weitzel and Lubienski (2010) have consolidated these rationales into three categories: equity, innovation, and competition. These categories provide a framework for proponents and opponents to supply evidence as to why charter schools either do or do not lead to higher performing, innovative schools for all students. Each of the three categories, should be reviewed in order to understand and evaluate the rationale for charter schools.

Equity Rationale

In 1993, forty percent of parents said they choose their residency based on access to good schools (NCES, 1997). Rooney, Hussar, and Planty (2006) found that a quarter of U.S. families have moved to their current location based upon the schools, most of these families being middle and upper class families. While high socioeconomic families have the means and the ability to choose schools, most poor families are unable to do so. This stratification by residential choice, has led to substantial stratification of public schools based upon race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Orfield and Lee, 2004). Since poor schools do not have the funding or means to provide similar educational opportunities as compared to their more affluent

counterparts, many disadvantaged students are trapped in failing schools.

Based upon the equality rationale, school choice can be viewed as a civil rights issue. However, according to Orfield and Frankenberg (2013), school choice has been "increasingly separated from civil rights while being linked to different agendas" (p. 4), yet educational inequality is escalating.

If one looks at the academic performance of most schools in poverty stricken areas, it becomes evident as to why some look to charter schools as a way to bring equity in education. The thought is that providing more choice through charter schools should improve equity by giving parents and students with low socioeconomic status, the same options already available to upper-class students (Lubienski and Weitzel, 2010).

In theory, the charter school choice would offer all students equal access to high quality, innovative education. Unfortunately, what happens is that the choice for poverty stricken students is usually "another segregated impoverished school under a different management system" (Frankenberg and Orfield, p. 5). According to Lubienski and Weitzel (2010), most data show that charter schools are as segregated, sometimes more so, than public schools in the same geographical area. In addition, the data indicate that charter schools tend to have

fewer special education and low socioeconomic students than their public school counterparts.

Innovation Rationale

With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, increased accountability and the importance of test scores have pushed states and school districts to reform their beliefs and practices. The idea that, if unencumbered by local school district policies, charter schools could reform education, is one on which the charter school movement was built. "Since public schools typically have limited choices in their management of teachers, use of resources, and selection of curricula and instructional techniques, they arguably do not have enough latitude to develop innovative approaches to common educational challenges" (Lubienski and Weitzel, 2010, p. 16). Charter schools are not limited by the bureaucracy, and therefore are believed to have a greater range of options for responding to needs of students (Merseth, 2009).

In their book, *Politics, Markets, and American Schools*, Chubb and Terry Moe (1999), argue that choice itself has the capacity to bring about significant educational reform. While charter schools have indeed, brought about change in educational governance, it is questionable as to whether they have brought about change at the classroom level, the place where parents and students would experience the innovation. Instead, many

charter schools have "gone back to the basics" approach.

Lubienski and Weitzel (2010) argue this is because many charter schools have adopted the "tried and true approach" that appeals to conservative parents who want academic performance.

Additionally, true innovation is costly and many charter schools simply do not have the capital to pursue innovative classrooms.

Although there is not much evidence to show innovation at the classroom level, it can be argued that charter schools offer innovation in other areas. Specifically, charter schools have pioneered the idea of school marketing (Lubienski and Weitzel, 2010, p. 23). Unlike public schools, charter schools are faced with the fact that funding is tied to school enrollment and therefore must be innovative in ways in which they attract potential students. This leads into the final rationale for charter schools.

Competition Rationale

It was the belief of charter school proponents that competition would result in better public schools, a system which typically did not have to worry about competing. Specifically, the thought was that parents would pull students from underperforming schools and enroll them in charter schools. When the charter schools produced higher achievement scores, more students would enroll. This would leave the public schools with fewer students and therefore, fewer dollars. The public

schools would have no choice but to improve their educational opportunities to raise student achievement, thus promoting competition with the charter schools.

This suggests there are two issues associated with competition between charter and traditional public schools. First is the question as to whether students in charter schools perform better. In one study, Hoxby (2000) found that high levels of choice were associated with better performing public schools. This however is not the case in all studies. "A few of the smaller-scale studies of specific localities show advantages for charter schools, but most of the large-scale studies indicate that charter schools are performing at a level about or equal to, or somewhat lower than, public school comparison groups"(Lubienski and Weitzel, 2010, p. 20). The second question asks what effect charter schools have on public schools? While many suggest that competition strengthens all schools, Ni and Arsen (2010) argue that charter schools not only do not result in better public schools, but in some cases, result in the detriment of public schools. Both of these questions will be reviewed in greater detail in the next two sections.

While there is potential for charter schools to lead innovation and educational reform for all students, Orfield and Frankenberg caution:

Choice is meant to disrupt the status quo and is defended as a great creator of opportunity and positive change, but fundamentally different theories and philosophies are at war under its broad umbrella. Praising choice in abstract terms is affirming something that has many contradictory realities and consequences without thinking through the many different kinds of processes that can either open opportunities or increase stratification (Frankenberg and Orfield, p. 63, 2013).

Student Achievement in Charter Schools

It is not surprising that Erb (2004) found that parents placed little importance on high stakes testing when they cited communication, behavior, and curriculum as important. That is because standardized testing does not account for the traits and values some parents believe is important. Bill Ayers explains:

Standardized tests can't measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, commitment, nuance, goodwill, ethical reflection, or a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes. What they can measure and count are isolated skills, specific facts and functions, content knowledge, the least interesting and least significant aspects of learning (Ayers, pg 3,1993).

While this may be the case, the first and most basic goal of education is to give students a strong knowledge base so that they will be able to apply that knowledge to the dispositions and attributes Ayers suggests. Additionally, while these attributes are extremely important in educating children, they are difficult if not impossible to measure. It is therefore easier to use standardized tests.

There has been much research on student achievement on standardized tests, and while there are proponents both for and against such tests, with the requirements of NCLB, all public schools, charters included, must use these tests as measures of student performance. With this in mind, both sides of the charter school debate have looked to research on standardized testing. The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes at Stanford University found a "wide variation in performance" (2009 p. 6). The study showed that seventeen percent of charter schools provided students with a superior education, fifty percent of charter schools have results that are no different from public schools, while thirty-seven percent of charter schools deliver a poorer education to their students than they would have received if they would have remained in their traditional public schools (2009). Tim Sass (2006), in his analysis of student achievement of charter school students in Florida, found that achievement is initially lower in new charter schools. According to the study, this changes in year five, when charter school students show no difference in mathematic scores and a slight increase in reading over traditional public schools. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2002), in their study of students attending Texas charter schools, also found that scores in first year charters are significantly lower than average public schools. Additionally, they found that

scores of charter school students are par with traditional school students after the first three years of the charter schools existence.

Overall, Hanushek et. al. (2002) found that higher quality charter schools are as good as or better than average public schools but, the lowest performing charters perform much lower than the lowest performing traditional public schools. Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass, and Witte (2009) completed a longitudinal study of eight states to evaluate the effects on charter schools on achievement, attainment, integration, and competition. Like the other studies mentioned above, Zimmer and his colleagues found the charter schools beginning their first year had lower scores than their traditional public school counterparts.

Charter School Effects on Local School Districts

While most of the data are inconclusive, it is evident that new charter schools are performing at a lower level than are their traditional public school counterparts. Yet, many students and parents decide to leave traditional public schools for the charter school experience for many of the reasons already mentioned. As they choose to leave, many critics of charter schools say that this migration has harmful, lasting effects on the traditional public schools. These effects include loss of resources and funding of traditional public

schools, loss of "better students" thus affecting school performance, profit component of charter schools, and socioeconomic and racial segregation.

The eight state longitudinal study which was completed by Zimmer and his colleagues found no evidence that charter schools affect the performance of the nearby traditional public schools, either positively through completion or negatively by diverting resources (Zimmer et al., 2009). While the authors label these findings as "suggestive", not "definitive", many districts losing hundreds of thousands of dollars to charter school funding would argue against these findings. Proponents of charter education would argue that leaving a traditional public school, is the same as moving to another district, the state money moving with the student.

This however is not the case with charter schools in Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania, both state monies and local tax dollars are sent to charter schools when student choose to attend. This, coupled with some charter schools being run as for profit agencies, has led educational reformers like Diane Ravitch (2010) argue that charters are draining already scarce resources from public schools. Ravitch also suggests that charters are taking the "better" students from traditional schools and leaving those hardest to educate. Proponents of

charters argue that, since charters are public schools, all students have the right to attend either.

Ronald Wolk (2011) also addresses the concerns and criticism that appeared in a report by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA. In this report, Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang argue that charter schools are more racially segregated than traditional public schools because a majority of their students are minority students. Wolk, who calls this criticism outlandish, argues, as a proponent of charter schools, that this should be no surprise. He believes that this is the case because minority students attend the lowest performing traditional public schools and thus have a reason to want to leave them. Zimmer and his colleagues, in their eight state study, found no evidence to support the fact that charter schools increase racial segregation, with the exception of African American students. These students, according to the study, are most likely to attend charter schools with a larger population of African Americans than the public schools in which they previously attended (Zimmer, 2009).

What is clear, is that charter schools are not having the positive effects on traditional public schools which Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of teachers, believed they would when he embraced the movement in 1988 (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). At this time, it was believed

that teachers would be part of the charter school growth. Instead, the movement has been championed by parents, non-profit, and for profit groups.

Jeffery Henig (2008), in his book *Spin Cycle*, takes us back to August 17, 2004, when the *New York Times* published an article entitled "Charter Schools Trail in Results, U.S. Data Reveals". The article, which cited evidence on the ineffectiveness of charter schools as related to student achievement, implied that the Bush administration attempted to suppress this information. In response, school choice proponents mounted their own public campaign citing evidence from Hoxby and others in support of charter schools. Henig, reviews how research, democracy and policy making are intertwined. Finally, Henig states that it is "apparent that the lines between politics and research, between values and data, between theories and ideologies, are permeable and ill defined" (2008, p. 217). Until these lines are defined, the charter school debate will continue.

Why Parents Choose Charter Schools

It is clear, based upon available research studies, that parent involvement is beneficial in the education of students. Izzo, Weissberg, Kasrpro, and Fendrich (1999) found an increase in student achievement as parental involvement increased. According to Brody, Flor, and Gibson (1999), parent involvement increased social skills and improved overall behavior of

students. We know the importance of parent involvement yet; most teachers would list parent involvement as one of the most important things missing in education. Schneiger, Teske, and Marschall's parent decision-making model provides a link between school choice and parent involvement. They suggest that when parents choose their children's schools, they will become more engaged in the education of the children (Schneider et al., 2000). This model has come up against some criticism. Howell evaluated school choice in several urban cities and found no more involvement from parents who exercised school choice than from parents sending their children to traditional public schools (Howell, et al, 2002).

While parental involvement in schools is important, the question in this study is how and why parents choose schools, specifically charter schools. Buckley & Schneider (2003) argue that it is at least a "two step process" as parents must first choose to leave the traditional public school in which their children are enrolled and then determine which alternative to choose.

If one is to believe Schneider and Buckley's argument, then the first part of the two step process to determine why parents choose to leave the traditional public school. Mote (2001), in reviewing Phi Delta Kappa data, found that parents were dissatisfied with public schools because they believed their

public school was outperformed by private school, did not address diversity issues, was intolerant of religion, did not provide for a safe atmosphere, and did not promote parent involvement. A report from the Consortium of Productivity of Schools (1995) suggests that there must be external adaptation in public schools. Specifically, schools must determine what their customers, their students, want and need, and then use that information to promote change within the system. Unfortunately, public schools, due to policies, procedures, and regulations, not to mention the long standing tradition of being the only game in town, are not always equipped or willing to do so.

Once a parent decides to choose something other than public school, the determination of which alternative to choose is a difficult one, especially considering both the number of choices in schooling and the amount of data and information which are accessible to help parents make the choice.

When making these decisions to leave the traditional school and enroll in an alternative, this case, a charter school, what resources do parents use? Weiss (1995) suggests that different people bring different resources to the table; specifically, different interests, ideologies, and information.

Information in Parental Decision Making

The knowledge or information people collect to make decisions is based upon the values and the interest discussed previously and comes from their experiences. The information can be gathered from organization data, education, or from outside sources such as friends and consultants (Weiss, 1995).

Buckley and Schneider (2007) suggest that the:

level and quality of information about schools is often poorer than the information about consumer goods, and there are few intermediaries or third parties (such as the Consumer Union) that independently "test" products and disseminate information about the quality and reliability of schools. In turn, most parents have very low levels of reliable information about the schools their children attend (p. 135).

Of course, with PA schools being "graded" on everything from graduation rate, to test scores, to academic growth rate, organizational data are easy to find. Pennsylvania Department of Education has launched several websites, including www.paschoolperformance.org and www.pvaas.sas.org, which are designed to give the public information on how schools are performing with regards to state assessments, graduation rates, number of Advanced Placement Courses, and SAT scores. In addition to these data, parents receive report cards and newsletters from the school in which their student attends. This information is not only easy to obtain but is also black and white as compared to information from outside sources. While easily obtained, the large quantity of information, the parents'

abilities to navigate the information, and the knowledge of where to go to get the information can put this information out of reach for many. In addition, is it the right information, meaning, is it the information that parents want?

Lupia and McCubbins (1998), argue that, instead of "encyclopedic knowledge", people can use shortcuts to obtain information to help them make decisions. Buckley and Schneider (2007) cite identifying experts and taking cues from those experts, social networks and verbal information passed on by friends and colleagues as examples of these short cuts. It should be noted that many outside sources, such as social networks, tend to have bias data or information, as they tend to be segregated by race and class. This is supported by Buckley and Schneider (2007) who sum up the research:

research based upon surveys tends to find that parents of all races and social classes say they prefer schools that have good teachers and high test scores...However, these stated preferences are not congruent with observed parental behavior, where researchers have found significant effects on race and class (p. 123).

Finally, advertisement is an increasing way that parents can gain information on on school choice. Because cyber charter and charter schools are not subject to the same financial constraints and scrutiny from taxpayers as are their traditional public school counterparts, may charter and cyber charter schools advertise their schools in a variety of ways.

These include commercials in movie theatres, advertisements in newspapers and magazines, advertisements on the radio and on the Internet and mailings. According to a the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School Performance Audit Report (2012) written by the PA Auditor General, the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School alone spent \$3.5 million dollars on advertisements in the two year period from 2008 to 2010.

Parent Interests in Decision Making

Weiss (1995) believes that "people work out the specifications of their interests in light of the information they have" (p. 578) and they redefine their interests as situations change. These interests are personalized according to the values and beliefs of the family. According to Teske and Marschall (2000), parents choose to move their children to a different school when they believe the school is not receptive to their involvement or when their children were not successful in school. Rebecca Erb (2004), in a study of parents who enrolled their children in PA charter schools, found that communication about performance was an important factor in parental decision making about schools for their children. Specifically, while report cards, conversations with teachers, and curriculum were important, data on high stakes testing had little influence on the decision making process.

Moe notes that critics suggest that parental interest, especially among low-income parents, is more "about practical concerns, such as how close the school is or whether it has a good sports team, and put little emphasis on academic quality and other properties of effective schooling" (Moe, 1995, pp. 26-27). According to Buckley and Schneider (2007), if as critics suggest, parents are interested more in non-academic issues than in academic performance, this situation could drastically decrease the quality of learning in all schools.

Parents' Ideologies in Decision Making

The self-interests parents are using to make decisions are based upon their beliefs and their values. Weiss, (1995) believes that

people's ideologies are sometimes carefully constructed and internally consistent, but often they are haphazard and makeshift. However weakly integrated they may be, they provide an emotionally charged normative orientation that provides a basis for position taking (p. 224).

Lubienski and Weitzel (2010), believe that this position taking, school choice, is a form of values expression. Specifically, they believe:

Parents not only will be able to find a high-quality school but will also be able to match their academic, behavioral, cultural, or philosophical preferences with school communities sharing the same views (p. 16).

Rebecca Erb's study supports this idea of values expression. Specifically, Erb's (2004) study on how parents

decide to send their children to cyber charter schools, determined that "push factors" values such as unsatisfactory school environment was much more important to parents than the "pull factors" such as innovations and promotions of charter schools (p. 96). Specifically, Erb found that parents believed that their children would achieve more in a charter school due to the increased communication and flexibility associated with charters. Additionally, Erb found that parents were concerned about negative behaviors in traditional public schools, including language, tobacco, and manners. Finally, Erb found that bullying played a significant role in parental decisions to send their children to charter schools (Erb, 2004).

While ideology plays a big part in parental decision making, many critics argue that parents, especially parents of low socio-economic status, would make decisions based upon the "wrong" criteria or would make no choice at all (Ascher, Fruchter, & Berne, 1996).

Assuming that most parents, regardless of race, class, or educational background want what is best for their children and make decisions based upon what they perceive to be in the "best interest" of their family, the purpose of this research is to determine why parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, choose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Parents have, for a long time, had the right to exercise school choice for the education of their children. The school choice concept has been a foundation of educational policy in Pennsylvania and, for the past decade, has become increasingly popular and controversial. Some advocates see charter schools as a civil rights and liberty issue for those economically disadvantaged students in failing schools (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Yet, many students leave high performing schools to attend charter or cyber charter schools.

As stated above, the purpose of this research was to determine why parents in the Penns Valley Area School District, a high performing district according to AYP data, choose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district.

Specifically, this study will address the following research questions:

1. Why do parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, make the choice to consider charter schools?
2. How do parents learn about schooling options and what data do they use to make their decisions about where to send their children to school?

3. What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school?
4. What values drive parents' decisions to choose charter or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley's local public school?

Rational for Qualitative Approach

This inductive case study required the researcher to probe parents as to the why and how of the decision-making process to gather descriptive dialogue about parental decisions and how they are made. The intent of the research was to obtain a deep, rich understanding of complex decision-making models parents use when deciding to send their children to cyber charter or charter schools instead of the high performing Penns Valley Area School District's traditional public schools. According to Krueger (1994), a qualitative approach will enable the researcher to get in tune with the respondents and discover how the people view reality. This discovery will be vital in determining the ideologies, information, and interests used to make decisions (Weiss, 1995).

Because this study attempted to determine the complex thought processes behind parental decisions to choose cyber charter and charter schools over the more traditional public schools, it was necessary to probe and question parents in face-

to-face interactions over time. This data collection method, which happened in a natural context, is a major characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009).

Giving participants the opportunity to share their views and beliefs in order to determine an explanation was an additional rationale for this approach. Having the data collected in this open-ended manner allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' beliefs. This reliance on meaning that participants hold about a problem or issue, not on the researcher's views or the expressed views of the literature review, is another basic characteristic of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009).

The emergent nature of the qualitative method is yet another reason it was the method of choice for this study. While the researcher had an initial "plan of attack", the process, questions, and the form of data collection changed as information from the participants was collected (Creswell, 2009). This emphasis on future research activities, which are explicitly contingent on what is learned through ongoing encounters, could not be accomplished through other means (Morgan, 1997).

Finally, this qualitative approach gave the researcher multiple sources of data which were then interpreted and organized into the themes stated in the conceptual framework.

This holistic method allowed the researcher to make inferences about the larger population (Creswell, 2009). The themes or abstractions which emerged allowed the research to better construct an understanding of how parents decide to send their children to cyber charter or charter schools.

In summary, the intent of this research was to provide a holistic understanding of why parents in the Penns Valley Area School district decide to send their children to cyber charter and charter schools and how, meaning what data and ideals are used to make those decisions. The natural settings in which participants' meanings were collected through various data sources in an emergent design lends itself to the qualitative approach.

Justification for Research Design

According to Tellis (1997), a case study can be seen to satisfy the three tenets of the qualitative method: describing, understanding, and explaining. Since the purpose of this study was to determine why parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, a high performing district, choose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district, a case study design is a logical choice. This design allowed the researcher to describe the phenomenon in the Penns Valley Area School District, gave the researcher an understanding of why parents are making the choices they are, and helped to explain

the decision-making process in terms of interests, ideologies, and information as described in the conceptual framework.

A case study, as defined by Creswell (2009), is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth an event, process, or individuals. Schramm (1971) believes the focus of case study research is to help the researcher explain a decision with regards to why it was made, how it was made, and with what result. Tellis (1997) writes:

The body of literature in case study research is "primitive and limited" in comparison to that of experimental or quasi-experimental research. The requirements and inflexibility of the latter forms of research make case studies the only viable alternative in some instances. It is a fact that case studies do not need to have a minimum number of cases, or to randomly "select" cases. The researcher is called upon to work with the situation that presents itself in each case. (p. 3)

A frequent criticism of case study methodology is that its dependence on a single case renders it incapable of providing a generalizing conclusion yet Yin (1993) believes the goal of the study should establish the parameters, and then those should be used to make generalizations. It is for these reasons that the case study method was invaluable in determining the interests, ideologies, and information parents use to choose a cyber charter or charter school over a traditional public school.

Site and Sample Selection

This study focused on the Penns Valley Area School District and the reasons parents choose to send their children to charter schools rather than the traditional public schools within the district. It was therefore necessary to have an understanding of the district, the community, and the community beliefs about the school. These background data were gathered via achievement data, and community and parent surveys which the district possess as part of the Strategic Planning Survey.

Additionally, information about the charter schools in which the students are enrolling, was collected. This information included achievement data, teacher qualifications, and advertising. These background data were used to develop questions for the study. As the study unfolded, and parents' beliefs were determined, additional data were gathered as needed.

In order to obtain participants for the study, the researcher obtained the number of students in the district currently enrolled in cyber charter or charter schools. The district sent each family a letter explaining the purpose of the study and asked them to participate in a focus group in which they were asked about their decision to choose a charter school over the traditional public school within the district.

This sampling method is what Morgan (1997) calls a theoretically-motivated sampling. This sampling method was used over random sampling for two reasons. First, it was unlikely that the sample size in this study was adequate to represent a larger population since there were only approximately eighty-four students in the district attending charter schools. Second, a random sampling of families in the district may not have been sufficiently informed about charter schools, making it difficult to have a perspective. Instead, the theoretical sampling was used to achieve homogeneity and segmentation. This method of sampling helped to ensure that all participants had something to say about the topic (Morgan, 1997).

The location of the initial focus groups was in a school library in one of Penns Valley Area School District's buildings. While Krueger (1994) recommends that environmental group be neutral, this was considered and discarded due to the circumstances of the study. Specifically, complete neutrality was virtually impossible based on the topic of the study and the researcher, who is employed by the district. The attempt to minimize this concern was the basis for the decision to conduct a focus group.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher of this study has been employed by the Penns Valley Area School District as the Assistant Superintendent of Schools for the past seven years. This posed both pluses and minuses during the study. This position meant the researcher had a deep understanding of the working within the district and had easy access to all data. Due to the position of the researcher, some parents were willing, even anxious, to share their stories. One parent commented that " ... it was nice that someone from the district was willing to listen." Additionally, as parents were telling their stories, the researcher was able to understand the scenarios. For example, when a parent was talking about the seventh grade team structure, the researcher had considerable knowledge about that specific structure.

There were several negative aspects of the researcher being employed by the district. First, while there were eight-four possible participants, only twenty-four of the original charter school students' parents agreed to be part of the focus groups. This may be due to the researcher being employed by the district. Additionally, researcher's knowledge and close ties to the district made it more likely that she would bring bias into the focus groups. In order to minimize this, the third party who was charged with documenting changes in speakers, was

also tasked with ensuring the researcher was not pulled into the discussion. Finally, this research was about parental decision making based upon information, interests, and ideologies.

There were times during the focus groups when the parents were stating inaccurate information about the district, some of it about issues on which the researcher, due to confidentiality, could not correct.

Research Strategy

Gaining entry to the district information and to the names of the families enrolled did not involve the more formalized process recommended when doing a case study as the researcher for this study is employed by the district and is the gatekeeper of the information. This being said, a formal proposal to the District Superintendent was submitted. Before beginning the study, the researcher also gained approval through Pennsylvania State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), for "Exemption Review".

Again, the researcher working for the district which was being studied posed some concern about bias and neutrality. To minimize these concerns during the research, a case study using a focus group strategy was utilized for initial data collection. This is a multi-perspective analysis where the researcher considers both the voice and perspective of the participants, but also of the interaction among participants (Tellis, 1997).

In addition to the concerns of bias and neutrality, the focus group was chosen over individual reviews to allow the researcher to observe interaction during a group discussion. These discussions provided direct evidence about similarities and differences in opinions and experiences (Morgan, 1997). It is these data which allowed the researcher to use these opinions and experiences to determine what interests, ideologies, and information parents use when choosing a school for their children.

The use of focus groups does pose possible disadvantages over the interview method which could have been used in this study. While the interview method would have provided a greater amount of information from each participant and greater control for the researcher, the fact that the researcher is employed by the district to which parents in this study have chosen to not send their children, makes the focus group more advantageous. The "safety in numbers" thought process is appropriate in this reasoning. If a parent has experienced a problem with the school, he/she might not be willing to discuss the matter in an individual interview with an administrator from that specific district. He/she might feel more comfortable if other parents were present to support them or express similar concerns. It was the hope of the researcher that, in addition to data collection, the use of the focus group could also be

used as an "ice-breaker" between the researcher and the participants so that participants might feel more comfortable with talking privately to a district employed researcher during an individual follow up interview.

After the initial focus groups were completed, individual interviews with some of the participants were used to follow-up on ideas which were needed to be fleshed out in greater detail. This was done because the researcher believed that, for a variety of reason, the participant's complete story was not shared in the focus groups. Agar and MacDonald (1995) argue that this closer communication between the researcher and the participant requires the participant to explain themselves in greater detail than they would need to during a focus group.

Data Collection Techniques

The Penns Valley Area School District Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Brian Griffith, granted formal approval for the study. Because the researcher works for the district, she had access to the names and contact information for all parents of students enrolled in a cyber charter or charter school. As of fall 2015, there were eighty-four students living in the Penns Valley Area School District who are attending a charter school. While providing incentives to participate in the study were considered, they were rejected as it is believed that this controversial topic was enough reason to participate. Many

parents and students want to be heard and want to believe their opinions and beliefs matter. Giving them a forum to express these beliefs and opinions should have provided enough incentive to participate.

All parents of the eighty-four students attending charter or cyber charter school were sent a letter (Appendix A) explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Parents could either respond via email or by telephone. Two weeks after the letters were sent, another letter was sent as a reminder so that a maximum number of participants could be obtained. Twenty-six parents agreed to participate in the study and each was given the opportunity to choose one of several times/dates for the focus group. One participant contacted the researcher to inquire about a parent of a home schooled student attending one of the focus groups, bringing the total count of respondents to twenty-seven. Of the twenty-seven, respondents, twenty-three attended one of the three focus group sessions. The first focus group was made up of six parents of cyber charter or charter students plus the one parent of a home schooled student. Two parents who were scheduled for this focus groups did not attend the evening of the event. They were contacted, via email, to determine if they wanted to attend another focus group or participate in an individual interview however, they did not respond. The other two focus groups sessions were comprised of

eight parents each. Two parents who agreed to participate preferred to be interviewed individually. These interviews were conducted via phone. This brought the total number of participants to twenty-five, including one home schooling parent. Of the twenty-five participants, one was a parent of a home-schooled student, nineteen were parents of brick and mortar charter school students, and five were parents of cyber charter school students.

Each focus group was scheduled to be from one and one-half to two hours in length, although two of the focus groups lasted approximately two and one-half hours. Upon approval from all participants, each focus group was recorded and each session was transcribed. In order to ensure that the all comments in the transcript were attributed to the correct participant, a third party was asked to attend and document changes in speakers during the focus groups. These documented changes in speakers were compared to the transcripts so that all dialogue could be paired with the correct participant.

Since the researcher works for the Penns Valley Area School District, it was necessary to attempt to minimize all bias from the beginning of the data collection process. The researcher's affiliation to the district was stated in the initial and follow-up letters as well as implicitly stated at the beginning of each focus group. Additionally, each focus group began with

several statements, the first of which was restatement of the intent of the research which was to help the researcher improve in her role as an educator, to potentially help Penns Valley Area School District grow and improve, and to hopefully help all educational institutions improve their communication with parents as well as their educational programming. The final statement at the end of each of the focus groups was a statement of the researcher's commitment to confidentiality during the focus groups, any subsequent interviews and in this final document.

During the focus groups, all parents were amiable and seemed very willing to share their experiences. Each focus group began with a series of general questions (Appendix B). After the initial questions were asked, the researcher allowed the discussion to flow as determined by the group. Because the researcher was an administrator in the district, some parents wanted to explain the specific situation which lead them to leave the district in favor for a cyber charter or charter school. In order to keep the focus group discussion continuing, the research would listen to the story and then, if clarification or more detail was needed, the researcher followed up on the specific situation via a follow up individual interview. Additional individual interviews were conducted as needed until theoretical saturation or interviewing until little

new information was gleaned (Krueger, 1994). Seven follow up phone interviews were requested by the researcher and five were conducted. These requests were based upon the researcher's belief that these seven participants were not able or willing to share their entire story during the focus groups. Two follow up interviews could not be conducted as phone calls were not returned.

Data Analysis Strategies

In analyzing a case study, Yin (1994) presented two strategies. The first is to rely on the theoretical propositions of the study, and then to analyze the evidence based on those propositions. The other technique is to develop a case description, which would be a framework for organizing the case study. In this case study, the evidence was analyzed using a modified version of Carol Weiss's Four "I's" Conceptual Framework (Weiss, 1995). The modified framework analyzes data with regards to the interests, ideologies, and information people bring to the decision-making table. This "peeling back the layers" allowed the researcher to analyze the data for the issues and themes underlying reasons why parents in the Penns Valley Area School District might choose a charter school over a traditional public school.

In this case study, the use of focus groups required the researcher to analyze large amounts of dialogue and transcripts.

Additionally, individual interviews, when necessary were analyzed. Axial coding, or organizing the material into chunks based upon ideas, allowed that researcher to fracture and reassemble data in many ways in an attempt to understand the data (Krueger, 1994). While the researcher began the proposal with broad topics, namely interests, ideologies, and information, the analysis was more of an emergent encounter.

During the analysis phase of the research, it was important to focus the analysis and ensure that the analysis was verifiable. Both of these are vital so that the researcher's interpretation was based on the trail of evidence and not on selective perception. It is, on the other hand, important that the analysis was not a mere descriptive summary of the data but an interpretative process where the meaning of the data helps to provide an understanding of the problem (Krueger, 1994).

Data Coding

All focus groups and follow up conversations were conducted over a period of four months. Each focus group recording was transcribed and put on paper. After each focus groups, the researcher listened to the audio recording of the focus group to make notes and document statements of the participants, which were designated a number from one to twenty-five. These notes were documented on a card designated to each participant. Additionally, the researcher used the written transcription to

"chunk" data by themes. The transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed and themes were labeled. The transcripts were cut apart into common ideas based upon what the participants said they wanted or valued in a school.

After all initial data were coded, the research reviewed all data from each of the twenty-five participants. If a story or ideas was not fully developed, follow-up questions were developed. Additional questions were developed for seven of the participants. These participants were contacted via phone to schedule a follow-up interview. Five follow-up interviews were conducted.

The specific data were then coded according to Carol Weiss's "I"'s of decision making framework to include only three "I's", interests, ideologies, and information, as the fourth "I" involved is institutional decision-making, something which is not addressed in this study.

Reliability and Validity

When interpreting data and explaining a study's findings, the accuracy and credibility of the findings are of major importance. While validity is a strength of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009), it can also be problematic (Tellis, 1997). In order to address interval validity concerns, this study incorporated techniques suggested by Owens (1982). The techniques are: prolonged data-gathering on site, triangulation,

member checks, development of a thick description, and engagement in peer consultation.

Data-gathering was achieved by using three focus groups over a period of more than four months. Each group consisted of six to ten members. In addition to the focus groups, individual interviews were conducted as the researcher analyzes the data.

In addition to the data-gathering, triangulation, or examining evidence from different sources and methods to build themes, was also used to add validity to the study. This occurred through the use of several focus groups, interviews, the data from the district's parent survey and assessment data. After coding of each focus group data, axial coding allowed the research to fracture the data and reassemble it in new ways (Krueger, 1994). This method increased the credibility of the study.

As this research study is a partial fulfillment of a doctoral program, peer to peer consultation with the dissertation committee was certain. The dissertation committee composed of faculty members from the Pennsylvania State University provided valuable insights and feedback. Additionally, the committee was able to confirm to what extent the researcher used rich, thick descriptions to convey the results of the findings. While each of these techniques

provided validation, together a strong case was made for internal validity of the study.

External validity, which deals with knowing whether the results are generalizable beyond the immediate case (Tellis, 1997), is difficult to achieve in a case study such as the one outlined in this proposal. This study was specific to Penns Valley School District parents who send their children to charter schools, not to parental choice in general. With that said, the findings from this study might lead to patterns and themes which could be the foundation of other studies.

In a case study such as this, reliability, or consistency across researchers and projects, can best be achieved by setting up a detailed, well-developed protocol (Tellis, 1997). This includes a detailed and complete data collection method and solid definitions of codes. Again, this case study is limited to one researcher within one geographic setting. This alone, increased the reliability of the study.

Limitations of Research Design

The purpose of this study clearly lends itself to a case study. Specifically, for reasons mentioned in pervious sections of this chapter, a focus study was chosen. The researcher believes that this method allowed for a rich, thick description of the problem and findings, yet it was not without limitations. A frequent criticism of case study methodology is that its

dependence on a single case renders it incapable of providing a generalizing conclusion (Yin, 1993). In this instance, the purpose of the research was not to provide generalizations which could be applied to future studies but instead to look specifically at the Penns Valley Area School District.

The focus group also lends itself to limitations. Morgan (1997) points out that the groups may influence the nature of the data they provide both from conformity and from polarization. Participants within the focus group may withhold information they would feel more comfortable disclosing in a face-to-face interview or questionnaire or they might believe that the group is an audience to which their extreme views can be heard. A highly controversial topic, which could pose great disagreement among participants, might be another limitation of the focus group. This was best be solved by a strong facilitator within the group.

Clearly, this study could be conducted via several research designs. It is however, the role of the researcher to determine the design which will provide that data which will best address the research questions with the most validity and reliability. The purpose of this study was to determine how and why parents in the Penns Valley Area School District chose to send their children to charter schools when the traditional public schools within the district are some of the best in the state. The

focus group design, described in this dissertation, enabled the researcher to answer these questions within the chosen framework.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

To review, the purpose of this research was to determine why parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, choose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Why do parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, make the choice to consider charter schools?
2. How do parents learn about schooling options and what data do they use to make their decisions about where to send their children to school?
3. What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school?
4. What values drive parents' decisions to choose charter or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley's local public school?

The research problem in this study called for a qualitative approach which helped to develop a thick description of why and how parents are making decisions to select cyber charter or brick and mortar charter schools over the local Penns Valley Area School District as a means to educating their children. Specifically, the intent of the researcher was to provide an understanding of what ideologies parents have about schooling,

what interests parents have, and what information parents use when making educational decisions.

The Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board and the Superintendent of Schools for the Penns Valley Area School District granted approval for the study to be conducted. This role of this researcher is unique since she is employed as the Assistant Superintendent of Schools in the Penns Valley Area School District. As such, she had access to all names and addresses of parents living in the who had chosen cyber charter or brick and mortar charter schools as well as direct access to all district achievement data and survey data.

Document Review

The Penns Valley Area School District

In order to best understand the why parents who live in the Penns Valley Area School District chose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district, it was necessary to have an understanding of the district, the community, and the community beliefs about the school. These background data were gathered via achievement data and parent surveys which are completed yearly as part of the district's Strategic Plan.

The Penns Valley Area School District is located on the eastern side of Centre County, Pennsylvania and encompasses five townships (Gregg, Haines, Miles, Penn, and Potter) and two boroughs (Centre Hall and Millheim) in just over two hundred and

fifty square miles. At the time of this research (fall, 2015), there were approximately 1,500 students enrolled in three elementary schools, one intermediate school and one junior-senior high school. The district employed approximately 120 faculty, 80 support staff, and eleven administrators. The operating budget of the district for the 2014-2015 school year was just over twenty-three million dollars, with just under one million of the budget allocated for charter school payments.

Since 2006, the district has offered their own cyber school, either as a full time as an option for students grades K-12 or as a part-time option coupled with brick and mortar attendance. The cyber school courses are purchased through an online company at a rate of no more than six hundred dollars a course. A full time student takes between six and eight courses per year. Student progress in the district's cyber school is monitored via administrators and guidance counselors. If a student fails to perform in the district's cyber environment, the student is not permitted to continue after one marking period and instead is required to attend the traditional Penns Valley Area School District. In the 2014-2105 school year, the district's elementary cyber programs had seven student enrolled on a full time basis. There were sixteen students enrolled in the high school program, six on a full time basis and the others part time in the Penns Valley Cyber School and

part time as a regular Penns Valley student. All elementary students were successful in completing all coursework where as three secondary school students were required to return to the traditional public school due to grades.

Each year, the district solicits information from parents and students via an anonymous online survey. Paper copies are also available. The parent survey asks parents to answer forty-five question, both multiple choice and Likert scale questions and also gives them an opportunity to provide open ended comments. The data are then used by administrators during the yearly goal developing process. The survey comparison data for 2009 through 2015 can be found in Appendix C. However, for this study, there are specific questions which might help understand a parent's interest and ideologies when it comes to choosing a school. These questions are listed in the Table 1 below.

The questions in Table 1 are beliefs and perceptions parents have about the Penns Valley Area School District. Eighty-four percent of parents agree that they feel welcome at the schools which means there are sixteen percent of parents that are potentially dissatisfied or might have had at least one negative experience when it comes to feeling welcome when interacting with a school.

Additionally, in analyzing the data in Table 1, approximately eighty percent of parents believe the Penns Valley Area School District is meeting the social and academic needs of their child/children and only seventy-four percent of parents believe that the school district is preparing their child for future achievement. This means that one in approximately every five parents do not believe their child's social, academic, or future needs are being met. All parents want what is best for their children and if they believe the school is not meeting the needs of the child, one possible option would be to look elsewhere, potentially a charter or cyber charter, for an environment where these needs are being met.

According to Table 1, while almost all parents, ninety-four percent, feel comfortable contacting Penns Valley Area School District teachers, only seventy-five percent of parents believe they have adequate communication from those teachers. This twenty percent difference could signify a possible perception that parents believe teachers do not want to communicate or work with them to help in the education of their child/children.

Finally, while eighty-five percent of parents believe the school district has a good public image, only seventy-one percent of parents would rate the perception of the district in the community as high or very high. These data indicate there is a dissatisfaction with the Penns Valley Area School District.

While the phrase, you can't please everyone is true, especially within a large organization, it is important to note, that these data show not only that parents in the Penns Valley Area School District are dissatisfied but also begin to provide a glimpse into why this dissatisfaction might exist.

Table 4.1 Questions from the Penns Valley Area School District Yearly Parent Survey – Survey Data Comparison from 2009 to 2015

Comparison of 2009-2015 Parent Survey Data	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
I feel welcome at my child's school:							
Strongly Agree	39.10%	34.84%	38.70%	33.22%	40.80%	41.26%	38.89%
Agree	38.10%	45.25%	46.44%	44.75%	43.78%	43.72%	45.63%
Neutral	14.00%	11.54%	12.07%	12.88%	9.45%	10.38%	11.90%
Disagree	7.00%	3.39%	2.17%	5.76%	3.98%	2.73%	2.38%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	1.36%	0.62%	3.39%	1.99%	1.64%	1.19%
The school meets the social needs of my child							
Strongly Agree	30.40%	24.66%	28.48%	24.75%	26.12%	30.33%	38.10%
Agree	45.80%	45.02%	47.37%	48.81%	55.97%	50.55%	42.86%
Neutral	15.00%	14.25%	17.34%	16.95%	12.69%	13.11%	13.10%
Disagree	5.10%	5.88%	4.95%	5.76%	3.98%	4.37%	5.56%
Strongly Disagree	3.70%	6.56%	1.86%	3.73%	1.24%	1.37%	0.40%
The school meets the academic needs of my child							
Strongly Agree	27.80%	25.79%	29.72%	27.80%	31.34%	33.06%	35.32%
Agree	41.50%	42.99%	45.82%	45.08%	46.52%	50.82%	44.84%
Neutral	17.50%	13.80%	14.24%	15.93%	13.93%	7.92%	10.71%
Disagree	10.40%	7.47%	7.43%	9.15%	6.97%	7.10%	7.94%
Strongly Disagree	2.80%	6.11%	2.79%	2.03%	1.24%	0.82%	1.19%

Overall, the school performs well academically							
Strongly Agree	26.20%	24.21%	31.27%	25.42%	39.55%	39.07%	42.46%
Agree	47.70%	48.64%	49.23%	52.88%	47.01%	50.00%	47.62%
Neutral	18.20%	13.57%	13.62%	16.27%	10.95%	8.47%	8.73%
Disagree	7.50%	3.17%	4.95%	3.39%	1.99%	1.91%	0.79%
Strongly Disagree	0.50%	5.88%	0.93%	2.03%	0.50%	0.27%	0.40%
The school succeeds at preparing my child for future achievement							
Strongly Agree	26.20%	21.72%	26.01%	23.73%	30.10%	31.69%	37.30%
Agree	42.50%	44.57%	45.51%	44.07%	45.52%	48.09%	37.30%
Neutral	17.80%	14.71%	16.72%	18.31%	15.67%	11.48%	15.87%
Disagree	11.70%	8.82%	8.05%	9.49%	6.97%	6.83%	8.73%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	6.33%	3.72%	4.41%	1.74%	1.64%	0.79%
The school has a good public image							
Strongly Agree	26.80%	22.17%	24.15%	21.36%	29.60%	32.24%	38.89%
Agree	43.20%	42.08%	46.44%	40.34%	46.77%	49.18%	46.43%
Neutral	17.40%	19.00%	20.43%	23.05%	17.41%	13.66%	10.71%
Disagree	10.80%	5.66%	7.74%	10.51%	5.22%	3.83%	3.17%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	6.79%	1.24%	4.75%	1.00%	0.82%	0.79%
I feel comfortable contacting my child's teacher with concerns.							
Yes	0.00%	0.00%	92.88%	88.47%	92.29%	95.90%	94.44%
No	0.00%	0.00%	7.12%	11.53%	7.71%	4.10%	5.56%
I believe that I have adequate communication from my child's teacher to assist in developing my child's learning.							
Yes	0.00%	0.00%	82.04%	74.58%	77.86%	80.60%	75.40%
No	0.00%	0.00%	17.96%	25.42%	22.14%	19.40%	24.60%
I would grade my child's school:							
A	0.00%	0.00%	34.06%	32.54%	43.53%	50.27%	52.38%
B	0.00%	0.00%	45.20%	46.44%	42.54%	39.34%	36.90%
C	0.00%	0.00%	16.10%	12.88%	12.94%	9.02%	9.13%
D	0.00%	0.00%	2.79%	5.76%	0.25%	1.37%	1.19%
F	0.00%	0.00%	1.86%	2.37%	0.75%	0.00%	0.40%
I would rate the perception of the Penns Valley Area School District in the community as:							
Very High	0.00%	0.00%	16.72%	13.56%	21.39%	22.13%	23.41%
High	0.00%	0.00%	40.25%	34.58%	40.05%	46.45%	48.02%
Average	0.00%	0.00%	34.67%	34.24%	31.59%	24.86%	24.21%
Low	0.00%	0.00%	6.19%	12.20%	6.22%	5.74%	3.97%
Very Low	0.00%	0.00%	2.17%	5.42%	0.75%	0.82%	0.40%

Academically, the district is performing well. In the tables 4.2a, 4.2b, and 4.2c below, the district's grades 3, 5, and 8 PSSA proficiency rates are compared to all cyber charter or brick and mortar schools in which district residents' children are enrolled. In each of the three grade levels, grades 3, 5, and 8, the data show that the Penns Valley Area School District is out performing all cyber charter schools and all but one brick and mortar charter school in 2013. These data are consistent in all PSSA tested grades, grades 3 through 8, and in all academic years from 2008 through 2013.

In reviewing these tables, it should be noted that the two charter schools having the worst PSSA scores, Agora Cyber Charter School and Sugar Valley Charter School, have thirty-four Penns Valley residents enrolled. This represents over forty percent of the total number of Penns Valley residents enrolled in charter or cyber charter schools.

Tables 4.2a, 4.2b, and 4.2c, also indicate that there are two charter schools which are performing similarly to Penns Valley Area School District, Centre Learning Charter School and Young Scholars Charter School. The enrollment of Penns Valley residents in these schools only represent sixteen percent of all cyber charter or charter school enrollment.

Parents across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, either via the PA Department of Education website, or the eMetric public website, www.pssa.emetric.net, can easily access school achievement data. Reviewing the data, one brick and mortar cyber school, Sugar Valley Rural Charter, was consistently among lowest performing schools of the eight schools attended by district residents. It is the belief of this researcher, based upon twenty-five years of working in education, that all parents want what is the "best" for children in all areas of life, and especially in education. If this is believed, then this would lead one to question whether parents, the PA Department of Education, and public schools, including teachers and administrators, have a mutual understanding of the "best" possible education. Clearly, if parents were only looking at standardized test scores, the "best" possible education would be in the Penns Valley Area School District yet, in the 2014-2015 school year, the parents of eighty-four students made another decision, thirty of them choosing Sugar Valley Rural Charter School.

Table 4.2a Eighth Grade PSSA Proficiency Percentages for Schools Attended By Penns Valley Residents

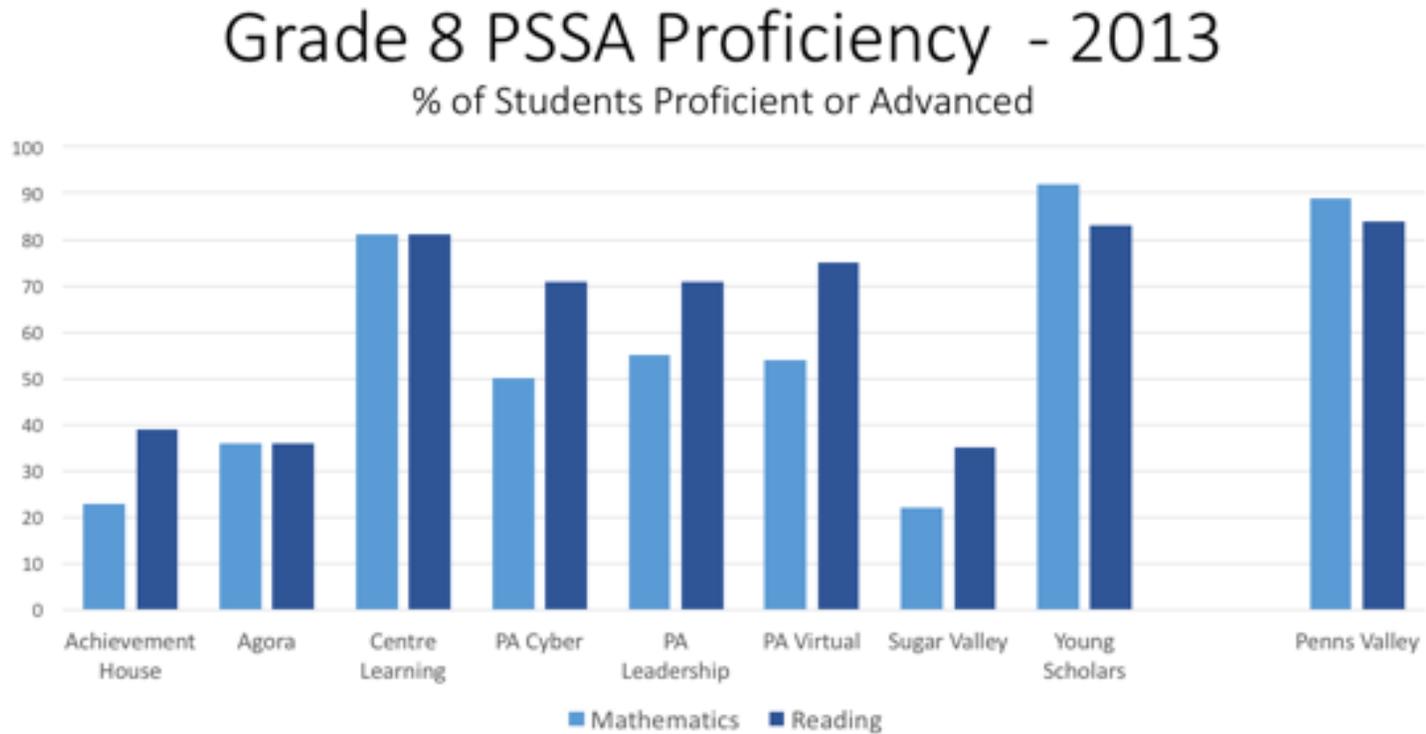


Table 4.2b Fifth Grade PSSA Proficiency Percentages for Schools Attended By Penns Valley Residents

Grade 5 PSSA Proficiency - 2013

% of Students Proficient or Advanced

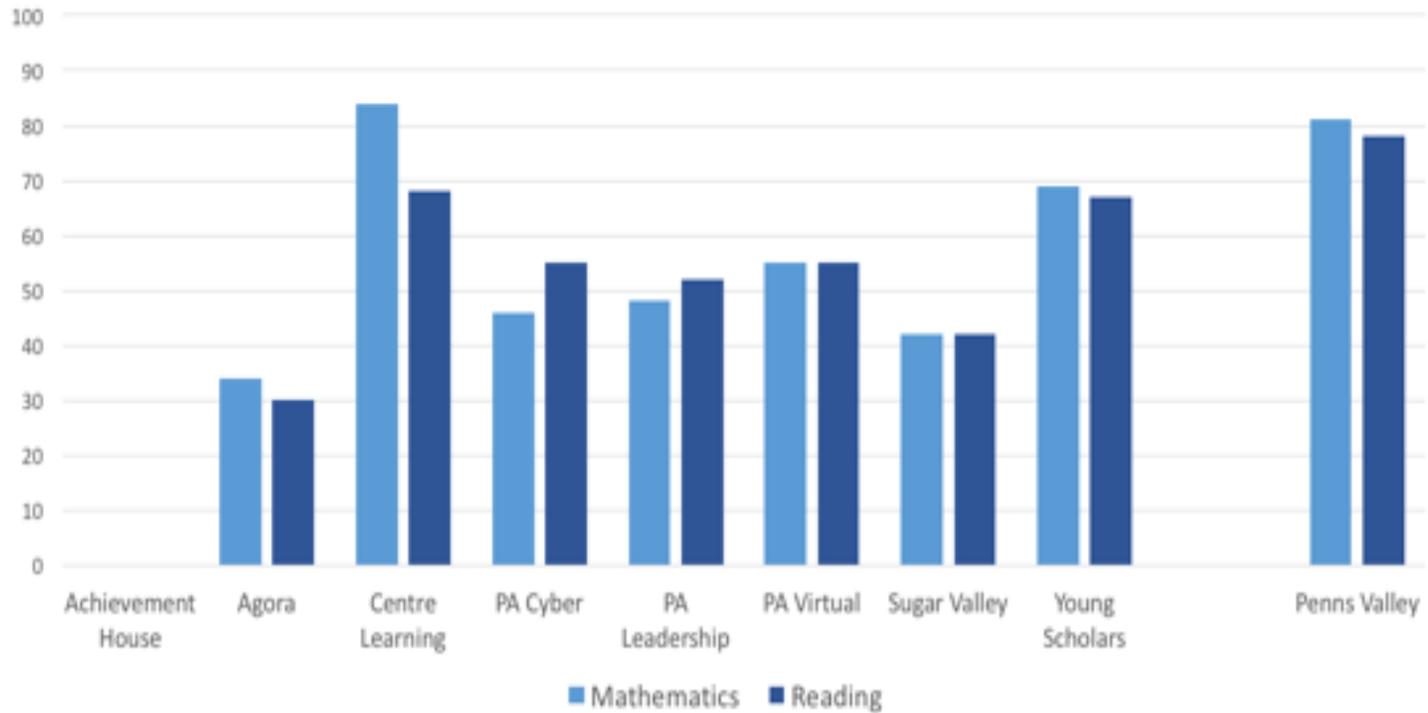
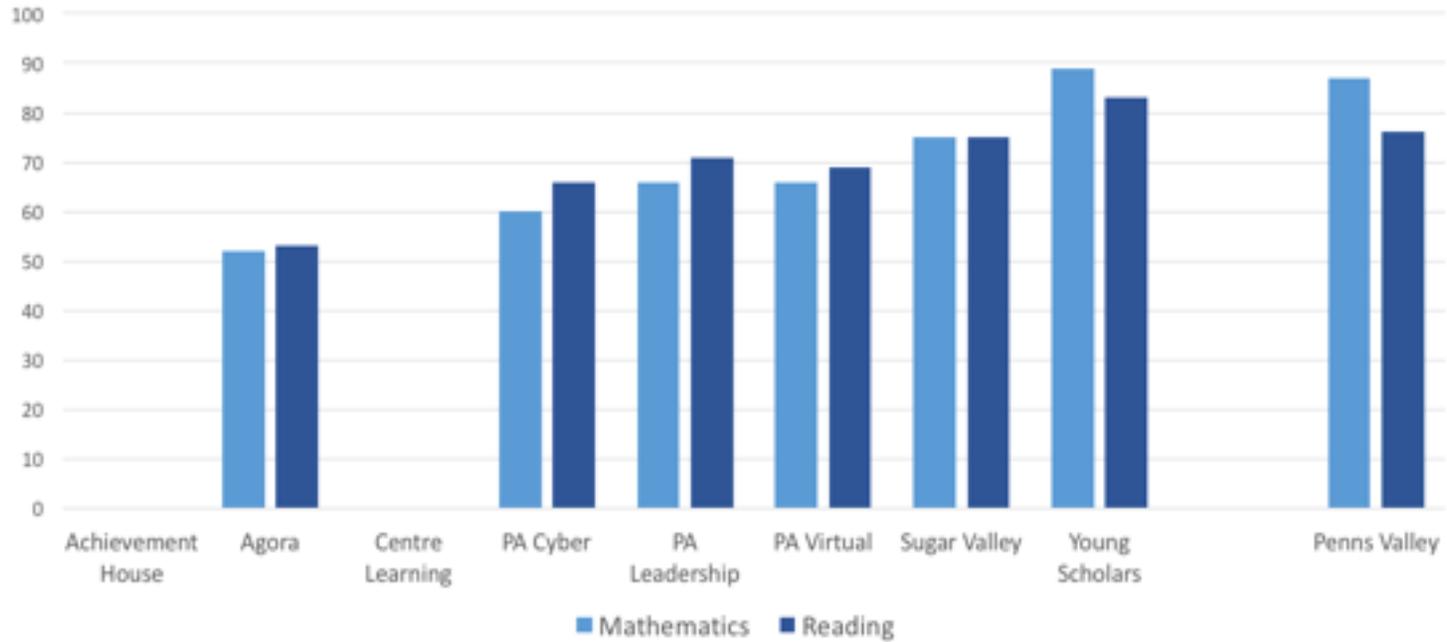


Table 4.2c Third Grade PSSA Proficiency Percentages for Schools Attended By Penns Valley Residents

Grade 3 PSSA Proficiency - 2013

% of Students Proficient or Advanced



Charter and Cyber Charter School Information

Since 2008, when the Penns Valley Area School District began collecting data on the number of district residents attending cyber charter or brick and mortar charter school, the number of students enrolled in the ten charter schools chosen by district residents increased by approximately 43%, as seen in the tables below (Table 4.3 and Table 4.4). This increase is consistent with, yet higher than, the 37% increase in the enrollment of the same charter schools across the Commonwealth (Table 4.5).

It is also interesting to note that the two charter schools which have the best academic performance on the PSSAs, Young Scholars Charter School and Centre Learning Charter School, (see Tables 4.2a, 4.2b, and 4.2c) are the only two cyber charter or charter schools that have seen a decrease of enrollment by Penns Valley residents. As previously mentioned, the two lowest performing charter and cyber charter schools attended by Penns Valley residents, Sugar Valley Charter and Agora Cyber Charter School have seen enrollment increases of two hundred thirty-three and thirty-three percent respectively.

In reviewing the data in Tables 4.3 and 4.4, it should also be noted that PA Cyber Charter School has almost twenty-nine percent of the Penns Valley resident cyber charter and charter school enrollment. The students enrolled PA Cyber Charter School

and Sugar Valley Charter School represent more than sixty-four percent of all Penns Valley resident enrollment in cyber charter or charter schools. These data give support to the questions which are asked in this study.

The increase of cyber charter and charter school enrollment by Penns Valley residences, even more so than the state average, is a concern for the district, both financially and educationally. Therefore, the data collected in this study and the subsequent findings should benefit not only the Penns Valley Area School District but others as well.

Table 4.3 Total Change in Cyber Charter School Enrollment of Penns Valley Residents Since 2007

Cyber Charter or Charter School by County Location	2008 – 2009	2010 – 2011	2012 – 2013	2014– 2015	2015– 2016	% of Change since 2009
Achievement House	0	0	1	0	1	100%
Agora Cyber Charter	3	11	14	3	4	33%
Centre Learning Charter	11	9	2	7	7	-36%
Nittany Valley Charter	0	1	1	3	3	300%
PA Cyber Charter	10	25	23	25	24	140%
PA Leadership Cyber Charter	0	0	0	1	1	100%
PV Virtual Cyber Charter	1	0	0	2	5	500%
Sugar Valley Charter	9	19	26	41	30	233%
Wonderland Charter	1	0	3	2	2	100%
Young Scholars Charter	13	11	9	9	7	-46%
TOTAL	48	76	79	93	84	43%

Table 4.4 Seven Year Charter and Cyber Charter Enrollment Numbers for Penns Valley Residents

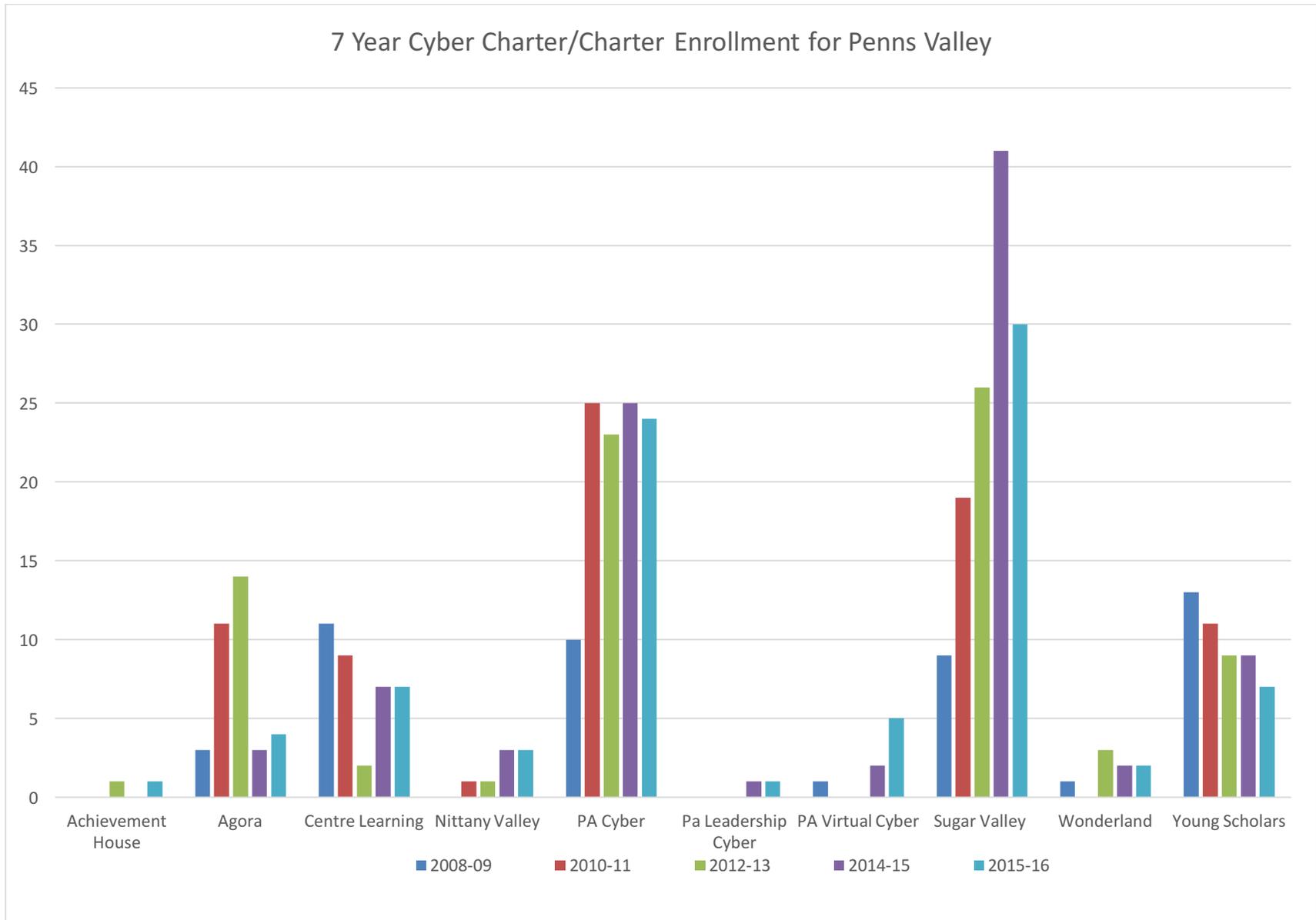


Table 4.5 Total Change in Cyber Charter School Enrollment Since 2007

Cyber Charter or Charter School by County Location	2008 - 2009	2010 - 2011	2012 - 2013	2014- 2015	% Change since 2007
Beaver - Pennsylvania Cyber CS (N/A)	7,874	9,651	10,434	9,344	59%
Centre--Centre Learning Community CS (Suburban)	101	94	103	98	-2%
Centre--Nittany Valley CS (Suburban)	48	48	59	49	6%
Centre--Wonderland CS (Suburban)	34	29	68	89	218%
Centre--Young Scholars of Central PA CS (Suburban)	158	172	246	309	157%
Chester--Achievement House Cyber CS (N/A)	267	536	733	885	167%
Chester--Agora Cyber CS (Urban)	4,202	5,861	9,175	9,290	121%
Chester--Pennsylvania Leadership Cyber CS (N/A)	1,992	2,155	2,324	2,444	44%
Clinton--Sugar Valley Rural CS (Rural)	204	261	319	411	87%
Montgomery--Pennsylvania Virtual Cyber CS (N/A)	3,644	3,353	3,198	2,482	-35%
TOTAL	18,524	22,160	26,659	25,401	37%

Research Question #2 – Information
How do parents learn about schooling options and what data do they use to make their decisions about where to send their children to school?

“Information helps people figure out where the problems are and which potential solutions hold promise for coping with them effectively.” (Weiss, 1995) Weiss also argues that the information or knowledge that people have is not necessarily accurate or most appropriate, instead information is embedded in some set of ideas.

The PA Department of Education provides each school a grade or a school performance profile, SPP, based primarily upon student test scores on PSSA and Keystone Exams. Beginning in January of 2016, PDE entered into a two hundred ten-million-dollar contract with a Minnesota Testing Company, Data Recognition Corporation to provide PSSA and Keystone testing to all public school students in the Commonwealth. In addition to this contract, the Department of Education has spent significant time and money to develop websites, www.paschoolperformance.org and www.pvaas.sas.com, to help parents and the public gather data and information about PA public schools.

During the focus sessions and subsequent interviews, not one parent mentioned the PSSAs or the Keystone Exams scores of a district or charter school as information they collected in order to make the decision as to where their child would attend

school nor did any parent use the websites developed by the PA Department of Education. Instead, eight parents cited high stakes standardized testing as one of the reasons that they chose to leave the Penns Valley Area School District. Parent number 16 stated:

I have read about the state tests and the school district's scores but I really don't put a lot of stock in them. You can't tell much about a kid by them circling bubbles. The district places too much importance on the state tests ... I wanted a school where they just teach and not worry about the test.

Parents were, mostly due to newspaper articles or district newsletters, aware of how the district and the cyber charter schools and charter schools performed on state exams as seen in the comments below:

Parent #3: The newsletter was great in singing Penns Valley's praises ... it has an excellent reputation for getting good test scores, but that isn't important to all of us. Teaching kids is more than doing good on tests.

Parent #21: I read that the school has good testing scores, my son was a good test taker, but that doesn't mean he was getting a good education; he was good at answering multiple choice questions.

During the focus groups and subsequent individual interviews, questions such as "Who did you talk to?" and "What did you read to help you make your decision?" were asked to begin to understand what information parents were using to decide where to send their child to school.

The following are parents' comments on what information they collected. These discussions begin to explain how twenty-one parents said they got their information, word of mouth from friends who had experience at a charter or cyber charter.

Parent #11: ... was not unhappy with school but had a friend in Sunday school who went to Young Scholars. Her friend would tell her about the neat things she was doing in school and my daughter would want to know why she didn't get to do that too. ... I talked with her mom and she told me about Young Scholars. It is hands on and gives kids choice. They welcome parents.

Parent #8: ...she is a very sensitive girl. She came home upset a lot because she said that the teacher yelled a lot. I don't necessarily think that the teacher yelled a lot but my daughter perceived it that way. I have a friend I work with who sends her son to CLC. She told me about the nurturing environment and small class size ... We wanted our daughter to love school so we decided to visit CLC. They were very welcoming. My daughter loves it there.

Parent #19 ...every kid is different. We had a neighbor go to Young Scholars and he (my son) wanted to try it so we let him. I think at a certain age, kids should have a choice ... My daughter still goes to Penns Valley and she is happy there for now.

Parent #18: ... she hated school and had trouble with other kids ever since she came back from partial. Her friend goes to Sugar Valley and she likes it. My daughter wanted to be with her friend and I did not want to keep fighting with her so I let her go. She is passing everything and doing okay. It is more low key there.

Parent #6: ...my daughter shows horses and she was absent because of that. I got letters from the school about her attendance. They said I would be fined if it continued ... While we were at a horse show, a mother told me that her daughter was in PA Cyber, she got a computer and everything. She could travel and never be absent from class ... I talked with my husband and we enrolled her.

When Parent #6 was asked if she had looked into Penns Valley's Cyber School, she said,

No, I didn't even know they had one. Why didn't they give that to me as an option when they knew she was missing school due to horse shows, not because she just didn't want to come to school.

While most parents received their information from friends and relatives via word of mouth, several of the parents said that they used the Internet to find alternatives. In each of the cases, the parents were unhappy with the district and wanted to leave quickly.

Parent #22: I believed in public school but last year was a horror story. My son had a lot of emotional needs that were not being met. I contacted the school many times and it was like it was my fault. This is what my son and me needed to do, not what the school could do to help. I just wanted him out of there so I looked into cyber. I looked at several and picked PA Leadership.

Parent #10: My son was failing all subjects until I pulled him and put him in cyber. I picked PA Cyber because I saw ads and then looked them up on the internet ... My daughter is too young for her to do cyber but I did not want her at Penns Valley because of how they treated my son so I looked at Sugar Valley. I knew about it so I looked it up online and we went to visit ... My daughter is happy there except for the long bus ride.

While the educational organizations, PA Department of Education and the Penns Valley Area School District, provided formal data on school performance, it was outside information that the focus group parents used to help them make decisions about where to enroll their children. Twenty-one parents

stated that they received their information via word of mouth from friends or co-workers while four parents said they found their information from the Internet or other media sources.

Additionally, the question, "Who all was involved in your choice?" was asked to the focus group participants. All participants said that their child had a say in the choice, and all but one parent said that both parents were involved in the choice.

According to Weiss (1995), much of the knowledge people have come from direct experience and only long immersion in an environment makes for salient learning. The data collected from the focus group supported this. People tended to get their information in places and with people whom they trusted and with which they were comfortable. Therefore, while educators might go to the PA Department of Education websites and educational ranking sites, people outside of education tend to gather information from other sources.

Research Question #3 – Interests

What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school?

As previously stated, it is this researcher's belief that most, if not all parents, want what is "best" for their children, in all aspects of life, including education. It is however, difficult to define "best" as everyone has a different

definition based upon the different information, interests, and beliefs they bring to the table. The third research question asked in this dissertation was: What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to charter or cyber charter school? In order to answer this question, interests of parents were ascertained through a series of questions. In this section, the interests of the focus group participants will be discussed.

Weiss (1995) defines interests as self-interests and states that people define interests based upon how they identify with the situation in which they are presently involved. She argues that, "new information can alter their definitions of both where their interests lie and the most judicious course for satisfying them." Going back to the comments of Parent #6, she clearly communicated her interests when she stated:

... my daughter shows horses and she was absent because of that. I got letters from the school about her attendance. They said I would be fined if it continued ... While we were at a horse show, a mother told me that her daughter was in PA Cyber, she got a computer and everything. She could travel and never be absent from class ... I talked with my husband and we enrolled her.

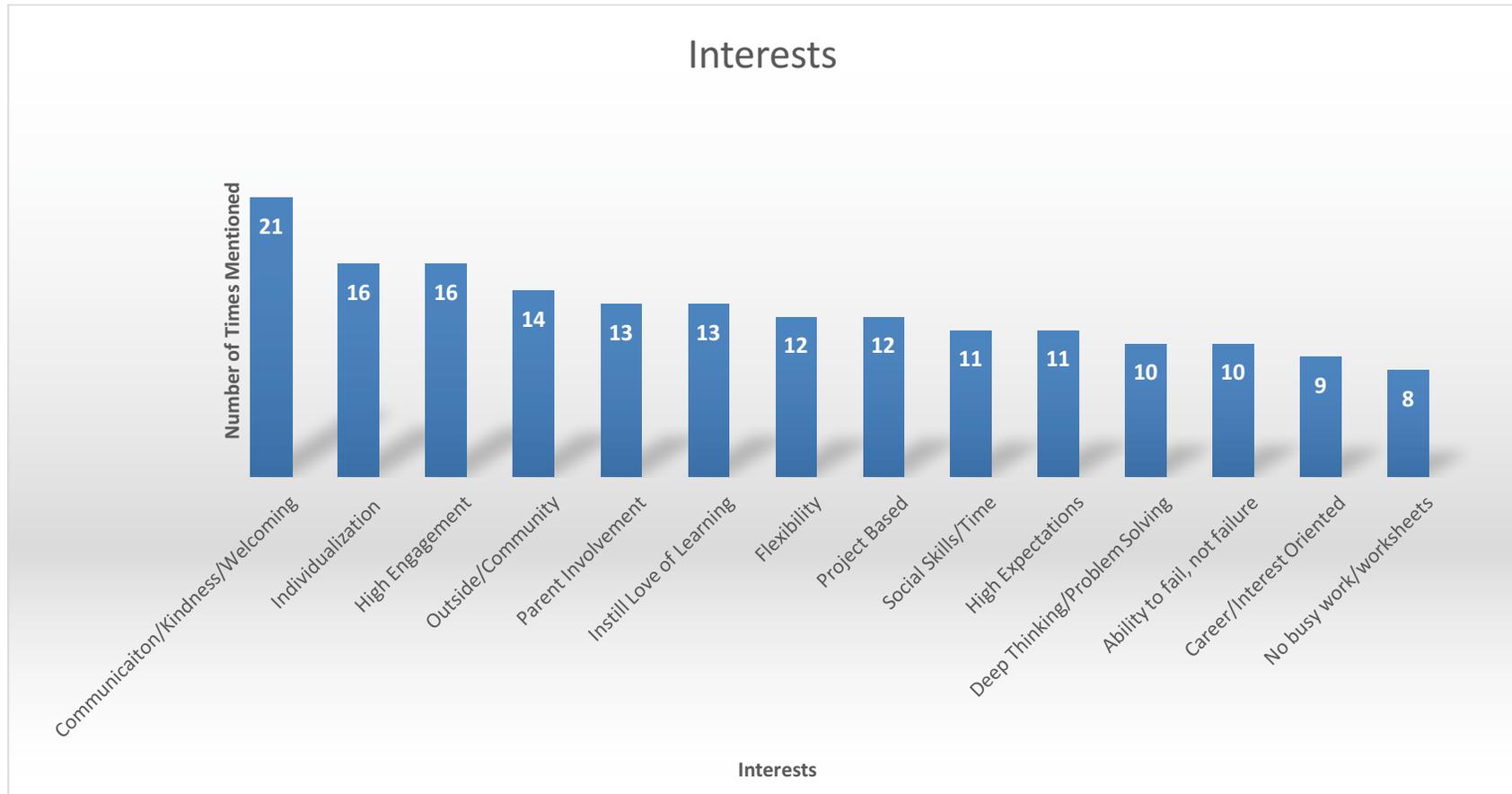
She was clearly interested in her daughter showing horses and seemed to be frustrated by her situation until she received new information and was able to give her child both a daily education while showing her horses.

In order to determine the interests of parents as it relates to their children's education, the researcher asked open ended questions like the following:

Why did you choose charter school?
What is important when choosing a school?
What factors did you consider when making your choice?
What is the story behind your choice?

After reviewing the transcripts and notes from the focus groups, various specific interests emerged. These were coded each time they were mentioned in a unique situation or story. Using the data collected from the focus groups and from the subsequent interviews, general interests were evident. These are graphically represented in Table 4.6. In analyzing the data, these interests were grouped into five categories: Interaction between school and home, higher order thinking experiences, people outside the classroom participating in learning, instilling a love of learning, and interest in individualized learning and exploring career/interest opportunities. Each category will be reviewed.

Table 4.6 What Parents Want in a School – The graph below represents documented number of times, during focus group meeting, a parent mentioned these attributes as something they want in schools they were choosing for their children.



Interaction Between School and Home

Twenty-one parents were interested in a school environment that was welcoming and provided open communication between home and school. Parent #25 explained her feeling that the high school environment was "harsh" when she wanted to discuss her daughter:

... she was having trouble in a class and while it was not said, I felt that the teacher was saying "this is the way it is, she will need to get over it". The teacher did most of the talking and I felt I was being dressed down. There was never a time where the teacher asked for my input or for my daughter's. ... I even felt that I was an intruder in the building. I had to be buzzed in – I know that is for safety and we live in a time where we need that but I want to feel welcome in a school ... The office staff was busy as well and I felt like I was keeping them from their work ... I don't feel that way at the charter school (Centre Learning). I visit often and they know my name when I come in.

Another parent, Parent #2, spoke of the lack of communication and the treatment she received when the parents went in for a 7th grade team meeting with their son's teachers.

... They called us to come in so that they could all talk with us about his grades. He was not doing his homework. He is disorganized. We knew this. He has struggled with this since he started school. He was passing all of the tests with As. We thought we would be talking about what we could do to help him but they just told us that he needed to do his homework. If he can pass the tests, why does he need to do homework ... We also asked about someone helping him or reminding him ... we were told that he was in middle school – he needed responsibility ... I felt like they thought we weren't trying. We wouldn't have come to

the meeting if we didn't care ... I thought they were the experts and they should be trying different things.

While these two sets of parents were definitely frustrated with the communication and lack of positive interaction, most parents wanted consistent communication and wanted to feel welcomed in the school their child was attending. The comments confirm this need.

Specifically, the following comments discuss the need for regular communication, a concern that twenty-five percent of all Penns Valley parents expressed in the district survey (see Table 4.1).

I like that Wonderland sends home a regular newsletter

Teachers need to take on the responsibility to share info with parents. Some parents care and want to know.

He talks everyday with his teacher in a chat. I can go online and see what he is doing. I didn't always know what he was doing at Penns Valley.

The following comments support the concern parents had about feeling welcome in their child's or children's schools. Parents in the focus groups wanted to feel as they were a part of the school. They wanted to be invited into the school to support the learning process.

Why doesn't the school have room parents anymore? I loved to come in and help with parties. I am able to do that at Sugar Valley.

I wasn't even allowed to take cupcakes to my son's room at Penns Valley. I had to leave them in the office. I can stay and hand them out at Young Scholars.

Finally, parents want communication with teachers so that they know their children are cared about and listened to. The parents wanted to hear about how teachers know their children as individual people.

I want to believe that everyone at the school is invested in my child.

I don't want my child to be invisible. I want him to know his teachers care about him.

I want the teachers to believe in my child, listen to what he has to say

High Stakes Testing vs. Higher Order Thinking Experiences

Project based learning was mentioned as an interest twelve times. Giving students an opportunity to think deeply and giving the students the opportunity to fail were both mentioned as interests ten times. While these were expressed as interests when the focus group was asked about what they wanted out of education, there were no in-depth stories related to these interests mentioned in the focus groups. Therefore, the research dug deeper as to why parents were mentioning these as interests, on three occasions asking about this topic during follow-up interviews.

Parent #4: It is not that Penns Valley was not doing these things but I think they were too focused on the PSSAs. Because the PSSAs are a focus, teachers go through material so fast that they don't have time to just let kids explore and think about things they are learning.

Parent #15: We had a lot of worksheets coming home close to PSSAs. They were right or wrong. He felt bad because he did not think he was ready for the PSSAs ...I don't want him to be judged by one test but by his ideas ... failing is good sometimes.

In both follow-up interviews, the parents mentioned PSSA testing as a reason why teachers were not doing enough project based learning. They believed that PSSAs were too much of a focus within the district.

People Outside the Classroom Participating in Learning

Buckley and Schneider (2007) found that parental involvement is the third most important thing parents say is important when defining a good school, with only teacher quality and academic environment/curriculum being more important. In this study, using the community and outside experts to enhance education was mentioned as an interest fourteen times and parent involvement was mentioned thirteen times. Clearly, parents want to be involved in the education of their children, and are also advocating that educational systems use outside experts as well.

Parent #3: The charter school invites both my husband and I in to work with kids. A community member is helping them with a garden. The school is a part of the community ... they bring in artists to work with the kids.

Parent #17: The kids have the opportunity to go on field trips. They get to meet people as they study a subject ...There are other ways than textbooks to learn ... I get to be involved as well.

Instilling a Love of Learning

Parent #16 shared a story where her daughter came home upset because;

... she heard that the teacher would get in trouble if she did not do well on the PSSAs. This was third grade. How dare she (the teacher) put that kind of pressure on kids ... where is the love of learning being instilled in our kids. Why is it all about the tests?

Likewise, Parent #1 talked about too many worksheets associated with PSSA.

... he started coming home with lots of paragraphs where he had to read and answer questions. The readings were boring to him. He is a hands-on learner and he hated to do these. ... He even lied about having homework.

Parent #4 also discussed a need for engaging students.

The Common Core has made it so that school have to teach certain things. It seems like charter schools don't care about that as much. They (the charter schools) focus more on projects and what the kids want to do. ... I know kids need to learn certain things but ... it seems like Penns Valley is more interested in the test ... I want (child's name) to have fun so she wants to continue to love school.

Engaging students in their learning was mentioned sixteen times and thirteen parents were interested in the educational institution instilling a love of learning throughout life.

Interest in Individualized Learning

In cyber school, he is allowed to take whatever courses he wants. We don't have to worry about whether it fits his schedule or if it is being offered. He can take what he is interested in.

This came from a parent of a cyber school student. During the focus group this parent, (Parent # 5) talked about the constraints of individualized learning while at Penns Valley.

When he was in 7th grade, he had to take Reading Workshop even though he is a great reader. He wanted to take band, Spanish, and Tech Ed but we were told he couldn't because he had to have Reading. So we met with the counselor. He did not help at all. He said everyone has to take it. Why? He was reading at above a high school level. I couldn't get an answer.

Parent #13: Where is the exploration and play. Kids need an opportunity to explore their interests.

Sixteen parents were interested in individualized learning based upon student needs and interests while nine parents specifically mentioned learning based upon career interests as being an important aspect of education. Comments included:

They need to develop skills they could use in a workplace. Teachers should be asking where kids are going to use this in the real world. Since charter schools are not worried about tests, they have time to do this.

Teachers should be able to relate their material to careers and kids interests ... Charters have small class sizes – they can individualize better.

Saying things like "you are going to use this in college does not motivate all kids ... where are they going to use it.

Give kids choice, they know what they want to learn about.

These findings are similar to the results of the Buckey and Schneider (2007) survey which support the idea that parents say

that they are interested in academics and “academically sound criteria” (p. 121) when choosing a school. However, it is not just information and interests that drive decision making. According to Weiss (1995), ideology or values and principles offer the emotion that provides the basis for decision making.

Research Question #4 – Ideology

What values drive parents’ decisions to choose charter or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley’s local public school?

Weitzel and Lubienski (2010) state that with school options,

Parents not only will be able to find a high-quality school but will also be able to match their academic, behavioral, cultural, or philosophical preference with school communities sharing the same views. School choice, in this sense, is a form of values expression (p. 16).

While it is easy to answer questions about what data were used to make a decision and what is important when choosing a school, questions about values are more difficult. To determine the ideology of the parents who chose to send their children to charter school, data were evaluated until themes emerged. It is these themes that represent the ideologies of parents choosing to send their students to charter or cyber charter school.

The focus groups and subsequent interviews provided the researcher a small glimpse into the decision making process of parents who have chosen to send their children to charter or cyber charter schools. While collecting data on the

information parents used to make their choices and their stated self-interesting in choosing a school, themes about parental values emerged. These themes are parents value school that provide good customer service; parents value schools that see students as individuals; parents value schools that reach into the community; parents value schools that promote life-long learning.

Parents Value Schools That Provide Good Customer Service

The first theme that clearly emerged from the data collected was the value parents put on customer service. Peters (1991) talked about the importance of customer service:

Each of us carries around a crippling disadvantage: we know and probably cherish our product. After all, we live with it day in and day out. But that blinds us to why the customer may hate it or love it. Our customers see the product through an entirely different set of lenses. Education (of our customers) is not the answer; listening and adapting is. (p. 72)

While Peters is talking about customer service in the world of business and not education, his message is clear; people want to be heard and valued. And they want schools, based upon need, to adapt. While educators know and are often times proud of the data associated with their school or classroom test scores, their "customers" might not deem these factors important. In reviewing the transcripts and the follow-up interviews it is clear that many parents who chose charter school did not feel

welcome in their child's public school. Nor did they feel as though they were being heard.

Parents Value Schools That See Students as Individuals

"I don't want my child to march every step of the journey on the conveyor belt not able to ask questions." This is a quote from a parent describing what he wanted in a school. Thus, the second emerging theme was that of individuality. All students have different strengths and needs however parental stories pointed to experiences where teachers expected students to adhere to a one size fits all model. Parents looked to charter and cyber charter schools to individualize schedules and courses as well as learning modalities.

Parents Value Schools That Reach into the Home and Community

At Sugar Valley Charter School, students get to tend a community garden and get to work with animals. People from the community come in and help with that.

Parent #12 talked about her interest in having her child, who was in the Autistic Support Classroom experience community through his education.

Additionally, parents in the study as well as the Penns Valley Area School District parent survey, cited communication with the teacher as a concern. Parent #9 voiced her concern about communication:

...they (teachers) only communicate when there is a problem, then it is already too late. I want to be updated on what is happening... They (Penns Valley) don't even have room mothers anymore. I don't understand why they don't want

people in the schools. That is not how I feel when I go to my son's school now. They make me feel welcome.

Parents Value Schools That Promote Life-long Learning

Parent #23 told this researcher about a time when her daughter came home and told her that her teacher said that she did not want to teach this concept but ..."we have to learn it for the test".

This made me really angry. Of course my daughter doesn't want to learn something that her teacher doesn't even want to teach. Learning should be exciting. I want my child excited to learn all kinds of stuff ... I want my child to know that he can be whatever he wants to be ... He can even change careers because learning new things should be forever.

In talking about their interests and hearing their stories, it is clear that parent want learning to be engaging. They want learning to take place both inside the classroom as well as out in the community. They want students to be both the teachers and the learners. They want their children to be prepared for whatever path they choose to take. They want a variety of experiences.

Research Question #1 - Patterns and Themes

Why do parents make the choice to consider charter schools?

Each parent in this study had a story or a rationale for removing their child from the Penns Valley Area School District in favor of a charter or cyber charter school or for originally enrolling a child in a charter or cyber charter school. Although many did not voice it as such, the underlying theme was that of

an unsatisfying experience with the local public school or an overall feeling of dissatisfaction with the traditional educational process in general. Parents are motivated to leave the traditional public school due to dissatisfaction (Peck & Carr, 1997). Once dissatisfied, parents then begin the process of deciding what, if anything, they are going to do about it. When making a decision like choosing to send a child to either a public or a charter school, one does not necessarily gather information, determine interests, and decide on an ideology in separate, linear terms. Instead, according to Weiss (1995):

Every individual decision is the product of the interplay among ideology, interests and information. The interaction is constant and iterative, and decision-makers work out the specification of their ideologies and interests in conjunction with their processing of information. (p. 577)

That is to say, parents are not going to gather all information about traditional public schools, including financial data, enrollment data, curriculum data, state assessment data, and satisfaction data, before beginning to think about their interests. Instead the information they gather effected by their interests and values. This was clear in this study. While there are massive amounts of school achievement data published every year, not one parent sought this data in making the decision to enroll their child in a charter or cyber charter school. Instead, they relied on the data they received from people they knew. More telling was the data they collected.

They were interested not in numbers or facts, but experiences. How did the cyber charter and charter schools treat both parents and students? Were the parents and the community part of the learning? Did the schools place value on testing? How did the student feel about attending the charter or cyber charter school? The parents value customer service and the ability of a school to see students as individuals and therefore sought out individual charter and cyber charter customers to see what their experiences were. This is also the case for home schooling parents. "The heart of the home school choice is the parents' need to individualize learning experiences for their children" (Marsh et. al., 2009).

As parents hear the stories of their friends, families and co-workers and their children hear about cyber charter and charter schools via their friends, there is, according to Marsh, et. al., another reason as to why parents are choosing these options: "I can try this without financial risk and without some possible reward". Before charter or cyber charters become a viable option for parents, they were either "stuck" with the local public school or they had to have the financial means to send their children to private schools. With cyber charter and charter schools, parents are able to "test drive" options without the financial burden.

Chapter 5: Summary of Findings and Implications

The purpose of this research was to determine why parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, choose cyber charter or charter schools over the local public school district. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. Why do parents, in the Penns Valley Area School District, make the choice to consider charter schools?
2. How do parents learn about schooling options and what data do they use to make their decisions about where to send their children to school?
3. What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school?
4. What values drive parents' decisions to choose charter or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley's local public school?

Because this researcher wanted to gather a deep, rich understanding of complex decision-making models used by parents when deciding to send their child/children to cyber charter or charter schools, an inductive case study was chosen. This qualitative method allowed for probing questions and open-ended dialog via face-to-face interactions. Data were obtained

through a series of three focus groups consisting of twenty five cyber charter and charter school parents as well as one home schooling parent. Additionally, five follow-up individual interviews were conducted. While the focus groups and subsequent interviews occurred with only 26 parents who reside in the Penns Valley Area School District, the holistic method will allow other researchers a starting point as they attempt to understand how parents decide to send their children to schools other than the local public school.

Summary of Findings

Information

While the PA Department of Education and other websites like www.schooldigger.com, have spent a considerable amount of time and money publishing data about public schools, parents residing in the Penns Valley Area School District are not using these data. Additionally, many cyber charter and charter schools spend a significantly larger amount of money than their traditional public school counterparts advertising their schools via the internet, postal mailings, and TV advertisements. In this study, parents in the Penns Valley Area School District enrollment area, are foregoing this published data and formal advertising. Instead word of mouth seems to be the most prevalent way parents are learning about schooling options. Parents consistently discussed how their peer groups, their

children's peer group, and their church groups informed them of cyber charter and charter school options. Thirteen parents specifically stated that their child played a significant part in the decision making process.

Interests

When asking the question, *What are the aspects of public schools, if any, that parents are seeking to escape when they send their child to a charter or cyber charter school*, the focus is on parental interests. In this study, parents were escaping what they perceived as a one size fits all educational system that lacked interaction between school and home, did not include enough higher order thinking experiences and did not include people outside the classroom in the learning process. Additionally, they were trying to escape what they believed to be an inappropriate amount of focus on high stakes testing by the district which did not permit or leave time for educators to instill a love of learning in students through individualized learning experiences and career/interest opportunities.

Ideology

Converse (1964) argues that ideologies or values are often, not well constructed, but instead haphazard. Even so, they often are the emotion behind the decision-making process. Therefore, for this research, it was important to answer the question, *What values drive parents' decisions to choose charter*

or cyber charter schools over Penns Valley's local public school, as this question got to the values behind parental decision making. While the parents were not specifically asked this question, the research did ask about the reasons why the parents chose charter schools and what factors were considered when making the choice.

Through the parents' stories and experiences, it was apparent that several aspects of traditional public schools were driving the parents toward charter and cyber charter schools. Specifically, parents think schools are missing the individualized customer service that they believe some charter or cyber charter schools provide. They want to be able to have their child/children pursue his or her interests based upon strengths and passions. Parents value school that provide good customer service and see students as individuals.

Additionally, parents talked about not feeling welcome or involved school and believed that the school did not engage with the community. Parents value schools that reach into the community.

Finally, several parent stories involved the amount of testing the state requires of each student. Many parents commented on the need for less testing and the value of teaching higher order thinking. Parents value schools that promote life-long learning.

Why do parents make the choice to consider charter schools?

This study involved twenty-five parents in three focus groups and five subsequent phone interviews designed to follow-up on stories and ideas heard during the focus groups. All twenty-five parents expressed some sort of dissatisfaction in either the Penns Valley Area School District or in traditional public schooling in general. This dissatisfaction lead parents to make the decision enroll their child/children in cyber charter or charter schools.

Limitations of the Findings

While these findings might act as starting point for others as they attempt to understand how parents decide to send their children to schools other than the local public school, several cautions should be considered. First, the study was limited to the Penns Valley Area School District residents and its findings cannot be generalized beyond the district. Communities and the schools within their borders vary greatly, both in their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Thus, since this research was limited to the Penns Valley Area School District community, it would not be acceptable to think that these findings could be exactly duplicated in other communities across the Commonwealth. Instead, this research should act as a starting point for other research.

Secondly, in any research study, researcher bias is a potential concern. This research is employed as the Assistant Superintendent of Schools in the Penns Valley Area School District and thus, it is conceivable that her position influenced how forthright parents were during the focus groups and subsequent interviews. Additionally, bias could also come in the form of the researcher's predetermined notions about how parents should perceive the district. While the conceptual framework and the addition of the third party observer should have helped to minimize the bias, it is not reasonable to assume no bias is present in these findings.

Finally, and probably most importantly, this study was limited to a small number of participants. Of the eighty-four possible participants, forty of them send their children to cyber charter schools and forty-four send their children to brick and mortar charter school. This study was limited to twenty-five of the eighty-four parents who are currently residing within the Penns Valley Area School District. This is only approximately 30% of possible participants. Additionally, of those 30% or twenty-five participants, only five of those were parents of cyber charter students and the majority of the parents had students in grades one through eight. Cyber

charter parents and parents of high school students were disproportionately represented and it could therefore be argued that these findings are limited in their scope.

Implications for Practice

The local public school district is no longer the only game in town. As such, parents have the opportunity and options to seek other public cyber charter or charter schools as a method of education. If specifically, the Penns Valley Area School District and more broadly traditional public schools want to ebb the exodus of students to cyber charter and charter school the district stakeholders must first understand why parents are choosing to send their children to charter schools and then determine how to improve the district in hopes of avoiding the departure. This research points to several recommendations. First, parents overwhelming said they gathered information on schools via word of mouth, not through advertisement or educational websites. It would therefore befit the local public schools to think of their current students and parents as "ambassadors" of the school. They need to ask questions to determine what parents think of the district and, based upon the results, develop Strategic Planning goals and activities to address the relative weak areas. For example, according to the Penns Valley Area School District Parent Survey data in Table 1,

fifteen percent of parents who send their children to school within the district do not agree that they are welcome in the district schools. Additionally, more than twenty-eight percent of parents would rate the perception of the district in the community as average or below. These data suggest that the district "ambassadors" would not give the district high praise when talking to parents thinking about alternative schooling options. It would, therefore, behoove the Penns Valley Area School District to not only think about ways to invite and welcome parents and the public into the schools but to set measurable goals based on this data.

Secondly, teachers and office staff are the employees who interact the most with both parents and students. They are the face of the school. School districts must determine what message these employees are sending. Most professional development and in-service training focus on new programming or on instructional pedagogy, not on positive ways to interact with parent and the community. Providing professional development for teachers and staff on how to provide a welcoming atmosphere and on how to talk with parents to promote positive communication would go a long way in improving the image of a school district.

Third, before the introduction of charter and cyber charter schools, the only option for education was the local public school unless parents were willing to pay for a private

schooling education. Therefore, even if they were dissatisfied with the local schools, most parents, due to financial constraints, had no other options. However, with the arrival of charter and cyber charter schools, parents have now become customers and believe charter schools can offer them a product without financial risk and with potential rewards (Marsh et. al., 2009). As such, traditional public schools must begin to think of their students and parents more like customers.

Implications for Policy

Policymakers, both at the local and state levels, must understand that local public schools are no longer the only public option parents have. Instead, in the Penns Valley Area School District, parents are making their choice to send their children to cyber charter and charter schools based upon four sets of values; customer service, individualization, community outreach, and life long learning skills. It would therefore, be prudent for district school board to consider several ideas. First, as a school board is developing their five year Strategic Plans, they should be thinking about goals and action items to promote customer service to include trainings, expectations, and procedures.

Secondly, if parents are expressing individualized learning as an important educational aspect, school board and state legislatures must begin to consider not only the high stakes

testing but the strict adherence to mandated specific state and local courses for graduation. This one size fits all model might not be what the public wants or needs. Furthermore, the the same traditional school day and year should be debated.

Additionally, community outreach is a daunting task, especially in this time where tightening security for the sake of safety is paramount for all districts. Thus, in order to bring the community into our schools and to allow our students to go out into the community for learning experiences, the hiring and training of community outreach coordinators would need to be a priority for school boards.

Implications for Further Research

As with most research, the findings in this study left the researcher with more questions than answers. Therefore, several follow-up studies are needed to continue to analyze the issues presented. First, it should be noted that while this research focused on parental decision-making, thirteen parents, which equate to more than fifty percent of participants, stated that their child had a significant part in the decision to enroll in a charter or cyber charter school. Hence, a study to determine why students in the Penns Valley Area School District are choosing cyber charter or charter school over the local public school should be completed for a more well developed understanding of the issue.

During every student's thirteen years of public education, parents are bound to experience some dissatisfaction with the educational process and with the educational system in which they have enrolled their child. This research focused on only eighty-four possible participants who, for whatever reasons, chose to send their child to a charter or cyber-charter instead of the local public school. It would be important to expand this study to determine how these parents are different from the more than fifteen hundred other parents who, while presumably have been dissatisfied with the local public school, have decided to continue to keep their child enrolled in the Penns Valley Area School District.

This study focused on the eight-four parents who chose to send their children to cyber charter or charter schools. It did not take into consideration the large homeschooling population within the district. The reasons and the thought process behind the choices of these parents might be very different than those of cyber charter and charter parents.

Finally, this study found that parents were choosing cyber charter and charter schools as they wanted to instill in their children, a love of learning. A study to determine if students, who attend charter or cyber charter school, enjoy learning more than their local public school counterparts.

Summary

Public schools across the Commonwealth face a dilemma. They are held to strict PA Core Standards which are evaluated by high stakes testing in grades three through high school graduation. At the same time, parents and students are expressing their interest for more individualized, holistic instruction based upon their needs.

While the public education system, when it was first conceived, was not intended to be a business, one could argue that it has morphed into just that. If that is the case, then parents and students are the customers. If customers become dissatisfied, they then have the ability, since there is now more than one game in town, to choose another option: cyber charter or charter schools. Local educational systems can no longer avoid listening to, communicating with, or working with their customers to determine their needs. Capodagli and Jackson (1999) believe that far too many companies do not try to please their customers.

A cavalier attitude toward customers is shortsighted in the extreme. The hard truth is that it costs five times more to attract a new customer than it does to keep an old one (p. 60).

Local public schools must consider this as they look at where their customers are going and why they are leaving. This study

provides the basis for that understanding for one school district, the Penns Valley Area School District.

"You don't build the product for yourself. You need to know what the people want and build it for them."
-Walt Disney

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Appendix A
Letter Asking for Participants

Dear Parent or Guardian,

As an administrator in the Penns Valley Area School District and as a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the Pennsylvania State University, I am very interested in your decision to send your child/children to a charter or cyber charter school. My research into why parents choose options other than the local public school will help me improve in my role as an educator, will potentially help Penns Valley Area School District grow and improve, and will hopefully help all educational institutions improve their communication with parents as well as their educational programming.

As such, I am asking if you would be willing to attend one of several small focus groups to discuss your decision making process in choosing a charter or cyber charter school for your child/children. I will be holding several of these public focus groups this fall. During the focus groups, which will be comprised of between four and eight parents, I will be recording conversations to use in my research. At no time will I use your name or that of your child/children. After the initial focus groups, I may be asking for additional individual meetings for the purpose of clarifying or gathering additional information. If you would feel more comfortable, I could also schedule a phone interview or an individual meeting as opposed to a focus group.

If you should want to schedule an individual meeting, or if you would like to attend one of the focus group meetings, please contact me 814-422-2000, ext. 2528 or via email at sconnell@pennsvalley.org.

Sincerely,

Sherri Connell
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B
Questions Used During Focus Group

The questions used by the researcher during the focus group will be changing and evolving as the discussion develops. As such, the researcher will begin with a list of possible questions and then develop additional and more specific as needed to obtain saturation of data in this qualitative study.

Questions might include:

Tell me about why you chose charter schools?

When did you first think about this?

What is the story behind your choice?

With Whom did you speak?

What did you read?

What is important when choosing a school?

Who all was involved in your choice?

What factors did you consider when making your choice?

My child is safe going to and from school							
Strongly Agree	29.80%	26.02%	31.89%	30.51%	31.09%	34.43%	37.70%
Agree	49.80%	47.29%	50.77%	49.15%	53.48%	54.92%	50.40%
Neutral	15.30%	13.35%	13.31%	13.90%	11.69%	7.38%	9.92%
Disagree	5.10%	6.33%	3.10%	5.42%	1.99%	1.91%	1.59%
Strongly Disagree	0.00%	3.17%	0.93%	1.02%	1.74%	1.09%	0.40%
Teachers show respect for the students							
Strongly Agree	31.90%	28.05%	27.24%	28.47%	31.34%	35.52%	39.29%
Agree	43.70%	38.24%	47.37%	43.39%	47.51%	50.27%	42.46%
Neutral	13.60%	15.38%	17.65%	16.27%	12.94%	9.56%	13.10%
Disagree	8.90%	10.63%	6.50%	6.10%	5.22%	3.01%	4.37%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	2.71%	1.24%	5.76%	2.99%	1.37%	0.79%
Teachers show respect for parents							
Strongly Agree	32.90%	31.90%	31.27%	31.19%	34.08%	37.16%	40.48%
Agree	46.50%	41.86%	49.85%	46.10%	49.50%	50.27%	46.03%
Neutral	15.50%	17.42%	14.24%	14.58%	11.19%	9.56%	11.51%
Disagree	3.30%	3.62%	3.72%	4.41%	3.73%	1.64%	1.59%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	0.90%	0.93%	3.73%	1.49%	1.09%	0.40%
The school meets the social needs of my child							
Strongly Agree	30.40%	24.66%	28.48%	24.75%	26.12%	30.33%	38.10%
Agree	45.80%	45.02%	47.37%	48.81%	55.97%	50.55%	42.86%
Neutral	15.00%	14.25%	17.34%	16.95%	12.69%	13.11%	13.10%
Disagree	5.10%	5.88%	4.95%	5.76%	3.98%	4.37%	5.56%
Strongly Disagree	3.70%	6.56%	1.86%	3.73%	1.24%	1.37%	0.40%

The school meets the academic needs of my child							
Strongly Agree	27.80%	25.79%	29.72%	27.80%	31.34%	33.06%	35.32%
Agree	41.50%	42.99%	45.82%	45.08%	46.52%	50.82%	44.84%
Neutral	17.50%	13.80%	14.24%	15.93%	13.93%	7.92%	10.71%
Disagree	10.40%	7.47%	7.43%	9.15%	6.97%	7.10%	7.94%
Strongly Disagree	2.80%	6.11%	2.79%	2.03%	1.24%	0.82%	1.19%
The school expects quality work of its students							
Strongly Agree	28.20%	27.83%	32.20%	26.44%	36.32%	37.70%	40.48%
Agree	53.10%	50.23%	52.01%	52.54%	49.25%	52.19%	51.98%
Neutral	13.10%	12.44%	11.46%	15.59%	11.94%	7.65%	7.14%
Disagree	4.70%	3.62%	4.02%	3.39%	1.99%	1.91%	0.00%
Strongly Disagree	0.90%	2.26%	0.31%	2.03%	0.50%	0.27%	0.40%
The school encourages academic achievement							
Strongly Agree	30.40%	26.02%	30.96%	28.14%	37.56%	38.80%	42.46%
Agree	49.50%	48.42%	49.23%	47.46%	46.27%	48.91%	45.63%
Neutral	12.60%	11.31%	13.93%	14.92%	9.95%	7.65%	9.52%
Disagree	5.60%	4.75%	4.64%	6.78%	5.47%	4.10%	1.98%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	5.20%	1.24%	2.71%	0.75%	0.27%	0.40%
I respect the school's teachers							
Strongly Agree	35.20%	35.29%	39.63%	34.24%	41.04%	45.08%	44.05%
Agree	46.70%	44.12%	46.75%	46.78%	47.76%	46.17%	47.62%
Neutral	16.20%	13.57%	10.53%	9.83%	7.96%	6.01%	5.56%
Disagree	1.90%	2.71%	2.79%	7.46%	2.24%	1.91%	1.98%
Strongly Disagree	0.00%	0.45%	0.31%	1.69%	1.00%	0.55%	0.79%

I respect the school's principal							
Strongly Agree	28.60%	30.54%	33.75%	30.17%	45.52%	51.64%	54.76%
Agree	46.90%	38.69%	45.20%	40.34%	46.02%	40.71%	34.52%
Neutral	16.40%	13.35%	13.93%	12.54%	6.97%	6.01%	8.73%
Disagree	6.60%	6.11%	4.33%	10.51%	1.00%	0.82%	1.19%
Strongly Disagree	1.40%	6.79%	2.79%	6.44%	0.50%	0.55%	0.79%
Overall, the school performs well academically							
Strongly Agree	26.20%	24.21%	31.27%	25.42%	39.55%	39.07%	42.46%
Agree	47.70%	48.64%	49.23%	52.88%	47.01%	50.00%	47.62%
Neutral	18.20%	13.57%	13.62%	16.27%	10.95%	8.47%	8.73%
Disagree	7.50%	3.17%	4.95%	3.39%	1.99%	1.91%	0.79%
Strongly Disagree	0.50%	5.88%	0.93%	2.03%	0.50%	0.27%	0.40%
The school succeeds at preparing my child for future achievement							
Strongly Agree	26.20%	21.72%	26.01%	23.73%	30.10%	31.69%	37.30%
Agree	42.50%	44.57%	45.51%	44.07%	45.52%	48.09%	37.30%
Neutral	17.80%	14.71%	16.72%	18.31%	15.67%	11.48%	15.87%
Disagree	11.70%	8.82%	8.05%	9.49%	6.97%	6.83%	8.73%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	6.33%	3.72%	4.41%	1.74%	1.64%	0.79%
The school has a good public image							
Strongly Agree	26.80%	22.17%	24.15%	21.36%	29.60%	32.24%	38.89%
Agree	43.20%	42.08%	46.44%	40.34%	46.77%	49.18%	46.43%
Neutral	17.40%	19.00%	20.43%	23.05%	17.41%	13.66%	10.71%
Disagree	10.80%	5.66%	7.74%	10.51%	5.22%	3.83%	3.17%
Strongly Disagree	1.90%	6.79%	1.24%	4.75%	1.00%	0.82%	0.79%

The school's assessment practices are fair							
Strongly Agree	23.80%	19.46%	20.12%	21.69%	23.38%	26.23%	26.59%
Agree	43.00%	45.48%	45.51%	40.00%	47.26%	51.09%	45.63%
Neutral	23.40%	20.36%	25.08%	25.76%	20.65%	15.85%	19.44%
Disagree	6.50%	7.47%	7.74%	8.81%	6.97%	4.92%	7.94%
Strongly Disagree	3.30%	3.62%	1.55%	3.73%	1.74%	1.64%	0.40%
I feel that my child is assigned (brings home) _____ homework.							
Too much	56.50%	21.72%	22.29%	16.27%	13.68%	11.20%	55.00%
Too little	43.50%	16.97%	24.46%	9.83%	7.21%	12.57%	45.00%
I feel comfortable contacting my child's teacher with concerns.							
Yes	0.00%	0.00%	92.88%	88.47%	92.29%	95.90%	94.44%
No	0.00%	0.00%	7.12%	11.53%	7.71%	4.10%	5.56%
I believe that I have adequate communication from my child's teacher to assist in developing my child's learning.							
Yes	0.00%	0.00%	82.04%	74.58%	77.86%	80.60%	75.40%
No	0.00%	0.00%	17.96%	25.42%	22.14%	19.40%	24.60%
I would grade my child's school:							
A	0.00%	0.00%	34.06%	32.54%	43.53%	50.27%	52.38%
B	0.00%	0.00%	45.20%	46.44%	42.54%	39.34%	36.90%
C	0.00%	0.00%	16.10%	12.88%	12.94%	9.02%	9.13%
D	0.00%	0.00%	2.79%	5.76%	0.25%	1.37%	1.19%
F	0.00%	0.00%	1.86%	2.37%	0.75%	0.00%	0.40%

I would grade my child's teacher(s):							
A	0.00%	0.00%	49.85%	41.36%	53.48%	60.38%	56.75%
B	0.00%	0.00%	32.51%	42.37%	33.83%	31.42%	32.54%
C	0.00%	0.00%	13.93%	10.85%	9.45%	6.83%	8.33%
D	0.00%	0.00%	2.79%	3.39%	2.49%	1.09%	2.38%
F	0.00%	0.00%	0.93%	2.03%	0.75%	0.27%	0.00%
I would rate the perception of the Penns Valley Area School District in the community as:							
Very High	0.00%	0.00%	16.72%	13.56%	21.39%	22.13%	23.41%
High	0.00%	0.00%	40.25%	34.58%	40.05%	46.45%	48.02%
Average	0.00%	0.00%	34.67%	34.24%	31.59%	24.86%	24.21%
Low	0.00%	0.00%	6.19%	12.20%	6.22%	5.74%	3.97%
Very Low	0.00%	0.00%	2.17%	5.42%	0.75%	0.82%	0.40%
The school as provided opportunities to help us explore career placement or post secondary opportunities.							
Strongly Agree						13.46%	22.22%
Agree						40.38%	55.56%
Neutral						25.00%	7.41%
Disagree						19.23%	14.81%
Strongly Disagree						1.92%	0.00%

Sherri L. Connell

261 Ninth Street
Mifflintown, PA 17059
phone: 717-363-6684
cell: 814-883-1804
sconnell@pennsvalley.org

OBJECTIVE

To provide the reader with the educational background of the researcher

EDUCATION

Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA

Bachelor of Arts – Chemistry and Chemistry Education
June 1988

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

K-12 Principal Certification
May 1998

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Superintendent Letter of Eligibility
May 2005

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Doctor of Educational Leadership
August 2016

EMPLOYMENT

Penns Valley Area School District, Spring Mills, PA

Assistant Superintendent: *July 2008 – Present*

West Perry School District, Elliottsburg, PA

High School Principal: *July 2005 – June 2008*
High School Assistant Principal: *July 1999 – June 2005*

Mifflin County School District, Lewistown, PA

Chemistry Teacher: *August 1993 – June 1999*

Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA

Associate Director of Science in Motion: *June 1991- August 1993*

Bald Eagle Area School District, Wingate, PA

Chemistry Teacher: *August 1989 – June 1991*

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Pennsylvania Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators